

No one knows what kind of hell will break loose

# When Harry Comes to Call



**Billy Ramone**

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COMES TO CALL

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WHEN HARRY  
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# I

“What difference does it make?” I ask.

The cop with the piggy eyes, Brown, leans back. His face reddens. The black one, Minton, stares at me. After a while Minton leans in and says coolly, “I think maybe it gives you a reason to want Harry Gallagher dead, that’s what difference it makes.”

That makes me laugh. “If I’m already getting it, why go through all that trouble? Maybe you should ask if she turned me down.”

Hard stares. They don’t get my sense of humor.

“Well?” Brown says at last.

“Well what?”

“Did she turn you down?” he says.

I laugh again, but I don’t answer.

“I’m taking that as a yes,” says Brown. “I don’t think you’re man enough anyway. You need pecker pills, Pike? Can’t perform?”

“Fuck you,” I tell him. He makes like he’s going to slug me, but Minton catches his arm. It was a bad fake. Brown’s a shit actor.

“I don’t know,” Minton says. “I think Pike here gets plenty of pussy. I think he’s been getting plenty of Kim Gallagher’s pussy, in fact. I think he likes getting it so much that they came up with this little

scheme to make it so he can have it whenever he wants.”

Brown nods. “Yeah. Just get Harry out of the way . . .”

Minton smiles, “Yeah. Make him angry. Make it look like self-defense.”

“You get the girl and the . . . well, I guess the life insurance won’t pay out when the beneficiary clubs the decedent to death. But shit, you get the girl, anyway, eh Pike?”

“Is that how it went down, Pike?” says Minton. “You set this all up to get Harry out of the way?”

“You guys done telling one another funny stories? It’s way past my bedtime.”

“I ain’t nearly done,” growls Brown. He slams out of the room.

Minton grins and says, “So tell me again what happened. Because I don’t get it.”

I sigh. I want to ask him what part he doesn’t get, but I figure I better play nice, at least a little. “I was at dinner. With friends. And a client. At the freaking Olive Tree, of all places, which by the way I hate. That’s halfway across town from the Gallagher place. A little after seven o’clock my phone rings. It’s Kim Gallagher. She says something terrible has happened, but she won’t say what. I try to blow her off, but she’s freaking out. So I apologize to my client and leave. I drive over to the Gallagher home. Which makes me about the dumbest guy in the room, at least until your partner gets back.”

“Why’d she call you instead of us?”

“That’s a great question. You should ask her. Let me know what she says.”

“What happened when you got there?”

“She met me at the door. She was shaking. Said Harry’d attacked her and she killed him.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Did she appear to be injured?”

“She had a black eye. Her front tooth was missing.”

“Right, o.k. Then what happened?”

“She led me back to the kitchen. I saw Harry on the floor. He was dead.”

“How did you know he was dead?”

“He was lying on the floor in a puddle of blood. She’d knocked his skull in with a hammer.”

“You’re sure he was dead.”

“Looked dead to me. I didn’t take a pulse.”

“What did you do?”

“I called the police.”

Minton walks to the door and goes out. A minute later he comes back.

“Tell me again how you know Kim Gallagher,” he says.

“Client. I did some investigative work for her about two years ago.”

“What kind of investigative work?”

“She managed a clothing shop. Had an accountant she thought was robbing her. He wasn’t.”

“So she’s a suspicious type?”

I shrug.

“Seen her since?”

“From time to time.”

“Close?”

I shrug.

“So why’d she call you instead of the police?”

“You’ll have to ask her that.”

“Did you punch her in the face and give her a black eye?”

“No.”

“Did you knock that tooth out for her?”

“No.”

“Did you strike or injure her in any way?”

“No.”

“Show me your hands again.”

He looks at the unbroken skin of my knuckles and says nothing. The door opens and Brown comes back in and leans against the wall. He squints at me. Minton turns to him. “Anything?” Brown shakes his head.

Minton looks at me again. “How well did you know Harry Gallagher?”

“On a scale from one to ten, about a negative two. I think I met him once.”

“You don’t seem too upset about his death.”

“If you’re looking for sympathy, try in the dictionary between shit and syphilis,” I tell him.

Brown chuckles. I guess I finally got down to his level. Minton just looks pissed. “The guy’s dead. And

you just said you didn't know him. Why the animosity?" he says.

"I didn't know Harry Gallagher. But from what I've heard—well, you sow thistle you get thistle. Sometimes you get it right in the kisser."

"You heard what, from where?" says Minton.

"Enough," I say, "from his wife."

"So, you screwing her?" asks Brown.

I'm tired of it. "You bet I am, fat boy," I tell him. "Every position you can imagine and a few you never dreamed of, too. Last I heard that wasn't a crime. A restaurant full of people can tell you where I was when Harry got his. My client can tell you about the call I got before I left. So charge me with something or let me go."

They look at each other. Without a word, they walk out of the interrogation room. I wonder how many bozos are watching through the mirrors. I don't know how long they'll try to sweat me. I'm annoyed and it's late, but I'm not guilty so it doesn't matter. There's a big sign on the wall that says no smoking. Brown has left a pack on the table. I consider lighting one up but think the better of it. It would be like these clowns to hold me for it.

I curse myself for the twentieth time for going to Kim's house when she called. Sucker. I'd figured Harry'd probably used her as a punching bag again, thought maybe I could take her out for a drink, calm her down, that sort of thing. When I got there, she seemed to have some cock-eyed notion that I was

going to make the problem go away. I called the cops, because there's no way I'm going to stick my neck out for her or anyone. Besides, there was no need. She had the injuries to back up the self-defense claim. Harry was a jerk who made kicking her ass a regular habit. I figured it was all good.

It *is* all good, I remind myself. Harry got nothing more than what he deserved, and no one is going to go down for it. In the year and a half that I've been sleeping with Kim, I've heard enough about that bastard Harry that I'm not about to start questioning the justice of it. His drinking. His sadistic games. His smug brutality. I've seen enough of the belt marks and the cigarette burns and the cuts. She should have taken my advice and left him ages ago.

The door swings open, and the dynamic duo is back. Brown hangs to the rear. Minton comes up so close he's nearly standing on my loafers.

"Get out of here," he tells me, "but don't go too far. We might need to talk to you again."

I stand and brush a bit of lint off my jacket sleeve. "It's been a pleasure," I say.

"Don't let me catch you jaywalking," Brown says. "I mean, you so much as spit on the sidewalk I'll be there to haul you right back in here."

"Naturally," I tell him.

"You're a riot," Brown tells me.

"Of course," I say.

"Your girlfriend ain't coming home tonight," Minton says.

I smile. “Which one?”

I get in the car. I start to drive, but although I’m tired I find I’m not heading home. It’s midnight, and traffic is light. I like driving, the rhythm, the mechanics, the vibration of the Camaro’s engine. Outside the interrogation room it’s hard to be so dismissive. I think of Kim and Harry and how sometimes things get smashed up. I feel bad for them, but there’s no help for it. Why’d they marry when they didn’t fit? Why’d they stand when they should have cut? Now it’s a sorry wreck. Even though it’s how I make my living, I don’t feel the need to celebrate it. I mean, people come to me when things are messed up, right? I get the call to come and mop up. I’m the guy who gets to the bottom of things. That doesn’t mean I always like the view from the bottom.

Kim and Harry. Today’s entrants in a long line of fuck ups.

A burst of music from my phone interrupts my thoughts. I check the screen. It’s Carol.

“Hey,” I say.

“You’re a hard man to get a hold of,” she says.

I grunt. “Busy,” I tell her. I don’t feel up to small talk with the ex just now.

“I won’t keep you,” she says. “I just want to remind you that Rachael’s birthday is coming up. It’s been a while since—”

“O.K., thanks,” I tell her.

“God, Pike, she’s your daughter—”

“I know. Really. No worries. I’m on top of it. I’ll be sure to see her.”

“Promise? I think it would mean a lot to her.”

“Absolutely,” I say.

When I hang up, I remember something Carol used to say. “You have the devil’s eyes,” she’d tell me. I gaze at my reflection in the rearview. They’re nice eyes, deep brown and warmer than they have a right to be. Are they the devil’s eyes? A deceiver’s? Carol was deceived, of course, but only because she wanted to be. Perhaps that’s what she meant—not that my eyes made her believe, but that they made her *want* to believe. Just ask Eve: desire fuels the fall.

I smile at myself getting all righteous over Harry and Kim. It’s not like I haven’t messed up a few things myself over the years. I’ve made a good living at the detective gig for the last decade, but there have been bumps in the road. Like some genius once said, life is what fucks you up when you’re making other plans. The blown knee in the Fiesta Bowl my senior year that knocked me out of the NFL draft. The marriage shot down the tubes because I couldn’t keep it in my pants. My daughter a stranger. Although I don’t like hearing it from Carol, I know she’s right about one thing: I need to do better with the people in my life.

Maybe I’ll start with Kim. It occurs to me for the first time that I can marry her if I want to. She’s free, and somehow I know she’ll say yes if I ask. Maybe she’ll expect me to. But I won’t. No way. She’s too much like Carol. I shudder at the admission, realizing

that I've been unconsciously denying it for months. On the surface they're nothing alike. Inside, though, they are perilously similar: too easily pleased with small attentions, too eager to make me happy, too willing to believe my lies. And the lies would come sooner or later, I know. Good intentions won't change that. I'm a jerk when it comes to women. I'm not proud of that, but I'm not in the business of trying to fool myself about it. Pretending only leads to pain and disappointment.

I'd be wiser to focus on reconnecting with Rachael, but I'm not quite sure how to go about that. Getting started is the hardest part. It's been almost a year since I've seen her. I tell myself I've been busy, but I know it's just a matter of shoddy priorities. It's not just the last year, anyway. It's since the divorce. We've spent the last eight years drifting apart. It'll take a long while to pull it back together. Baby steps, I tell myself. Probably the worst thing to do with a teenager is to come on too strong and freak them out. Chase her further away. Think about it, I tell myself. It may take a while to come up with the right approach.

I notice I'm speeding and think of Brown. He must not be watching like he promised. I laugh and slow down. My reflections have finally brought me home. I pull up the long drive, thumb the button to the garage opener and slide inside. The security system beeps reassuringly as I move from the garage to the back hall and into the kitchen. It's almost one o'clock. I climb the stairs and, as I approach the bedroom, I see

myself in the long mirror on the door. I pause and look. The fact that I don't look terribly different than I did in the morning strikes me as odd and, somehow, sinister.

## II

I'm leaving the police station a couple nights later when I see Brown and Minton closing in like a couple of hungry sharks.

"Just the guy I was looking for," Brown drawls as he steps into my path.

"I thought you were watching me all the time," I tell him.

"Had to stop. Eye strain. Looking at ugly things'll do that."

"Sure," I say.

"We need to speak to you for a moment," Minton says.

"It'd be great if it could wait," I say. I'm not kidding. It's pushing ten-thirty and I've been on the go most of the day. My feet ache, and the knee feels like someone took a nine iron to it.

"Too bad it can't," says Brown with the sunniest smile I've ever seen on his fat mug.

I follow them to an interrogation room. Minton and I sit. Brown leans with his back against the closed door.

"Where were you this evening, about nine o'clock?" Minton asks.

I make a show of pondering. I wait until Brown looks like he's going to stroke, then say, "Right here at the station, talking to your buddies over in property crimes with a client. He's got a couple of bad apples—employees that have been ripping him off."

Brown stomps out of the room. A grin floats across Minton's face. "It might interest you to know," he says, "that someone split Kim Gallagher's head open with an ax about nine this evening. Right in her living room."

"Shit," I say. The room is small and quiet, and I look at Minton's eyes and see he's not jerking me around. I blink. I'm suddenly glad I've been ducking Kim's calls. Of course, a healthy dose of guilt follows in the wake of that feeling. She hadn't left messages.

"I thought you had her in custody," I say.

"Released yesterday."

Neither of us says anything else. I stare at the wall. I hear a clatter of feet in the hall, and the door bangs open. Brown enters, followed by Wilson and Craig from the burglary squad.

"This guy," says Brown, thrusting his thumb at me.

"Yeah," says Wilson. Craig nods. Brown fumes.

"Since when?" asks Minton.

"Couple of hours. Him and his client swearing out complaints against a couple of guys been ripping him off."

Brown curses and kicks the wastebasket. I stand up and look at Minton. He nods.

“Thanks guys,” I tell Wilson and Craig. I wink at Brown as I walk out the door. “We should do this again sometime,” I tell him.

An hour later, I’m stretched out on the couch. I’m beat, but I can’t sleep. Kim. Poor Kim. It doesn’t make sense no matter what angle I take. I don’t buy it as unrelated to Harry’s death, but I can’t make the connection. It’s not like there’s a club of Harry Gallagher fans out there looking to take revenge. Worse, even though I can’t sort it out I feel like I should have seen it coming, like I let Kim down. Useless guilt leading nowhere. The only thing I can do for her now is figure out who killed her. Seems like little enough.

I turn on the t.v. The Reds are playing the Giants out on the coast, and they are trying to scrape up a run to tie in the top of the ninth. It’s looking promising, two on with no outs and Votto coming to the plate, when the alarm chirps and the motion lights in the backyard kick on. I walk to the mantle and pick up the Beretta. Three seconds later everything goes to hell.

I hear the crash of breaking glass from the study. I rush to the door and look in. In the darkness, I see a hulking silhouette etched against the backyard lights. A big guy has busted through the French doors from the patio. He’s waving something over his head. I order him to stop and hit the switch next to the door. Light fills the room, and I see that the intruder is Harry Gallagher. He’s brandishing an ax. My mind,

everything, comes clunking to a stop. On his head I see strips of duct tape where the hammer blows knocked his skull in. He's still wearing the bloody clothes he had on when Kim killed him.

Killed him.

Some part of me must still be working, because I squeeze off a round as he steps forward. It slams into his chest so hard it forces him back a half step. Still, he keeps coming. I fire again, then again. I see where my slugs hit, clustered in the chest and abdomen. The holes are angry and red but no blood flows from them. The empty gun clicks harmlessly. The ax swings toward me and I dive. Lucky for me his aim is bad. The handle of the ax sideswipes my arm as its blade smashes into the wall. A sharp ache bursts to life in my arm. I stumble forward and then turn in time to see him pull the weapon free of the wall and shuffle around to face me again.

I drop the gun and grab the sword off the wall over the desk. It's not very sharp but it's better than nothing. Harry's smells damn bad, and aside from the fact that he's moving he sure as hell *looks* dead—pasty skin, glassy eyes, the works. I don't have time to contemplate the philosophical angles of this, though, because dead or not he's a p.o.'d husband looking to chop me up. He doesn't seem to be the least concerned about the sword. I'm grateful that it has better reach than his ax. I catch him in the throat as he closes in. He keeps coming anyway, his momentum driving the point deeper into his neck,

which begins to split as he swings his body around for another shot at me. I wrench the sword to the side to maximize the damage. The sword jerks out of my hands as the entire side of his neck pulls loose with a popping sound. His head flops onto the opposite shoulder as he totters. The ax falls from his hands, which fly up to his throat in belated recognition of what's happened. Gallagher crashes to the floor with a shuddering spasm. He gazes up at me with a look of glazed contempt. I see the jaw over the ruined neck tremble, and his lips move and smack. His blueish tongue catches the top lip for a moment, but it leaves no moisture behind. The lips pull back and I see the yellowed teeth as his mouth opens and he says "Fuck." The eyes go completely vacant.

The air in the room is suddenly still. It reeks of death and powder. I feel my stomach start to heave, and my forearm hurts like a bitch. I run my hand over it. I'm pretty sure it's not broken. I'm also pretty sure I know now who killed Kim, but that still leaves a lot of questions. I pick up the ax and lay it on the desk. Then I walk out to the kitchen and pour myself a scotch. A few seconds later I pour a second one.

I give my aching arm another feel, and I'm still pretty sure nothing is broken.

I've got to believe there's some kind of sensible explanation here. I'm not a religious man, and the gods don't patch guys up with duct tape. Voodoo and zombies and all that are just a bunch of movie-script mumbo bullshit. It takes another moment, and the

whole of that second scotch, to level me out. It's about time those idiots Brown and Minton made themselves useful. I can't get in trouble for killing a guy who's already dead, so why not put the department's lab boys to work? Maybe they can tell what the hell's going on.

I walk back to the study to use the phone on the desk. Gallagher's body is gone. So is the ax. I look out into the back yard. Nada.

The sword is still on the floor where it fell. I roll it up in a rug. I retrieve my gun from where it ended up under the desk and tuck it in my waistband. I hate leaving the busted door unsecured, but there's no help for that now. I hustle upstairs and toss clothes in a suitcase, then down the basement, where I unlock the cabinet and pull out the Mossberg. I grab a box of shells, pop a new clip into the Beretta, and pocket a couple of extras for good measure. Time to go.

I put the rug and the suitcase in the back seat of the car and the shotgun on the passenger seat next to me. My thumb lingers for a moment on the opener before I press it. The garage door rumbles upward. I take one hard glance in the mirror and I slide slowly out the drive. No Gallagher. No one. I drive away. A slow breath eases from my lungs as I turn the corner.

I drive toward the airport and pick a hotel at random. I slide the shotgun into the rug and carry it in under my arm, the suitcase in my other hand. The night clerk is a young Indian guy with thick glasses who stares at me the whole time. Maybe he thinks a Persian rug is a strange choice of luggage. I place everything

on the lumpy single bed. I make sure the door is shut, turn the latch, and set the chain. I sit in the room's only chair and stare at the phone, but I can't think of anyone to call. I sit up all night and try to make sense of it. It doesn't work. When morning comes, I drive home. I take some measurements and hit the hardware store. I take down the remnants of the old French doors and hang a couple of new ones, and I patch the spot in the wall where the ax hit. It makes things feel a little more normal.

Then I get the hell out of there.

### III

I spend the next two days tailing Beaker Goins around town. Beaker's real name is Jerry, but folks call him Beaker because he looks like that red-haired Muppet from Muppet Labs. I guess if he minded the Beaker thing he would take off his lab coat when he leaves work. He wears the damn thing all the time. I won't complain. It makes it easy to follow him.

I don't know that Goins has anything to do with Gallagher's Lazarus routine, but I can only go on what I've got, and right now Goins is it. As far as I can recall from Kim's ramblings, Goins was Harry's only friend. Goins is a chemist. He works at the Decker Institute, in the same lab Harry worked in. If he doesn't have anything to do with what's going on, he might be able to at least give me an idea of Harry's most recent research projects.

Goins comes off as a loner and a geek. He lives in a small apartment about two miles from Decker, and for two days those are the only places he goes. Home to work. Work to home. Lighting suggests that he spends most of his evenings either watching the tube or glued to a computer. If the two days are representative of his life, I almost feel sorry for the guy. The third morning, I follow him again to Decker and

then, after he badges into the building, I drive back to his apartment. The place is a real prize: peeling, whitewashed concrete block. Dingy windows. Crumbling sidewalks. It feels wrong. A gig at Decker pays well. Hard science PhD's don't work cheap. I've seen Harry's house and Kim's jewelry, so I have an idea what the tax bracket looks like. This sure as hell isn't it. I can't imagine the difference between a chemist like Goins and a biologist like Gallagher amounts to anything. I wonder if Goins has an ex-wife out there somewhere sucking him dry.

I pop doorbells until some clod buzzes me in. Inside the place is even less impressive. The walls are smeared with dirt and obscenities. The hall carpet is ratty and stinks of mildew. Goins's place is on the garden level, down at the far end. I knock on his door once, count off a minute, then knock again. The lock is cheap and pops easily with a bit of pressure. I step inside, slip on a pair of gloves, and look around. Geek heaven.

The living room is full of scattered paperback books and DVD cases, some on shelves and others piled around in stacks. Sci-fi and cheapie horror titles. A few science journals here and there. There's a stack of dirty dishes on the coffee table, along with a half-full two-liter bottle of soda. In the kitchenette I see more dirty dishes and an overflowing trash can. On the side of the fridge, he's tacked up a Sports Illustrated swimsuit calendar. It's like the apartment of a fourteen-year-old boy.

I track through the living room and over to a short hallway that runs off the back. Two doors. Dirty but unremarkable bathroom on right. Bedroom on left. Dingy sheets are wadded in the middle of the single bed. A heavy layer of dust coats everything except the desk in the corner. If Goins has spent money on anything other than videos, the computer is it. The flat-screen monitor is massive—twenty-five inches, maybe more—and I see two towers, holding lord knows how many processors and drives. The screen is blank but the sucker's running because I can hear the cooling fans. I walk over and whack the space bar, just to see. A screen saver pops up. I try beaker1 as a password just for fun. Nothing.

I slide back out into the living room. Goins is standing in the kitchenette, staring at me. That impresses me, but what impresses me even more is that he opens his mouth and says, "So, you're the guy who sent Harry Gallagher to kill me."

"Harry Gallagher's dead," I say.

"No one appears to have told him that," Goins says. His Adam's apple bobs and I see that he's scared shitless. "Who are you?"

"When did you see Harry?"

"You didn't answer my question. Maybe I should call the police," Goins says. He pulls out a cell phone.

"Good," I tell him. "Did you call them when you saw Harry?"

"They wouldn't believe me, would they?"

"When did you see him?"

“Who the hell are you, and why are you following me?”

“Name’s Pike,” I tell him. “How’d you know I was following you?”

“New Camaro. Inferno Orange Metallic. Sweet.”

His approval is enough to make me consider trading the car in. I want to kick myself. It shouldn’t matter that the new car is an eye-magnet. I’ve been driving it for almost a year, and I’ve used it on a dozen-plus jobs that required surveillance. Do it right and they don’t see you most of the time, anyway. “I’m following you because I saw Harry, too,” I tell him.

“Fuck.” Now he looks even more scared.

“I saw Harry with a really big ax,” I say.

Goins is nodding now. “Tuesday night,” he says, “same night he killed Kim. Why would Harry come after you?”

“Something personal,” I tell him.

“You the guy that was screwing Kim?”

“Jesus,” I say, “what did she do, send out announcements?”

“Subtlety wasn’t her strong suit.”

“Well, that explains why he came after me. But why you? I thought you and Harry were pals.”

“Used to be,” he said. “I should call the police.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“You broke into my home,” he says.

“So maybe they can put me in jail while Harry comes after you again?” I say.

“You break into my home and now you want to talk,” he says, “that’s bullshit.” I notice he isn’t dialing, though.

“I thought maybe I could find out what’s going on if I looked here,” I said.

“Wrong.”

“O.K., so I thought wrong. So what the hell is going on, any clue?”

“No,” he says.

“Why aren’t you and Harry pals anymore?”

“You ask a lot a questions,” he says. “Why don’t you answer some?”

The guy doesn’t scan as the criminal mastermind type, and I figure he’s on the level. So I tell him about Kim, and I tell him about Harry’s visit to my house. He crosses to the sofa and sits on the corner. When I finish he finally says, “I honestly don’t know why Harry was mad at me. He was a strange man. Smart, but strange.”

He pockets his phone and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. He offers me the pack and I take it. I haven’t had one in years, but the smoke feels familiar as it slides into my lungs. We smoke in silence for a minute.

“Harry was hard to work with,” Goins says finally. He was impatient and temperamental. He nearly lost his job more than once due to his temper. I was one of the few at Decker who got along with him. I knew when to shut up and when to ask questions. And I knew when to get out of the way.

Those things went a long way to keeping a decent working relationship. We teamed up on a lot of projects over the years.”

He crushes out his cigarette, lights another.

“That changed eight, maybe nine, months ago. I don’t know what I did. Harry just blew up at me one day, told me to stay the fuck out of his way. He was volatile like that. So I figured screw him.”

“You never spoke to him after that? He never explained?”

“Explaining was never Harry’s style. I hardly saw him after that anyway. He was increasingly tied up with a project over at the university. He was on indefinite loan for some neurology research. I think Decker was happy to be rid of him.”

“You didn’t call him or try to find out—?”

“Why he got mad at me? No. Harry was a pain in the ass. Oh, he was smart and did good work, but he was never easy to work with. Good riddance. I didn’t really care that much.”

“But apparently he cared,” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“He must have, or he wouldn’t be coming after you now.”

“Go figure. Like I said, he was a strange person. It must have been after he killed Kim. It was, oh, maybe ten o’clock that same night. I was lucky. If I’d been sitting in here he’d have had me trapped. But I was walking down the hall to the laundry room when he came around the corner with his ax. I ran as fast as

I could, down the hall and out into the lot. Hopped in the car and drove away. I just kept driving. I didn't feel safe stopping anywhere. It was a long night. I came back about six in the morning, and he was gone."

"Do you have any idea how this can happen? Anything he has working on that might start to explain it."

Goins shakes his head. "I'm thirty-nine years old. I have a PhD in Chemistry. I've spent most of my professional life working at one of the best think tanks in the country. This is completely beyond anything I've ever seen or heard. It's like . . . witchcraft."

Goins stares at the floor, cigarette smoke swirling around his head.

"None of it makes a damn bit of sense," I say. I try to sound sympathetic, but it sounds forced. Maybe because I never thought the world made much sense anyway.

"What do we do now?" he asks.

I shrug. "I wish I knew. If you don't have a gun to protect yourself, you should get one. Not that bullets help much." I dig in my jacket pocket and fish out one of my business cards. "Call me if you see anything, or even if you just think of anything. 24/7. I'm trying to figure this mess out. I'll be in touch."

He stares at the card and nods. He's still nodding when I turn to leave. When I reach the door he asks, "Do you believe in magic, Pike?"

"Not really," I tell him.

"Neither did I," he says.

I spend the afternoon at the university. The project Gallagher had been working on was headed by a doctor named June Matthews. From the entry in the faculty directory, she sounds like hot property. She's a triple threat: researcher, surgeon, educator. MD. PhD. Full professor. Former Chair of her department. Sits on the Board of Directors for University Hospital. Probably pulls more research money into the university system than ten of her average colleagues rolled together. She's also not a bad looking woman, though I suspect the photo on the university website is probably a good twenty years old.

Matthews is supposed to have an office hour at four. I wonder if she keeps it, or how much actual teaching she does. When I get there, I'm surprised to see that not only is she in, but she also has a trio of students gathered around her desk. I retreat down the hall to an armchair next to a group of vending machines. I can see her office door from where I sit. After about twenty minutes, the students leave. I approach the door again and lean my head in.

"Good afternoon," I say.

"It *is* a good afternoon," she says. "Please come in."

She has an unusual manner of speaking, emphatic and bright without seeming forced. I like her immediately. She stands and shakes my hand across the desk. Firm and straightforward, but not aggressive. She has clear brown eyes that don't flinch. I see I was

wrong: the picture in the directory is current. I'm impressed. I'd put her at forty, which is damn young for that resume. I sit at the chair she offers and introduce myself.

"I'm an investigator," I tell her, "and I've been asked by friends of Kim and Harry Gallagher to look into their recent deaths."

Matthews nods. "I don't know anything other than what I've read, of course, but I gather that in Dr. Gallagher's case it's pretty clear what happened, isn't it?"

"Seemed that way at the time. And I haven't learned anything to the contrary. But with what's happened since . . . well, I'm keeping an open mind."

She ponders this, nods. "I never met Kim Gallagher. I worked closely with her husband over the last year, but I'm not sure what I can tell you that will help."

"I'm just trying to fill in some details on what Harry was working on since he came over from Decker."

"Well, I'm not sure how much that will help, but I'm always happy to talk about my work." She smiles, and the whole room lights up. Matthews radiates a rare mixture of head-first competence and genuine charm that makes me want to spend a long time listening to her. "Although," she adds, bursting my bubble, "I'm a little pressed for time right now. If you don't mind, can we schedule something for tomorrow?"

"Whatever works for you."

“Let me see.” She turns to a computer and pulls up a calendar. “How about nine tomorrow morning. I hate to ask you to come back, but I have a group of students coming any minute.”

“It’s not a problem,” I say.

She scribbles something on a post-it and hands it to me. “We’ll meet at the lab in the morning.”

I leave the university and go by the house. I’ve been staying at the hotel, but I like to check in. The answering machine is blinking. I hit the button, and Carol’s voice fills the room. My memory zings me and I know what’s coming before she’s three words in. “Do you think maybe you could at least pretend to give a damn? I mean, I don’t expect you to send a present, or stop by or anything painful like that. Believe me I don’t want to see your face anyway. But do you think you could at least send your daughter a *fucking birthday card*? Maybe give her a call? I mean, I figured out what a jerk you are a long time ago, right? But Rachael’s just a kid, and even though she pretty much understands that her dad’s a dickwad, there’s times when you make her feel bad, believe it or not, maybe even sometimes when she thinks it’s her fault that you treat her like shit. It’s not like I’m expecting you to be father of the fucking year but Christ on a meat hook, Pike, you need to—*Jesus*, Pike, you asshole—you *promised*—”

I’m not sure if she was really done or not, but that’s where the message cuts off. I think maybe she burst into tears at the end. I deserve every bit of it.

The calendar on the wall tells me I'm already two days late. I almost pick up the phone and start dialing, but I don't. I figure the last thing the kid needs is me trying to make myself feel less like a heel by slobbering apologies all over her. I need to take a while and figure out the right approach.

Yeah, I know I'm procrastinating.

I want to stay home. Harry's midnight visit seems more surreal with each passing day, more like the trailer for a bad movie than something that happened, and the hotel hideout is starting to feel like paranoia. But I'd hate to be wrong, so I decide to stay out one more night.

I'm almost at the car when someone pulls into the driveway behind me. I see Minton sitting behind the wheel, a tight-lipped smile on his face. Brown jumps out of the passenger side and comes toward me. He's steamed. I stand flat-footed and let him come.

Brown grips my arm and slings me into the Camaro, then pats me down. He pulls my piece from its holster.

"I have a permit for that," I remind him.

"Shut the fuck up," he says, and he pushes my face against the roof of the car.

"Want to know something funny?" he hisses in my ear after he's frisked me a second time.

"Yeah, okay," I tell him. He gives me a kidney punch.

“Laugh at this, smart ass. You know what they found the other day? Right down the street? Right in your neighbor’s fucking yard?”

I hear a car door slam and Minton says “Easy, Bill.”

A fist slams again into my back. “They found the ax, motherfucker. And once I prove it’s *your* ax then I’m going to nail you for killing Kim Gallagher. And once I have you for that, who the fuck is going to believe you didn’t do Harry, too, right? The two of you killed Harry and she got jumpy and you killed her to keep her quiet.”

Brown presses my face into the car, then lifts it. Maybe he’s going to slam it into the roof. I hear a scuffle behind me.

“Get in the car, Bill,” Minton says to his partner.

“I don’t care where he says he was when she got it,” Brown growls. “I don’t care who he’s fooled. He ain’t fooling me.” He bangs his fist on the top of the Camaro and stomps away.

“Do I need to come downtown?” I ask Minton.

“Naw, we can talk here.” He hands me my gun.

“I don’t know. Your boyfriend’s getting a little feisty. I might feel better if we sat down with my attorney the next time we need to talk.”

“Where you been? Haven’t seen you around.”

“Busy.” I open the car door.

“If I didn’t believe you, I might think you were hiding.”

I sit in the driver's seat. Minton grips the door to keep me from closing it. I pull out a pen and jot Griffith's number on the back of a card and hand it to him. "Call my lawyer and he can set up a time to get together, if that's what you want."

Minton takes the card and pockets it. He steps away from the door, and I close it. He taps on the window. I roll it down.

"Interesting thing. They really did find the ax right down the street. Kim's blood on it. Hair. Her DNA all over it. You know what else they found?"

I grunt.

"Fingerprints. Lots of them. Mostly smears. But right in the middle of the handle they found one big, beautiful thumbprint. Know whose it was?"

I don't say anything. I start the car.

"What would you say if I told you it's yours," Minton asks.

"I'd say you're a liar." They'd have cuffed me already if it was.

He laughs. Then he stops short. "It was Harry Gallagher's," he says.

I do my best to look surprised. I don't know if it works or not.

"No shit," he says. "What do you think of that?"

"Ask your partner," I tell him. "He seems to have all the answers."

They pull out, and after a moment so do I. I drive slowly and circle the block a couple of times, then change blocks and do it again. When I'm sure they're

not following me, I start back to the hotel. But I don't make it, because my brain is still going in circles, too. The whole ax thing has me rattled. Did Gallagher—or whoever mopped him up—leave it on purpose to implicate me? Or was it dropped by accident? Either way, it's only dumb luck that I didn't leave any usable prints on it. I'm slipping. First Goins spots me when I'm tailing him, now this. Am I really getting so sloppy? With the cops leaning on me from one side and Gallagher trying to carve me up on the other, I don't have the margin for mistakes.

My stomach growls, and I realize I haven't had anything since coffee and Danish at the hotel breakfast. I need somewhere to sit and think. I head out along the River Road and hit the Green Roof Roadhouse. Mickey's behind the bar when I go in. He waves. I go over, and we shoot the shit for a few minutes like we used to, the Buckeyes and the Browns and blah blah blah. I can tell he wants to say something about how long it's been, but he's skittish because he doesn't know quite where that line of talk will lead. I finally decide to just get it over with and ask, "Josie around?"

"She doesn't work here anymore," Mick says. "I thought you knew."

"I haven't seen her for a long time," I tell him. I don't go into detail. He doesn't ask.

Mick gets me a beer and I carry it to a table and a waitress comes by. She says her name is Carrie. She has a nice ass, but that's about it. She's no Josie. After

Kim, I need to cut it out anyway. You'd think that sooner or later I'd figure out that I'm not doing myself any favors. I order the biggest, bloodiest steak they have and a salad and a pile of onion rings. I watch Carrie's body as she walks away. I finish the beer while I wait for the food, so I get to watch her bring me another. I decide maybe I was a bit hard on her at first. She has a nice face and bright blue eyes and a beautiful smile. I stop her and ask for some pretzels, and when she brings them I ask how long she's been working here. She laughs and says not long, and we chat a while. Dinner comes. Then a third beer. I tell myself it's o.k. to look.

Once or twice I think I see Mick looking over, like maybe he's got a problem with the fact that Carrie lingers by the table and we exchange a few words here and there. But you know, if Mick doesn't like it that's too bad. He carried a torch for Josie for over a year. Everyone, especially Josie, knew it. And everyone, except Mick, knew it wasn't going to happen. It got to be a running joke. So, finally, Josie and I went on a few dates, had some fun. Mick got his nose out of joint about it. For some reason that bothered Josie, so we knocked it off. I stopped coming by the roadhouse for a while.

Somehow a while turned into over a year. I half-expected Mick to get lucky on the rebound with Josie. I wonder if he did. That might help explain why she left.

Mick's my age, so if I'm looking at Carrie it's not like he has any right to think I'm some dirty old man, even if I'm old enough to be her father. And that thought, of course, brings me crashing right back into what's really bugging me: Rachael. To me, she's still four years old, bright blonde and pigtailed, standing in front of the house on her first day of preschool next to Carol while I fumble with the camera. When I finally get the shot, Rachael springs at me with a wicked, gap-toothed hug and says "I'm a big girl now" and I agree with her. I'll always have that day, that girl, in my heart somewhere, no matter what happens. But what the hell *has* happened? When things with Carol started to fall apart, the first promise I made to myself was that I would not allow our troubles to hurt Rachael. But that was bull. How can you tear apart a kid's world and not do a bit of tearing on her insides, too? And once the damage is done, I guess it's easier to turn away so you don't have to see it.

I didn't think of it that way at the time, of course. Who the heck would? When Carol and I weren't getting along, when we were battling each other so viciously about the money that we didn't notice that the lawyers were getting most of it . . . well, the less she and I saw of one another the better life was. It's easy to tell yourself that you should stay away so the kid doesn't have to hear you fight. Honestly, that's not a bad idea. You just have to be careful not to stay away too long.

Logic tells me that the relationship fell apart piece by piece and that's the only way it can be put back together. I don't like that logic. I'm lazy. I want there to be a magic switch inside Rachael I can flip that will take us back to that first day of preschool and make us part of one another again, whole and loving and real. I resent the fact that things don't work this way. Even though she still carries me around in her just as I carry her, there is no switch. And that means we will have to work like slaves, digging trenches and hauling stone, to lay out new roads to one another. Cut and claw and fight to get to a love that we both already know is there. We've got to have trust. Respect. Honesty. Communication. All the things I suck at.

Carrie is coming toward my table to see if I want anything else, and I'm too disgusted with myself to even look her in the eye as I stand and cross to the bar. It occurs to me that Carol never did like me hanging out at the Green Roof, and I guess I can see why. Mick hands me a beer and I take a stool.

"Did you ever get that old Chevy on the road? What was it, a sixty-four...?"

"Sixty-three Impala," he says. "Yep, it's all together now."

"No kidding," I say. I have to admit, I'm impressed. Mick had been working on the thing for a long time. I'd come to think of it as one of those projects that would never get finished.

"You should come in on a Friday or Saturday night. I usually drive it to work on the weekends."

“I’ll have to do that. I know you put a lot of hours into it.”

“Just chipped away at it a little at a time.”

I ponder that one, sip my beer, and try to reconcile myself to the notion of long periods of steady, patient work. Mick goes on about the car, telling me the details, relishing the story. He even pours himself a beer, which I don’t think I’ve ever seen him do while working. I grin a lot and grunt occasionally to foster the illusion that I’m listening, while I’m really thinking about Rachael. It’s not that cars, or Mick, bore me. But somehow I get lost in the details—or maybe the point is I *don’t* get lost in them. It’s Mick who’s lost. His talking takes him further away from here, back into an experience we didn’t share and never will. Most people think conversations connect them, but they often just remind me of how alone I am, how alone we all are. It’s fine, though. Sharing isolation with an old friend like Mick doesn’t bother me. It’s the people who don’t understand, who expect some sort of cosmic bridge to form out of their conversations, that get on my nerves. People who think words are magic. They aren’t. They’re just words.

I excuse myself and go to the restroom. I rinse my mouth out with water and splash my face and smile in the mirror. I feel warm and comfortable, but I’m not drunk. I slide back out of the restroom and give Mick a wave as I head out into the night. It’s almost one a.m.

There's a chill in the air that tells me September will be done soon. I can smell wood smoke on the breeze, which makes me think a camping trip might be nice before it gets too cold. I can hear the rippling of the river that runs behind the building. Even though the city has grown up around the roadhouse in the hundred or so years since it was built, it still feels surprisingly solitary. The river runs along the back and there's a golf course on the other side of the road. The city is here, just up the road and around the corner, but you wouldn't know it. It's here but not here.

Gallagher leaps out at me from behind the SUV parked next to the Camaro. His entire neck has been wrapped in duct tape, like he's some kind of white-trash mummy. He tilts a bit to the left with every step. One eye stares off at a crazy angle. I step away from the butcher knife he is waving at me. I reach into my shoulder holster and draw my gun, even though I know it didn't help before.

"Time to die, Pike," he says to me. His voice is a syrupy rasp.

"So what? You're past due," I tell him.

He lunges in clumsily, so close I can smell the rot beneath the heavy coat of cologne he's applied. I sidestep the knife thrust and jerk him forward by his outstretched arm. He drops to his knees on the asphalt, and I slam the top of his skull with my pistol. I keep doing it until he collapses like a stringless marionette. Just like in the movies. Take out the brain and down he goes.

I consider calling the cops, but I decide against it. I want to see if the witchdoctor shows up. I take a quick look around and grab the corpse by his feet. I drag him behind the dumpster, then jump in the car and drive away. The River Road is deserted. I make a quick u-turn and pull over and cut the lights. They wouldn't be far, I think. Close enough to watch.

In less than a minute, a dirty white van comes from the opposite direction and turns into the lot. A guy in a ski mask and jump suit leaps from the van and drags the body toward the back doors. He tosses Gallagher in and climbs in after him. I have my phone out, clicking pictures. He guns the motor and rockets out of the lot. I see there are no plates on the van. I wait a few seconds, then follow. The van moves along the dark on the River Road then turns right on Gudion.

It's like entering a whole new world. Lights. Traffic. I turn on my own lights. The van is an old Ford Econoline. It has a big dent in one of the back doors. I like being able to see more details, but my visibility makes me nervous, too. After Goins, I feel like anyone can see me tailing them in the Camaro. I drop back a bit. I let a couple of cars slip in between us as the light up ahead at Brinker turns red. We stop. A semi on Brinker starts into the intersection. The van rockets forward and clears the front bumper of the rig by just a few inches. Then it's gone.

When the light changes, I roll up Gudion. I look left and right, but there's no sign of the van. I wind my way into the maze of streets that serve the storage

units and warehouses that fill the area between Brinker and the CSX yard. I stop at last and punch the steering wheel. I curse. None of it helps. The van is gone.

## IV

Matthews looks even younger and prettier the next morning as she strides toward me through the lobby of Reistman Hall. After a nearly sleepless night at the hotel, I'm sure I'm looking older and uglier. I'm looking forward to sleeping in my own bed tonight.

"Right on time, I see," she says.

"I wouldn't keep you waiting."

"You didn't have any trouble finding the place," she says. It isn't a question.

She leads the way back across the lobby and into an elevator, talking all the while.

"My current project, the one that Dr. Gallagher was assisting on, involved the use of Embryonic stem cells. ES. You've heard of them, the controversy about their creation. Because it generally requires the destruction of human embryos."

"The right-to-lifers get up in arms about that."

"Of course. And far be it from me to take issue with someone else's view of the universe. The more I learn about life, the more I think there may be something to the idea of a creative intelligence behind it all. I don't know. What I do know is that our government restricts public funding for any program that destroys embryos in the creation of new stem cell

lines. That hampers research that I believe is vitally important.”

The elevator door slides open, and we step into a wide, white corridor. A pair of young Indian women in lab coats—grad students, I suspect—take our places in the elevator.

“Fortunately, there are older lines of ES cells that were not impacted by the regulations. I’ve always had some material to work with, even if I haven’t had the variety I would have liked.”

“What have you been working on?”

Matthews pushes open a door and gestures me inside. “Let me show you,” she says.

I’m expecting a lab, but it’s actually a small conference room with a projector hanging from the ceiling. I sit down and she begins to run a slide show on the screen at the front of the room. A picture on the screen shows a magnified image of a round clump of cells.

“This is a blastocyst, a human embryo just a few days past fertilization. The inner mass of the blastocyst consists of embryonic stem cells. These are very special cells because they are pluripotent. That means they can and do develop into all the different cell types in the human body. There are hundreds of different types of cells in your body, and these stem cells are the source of all of them. They’re . . . well, they’re pretty freaking amazing little buggers.” She smiles and clicks to a slide that shows an anatomical

illustration of a man, dozens of labels indicating his various cell types.

“But the adult body doesn’t have stem cells?”

“Some, but not many. And they are not pluripotent. An adult stem cell can only develop into a few different types of cells, while embryonic ones are practically unlimited in their differentiation. That gives ES cells greater potential in developing treatments.”

She flips through a slide showing a lab worker injecting a yellow liquid into a tightly-gripped rat.

“The general concept of the research project I have been pursuing is not all that hard to understand. We are trying to develop therapies to assist individuals suffering from brain or spinal cord injuries regain movement by introducing properly prepared and staged ES cells to the site of injury.” She flips to a slide that shows an artist’s rendering of a severed spine with a cut-away close-up of newly created nerve cells bridging the gap.

“Trying to cure paralysis,” I say.

“I wouldn’t go that far. Let’s say enhance the remaining nerve function and develop a limited improvement in movement.”

“One step at a time.”

She smiles. “Exactly. Results of computer modeling have been good enough that we have hope that the trial will lead to improvements for at least some of our test subjects.”

“You haven’t started trials with human subjects, yet, then.”

“No. No one has. I’m proud to say that this clinical trial will be the first that the FDA approves involving the introduction of human ES cells into human subjects. That makes it a pretty big deal,” she adds with a grin.

“Absolutely!”

She flips past a series of slides elaborating on the details of the research and stops on one that shows a picture of Gallagher peering into a microscope while an assistant behind him takes notes.

“Dr. Gallagher was a big part of our ES development group. Exactly what causes ES cells to differentiate, what determines the type of tissue they develop into, is still largely a mystery. Harry Gallagher knew more about the mechanisms that control differentiation than anyone I’ve ever met before. Or ever will again, I fear. I’m sure we could have gotten to where we are without him, but it would have taken a lot longer.”

“I see,” I say, but we both know I really have no clue.

“If an ES cell isn’t properly pushed, you may not end up creating the type of tissue you want. Harry Gallagher was developing techniques that helped him define the right protein sequences and other preconditions for generating neural tissues. So, he not only was a brain, he could *make* brains. That is, he could generate the nerve cells we need to populate and repair damage to the central nervous system.”

We sit for a moment while I digest.

“So, potentially, how far can this kind of research take you?” I ask her.

Her forehead crinkles a bit, and I get a lopsided smile that is, if anything, better than the straight-ahead version. “I don’t know if I understand your question. Ultimately, there could be a lot of potential therapeutic applications—”

“I mean, could you use these methods to repair a badly damaged brain? Maybe one that had stopped working?”

“You mean like a case when someone is in a vegetative state? Theoretically, it’s possible, depending on what areas of the brain need repaired. But that’s a lot more sophisticated than where we’re at now, I’m afraid.”

I nod. “Did you have a difficult time working with Gallagher? He had a bit of a reputation at Decker for being difficult.”

“The only things Dr. Gallagher needed were a challenge and the space to work on it. We gave him both of those things here.”

“So, no tensions between him and any of the other researchers?”

“None I ever saw. He was brilliant, and his mind was very quick, and he had little patience with people who were not up to his level. We generally left him to work things out on his own.”

“Just let the bear have the cave to himself and no one gets bit.”

She laughs. “Something like that, I suppose. Really, he wasn’t so fierce. But he did prefer to work alone when possible, or with people he chose. It worked because he wasn’t shy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that if he needed something he would let you know. Part of the problem with loners on teams like this is that they tend to become too isolated. Dr. Gallagher wasn’t like that.”

“Did he have any particular friends on the staff, people he really seemed to bond with?”

“I don’t believe so. He was a deeply introverted person. I suspect relationships grow very slowly for people like him. I don’t think the year he was here was really long enough.”

“Did you ever get the sense that there were problems, tensions between him and his wife?”

“He never spoke about home. It was like it, she, didn’t exist.”

She smiles, as if this is a description of the perfect arrangement. It occurs to me that even though I’ve read about her career and learned about her research, I know absolutely nothing about her life. Is she married? Children? What kind of car does she drive? Where did she grow up? When she orders Chinese—if she does—does she get soup? People are puzzles. Especially, right now, Harry Gallagher. A brutal slob who drank too much and treated his wife like a whack-a-mole game. A brilliant researcher on the cutting edge of healing technology who just needed space to work

his magic. Strangely, his encore as a shambling, ax-wielding corpse brings these two halves of his life together. I wonder if I'll have a chance to figure out how all the pieces fit before I end up a corpse myself.

The room seems small and warm, my questions increasingly pointless. I thank Matthews for her time and hurry away. I expect relief when I get outside, but even though I can breathe easier the world seems off-kilter. It's like a scene from a horror movie, where the sun is a little too bright, the voices too cheerful, and a homicidal lunatic is just about to come charging around the corner.

I head home and unpack my suitcase and my Persian rug. The answering machine is flashing again when I get in, and I hit it before I crawl into bed. The first message is from my attorney, Griffith. Apparently Minton called him. He wants me to call him to give him some idea of what the cops are talking about. In other words, he wants to bill me. The second is from Beaker Goins, who sounds like he just ran a marathon. What I get, through the huffing and the long bursts of static, is that Beaker has had another visit from Gallagher. Actually, it's unclear from what he says whether it was Gallagher or some other dead dude. It's also unclear how he got away. Hell, the whole thing is unclear. He says he's splitting town, then he says he wants me to come see him, but he gives me no idea where to reach him. I wish he'd remembered to call my cell, or to leave me his number. Then again, maybe

he did leave it somewhere in all that static. I run a quick web search but can't find a cell phone number for him, so I give his apartment a ring because it's all I can do. There's no answer.

I look out the window. Brown is out front in his car. Maybe he should have followed me last night. He might have been useful. Something about that idiot sitting out there wasting his time while I snooze puts a smile on my face. I mosey upstairs for a nap, but once I'm lying down, sleep doesn't come. For some reason, Rachael's missed birthday chooses that moment to come and sit on my chest like a two-ton vulture. I try to ignore it, but no luck. Finally I get up and fish the birthday card I bought last week out of my jacket pocket. It's a bit bent on one corner, but otherwise it looks fine. I walk back downstairs. I grab the gift card I have for her off the hutch and put it inside. Brown is still in front of the house. He appears to be asleep in his car, which makes me envious. I pick up the phone, then put it down again. I'll drive over and see who's home.

Brown pulls out slowly behind me and trails me across town. I wish my own sense of purpose were as clear. More than once I almost turn back. I had been going to plan this all out, yet here I am on the fly. Maybe it's best this way. No approach is going to go over well. Accept that and get started anyway . . . take my lumps and get on with the business of rebuilding. Frontal assault time. But when I get to the house my bravado has, predictably, faded and I circle the block

twice before parking across the street. It's all I can do to get out of the car and walk up to the door. No one answers my knocks, and I'm not a good enough person to suppress the surge of relief this brings. I start to leave the porch, then turn back and drop Rachael's card in the mail slot.

It's for the best, I tell myself. Better to remind her that I exist before I show up unannounced on the doorstep.

Brown leers at me as I cross the street. I suppose he thinks this is the house of some girlfriend. I roll down the windows and drive slowly, taking traffic-clogged surface streets and hoping Brown hates every minute of it. When I get home, I park in the drive and stroll to where Brown stops at the curb.

"You have a strange way of showing you love me," I tell him.

He grunts.

"What, are things really so slow that the department lets you sit here and stare at me all day?"

"It's my day off."

"You need a hobby."

"I do what I want."

"Relaxing would be good for you."

"Locking your ass up would be better."

I ponder that one for a minute. "If I need locked up, I'll make sure you're the first one I call," I tell him.

I start up the driveway, then turn back. "I'm going to wash my car now," I tell him. "Feel free to watch."

“Go ahead and wash mine while you’re at it,” he says.

The answering machine is flashing when I go in. I punch it but there’s only dead air. Rachael? I wonder, but I decide against trying to call. One attempted contact a day is plenty. I grab a bucket and some rags and make a show of washing the car for Brown. Sometime part-way through, he drives away. I wonder if he’ll return.

I go back in and flop on the sofa, and this time the sandman finds me. When I wake it’s six p.m. and Brown is out front again. I toss a frozen dinner in the microwave and my cell starts to squawk.

“Why didn’t you call?” Goins yells in my ear when I answer.

“I tried your apartment,” I tell him.

“The cell! I gave you my cell when I called,” he whines. It makes me want to punch him.

“Your message was a mess,” I tell him. “You were freaking out. Your signal was breaking up. I only made out about half of it.”

“Well write it down now,” he said, “Because I’m not home, and I’m not coming back soon.”

“I have it now,” I tell him. I refrain from pointing out that if he hadn’t called the landline earlier none of this would be an issue. “Tell me about Gallagher.”

“He came after me again. Busted through my front door with a machete,” Goins said. “I had to crawl out the window to get away.”

“Where are you now?”

“Cleveland. I need to see you. After we talked, I got to thinking, and I remembered there was a file cabinet at Decker that Harry was still using when he was splitting time between the Institute and the University. I found some papers there that . . . well, I can’t really explain it all now. We need to get together.”

“What do the papers say?”

“I’m not going to go into it over the phone. Just get here and I’ll show you.”

I grunt. “Where you at in Cleveland?”

He gives me the address of his hotel and a room number. I tell him I’ll call when I’m close.

I wolf my dinner and glance out front. Brown is still there. I call Yellow and leave by the back door. The cab picks me up a block over and I’m gone. I have the driver drop me at a rental place near the airport. I get the most invisible car I can think of—a white, midsize Ford sedan, the model name of which escapes me two minutes after I’ve heard it. I hit the road.

These papers Goins found sound good. It may be the first decent luck I’ve hit since this crap started, something that will help pull all this together. I have a hard time seeing Matthews as seriously involved, but maybe it was something Gallagher got into without her knowing. I try to think good thoughts while I drive. The evening dims as the sun drops below the horizon.

The motel is right off the interstate. I hit the lot. There aren’t many cars. Business is definitely not booming at the Sleepy Way Motel. With as much

money as he makes, Goins sure has shitty taste in accommodations. His ancient Volvo wagon is nowhere to be seen. The room he told me, number 112, looks dark and deserted. I dial his cell number. No one answers.

I don't like it. I glance around for a white Econoline van. Nothing. The place is definitely looking empty. I scan the row and see only two units with lights on. I drive out and park at Burger King across the street. I watch. A couple more rooms catch occupants, but that's the only movement. I ring Goins's cell every fifteen minutes. After an hour, the BK manager comes out and asks if he can help me. I wish him a good night and drive back across the street.

I have only the Beretta. Two clips. I curse myself for leaving home with so little. I park down by room 108. I switch the cell to vibrate, slip on some gloves, and clutch the pistol. Then I slip out and press the door shut behind me. I stride directly to 112 and rap on the door. Quick. Sharp. I count to fifteen and knock again. When no one answers the second time I try the handle. To my surprise, it turns. Softly, slowly, I push the door open. Inside is pitch black. I grope for the switch and flip it up. The bulb fills hell with light. Blood covers the walls and the bed. Goins lies face up in a puddle on the floor. That is, what's left of his face is up. Most of it has been battered and ripped away. Half a scalp of Beaker-bright hair is still there. The rest is gone, only the damp red skull remaining. One arm has a deep, raw gash in it. The other is broken and

twists above his head at an odd angle. His hands are mangled and crushed. Defensive wounds. I slide inside and shut the door behind me, but a quick look confirms what I already knew. Whatever papers Goins may have had with him are nowhere to be seen. I turn the light off and head for the car.

I almost make it.

The door to room 108 flies open and there's Gallagher.

"Home run, Pike baby!" he yells as he swings a nail-studded baseball bat at my head. I drop and it hisses right above me. My knee hits the pavement so hard I scream. The pistol pops out of my hand and clatters across the sidewalk. I hear the bat slam into the wall, and I do the only thing I can: I dive into his knees. He crashes down on top of me, wrenching my knee again and knocking the wind out of me. I fumble for the gun but can't find it. He tries to clutch me but he's slow and clumsy. I catch him in the groin with my good knee. He gives a grunt that sounds suspiciously like pain, so I do it again. I get out from under him and straddle him. My bum knee shrieks, but I don't have the luxury of caring. I see my Beretta by the Ford's front tire. It might as well be in Texas.

I go for his throat. In addition to a fresh supply of duct tape that all but covers him from the shoulders up, he is also wearing a surgical neck brace. I grab the front of the white plastic device and lift, then slam. Once. Twice. Three times. After eight he stops struggling and snarling. I don't stop slamming until I

get to fifteen. I struggle to my feet despite the fire in my knee and hobble to the car, dragging him behind me. Somehow I get him up and into the trunk, pushing and folding until I get it closed. I gimp back over, reclaim the Beretta, and haul ass. As I turn out of the lot, I hear tires squealing. The white van comes from behind the far end of the motel. I punch it and I'm doing eighty by the time I get down the ramp onto 71 south. I can see the van not far behind me. I drive like nuts for about ten minutes, then exit again and watch. No van exits behind me.

That's when it hits me and I start shaking. I think of the papers that Goins told me he found and wonder if I should go back and take another look. But there's no way I'm going back there. I'm sure the van driver made off with whatever Goins had. I think about driving straight to the police station and showing Brown what's in the trunk. But no. As much as I want to rub their faces in it, I'm not giving any of it up to him or Minton until I have the whole thing. So far as I can tell I only have one way to turn right now: Matthews.

I don't know her well, but none of this duct-taped zombie crap squares with my take on her. She's straight up, a do-things-right person. She has too damn much to lose for this kind of bullshit. And she's the only one I can think of who might be able to explain what is going on.

I dial 411 as I drive. Directory assistance has no June Matthews. They have twelve hits for J. Matthews.

I thank the operator and hang up. I can't start guess-dialing in the middle of the night. I have a contact at the BMV who can help, but not at this hour.

It's midnight by the time I check into a motel. Brown has probably given up for the night, but I'm sure the van driver knows where I live. My knee is so bad I can barely walk. The desk clerk looks at me like I'm a disease. I buy overpriced aspirin from a vending machine in the lobby and chew them dry. In my room I set the alarm for nine a.m. I lie down mainly to get off my knee. Surprisingly, I fall asleep almost immediately.

## V

When the alarm goes off, my knee is swollen to three times its normal size. If I don't do something completely bonkers—like try to bend it—it hurts surprisingly little. Luckily, I slept in my clothes, because I don't think I would be able to get pants on. The downside is that I look like I slept in my clothes.

I call my buddy at the BMV and by nine forty-five I am standing on June Matthews's front porch, ringing her doorbell. I guess I'm expecting a husband, but it's the doctor herself who answers the door, dressed to the nines and ready for another day. It occurs to me that every time I show up I look worse. She doesn't look surprised to see me.

I say, "I have something I need to talk to you about."

"How about some coffee," she says, and she swings the door open. I follow her back to the kitchen. It's a trophy kitchen, with unused steel appliances and an island the size of Greenland. She pours me a cup and I sit at the table. Before I can speak, she starts.

"I had a visit from a police detective yesterday afternoon. I think he wanted to warn me about you."

"Brown? Or Minton?"

“Minton. He seemed to think you had something to do with Dr. Gallagher’s death. And his wife’s.”

“Funny, they’ve given me that same impression. Apparently, you don’t believe them or I don’t think I’d be sitting here.”

“Hm,” she says. “Jury’s still out. Did you know that the police seem to have—now how did he put this—they . . . have misplaced—Dr. Gallagher’s body?”

“You know, that makes sense to me,” I tell her, “because I found it. Or maybe I should say it found me.”

For a second—only a second—she looks surprised. Then I tell her the whole story, slowly and deliberately. When I finish, she stares into her coffee cup for a long time, then looks me dead in the eye.

“So right now, you have Dr. Gallagher’s body in your trunk?”

I nod.

“And how long has he been dead?”

“Define dead.”

“And you want me to look at it and tell you what’s going on.”

“That’s about it,” I agree.

She shrugs. “Sounds interesting. Show me.”

She gets on the phone and cancels her morning appointments. I pull the Ford into a vacant half of her two-car garage. In the enclosed space, the Ford stinks of decay. I pop the trunk. We have a devil of a time getting him out. Like my knee, he’s stiffened up a bit

over night, and he acts more like a dead guy than he has in a while. Eventually we get him out to where we can examine him. It's the best look I've gotten this whole time. He's bloated and spongy and has an overall gray-green skin tone. He stinks to high heaven, which I guess is about right for a guy who's been dead for as long as he has.

Matthews is all business. She goes into the house and returns with a knife and some test tubes. She peels back a big chunk of duct tape off Gallagher's head and takes a sample of brain tissue, then gets some blood and skin, too. We take the neck brace off and she looks at the wound I made the sword the first time he attacked me. She takes some samples from the edges of the wound. Then she starts cutting at his abdomen.

"I want some liver," she explains.

Once she has it, we climb into her car and head for the university. She talks as she drives.

"Typically in my research projects, when we are using ES cells, we give them a radioactive marker. It's so we can track their development and movement when they are introduced to a tissue sample. That way we can see where the cells go and how they differentiate. If cells from the university trials were used to repair Harry's brain injury, the marker will enable us to verify that.

"The other samples will hopefully give us some clue about what is going on with him physiologically. It doesn't do any good to repair the brain if the body's

other systems have already shut down. ES cells won't restart a dead heart."

"What do you expect to see?"

"I have a theory, but I'm not saying yet. I'll let you know when I see it."

At the lab, Matthews unpacks everything quickly onto a lab table and starts preparing slides. I pace and wonder what she will find. Finally she places a slide on the microscope and looks. She grunts.

"Well, someone used ES cells with our radioactive marker to treat Dr. Gallagher's head wound," she says. "Probably some of the same material he was using on the project, though I would need a genetic workup to say for sure."

"Who would have had access to them?" I ask.

"Several people," she says, "One of whom was Gallagher, of course."

"Would it have been difficult to pinch some?"

"Honestly? No. We have security, but it would not be too difficult to lift a small sample. You wouldn't need much to start."

I wait while she preps more slides, slips them into the scope. She takes a long look at one, then shakes her head and sets it aside. She preps another and looks at it as well.

"I'll be damned," she says.

"What?"

"They really did it."

"Did what?" I ask. "Who?"

“Dr. Gallagher and his friend Jerry Goins are the who,” she says. “The what is a little harder to explain, though you’ve already met the results.”

“Goins? What do you mean?”

“Shortly after Gallagher came to work with me, Dr. Goins approached me with an off-the-record research proposal. The idea was to combine our stem cell research with another project that he and Gallagher had worked on at Decker. They’d been involved in the development of a new blood technology, kind of a high-tech wrinkle on the idea of blood doping. Are you familiar with the idea?”

“I’ve heard the term,” I tell her.

“Blood doping is something athletes do sometimes to improve their stamina. Basically it’s artificially increasing the number of red blood cells either by direct infusion of additional cells or by injecting hormones that increase blood cell production. Either way, the increase in cells leads to increased oxygen and better endurance.”

“I get it.”

“So, Goins and Gallagher worked on the development of something called hyperoxygenated blood. The idea was for surgical applications. They were trying to build a blood in which the red blood cell and hemoglobin density was so high that it could provide oxygen for a given tissue mass for an extended period of time—say an hour or two—even if circulation was impaired. They were moderately successful. Last I heard they were getting ready for

trials. I think the initial application was running toward microsurgery—think reattaching severed toes or fingers—where it might make things simpler to cut off blood flow to the area for a while.

“What Goins proposed was seeing what would happen if we combined an expansive use of hyperoxygenated blood with the reparative potential of ES cells. He wanted—I should say *they* wanted, because I’m sure Gallagher knew all about the conversation though he never said a word—they wanted to combine the technologies to repair and fuel a body that had stopped working, to bring something dead back to life.”

“I guess they succeeded,” I say.

“I’m sure I don’t know how,” she says. “Back then, there were still a lot of holes to fill in. That was only a year ago. They worked fast. The blood cells that are supplying oxygen to Harry’s tissues look a lot like what Goins described. They’re huge compared to normal red blood cells, and the hemoglobin has been altered. So there’s a supply of oxygen even though the blood isn’t circulating. Enough to last a couple hours, maybe.

“I told Goins I wasn’t interested. It was a daring idea, but premature. No one would fund it. I knew the university and the FDA would never sign off on it. Aside from the obvious ethical issues it raises, it involves the use of not just one but two radically new biotechnologies that haven’t even been tested on human subjects individually, let alone in tandem.

“I guess I should have realized my refusal wouldn’t be the end of it. Neither Gallagher nor Goins were stupid. Nothing I told them would have been news. Clearly, they didn’t care whether the FDA approved or not. This was very reckless of them.”

“Crimony.”

“Yup. But . . . but . . . *but* . . . this is a enormous breakthrough, no matter what laws they’ve broken in the process. Keep things oxygenated, replace some damaged cells with the right kind of tissue, and you can keep on kicking when the ticker ain’t ticking.”

“For how long?” I whisper under my breath.

“Not terribly long, I’d say. A few hours, maybe, at a shot, then you’d need to transfuse and replenish the blood. In the meantime, you rot. Harry smells pretty ripe. But they’ve made incredible progress.”

They. My mind whirls. I think the whole thing through, try to lock everything together. Goins. Playing me for a slob. It makes me feel stupid. Oh, there’s other ways that it may have gone down—maybe he started it but lost control of Gallagher. But I don’t buy that: someone’s been doing duct-tape body work and replenishing Gallagher’s blood supply periodically. I run it all back. The things that didn’t quite mesh before now loom before me. Goins’s low-rent apartment. The fact that he knew I was following him. The side-trip to Cleveland—a horror show designed to put me under, or at least put me off his trail.

Matthews is talking. “. . . don't really know how. They still had a lot to figure out just a year ago. I need to take another look at the body.”

“Fine,” I say. “I'm not quite ready to call the police yet. I want to see if I can find Goins first.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“So did I. Now I don't think so.”

“Are we in any danger?”

“Probably quite a bit. Then again, he may be making a run for it. That's what I have to find out.”

## VI

On the way, I make a phone call, bugging my BMW buddy for the second time today. He comes back with two vehicles registered to Jerry Goins: the Volvo wagon and a Ford Econoline van.

It's a little after eleven when we get back to Matthews's house. We decide to leave Gallagher with her for the moment. She promises to be careful and I head out. I stop by a corner drug store and buy a cane and a can of air freshener. I empty the spray into the trunk and the car. It still smells awful, but it's a different, flowery kind of awful that I figure will pass. I return the Ford then cross the street to a different rental place and pick up another nondescript car, a black Honda.

I figure you want to find a guy, you find his stuff. I drive by Goins's apartment. No Volvo. No van. I go downtown to the county treasurer's office and check the property tax records. I learn that Goins owns the apartment building he lives in, along with a couple of others. Even better, he owns a warehouse in the river district not far from where I lost the van the other night. I copy down the address and head out.

When I get there, I feel a little smarter than I have in days. I park across the way. There's a semi in the

dock marked “Three Dudes Moving Service.” Even from a distance, I can hear the three dudes banging around in the trailer as they load up. The Ford van is in front of the building. It has plates on it this time, and the number matches the one my BMW contact gave me. I don’t see Goins.

I watch. After an hour, two of the movers climb in the cab while the third gets in the van. I follow them onto the interstate and south out of town. They’re easy to track, and I keep a good distance just to be safe. After another hour, I’m glad I started with a full tank of gas. I call Matthews and give her an update, down to the mile marker. She says she’s still putting together the pieces of the science of resurrection. A while later the movers exit the interstate and set off through a series of state and county routes that seem to grow smaller and less traveled by the minute. The terrain is hilly and wooded and blurs into a green sameness. I memorize each turn and the mileage between them. I stay fairly close for fear of losing them on a quick turn.

We pass through a little town called Baptist Junction. I’ve never heard of the place, but I’m glad to be able to put a name to something. About twenty minutes later, the truck and the van turn left up a weed-choked driveway. The mailbox at the end says 16584. I keep going until I find a good place to park along the road. I call Matthews with another update, then hoof it back to 16584. I walk through the woods on a course parallel to the driveway. It’s slow going with my knee,

but if I keep my leg locked and use the cane it's manageable.

It isn't far. A couple hundred yards and a few curves later, a big house rises up out of the trees. It's an old place, though it looks like someone has spent a sizable chunk of change to update and add on to it. I don't have to guess who owns it. The tail end of the Volvo is visible in the old garage. Goins climbs out of the back of the van carrying a box, clumps up onto the porch, and disappears inside. He's shaved off his bright red hair, and he's dressed in a green flannel shirt instead of a lab coat.

My phone vibrates. The number on the screen doesn't look familiar. I answer.

"Hi Daddy," says a small voice.

"Rachael? That you, honey?" I can feel my heart hammering in my neck.

"Yeah . . . I got your card. Thanks."

"I'm sorry it's so late," I tell her. "I've been—"

"Don't," she says, "It's o.k." There's a long pause where I try to think of what else to say and fail utterly. Then she says, "Well, I just wanted to say thanks, so . . . thanks."

"How's school?" I ask her, and then I cringe. Dumb question. Then I add, "You're Welcome," just so I can sound like a complete doofus.

She laughs, and that saves me. It's a friendly laugh, full of kindness, and it lets me know that my awkwardness is not only expected, it's forgiven. I've never been granted absolution by a fourteen year old

before, and I'm so surprised that I laugh, too, despite the fact my eyes are watering.

"School's fine," she says, "I'm going out for cheerleading."

Goins comes out and gets another box from the van.

"Really? Cool."

"Yeah. Megan says I'm sure to make the team because I'm really good, and she should know because she did it last year. She's a grade ahead of me. She's my best friend, and I know if she helps me I'll be like one of the best on the squad in no time."

The movers come out of the back of the truck carrying an oblong crate. I don't want to think about what's probably inside. It's obviously heavy. Goins comes onto the porch and helps them wrangle it through the door.

"That's great, hon. I'm sure you'll be great," I say. "Classes o.k.?"

"Easy so far," she giggles. "Haven't had time to get too hard yet. They spend the first month reviewing what we learned in the spring, like we're too stupid to remember things for a couple of months."

The movers and Goins come back out together and begin to muscle another long crate down the ramp and onto the porch.

"Make sure you stay focused on classes," I tell her. "Cheering is great, but grades come first."

“O.K. mom,” she says. I laugh. “When are you taking me out for my birthday dinner?” she asks suddenly.

“Well, I’m not sure. I’ll have to call you. I’m actually out of town right now. On a job, you know, and I don’t know when I’ll be back. I mean, it should only be a day or two—”

“I’m sorry it’s so tough for you,” she says, oozing sarcasm. So much for absolution, I tell myself, and I remember those warnings I’ve heard about teenagers and mood swings.

“Thursday should be good for me,” I say quickly, “that is, if it works for you. I should be back in town by then.” I figure forty-eight hours will be plenty of time to wrap up. If I’m still alive.

There’s a long silence on the other end. I’m not sure if she’s pissed or if she’s checking her calendar. Finally she says, “Pick me up about six?”

“Sure,” I say. “Think about where you want to go, o.k.?”

Rachael says “K,” and then she’s gone.

The conversation leaves my brain buzzing. I shut it off. I need to stay focused.

The movers climb into the truck. Goins stands with his arms folded and watches them churn out the dusty drive. When they’re gone, he goes back into the house. After a while, he comes back out and gets into the station wagon. I sink down while he passes, then crane about to see which way he turns at the road. He

goes right, back toward Baptist Junction. I look at my watch. It's 4 pm.

I figure I've been making a career lately out of underestimating Goins, so I play it cautiously. I circle the house at a good distance, watching for signs of movement, surveillance equipment, booby traps. With the bum knee and the cane, I really don't have a choice but to go slow, but I try to keep up a decent pace since I don't know how long I have. It takes about ten minutes to complete a circuit. I move up halfway and start around a second time. The house itself is impressive. The old part is a big, two-story log house built in the saddlebag style—a central hall with a pair of rooms on each side. The size of the original house is more than doubled by the addition of a new stone wing.

As I circle around back for the second time, I see movement in a window. My hand goes to the butt of my gun. I stare, but all is still. Then, after a couple of minutes, I see it again. A flash of motion, indistinct but definite. I watch and consider the possibilities. The glass catching the reflection of a bird crossing the sky above? A cat or some other pet inside? My imagination? I move a little closer, determined to get a better glimpse. Then I see it: a face swims out of the dark and approaches the window for a moment, then drops back again into the interior gloom. A pale face.

Two big crates went in.

I don't like that. I figure my best angle is to surprise Goins on his way back in. I slide back around

the front of the house and look for a place to lurk. I decide behind the garage is best, since he's likely to park there again. I hunker and watch. It seems like a decent plan, but it has its disadvantages. If I went ahead and broke into the house, I would be able to help myself to something to eat. I haven't had a bite all day, and I don't even have so much as a bottle of water with me. It's not an issue yet, but if Goins is gone for a long while I may have to reconsider.

At five-fifteen my cell phone vibrates again. It's Matthews.

"I'm thinking it's time we called the police," she tells me. "I don't know that we're gaining anything by stalling at this point."

"Let's not rush," I tell her. "Goins is out right now. If they show up in force down here at the wrong time, they might spook him." I tell her about his departure, and about my ambush plan, but I don't tell her the real reason I don't want the cops. I want to be the one that puts the clamp on Goins. Not only did he try to kill me, he played me and made me look stupid. When he wakes up every day in prison, I want him to remember that Pike put him there.

"I haven't been able to figure out any more from examining Gallagher," she tells me. "I need to be able to get him into a real lab, even if it means letting the coroner take over. I'm afraid the longer we wait the more information we lose."

I sense that this is her real concern. "No worries," I tell her. "We've got one or two more

samples walking around down here even as we speak. Nice fresh ones.” I tell her about the long crates and the face at the window. I can practically hear her blood pressure rising as I speak.

“Don’t hurt them, no matter what,” she says. “And don’t let Goins hurt them, either. They’re very important specimens.”

“Don’t worry, they’re also important evidence. I like them ambulatory.”

“Call me back in an hour,” she says. “I want updates.”

“You bet,” I tell her.

I wait. Everything is quiet, still. I’m good at waiting. You do it a lot in this line of work. An hour passes and I don’t call Matthews because I don’t have anything new to report. I’m surprised the phone doesn’t buzz. The sun drops low in the sky. I lean against the wall and time passes. At quarter to seven, my phone vibrates again. The screen shows Goins’s number. My breath hitches. I blink at the screen and thumb the answer button.

“I see you’re finally starting to catch on.” His voice is low.

“What’s that they say . . . you can fool some of the people some of the time?”

“How’s the view from my garage, bright boy?”

The surprise slaps me in the face. He’s got me again. “It’s so much nicer with you here. Where are you, anyway?”

“Oh, Pike, Pike, Pike. You mean you don’t know? Really? You’re good at beating up dead guys, but when it comes to matching wits with the living, you’re screwed.”

“Lucky for me you’re not bright enough to send someone alive to take me out,” I tell him.

“Sentimental me. I promised Harry he could do it. Poor Harry. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. Let’s try this another way. Who do you think I’m with right now?”

I get it, but I don’t say anything.

“You understand, then. Doctor Matthews and I will be there shortly, you know. She’s been most helpful in bringing me up to speed on what you’re doing.”

“Leave her out of this.”

He laughs. “To be fair, I’m not the one who brought her into it. Let me tell you what you are going to do. I’m sure you have a gun. Put it in my mailbox, out at the road. Then go back and sit on the front porch steps. And you stay there. You talk to no one. You don’t go inside the house. If you don’t do as I say, I will kill Dr. Matthews. Do you get all that?”

“Yeah. How do I know you aren’t going to just kill both of us anyway?”

“Because I like Doctor Matthews. Hell, I even like you, believe it or not. Harry was the one with the grudge. So we’re going to talk when I get there. I just don’t want to get shot. Now, tell me what you are going to do?”

I repeat his instructions back to him. He says good and hangs up.

I figure I have until around eight. I have no doubts about what I am going to do. I only hope I'm right that I will find at least one gun in the house. I guess if I don't I can work on plan b.

I walk around to the back door. I try it with a quiet shoulder press, but it doesn't give. I step back and body slam it once, twice. The noise is tremendous. On the third shot the door gives way. I suck my lips back against my teeth and listen. I step inside, alert for the sound of their approach. If they both come now—if indeed I'm right and there are two of them—that might not be such a bad thing. The central hall is narrow, a decent shooting gallery. Aim for the head, I remind myself.

I wait and listen, but no one comes. Reluctantly, I start forward and slip through the first door on the right. The kitchen. The place is bright and clean and functional. I spot a swinging door at nine o'clock that leads to the front room, and a cutting block on the counter halfway there. I leave my cane leaning against the counter and clutch a big blue-bladed butcher knife. I try a step without the cane and find that I can do it as long as I keep my knee straight. I like having the second weapon more than the cane. I push through the door.

He comes at me from a crouch. He wasn't expecting the knife, and the wide blade catches him just below the eye as he lunges. It slices through the

soft sinus and bisects his eyeball. He barely has time to start to scream before I press the gun barrel to his forehead and pull the trigger. The impact of the slug slams him to the floor. The knife is still in my hand. I drop it on his shuddering corpse. I look at him. He's young and thick muscled and his arms are covered in tats: crosses, suns, skulls. He has a double strand of razor wire inked around his neck. Through the ugly sheen of death his skin is tawny. Latino? Hard to say for sure.

I look across the dining table that dominates the room and through the front window. I'm looking right at the side and back of the garage. I imagine him standing here, watching me the whole time through the glass. Tensing as I circle around the back of the house. Listening as I knock in the door. He'd sized me up, seen the gun and the cane. Did he choose the left to take advantage of the bum leg, or was that just chance? He hadn't known I'd picked up a knife.

I go back out into the center hall and cross to the front room on the other side. Nothing. A living room with a few chairs and dusty magazines. It doesn't look any more lived in than the other rooms—because, I remind myself, no one has been living in them. I cross to the door that adjoins to the back room and slide through. A sound hits me that makes me freeze. I hear it again: a shout, a scream, the blast of a shotgun. It's clear, but somehow muted and strange. As it continues, it snaps into place. It's a t.v. I exhale and look around. I'm in Goins's lab. There's a desk with

a big PC—possibly the same one from the apartment, though I can't say for sure—flanked by a teetering pile of composition books. There's a sink stacked with glassware and test tubes; others, still in use, fill the racks that form a long line along the back of a lab table. Against the back wall, there is a huge stainless-steel refrigerator. For the first time, I see evidence of the move—a cluster of boxes in one corner waiting to be unpacked. I cross to a door in the back corner. The t.v. sound is louder there. The door leads into the new part of the house. I duck down a short hallway, past closets and a bathroom, homing in on the electronic sound. At the end of the corridor is a door. I nudge it open and take a look.

It's a big room, and it's crowded with boxes. Stuff's everywhere—magazines, newspapers, stacks of mail, clothes. There's a weight bench and exercise equipment and a couple old cabinet-style video games. The room is dominated by the huge screen on the wall and the racks of video and game disks that flank it. The screen is alive with surging bodies and muzzle flash. I blink and it resolves into something recognizable. A video game. As in confirmation, the machine gun at the bottom of the picture begins to spray the crowd on the screen. First person shooter. Some of the crowd fall, some keep coming. Then I see the undead pallor of the game's attackers and I almost laugh out loud. He's killing zombies.

I glide into the room. Whoever's playing is too busy swapping out his machine gun for a chainsaw to

notice me. The area facing the video screen is squared off on three sides by big, red leather sofas, but I don't see anyone there. As I draw closer, I see the area enclosed by the sofas is a sunken pit full of pillows. Right in the middle, reclining on a big purple bean bag, is the gamer. I'm directly behind him, and I can see the sickly greenish top of his shaved head and the bright blue crocs on his elevated, oversized feet. The rest of him is sunk out of sight. There's a pistol sitting on a pillow to his left.

On screen, he chucks the chain saw and switches to a shotgun. He kicks in a door and sprays a roomful of figures. Animated blood and body parts fly, and the guy on the bean bag gives a deep, booming laugh. Part of me wants to just plug him in the top of his ugly skull and be done with it. I take a bead on his head and begin to circle. When I get about a quarter of the way around he catches my movement on his periphery and drops the gamepad.

"Easy," I say as he reaches for the pistol. He stops.

He's big, and he has even more tattoos than the last guy. He has gold hoops in his ears, which give him a Sinbad effect. Since he doesn't have a shirt on, I can see a long, fresh scar down the middle of his abdomen. There's a scabbed-over bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. My trigger finger twitches. "Seems like you and I have something in common. We both like killing dead guys."

I'm the only one who laughs. His filmy eyes flick back and forth between the gun in my hand and the one on the pillow.

"I'm Pike," I tell him. "Who are you?"

He finally stops looking at the guns and looks at me instead. "I'm Joe," he says. His voice is thick. Death, or a Spanish accent. Both, I guess.

"You know, Joe, you don't have to die again right now. Maybe not ever."

"Where's Carlos?" he says.

"Carlos wasn't as smart as you, Joe. So now he's dead for keeps. What about you?"

He doesn't say anything. But he doesn't go for the gun.

"Dr. Goins is going down, today," I continue. "You should be glad. Yeah, he's keeping you alive. But you can bet he killed you in the first place. I have a friend, another doctor, who can take care of you. You want my friend to keep you alive, right?"

"What, like some fucking lab rat, Pike?"

I shrug. "I ain't going to lie to you, Joe. Way I see it, you're a lab rat. Question is, do you want to be a live dead lab rat or a dead dead one? You want to sell your story to Rolling Stone for a zillion bucks and be king shit of the lab rats, or you just want an autopsy?"

Joe doesn't say anything for almost a minute. Then he says, "And I do what?"

“Nothing. It’s easy. Give me the gun and sit tight until you hear from me and my doctor friend. Then—just the truth . . . questions . . . research.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

“Esta bien,” he says with a sharp nod.

“Roll onto your stomach and put your hands behind your head,” I tell him.

“No,” he says. “That wasn’t part of the deal.” He stands up and steps away from the gun. “I sit. Tight,” he says, and he demonstrates on the end of the sofa.

I walk to the pillows and pick up his pistol. “O.K.,” I tell him.

As I’m walking out of the room, he calls out. “Pike, o.k. if I play?”

I point to the screen. “Knock ’em dead, dude.”

I unload my gun and put it in the mailbox. Then I take up my post on the front steps. I sit on the middle step with my bum leg straight out in front of me. It’s fully dark by the time the headlights round the curve and the Volvo comes to a stop in front of the porch. I resist the temptation to fidget. I hold Joe’s gun on my lap, covered by my folded jacket. Goins leaps from the car and says, “put your hands up” and he waves a pistol in the air. Dumb move, because by the time he pulls it back down I’ve already fired two rounds and used my good leg to launch myself upward in a stiff-legged half-charge, half-stumble. His pistol rings once, twice, and I feel something crease my shoulder. I squeeze off two

more shots. Goins catches them in the chest and goes down.

I step around him and turn off the ignition. Matthews is sitting in the front seat. She has her hands over her ears.

“It’s o.k.,” I tell her. She uncovers her ears and stares at me from a long way off.

“Goins is dead,” I tell her.

She nods.

“You all right?”

She nods again. “Yeah.” I know she is. She’s never had much more than half a moment of not all right in her life.

I walk around the Volvo and open the door for her. She steps out and gives her head a quick shake. “He came to the house,” she says. “I don’t know how he got in, but all at once he was there—oh, you’ve been shot. We can talk later. I’ll call a squad.” She pulls out a phone and starts to dial.

“Have them send sheriff’s deputies, too,” I tell her as I sit back down on the front step. “And after that, there’s someone inside I want you to meet.”

I pull out my own phone and begin to dial Minton’s number.

## VII

Then it's all flash and wonder and two days of watching the insanity of my life spill across every t.v. screen and newspaper in sight. Two days of answering questions for what seems like every cop in the state. I feel like the most famous guy in the world. But I'm not, of course. Not by a long shot.

Joe is.

Doc Matthews is a quick study. She does what is needed to keep Joe up and moving because she knows good PR even better than she knows good research. No doubt about it, Joe's both. He's a natural. He's more photogenic dead than most guys are alive, and he has a wry sense of humor that comes through beautifully. He's so damn quotable that reporters cream every time he opens his mouth. He's got an agent, and he's already getting movie and book offers.

More power to him. I love Joe. To me, he's worth his weight in gold. He's the one who squared it all. Without him all I have is some whacko story and some mad scientist who believes it. But no one can look into Joe's glazed eyes or smell his graveyard breath or take his blood pressure—a lovely, stable zero over zero—and think I'm making this shit up. Brown hates it and Minton isn't much happier, but there's nothing they can cuff me for. Between Joe and

Matthews and the autopsy on Gallagher's wonderfully redead body, I'm in the clear. At the rate they're pulling paperwork out of Goins's boxes, I figure soon there will be enough evidence to keep me there forever.

Matthews is top-notch, too, of course. The government's all in an uproar about the unauthorized research end of this, and she's right there with them calling for an investigation. With herself at the head of the research side, of course. There's been some rumbling about negligence on her part for letting Gallagher lift samples from her project, but anyone who thinks that will keep her from coming out on top never met the woman.

And me? I'm keeping as low a profile as I can. For now, I do my talking to Minton and Brown and their colleagues. I avoid reporters. Griffith has told me that a couple of national publications have expressed interest in an exclusive interview. I think there's a bidding war brewing. It doesn't mean the other reporters go away, of course. It just gives me a reason to ignore them. There's a gang of them out in the front yard right now.

It's about time to leave, and for a second I consider just driving off and waving to them as I go, but some of them will follow and that isn't cool. Instead, I call Yellow and escape through the back door, over to the next block. I give the cabby the address and we ride in silence. It's a warm night. I

drop the window and let the evening breeze fill the cab. When we turn down the street, I dial.

“Come on,” I say. “I’m right out front.”

I half-expect Carol to be standing in the yard, shaking her fist at me. She’s nowhere to be seen. Rachael comes bounding out the front door, and I barely recognize her. Could she have changed so much since I’ve seen her? But once she spills into the cab, I see it’s only hair and makeup and braces. The rest is still my girl.

“Hi daddy,” she says.

“Happy belated birthday,” I say. “How’s your mom?”

“She’s o.k. She didn’t want me to come. Afraid I’m going to get eaten by a zombie or something.”

“Well hey, if that happens, I know this doctor who can fix you right up.”

We laugh.

“Speaking of eating, where do you want to go?”

“Somewhere we can talk,” she says, “because I want you to tell me all about it. Did you know I’m on the school newspaper now? I’m going to interview you.”

I laugh. Griffith and the bidding war flash through my mind. Screw them, I decide.

“Take us to the Green Roof Roadhouse,” I tell the driver. Carol won’t like it, but Rachael’s right: we need somewhere we can talk.

I know words aren’t magic. But they’re all we’ve got.



## **About the Author**

Billy Ramone is a fan of cheap horror movies, old paperbacks, punk rock, and pulp fiction. He lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio.