

SWITCHBLADE

"THIS IS WHAT NOIR IS...BLUNT FORCE
DRAMA STRIPPED DOWN TO THE BONE, THEN MADE
TO DANCE ACROSS THE PAGE."

— STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES
AUTHOR OF DEMON THEORY

PIKE

BENJAMIN WHITMER

“This is what noir is, what it can be when it stops playing nice—blunt force drama stripped down to the bone, then made to dance across the page.” ≈ **Stephen graham jones, author of *ledfether* and demon theory**

“Benjamin Whitmer’s *Pike* captures the grime and the rage of my not-so fair city with disturbing precision. The words don’t just tell a story here, they scream, bleed, and burst into flames. *Pike*, like its eponymous main character, is a vicious punisher that doesn’t mince words or take prisoners, and no one walks away unscathed. This one’s going to haunt me for quite some time.” ≈ **nathan singer, author of *chasing the wolf and a prayer for dawn***

“Without so much as a sideways glance towards gentility, *Pike* is one righteous mutherfucker of a read. I move that we put Whitmer’s balls in a vise and keep slowly notching up the torque until he’s willing to divulge the secret of how he managed to hit such a perfect stride his first time out of the blocks.” ≈ **ward churchill, author of *pacifism as pathology***

“Whitmer’s writing is swift, brutal, precise poetry, formed into the shape of people—breathing, hateful, murderous, vulnerable people that I care about deeply now. His characters are broken to begin with, and yet he breaks them open again and again, each time revealing a darker, thicker black sludge inside, and yet, this is also a story about innocence and trying to protect what tiny amount there is. There isn’t a trace of sentimentality in here, but whatever tiny embers of warmth that are to be found in this devastated landscape (a landscape so bleak it approaches, at time, allegory, and yet remains disturbingly visceral), those embers are completely earned and the meager heat thrown off by them all the more valuable because of it. I feel covered in blood.” ≈ **charles yu, author of *third class superhero and how to live safely in a science fictional universe***



Switch · blade (swĭch'blād') n.
different slice of hardboiled fiction where the dreamers and the schemers, the dispossessed
and the damned,
and the hobos and the rebels tango at the edge of society.

THEJOOK

GARY PHILLIPS

I-5: A NOVEL OF CRIME, TRANSPORT, AND SEX

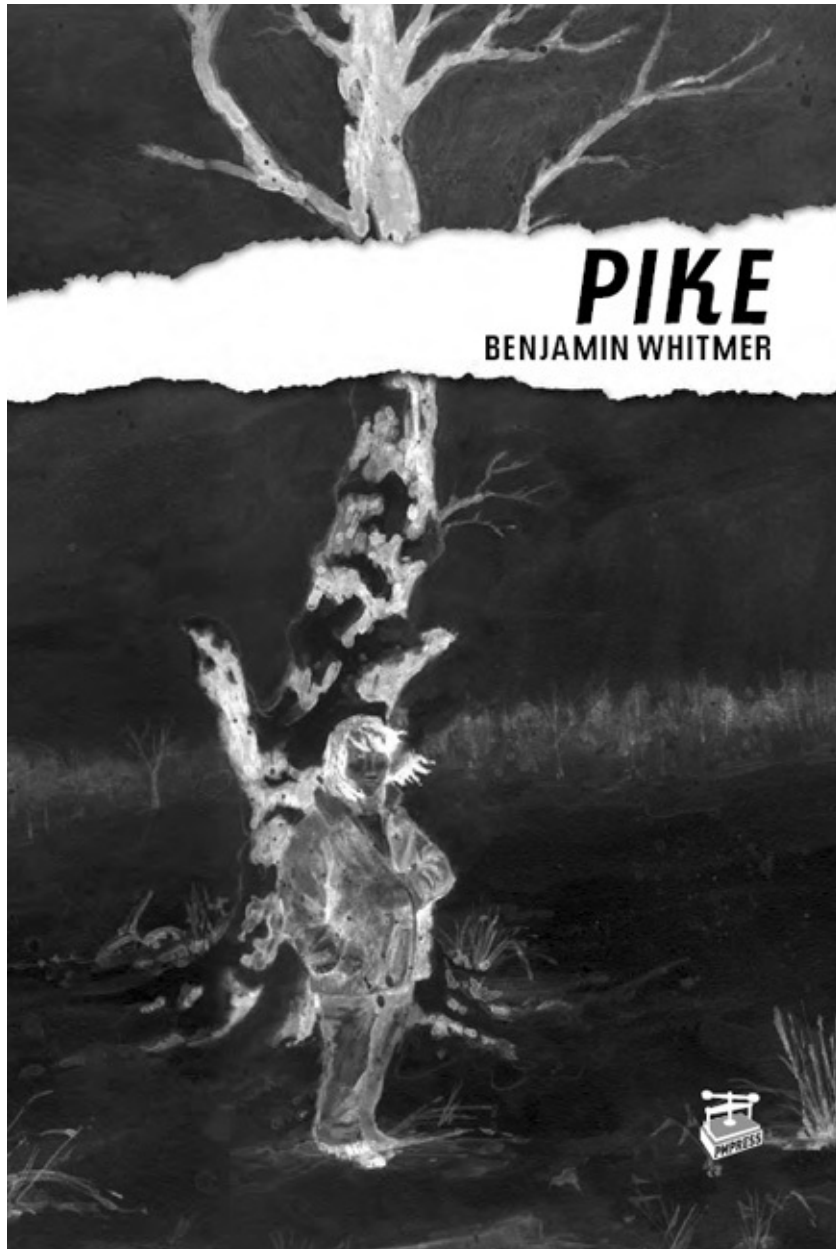
SUMMER BRENNER

PIKE

BENJAMIN WHITMER

THE CHIEU HOI SALOON

MICHAEL HARRIS



PIKE
BENJAMIN WHITMER

IMPRESS

Pike

By Benjamin Whitmer

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*For my wife, Brooky, and my children, Maddie and Jack.
All I can say is thank you.*

PREFACE

The kid's left arm angles out of the dirty snow like a stick of broken black kindling. Derrick prods the body with the toe of his cowboy boot. Not a twitch. He holsters his Colt 1911, scanning the alley. The redbrick industrials loom over him, an ancient fire escape peeling away from the building, threatening to pull down the entire degenerating wall. Ahead down the alley, a dead end into a dog run, home to a pair of pit bulls trained to take chunks out of white cops. Derrick turns and walks back toward Cincinnati's Main Street. The morning still, his boots crunching through the slick snow in time to his heartbeat, cold and regular in his chest.

The kid had sure as shit known what was coming. Had to have, the way he played it cool right up until he caught Derrick with his face bent down over a flaring cigarette, then turned and broke out through the kitchen door, nothing but an Afro blur and shoe heels. By the time Derrick got his .45 clear of his holster, the kid was already ten yards gone, running for his life.

And he played it smart for the first four blocks. He stayed off the side streets, making a spectacle of himself to the locals. There were a few of them up too, sitting on their wrecked doorsteps, watching the scene play out through their beer-reddened eyes. A couple even stood, thinking to get involved. Derrick changed their minds, snapping his sights on the closest, barking out he'd shoot the first dumb sonofabitch to step in his path.

But then the kid made two mistakes. The first was cutting down the alley. That was the easy one to see. But the second was actually an error in judgment he'd made much earlier, probably sometime the day before, when he picked out his shoes. He'd picked elongated shoelaces that trailed after him like rattails. And he tripped over them. Fashion victim. Derrick stopped, steadied himself, pulled the trigger twice. His pistol jumped in his hand like something alive, and the big .45 rounds sent the kid tumbling forward like a face cord of dry wood in a hard wind.

He was twitching when Derrick walked up to him. His lips parted, his mouth and nose foaming blood. He was blinking, trying to speak, the sky pressing down from above like an invisible hand. Derrick let loose one more round, pounding a smoking hole in his head.

He's almost out of the alley now. Twenty feet to go, less and less. Two boys step around the corner, blacking out the sun in their winter coats. The smaller of the two whistles, his white face round and all but translucent in the winter morning, his thin blue eyes watering in the cold. An electric chill flashes up Derrick's spine, he raises the .45 on them. "Back up." They do, against the wall. Lazily. Unimpressed.

"Shot him, didn't you, motherfucker?" the bigger boy says, his big, brown fists clenching.

Derrick keeps walking, .45 trained on him. "Tripped over his shoelaces."

"That right? And just managed to drop his brains all over the place?"

"Could have happened to anybody. Could even happen to you."

"Bet we get ahold of you, motherfucker."

Derrick picks up the pace, no more than five feet. A wizened woman in a maroon housecoat and galoshes peers around the corner, checking the commotion. He shoves past her and he's out, jogging. Ironwork and stone storefronts. The sidewalk ruptured as if blasted by an earthquake, and the few trees lining the street blown over with sooty snow. The gutters and sewers awash with last night's beer cans and cigarette butts and one red high-heeled shoe. Derrick skids to a stop in the middle of the street, takes his bearings. There, the limestone façade and iron balcony of the Hanke building. He starts towards Central, quick. There are more of them now, a lot more, poking their way out of the apartment buildings, stumbling out into the street. He runs.

A whistle from back towards the alley. He knows better, looks anyway. The white kid with the round face. A beer bottle whips through the air, grazes his arm, skitters smashing on the cold blacktop. He runs. A howl goes up somewhere to his left. Another beer bottle slips in front of his face. Smashes. Then a rock. Derrick ducks, it cuts the air not more than an inch over his head.

He runs. His cowboy boots slide in the slush and the beer, he doesn't fall. His car's parked behind the kid's apartment. No chance of reaching it. He hears the cold snick of a pistol's slide being yanked back. He doesn't look this time. The gun cracks out four times in sharp succession, the rounds slapping the street off to his right. Gangbanger, never seen the inside of a shooting range, no chance of hitting him. Derrick barrels towards downtown.

Side street to his left, a blue four-door sedan sitting at the stop sign. Derrick bolts for it. A Mexican man in a blue pin-striped suit, drop-jawed at this lone man in cowboy boots being chased by a roaring, flashflood mob, spilling out of their apartment buildings now, pouring down the street. Derrick snatches the back door open, jams his gun in the side of the Mexican's neck. "Drive," he rasps, jerking the door shut.

"¿Qué?"

The mob boils towards them in a fuming mass. Derrick grabs the Mexican's chin, forces his head towards downtown. "Vámonos. Ahora."

The Mexican's foot finds the gas. The car squeals through the intersection, lurches down Main Street. "They looked angry," the Mexican says.

"It won't be the last time," Derrick answers.

BOOK I

And blended horrors stare before her eyes,
Even in that time, when all should be at rest,
When not one thought should discompose her breast

— *Blind Harry*

CHAPTER 1

~ YOU AIN'T NEARLY AS BIG AS I EXPECTED.~

There's no trouble spotting Dana. She comes through the door leading with her greasy pelvis, wearing a pink winter coat that looks to have been run over by a garbage truck. A dirty black-haired girl skulks behind her, maybe twelve or thirteen, wearing a tattered sweatshirt an inch too thin for the weather. Dana's eyes land on Pike as if she knows him, and she shambles over and shoves the girl in his booth, then slides with her head ducked down like she's afraid somebody might see her. There's little doubt anybody hasn't. The diner's filled with miners heading in for the first shift, slurping coffee, rustling newspapers, calling to each other as they shoulder in and out of the cold, all of them with half an eye in her direction from the moment she stepped through the door. It's a small town, Nanticoke.

"You ain't nearly as big as I expected," she says.

Pike ignores that. "How'd she die?"

"Give Wendy some change," Dana says. "I saw a newspaper machine on the way in. She likes to read."

Pike digs a quarter out of his pocket. The girl snatches it, pushes past Dana. She's holding a gray and white kitten in her arms. It stretches its jaw and its pink tongue flicks out at the grease in the air as though trying to catch snowflakes, its eyeteeth like slivers of ice.

"How did she die?" Pike repeats.

Dana snuffles, wipes a long stream of snot down her pink coat sleeve. "She overdosed. Heroin."

It's not a surprise. But Pike misses when he ashes his cigarette at the ashtray. Tobacco embers swirl in the greasy air, rest sizzling in the thick black hair of his arm. He barely notices them. "When?"

"Last week." Dana reaches across the table and swipes one of his filterless Pall Malls and lights it with his lighter.

Wendy returns, a newspaper folded clumsily under her right arm. Pike ticks his head at Iris, the waitress. She elbows her way to their table, arriving at the same time as Wendy. "Take her to the bar and get her some blueberry pancakes," Pike says. He looks at Dana. "You need anything?"

"I could use some coffee," Dana answers.

"C'mon, honey," Iris says. She lays a hand on Wendy's shoulder, leads her

away.

Every seat in the diner's full. Iris grabs a plate that's almost empty off the counter and tells the miner who had been eating that he might want to get out in the world and work for a living. The miner sits for a minute, smoking his cigarette and staring at her as if expecting she might return his plate. When she doesn't, he keeps staring at her like he might get angry about it. Finally, he plants his John Deere hat on his head and stands, shaking his head in amazement. Iris sits Wendy down, yelling out an order for blueberry pancakes. The girl hunches down on her stool, stroking her kitten's head, her narrow face pale and her wide blue eyes darting around the room, scared and over-stimulated.

Iris returns to the table with Dana's coffee. "She's adorable," she says. "Your daughter?"

Dana snorts. "I can't have kids. I was born with two uteruses growing against each other. I had to have both of them chopped out when I got pregnant after my father raped me."

Both of Iris's eyebrows raise. She turns and walks away.

Dana snorts. "Uppity bitch, ain't she?"

"Who's the girl's mother?" Pike asks.

Dana grins maliciously. "Sarah."

Pike nods. As if there was any way that wouldn't be the answer. "Did she find the body?"

"No, and you can thank fucking Christ she didn't. Not after what they'd done to it."

"They who?"

Dana shakes her head, shudders.

"I can't take her," Pike says. "I don't have anywhere to put her."

"If there was anybody else, I'd be talking to them."

"What about Sarah's mother?"

"Alice?"

Pike nods.

"Alice caught a case of lung cancer. She's been dead for years." Dana's eyes are like powderburns. "When was the last time you talked to Sarah?"

Pike draws on his cigarette.

Dana takes another drink of her coffee and sets her cup down solidly on the saucer. "No more of this horseshit," she says, standing. "I'm leaving."

"Hold on." Pike peels a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet. She eyes the bill like she'd like to crumple it up and throw it in his face. "Take it," Pike says. "For your gas and your time."

She grabs the bill and fists it in her pocket.

Pike pulls another twenty out of his wallet, holds it between his fingers. “Where was she living?”

Dana wipes snot down her slimy pink sleeve. “In Over-the-Rhine,” she says finally, snatching the bill. “Cincinnati, 400 Mulberry Street.” She makes for the door, dragging the eyes of every diner in the restaurant in her wake.

CHAPTER 2

~ IRIS LOOKS AT HIM LIKE HE'S GROWN A

SECOND HEAD. ~

Pike's face closes, he can't help it. He thinks of Sarah and blood pours into his ears like a vessel has burst somewhere back in his brain, flooding away the sounds of the diner in an oceanic roar. The patrons hush around him, a cloud of thick viscous quiet spreading out from him like an oil spill, but he can't stop himself from thinking about her. He stops trying. For a minute. Then, "What's up, man?"

Pike chisels his daughter off his features. Rory stands over him, his square-jawed face screwed up in curiosity.

"You okay?" Rory asks. He's wearing jogging pants and a sweatshirt, a light sheen of perspiration across his blonde buzz-cut head.

Pike nods slowly. Rory slides in the booth. "Smile or something, before somebody calls a cop," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "We working today and I forgot?"

Pike shakes his head. "I had to meet someone."

"Who?" Rory's left eye narrows. "You ain't got no friends."

Pike fishes a Pall Mall out of his pack, his face slipping back into the funereal scowl. He rolls the cigarette in his fingers without lighting it.

"Not that hooker that just walked out of here?" Rory shakes his head. "Pike, you're old, you're ugly and you're mean, but even you can do better."

"What're you having, Rory?" Iris asks, suddenly standing by the booth.

"Heya, Iris." Rory gives her a boyish grin. "Half a grapefruit and a glass of orange juice."

Iris jots down his order. "I don't think that girl's ate anything indays," she says to Pike. "She's been through three orders of pancakes already."

"What girl?" Rory asks.

"That little girl over there." Iris points with her pen.

Rory cranes his neck. Wendy's at the bar, working over a fresh plate of blueberry pancakes, her snow boots hanging off the stool, dripping dirty water in a pool beneath her. "Who is she?" he asks.

"She came in with one of Pike's friends," Iris says. "The kind we always

knew he had, but could never prove. Looks like she left her here.”

“Rory gave you an order,” Pike says to her. “Go get his food.”

Iris taps her pen on the palm of her hand, looking at Pike.

“Fine.” Pike sets his jaw. “Fetch her.”

“Can do,” Iris says, smiling big and turning on her heel.

“I think Iris likes you a little bit,” Rory says, when she’s out of earshot.

Pike ignores him, watching Iris talk to Wendy, ruffling her hair. Then she and Iris are standing at his table.

Pike clears his throat. “Do you know who I am?” he asks her.

The girl shakes her head, the right corner of her mouth twitching angrily.

“I’m your grandfather.” Pike exhales cigarette smoke through his nose. “You’ll be staying with me.”

Iris’s jaw drops over the girl’s head, Rory whistles softly. Wendy just glowers. “I don’t want to.”

“I’m not sure how many options you have.”

Wendy’s eyes crack like twin windows smashed in a hailstorm, then flood through with tears. “Shh, baby,” Iris says, holding her shoulders as she tries to wriggle away.

“Fuck you,” Wendy says over her shoulder. She whips around at Pike and spits full his face. “Fuck you, too.”

Pike peels his glasses off and wipes the spittle on his T-shirt. “You’ll be safe with me.”

“I don’t want to be safe. You fucking pedophile.” She drops her chin, her broad forehead looming over her raging eyes. You can tell it’s the worst thing she can think to call somebody.

“Let her go,” Pike says.

Iris looks at him like he’s grown a second head. Then seeing he’s not joking, she relaxes her hands and steps back from Wendy.

“Tonight you stay at my place,” Pike says to her. “Tomorrow if you’ve got anywhere to go, I’ll stand you the money for a bus ticket.” He speaks slowly, enunciating his words carefully like he’s talking to a spooked horse. “But you can stay as long as you want, too. The only thing I’m asking is that you sleep on it. Sleep on it for a night.”

She stands very still, as though carved out of a block of slow dried ice.

“I’m gonna step outside and have a cigarette.” Pike pulls on his work coat. “I’ll wait for you until I’m done. There ain’t much I can do if you decide to run off. But I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

Iris looks at Pike like she’d prefer to run him through a wood chipper. Wendy stands with her hands folded around the kitten, tears and snot dripping off her pointed chin and landing in small sharp splats on her boots.

“Come on, Rory,” Pike says, shouldering past Iris, his eyes blank and fixed straight on the door.

CHAPTER 3

~ *IT DON'T MEAN I LIKE YOU.* ~

Rory cups his hands to blow heat in them, his lungs contracting in the cold. “You don’t think she’s a little young to be put on the spot like that?” he says to Pike.

Pike hocks phlegm past a fresh Pall Mall he’s about to stick in his mouth. “I wasn’t any younger’n her when I started out on my own.”

“I look at you and I see a man who could’ve used a little more love in his early years.”

Pike lights the cigarette, the flame glinting off the gray in his beard. “When men thus weep their courage grows the less.”

“Sure. That, and you’re a weird motherfucker.”

The door opens and Wendy glowers through it, her kitten burrowed down in her sweatshirt, its tiny street-crazed face peeking out over the zipper.

“I was hoping you’d come,” Pike says.

“It don’t mean I like you.” Wendy looks up at him like he’s a huge oak tree, stroking the kitten between the eyes. “I’ve heard my mother talk about you.”

Pike smoothes down his beard, his scarred hand the size of her head. “Never doubted it for a minute.”

They walk back towards Pike’s apartment. It’s one room in a brick industrial building that looms like a palisade over the small valley town. It once officed Anaconda and still carries their name in fading ten foot letters. The first flicker of Appalachian sunlight cracks over it like an egg. “So what’s the kitten’s name?” Rory asks.

“Monster.”

“He don’t look so monstrous to me.” Rory reaches out to pat thekitten on the head. It hisses, its fangs flashing in the cold air. “Jesus,” Rory yelps, yanking his hand back.

“Monster,” Wendy repeats.

Rory shakes his hand as if to make sure it’s still attached. “Does he get more friendly?”

“With some people.” Wendy kisses the top of the kitten’s head. “Not inbred rednecks.”

Rory elbows Pike. “I think she insulted me.” He’s silent for a little while.

Then he tries again. "So what grade are you in?"

"Seventh."

"Seventh," he repeats, as though impressed. "Seventh grade's a good grade."

"That about when you dropped out?"

Pike flicks his spent Pall Mall at an iced-over elm. "Stop setting yourself up, Rory," he says. "It hurts to watch."

Wendy snorts. Her face is thin and white, her limbs are starting to tremble with exhaustion. She appears to need all the venom she can muster just to stay upright. "You might as well tell the sun to stop rising."

"That's it," Rory says, veering off the sidewalk. "I'm heading home." He turns, walking backwards. "You coming to see me tomorrow?" he asks Pike.

"Depends on Wendy," Pike says.

"Bring her," Rory says. "She might enjoy it. There's always a chance I might get my head stove in."

Wendy doesn't answer. She looks like a flower in the middle of wilting.

CHAPTER 4

~ DINGY AND SMOKING AND A LOT SMALLER THAN IT LOOKED LAST NIGHT. ~

Three nights of rioting, there's no winding down. Derrick stands at the window of his fifth floor apartment, holding a glass of Jim Beam. Below the street's licked with the flames of a burning car, a pack of boys warming themselves before it, drinking beer and beating their good cheer on each other's arms and chests. Firelight and shadows flicker behind them, over the spires and ironwork of the Queen Anne storefronts, the arched windows winking at the rising sparks as if gleeful at seeing the city on fire. Given the cold, Derrick didn't think the riots would make it past the first night, but the mob just made its own sources of heat. He raises his glass to his mouth, drains the contents in one long swallow, washing away the taste of burning plastic with bourbon.

When he first joined the department he thought of the city as a river, as the big muddy Ohio that separated Cincinnati from Kentucky. Of each citizen as a tributary running into a common body of law, of order. He saw his talents as to channel it by force. He should have known better. There's always been different currents at work than he thought. Stored up in the ghettos until it bursts in an electric blossom like what's burning below. And whatever's to contain it, it ain't law and it ain't order. Derrick's learned that as a cop. The first time he found a six-year-old girl with her intestines hanging out her asshole, and her mother unwilling to finger her boyfriend. Him leaning on the wall grinning, the smell of shit still on his dick. Then picking up a kid for dealing pot the same day. The law's never enough and it's always too much.

Something moves in the hallway, scuffling, shouting, banging on doors. Derrick snaps out of his thoughts and picks his Colt off the leather couch, the metal and wood cold in his hand. He crosses the carpet silently, flicking off the lights. It scratches at his front door. Derrick yanks it open, drops his barrel. An olive-skinned girl wearing a pea coat, holding a baby. Derrick pulls her in by the back of the neck, locks the door after her.

"Behind me," she whispers, her eyes quivering.

Derrick nods at the couch. "Sit." He opens the closet beside the door, slings out a Remington 870 police model with a fourteen-inch barrel. He racks the slide halfway, loaded. He slides the .45 in his belt holster, then stands in front

of the door, holding the shotgun in the crook of his arm.

And he waits.

The door to the stairs chunks open. Loud footsteps, three pair. Two of them built slight, the third bigger. They bang on doors, they shout out. Derrick cuts the woman a glance, she's on the couch huddled over her baby. He puts a finger to his lips. Then the hollow crack of a small-caliber gunshot, .25 probably, and the sharp peck of the bullet smacking cement. Derrick rests his finger along the shotgun's trigger-guard.

Then the door to the stairs opens and closes. And there's no more noise at all.

Derrick sets the shotgun down, turns to the girl. She's already on her feet, making for the exit. Derrick steps to the side to let her pass, but she steps with him. "Please," she says, her face blotched red with fear and recognition. "No trouble." She's figured out who he is. Seen his face in the papers, probably.

"No trouble," Derrick says. "Stay here. Wait for it to pass."

"Please," she says again, and she bolts past him, holding the baby like a football. Derrick doesn't try to stop her.

He stares at the open door. Then at the small puddle of urine where she'd been standing. Something cold and slick rises in the back of his throat. He takes his shotgun, walks back to the window, pours himself another drink. He leaves the door open all night, but nobody tries to come in. He wishes like hell somebody would.

Morning finally arrives. Cold, gray, quiet. The last of the rioters have moved off to better pickings, stumbled home to wait for the next nightfall. The car's laid out on the street like a carcass. Dingy and smoking and a lot smaller than it looked last night.

CHAPTER 5

~ SET HIMSELF AFIRE? ~

Pike steps off the courthouse sidewalk to avoid two pinch-mouthed women coming out of city hall. And he almost grins, feeling the hatred roiling off their bodies. It's as natural to them as breathing, the way their kind hates him. They have ever since he was a dirty kid, greased to the elbows, tearing down engines in the front yard with his father. And it's sure as shit reciprocal, he's hated them right back ever since he was old enough to know what hate was. He even got one of their daughters pregnant, almost purely out of hatred. One who looked just like her mother and had all the same complaints. That really pissed them off. Must have. More than three decades since hasn't cooled them off. They've got long minds, these doddering old cunts.

He walks into Jack's office without knocking. Jack has a sheriff's head. A block of granite with the barest etching of a face chipped out of it. Just like Jack's father, posed in Jack's same uniform for a framed photograph that hangs over Jack's head. Pike sits down in one of the nail-studded leather chairs. "You got anything for me?"

Jack shuffles papers on his desk. "How's a few months of inside work hit you?" he says, his voice a practiced Kentucky drawl. He finds a slip of paper, flips it to Pike. "I bought it off the bank. I need you to wall it off for apartments."

"How big?"

"Big. Ten thousand square foot, give or take."

Pike folds the address into his pocket. "Got plans?"

"You figure it out. Make 'em all one bedroom. I'll get somebody in to figure out the wiring and plumbing." He goes back to shuffling papers. "How come your sidekick never comes in with you?" he asks after a minute.

"Gets nervous around cops. Somebody raised him right."

Jack chuckles. "What's his story?"

"He's a West Virginia boy. Hitchhiked out here when he turned eighteen."

"What made him decide on here?"

"He didn't. He was set on Cincinnati to make it as a boxer, but he ran out of money. I found him flat busted in the Oxbow, trying to beg a lunch. He's been working with me since, fighting the college boys by way of training."

"I hear he's good."