

Deep Cover

by Brian Haycock

Pike stared out the side window at the red dirt and the mesquite as it went by. There was a headache pulsing right behind his eyes and flashes popping off every few seconds. His mouth was sore from days of grinding teeth. Three days without sleeping, he didn't know whether he wanted to curl up and sleep for three days to make it up or never sleep again. What he really wanted was a fat line under his nose. Past that, he didn't much care.

Tic was talking. Crashing from a binge, strung out and falling, he never shut up for long. "Man, I hope he's out here, you never know. Can't call ahead, you know? Rayburn don't have cell tower. You just take your chances. But at least if he's here he'll have something. He cooks it up right there, never runs out. That's the good thing..."

Pike tuned him out. He didn't want to listen to Tic. He reached down and turned up the volume on the radio just to slow Tic down a little. It was one of those country music guys with the hats. Alan Jackson, maybe. Or Lincoln Gray. Pike couldn't really tell them apart. He just listened to the stuff to fit in.

Deep cover, they called it. Man, how much deeper could he get?

All the agents had stories about being under. They talked over beers when they got off work, bragging to the rookies about the times they had in the life like it was the best time they'd had. The big shots. The legends. The ones who didn't have stories wound up in field offices shuffling papers, a little too soft for the real action. Pike wasn't a shuffler. He was in this for the action.

Well, he was getting plenty of that now. He was way over the line. He'd have some stories.

He pulled out a Bargain-Buy and ripped off the filter, lit it with the Bic. His hands were shaking. He checked the pack. Three smokes left. He felt his stomach lurch. He didn't want to run out. He could get a couple from Tic, but if they were going to be out here a while that could get tense.

Tic was driving the old Ranchero like it was a Hummer. Too fast for the track through the desert. It didn't matter. They just wanted to get out there, score the crystal and get back. Get it over with.

"Okay, it's just up here a little way now." Tic tapped on the steering wheel. "Yeah, right up there."

Pike wondered how Tic could tell where they were in the desert. They hadn't seen anything but stunted scrub for ten miles. Maybe the man could smell a meth lab at a quarter mile. Maybe he had some kind of radar. Pike sat up straighter, stared at the desert ahead. They came across a rise and saw an old school bus, spray-painted red on rust and propped up on blocks, with a couple sheds and a pickup truck around it. There were vent pipes coming out of the roof of the bus. Pike caught himself smiling, thinking about the powder he'd be doing in a few minutes. How that would feel.

Tic said, "Yeah, that's his truck. Wow, that's a relief. I was worried we'd wind up sitting out here waiting for him."

"Okay, let's do this."

Tic pulled up next to the pickup, forty feet from the school bus door, and they got out. They stood there for a few seconds, getting their legs back after the ride. Pike felt himself swaying. He put a hand on the fender and waited for it to pass. Not long, he told himself.

“Man, this is a sweet set-up he’s got out here. I’m gonna get myself a deal like this, put it out in the desert. You can do what you want out here, none of that shit like back in the world, you know?”

Pike looked around at the sheds. They were built up from two by fours and corrugated tin. It looked like everything there came from a dump. One of the sheds had an air conditioner mounted in a wall, a couple windows cut in the metal. Living quarters. West Texas Hilton.

When he looked back at the bus there was a man standing in the door with a sawed-off. Not pointing it, but not putting it down either. Rayburn. Pike had heard stories about him, but he’d never seen him. He weighed about three hundred, maybe more. He was filling out a pair of denim overalls. He didn’t look like he’d been hitting too hard on the meth.

“Who you got there with you, Tic?”

“That’s Pike. He’s cool, man. Good people. You don’t need to worry about Pike.”

“He looks like he’s going to puke in my yard.”

“No problem there. He hasn’t eaten in days.” Tic broke up laughing.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Rayburn stepped out onto the bare dirt, still holding the sawed-off. “How you doing, Pike?”

“I’m okay. Little strung out, you know.”

“Yeah, you don’t look so hot.” Rayburn laughed at him.

Pike thought, *fuck you fatboy*. He pictured Rayburn in a prison orange jumpsuit, triple-XL. He pictured the man’s face peering out from behind the bars. Or Rayburn lying in the red dirt with his blood coming out. It could happen. That would be a story to tell the rookies after work.

A woman came out of the bus. She squinted hard against the sun. She was wearing a housedress that just draped off her bones. She stood in the dirt with her weight on one foot, looking back and forth from Tic to Pike and back. She looked like she might have been a looker once, but wasn’t now. Meth could do that. She mumbled something to Rayburn and went back inside.

“Well, did you boys come out here to say hi, or did you need a little something to get you by?”

“The second one,” Pike said. His voice sounded like sand in the air. He needed some water.

“Okay. I think you said you want to score. Hard to tell. Let’s go in and do some business.” He waved them to the door with the shotgun.

Pike worked his way up the stairs. Three steps. It shouldn’t have been that hard. He almost fell on the last step. Behind him he heard Rayburn laughing.

He found a folding chair and sat down hard. It took his eyes some time to adjust to the darkness. There was a card table set up with a bottle of Corona on it. Someone had been rolling a joint. The woman was sitting there staring at him. She didn’t say a word. Tic and Rayburn pulled up chairs. They were talking business, agreeing on how much crystal two hundred dollars would buy. There was a smell of ammonia in the air.

Maybe some propane. Pike tried to focus on the equipment set up in the back end of the bus. Beakers and flasks, plastic tubing, shelves with bottles on the wall behind. It looked a lot better than everything else around there. Rayburn seemed to know what he was doing.

“That okay, Pike?” Tic had asked him something.

“Sure. Fine with me.” Pike pulled the roll of bills out of his pocket and passed it to Tic. Two hundred. It didn’t look like much.

“How about we do a few lines? You know, for the road.”

“Sure. Here, I’ve got a mirror and a straw.” Rayburn reached behind him and pulled out a box, put it in front of Tic. “How about you, Pike? You going to do a line, get you back to the world of the living?”

Pike felt himself shiver. He was past ready. “Yeah, line me up.”

Tic worked the powder on the mirror, did a line. He put one together for Pike, slid the mirror over to him with the straw on it.

Pike got the straw into his nose, bent down and did the whole line in one long go. He felt the gasoline hit the match, the fire running through him. In a second he was right. In another he was beyond that. He felt his hands gripping the rails of the chair as if they could hold him to it.

Another, he thought. Just to get right.

He bent over the mirror, slid the blade across the glass, made a little pile and drew it out into a line. He hit that with the other nostril, saw the red lights flashing as his head just burned away. Now he was right. Better than right. Now he was king of the fucking world.

He could hear Rayburn laughing at him. He didn’t care. Tic was laughing, too. Even the woman was laughing. He thought maybe he was laughing, too. He wasn’t sure.

Tic had the mirror now, doing another, then he passed it to the woman. Pike wanted to move. He wanted to go outside, get a smoke, walk around. He stood up. And felt his chest explode.

All he felt was pain. It ran from his chest down his right arm and back up, then down his left arm. It was everywhere. He blacked out for a few seconds and wanted to stay that way. The others were leaning over him, Tic saying, “Hey, man, you all right?”

Pike wondered who had shot him. He was having trouble breathing. He could hear the sounds from his own throat as he pulled the air in. His body was rigid, his muscles spasming.

“I think he’s having a heart attack. We need to call an ambulance.”

“We can’t. There’s no phone service out here.”

“Okay. I’ll take him in. Help me get him outside.”

“Hold on, Tic. Hold on. You got this guy, he’s dosed, you’re going to bring him into the hospital, where, in Big Spring? Then what? You think they’re just going to say, okay, thanks for bringing him in? They’re going to want to talk to you about where you’ve been, who you’ve been hanging out with.”

“Jesus, Rayburn. I’m not going to say anything. You know me. I’m cool.”

“Sure, Tic. I know you. But you know, the way he looks, he’s gonna croak before you get near a hospital. Then what? No matter what, you’re going to be out there with a dead body. The law around here, they’re all dumb rednecks who don’t give a crap what goes on unless they can get a bribe out of it, but they’ve got a dead body to deal with, they get interested. And if he’s in your front seat, you’re in shit up to your hairline.

And let's face it, Tic, you get to that point, you're going to roll over on everyone you've ever met. Including me. No, he's not going to any hospital. Not like this."

"So what are you saying? We can't just kill him."

"I don't think we'll have to do anything to him. You hear that death rattle? That's him dying. Trust me. I've heard it before. We just let him alone, give him a little time, see what happens. He pulls it together, fine. Great. I hope he does. But if he doesn't make it we take him out in the desert, dig a hole. Simple as that. I've got shovels."

Pike tried to focus. He managed to pull himself into a sitting position, his back against the wall. He looked around, took it in. Tic was crouched in front of him, Rayburn standing back a little. The woman was gone. She'd probably gotten too freaked out to deal with this. They'd pulled the table away. He could see Rayburn's shotgun leaning against the wall.

He managed to say, "Water." A few seconds later Tic put a glass in his hand.

"Man, you scared us. We thought you were having a heart attack or something. See, Rayburn, he's doing better now. He just had a little too much, that's all."

Pike felt a hot pain across his chest. He wasn't doing better. If he was in a hospital he'd be in trouble. Out here he was dead. Simple as that.

"Sure he is." Rayburn stepped farther back, looked out the window. "Jennie's pretty upset. I should roll her a joint, help her mellow out some. Let me know when he kicks, we'll go out and bury him." He bent over the card table, started working on the joint.

Pike's leg felt cold. He'd spilled the water. Tic picked up the glass, turned to pour some more. Too bad, Pike thought. Tic wasn't a bad guy. If he'd picked a different life, he could have done okay. He didn't deserve any of this.

He rolled onto his side and got a hand on Rayburn's shotgun, pulled it toward him. It fell just right, into his hands, and he aimed it right into the middle of Rayburn's meth lab, right into the tangle of tubes and glass, where the propane and ammonia and Drano and everything else would meet and just a spark...

"Hey..."

"Pike, don't!"

He pulled the trigger back, thinking, deep cover. Deep cover. Is this deep enough for you motherfuckers?

Brian Haycock lives in Austin, Texas, where he has worked mainly for nonprofit organizations. He enjoys running (especially in the summer heat), hiking and reading crime stories. His stories have appeared on the e-zines Thuglit, Nefarious, Crime and Suspense and (coming soon) Yellow Mama. He doesn't do any of the things he writes about.