

## **The Inheritance**

### **Chapter 1: The Long Walk Home**

A gunmetal Greyhound stops at the edge of town, coughing smoke from a frying blacktop. The bus rumbles, heaves back onto the highway farting a cloud of diesel. Beneath the rising screech of cicadas, a buckshot riddled sign reads: "Taft County, Pop. 20,121." Dale McGovern hefts a duffel bag on his shoulder and humps the dusty road into town.

The walk is long, over five miles in the blistering heat. He could have taken the bus further into town, but he wanted to be dropped at the off-ramp. The walk would do him good. Nine hours cramped in that rolling oven, and he had to work out his aching legs. Nine hours and eight years in that cement box, he still needed time to think.

A few cars whiz past and he dips his head down, hiding behind the long black hair clinging to his face, though there is little chance of not being recognized. At six-foot-six and two hundred ninety-five pounds he was not easily overlooked. One of the cars slows as it passes and this, he figures is not good. Word will precede him, killing his chances for a quiet return. Fuck 'em. He was back and there wasn't a thing that was going to change that now.

An hour into the walk his shirt sticks to his skin, the heat sitting on him like a weight. The edge of town forms over a ridge, familiar rooflines and treetops rising into view. A rush of emotions floods into his gut, making him want to piss. He thought he

would be ready for this. Had run so many scenarios through his mind, all of them handled with calm calculation—rehearsed confidence now dripping down his spine. Fifteen or twenty minutes he'll be there, but all he wants now is still more time. Ironic. Time is the only thing he has left. Heaving the bag to his other shoulder, he wipes the hair from his face and pushes up the last hill home.

Dale keeps his gaze to the ground as another car passes him on its way out of town. He hears it pull it out onto the gravel, whip around and pull up behind him. The window of the Sheriff's car rolls down, black shades peering at him from behind the wheel.

"Well, I'll be damned. They said you were coming and here you are."

Dale leans into the window to make out the face. "Marlin?"

Sunglasses slide up his forehead, revealing blonde-haired and blue-eyed good looks and smile full of crooked white teeth.

"Been a long time, Dale."

"Yeah. I guess it has, Mar."

"Can't say we were expecting to see you back here so soon."

"Got out early."

"I heard that. I was just heading out to catch you at the depot. I was hoping to save you the trip, but I got a little tied up in town. Hop in. I'll give you a ride."

"That's alright. I'm just about..."

“C’mon, get in. You still got a walk ahead of you in this heat.”

He throws the car in park and waits, idling right in the middle of the road.

“All right... Thanks.”

He goes for passenger door. It’s locked.

“In the back.”

Dale looks at the caged backseat, then out towards town a few hundred feet away.

He ducks inside, closing the door behind him. Marlin throws the car in gear and takes them over the last rise into town.

Dale sits cramped in the back seat knees pressed against the stiff plastic divider, gym bag pinched in his lap, hot vinyl seat burning through his jeans. Scratchy voices crack over the CB. Marlin turns it off.

“Thing gets annoying after a while, know what I mean?”

Blue eyes linger in the rear view. The silence grows heavy. Dale cracks first.

“ So, how is it Marlin? Claire told me they made you deputy not long after I left.”

“Guess you two don’t talk much anymore.”

He glances over his shoulder at Dale through the plastic screen.

“I’m Sheriff now. Guess you can’t tell from back there can you.”

“You’re sheriff?”

“That’s right. Horton retired. They elected me. Been keeping the peace six years now.”

“I never would have thought you, I mean, you know...”

The car takes a pothole in the road, jamming Dale's knees into the squeaking barrier. He grips his gym bag to keep it from flying out of his lap, fingers digging deep into the old canvas.

“A lot's changed since you left, Dale. People come and go. Life goes on. Know what I'm saying?”

“What are you saying?”

“Don't disappointment me Dale. Of anyone I would expect you'd want to keep the past in the past.”

“Yeah. I guess I can appreciate that.”

“Good. Then maybe you can appreciate the fact that no one wants you back.”

“Something about keeping the past in the...”

“Eight years Dale. Eight years since we had a McGovern in this town, and we've all been better off without you.”

“Look if this is about my old man, I had nothing to do with that.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Doesn't change a thing. You don't belong here.”

“This is my home.”

“Your home? I got news for you. You gave it up when you left, all of it.”

Silence falls as they roll up to a traffic light. Downtown stretches before Dale through scuffed and dirty windows, a mirage of what he had dreamed so long to see again. He looks down into the meandering lines carved in his thick calloused hands.

“So how is he, Mar?”

“Horton? Haven’t seen or heard much of him since he stepped down.”

“Is he still on the council? Coaching...?”

“Look, he’s retired. Fishes, I don’t know. What else do you do when you retire? Nobody sees him anymore. He just lives up at the cabin now.”

The light turns green, Marlin’s eyes still on Dale’s in the rearview.

“You got a place in town?”

“Not yet.”

“Good.”

Marlin drops his glasses over his eyes, turns the CB on, filling the car with the chatter, pulls a U-Turn in the intersection, taking them back the way they came.

“Nothing personal Dale, but I have a job to do. It’s my duty to uphold and protect the law of this township. I don’t expect you to understand what kind of obligation that is, but I do expect you to understand that it means I will do everything in my power to protect the citizens of this town.”

“As a citizen I feel safer just knowing that.”

“Do not stay here. Go back to the city, shit go wherever the fuck your old man went. I cannot afford to have you screwing things up around here, there’s too much at stake, and I promise you, on my *badge*, I will send you right back where you came from you so much as sneeze wrong the way. Do you understand me now?”

“Sure, Marlin. Look, I don’t want any trouble. Really.”

“We’ll see about that. And that’s another thing we need to straighten out. You’re a felon and I’m a sheriff. From now on it’s either Sheriff Davis or sir. You got that?”

“Yes, sir, Sheriff Davis.”

“You know, I can’t wait to see their faces when they find out you’re here. Not going to be too happy about it I bet.”

“ Yeah? And how are they these days? Keeping you busy?”

“Not me. They work for J.D. now. He keeps them busy.”

“I guess that was just a matter of time. He keeping you busy too?”

The car pulls over to the side of the road near where Marlin had picked him up.

“I’m glad we had this little talk Dale. I would like to say it was good to see you again, but that wouldn’t be completely true.”

Dale pries himself from the back and closes the door.

“Thanks for the ride, Mar. Looks like you were right about my walk.”

“I’m going to level with you Dale. You’re walking into a heap of trouble. There’s only so much I can do. I can’t protect everyone.”

The car kicks around in the dust and speeds over the rise back into town.

The sun dips behind a wall of rooftops and trees. Dale walks through downtown in the cooling air, flanking main street mom and pop shops closed for business, window shades drawn, lights out. A small motel flashes a ‘No Vacancy ’ sign, it’s parking lot empty. Cars cruise along the main road passing through town. Miles in the distance Dale can make out the car plant just off the freeway.

On the stroll through town, he passes a run-down drive-in, its derelict paved lot cracked and overgrown with weeds, the tall sign a patchwork of broken plastic panels. He enters a residential area, passing old houses and mobile homes with manicured patches of lawn and gravel, stops before an open lot overgrown with weeds. A faded sign reads “Taft County Residential Park”. A half a dozen homes lie scattered across the barren undeveloped field. He stops in front of the last unit, three cars parked out front, kid’s bikes and toys scattered across the brown lawn. Sounds of activity emanate from within, kids and parents screaming. The smell of cooking drifts on the cooling breeze as the sun dips behind distant hills.

Nightfall and Dale is walking along the lit main street back through town. Two bars a block from each other bath the area in clashing neon light. Dale passes the first

sign, "Doyle's", walking into the second bar, "Ollie's". Avoiding eye contact with the other patrons, he pushes straight to the bar. The bartender stands with his back to the room, pouring a drink. He turns and nearly spills it when he sees Dale.

"Jesus, Dale! I don't believe it! What are you doing here?"

"I got out early."

"Early. Yeah. A few years early. Jesus! You in town for a while?"

"I'm home, Ollie."

"You don't say. I mean, great to have you back. Just a little surprised, you know.

It's been so long. Hey, what do you want to drink? We've got to celebrate..."

"I don't drink Ollie."

"Oh yeah."

"Could use a drink of water though."

"Glass of water it is!"

He pours Dale a glass from a tap and toasts him with the beer he still holds.

Someone protests from the end of the bar.

"Where are you staying? I could swing by tomorrow. We can talk."

"I haven't exactly settled down yet."

"How are things with Clare? You staying with her?"

"She doesn't know I'm back yet."

“Uh-huh. Not so great, huh. Well, why don’t you grab a room over at Mira’s? She’s always got a room.”

“Sign says she’s full up.”

“That right? Full of something. Got yourself a hospitality problem, huh?”

“Actually, I was hoping I could stay here for the night. Should be able to work out something in the next day or two. You still got the back room?”

“Sure I do, but we can get you something better than that. Shoot, come home with me. Crash on the couch.”

“The back room will be fine. Really. You still got that cot back there.”

“Yeah, but it hasn’t been used in a while. The room is a mess.”

“It’s alright. I’ll take care of it.”

“Well, you might change your mind once you take a look at it, but here are the keys. The big one is for the front door and the small one is for the bathroom. Listen, why don’t I close early tonight. We can catch up.”

“Tomorrow. I’ve been on my ass or my feet all day. All I want right now is to lie on my back.”

Ollie passes the keys to Dale, clasps his large hand in both of his own.

“Jesus, it’s good to have you back.”

“Thanks, Ollie.”

Dale makes his way past the bathrooms at the end of the bar and unlocks the door to the back room. The room is small and dirty, cramped with broken bar stools and tables, a bare bulb dangling from the ceiling casting it in a sickly yellow light. In one corner, a small portable TV sits propped on a chair, across from it, a disheveled folding cot canted on a bent leg. He locks the door behind him, cutting out only a fraction of the noise from the bar and urine reek of the bathroom across the hall. He throws his bag on the cot and cracks open a small window facing the back alley. A warm breeze rolls in with the smell garbage from a dumpster outside. Not so different from his home of the last eight years, not so different from his entire life.

The warm morning heralds another hot day. Dale peels himself from the sweat-stained cot, stands and stretches out the hard kinks in his back and legs, the new pains unrecognizable from the old. He throws on his shirt, straps on a boot, fishes out the other he'd used to right the cot. Down the hall, he stomps across cigarette butts and bottle tops, pulls out the keys and unlocks the bathroom door, almost recoiling from the stench inside. His bladder stings more than his nose and he just holds his breath till the job is done.

Dale returns to the bar to find Ollie sweeping around stacked chairs.

“Good afternoon.”

“Don't you ever go home and rest?”

“Sure I do. Just I don't need as much as you.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after one. I’ll be opening in a couple of hours.”

“Shit. Meant to look for a place this morning.”

“Like I said, you’re welcome to stay here as long as you can stand it.”

He points to two brown grocery bags on the bar.

“Got some things for you. Figured it was a good idea to stock up just in case. Also grabbed you some lunch.”

Dale peeks into the bags, pulls out rolls of toilet paper, toothpaste, shaving cream, snack food, pre-packaged sandwiches, chips, deodorant, and a can of air freshener.

“You always know just what a guy needs, Ollie.”

“Thirty years behind a bar will teach you plenty about that.”

Two quarters sit on the bar next to the bags. Ollie smiles at him. Dale glances at an old pinball machine abandoned in the corner.

“Didn’t that old thing break down back when I was eighteen?”

“Sure it did, but you know that old outside pay phone still works. Figured you could give Clare a call. Let her know your back.”

He shuffles them with a finger.

Shaking his head, “I don’t know. It’s been a long time.”

“A lot’s changed. Maybe she has too.”

“Don’t know about that. Things don’t seem to have changed all that much around here.”

“Yeah? Maybe you haven’t changed so much either.”

Dale scoops up the quarters, wrapping them in a fist.

“Neither have you.”

He shoots Ollie a look, then catches himself in the mirror behind the bar.

Ollie unstacks chairs from the tables. “Got to start somewhere, son. May as well start there.”

The afternoon sun cooks his long dark hair as he stands at the payphone. He picks the receiver off the hook and stares at it, then drops in a quarter and dials. His finger hovers above the receiver. At the third ring a woman’s voice answers and he hangs up before he can catch himself.

“Hailey...?”

The phone swallows his quarter and goes dead.

He holds the receiver to his ear for a minute before setting it back down. Pine trees and three-story buildings stretch beyond bar’s pitched roofline. He pitches the other quarter above them, high into the wide empty sky. He doesn’t hear it land. Even the air holds its breath, silent and unmoving. He wanders back inside.

Two toughs strut into the bar as Ollie un-stacks chairs, Bart Fitzsimmons, a curly haired six-foot, two three-hundred-pound red head almost as wide as he was tall, and Vince Dingham, a six-three lanky two-hundred-and-sixty pounder with big bones and greasy black hair. They strut to the bar crunching over peanut shells. Vince drops a lit butt to the floor, grinds it in with a cowboy boot.

“Sorry boys, not open yet.”

“We’re not here for drinks, Ollie.”

“We’re here to about a room for rent.”

“How’s that?”

“You know, a room. Figure you could help us out since you’re taking on borders now.”

“I don’t...”

“Where is he?”

“Oh, it’s Dale you want? Took off this morning. Not sure if he’s coming back.”

“Yeah? Looks like he did some shopping before he left.”

“It’s not us that wants him Ollie. We’re here on business. He and J.D. got a few things to square away. You know how it is.”

The two presses around Ollie, bar stool clutched in his hands.

“Well Vince, like I said...”

“It’s alright, Ollie.”

Dale emerges from the back hall. Bart and Vince whip around, unable to hide their surprise.

“Hey Dale, long time no see.”

“Guys.”

“We need to catch up. Let’s take a drive.”

Bart and Vince sit wedged in the front of the 70 Mach 1, their seats pressed forward with Dale crammed in back. Bart turns his to Dale from the passenger seat.

“You know, for eight years in the slammer, you don’t look all that different.”

Vince glances in the mirror, turns to Bart, “What, you expecting him to get a make-over or something?”

“I don’t know. Maybe lose some weight. Gain some weight. Get a tattoo or crew cut or something. What do you do in there, all that time, Dale?”

Vince watches in rear view, then smiles big, putting his mouth to work: “I know what he did. Big celebrity man like him, he was prime real estate. Back-door business 24-7. Know what I’m saying? Big beauty like you probably had a whole line of cherry pickers bangin’ on your back door. Shit, Bart, that’s *why* they let him out. *Good Behavior*, my ass!” Vince busts out in laughter, slapping his thigh, cracking himself up.

Bart laughed too and they high five each other with a loud meaty slap, they glance back at Dale for his reaction.

“Seems just like high school, don’t it. All we need is Dean and we’d be back in business.”

“Fuck you Dale.”

“Yeah, fuck you.”

Bart pokes a thick finger in Dale's face. “One thing you’re going to learn real fast. A lot’s changed since you been gone, especially with and me and Vince.”

Vince nods in rapid agreement, slapping the wheel with a hand. “That’s right, man. We work for J.D. now. Doing things for him. Special jobs, you know what I’m saying. We’re like his right-hand men, so we don’t take shit from no one anymore, especially, *especially* from you.”

“Yeah, asshole.” Bart and Vince turn forward, eyes on the road. Dale sighs, savoring a moment of silence.

A sign for the Roadhouse Bar & Grill rises into view.

The bar is closed when they walk Dale in. A guy sweeps the floor uninterested as they walk up to the bar. A guy stocking glasses glances up at them.

Vince saddles up to a stool, sliding the row of glasses out of his way. “Hey Markus. Where’s J.D.?”

“In his office. I’ll tell him you’re back. That him?”

“No. This is my mom. Have you met? Course it’s him.”

Markus shakes his head and heads down a side hall.

Vince walks behind the bar. Markus shouts over his shoulder at him.

“Goddamnit Vince! Get out from behind there.”

Vince casually flips him off, throwing a mug under a tap.

Bart drops on a stool, motioning to the empty seat next to him.

“Take a load off Dale.”

“That’s alright. I’m tired of sitting.”

Vince pulls out the half head filled mug. “Tired of being a cock-pot more like it.

I’m just giving you shit Dale. Hey what do they call this kind of beard in prison?” He puts the glass to his chin, leaving a frothy Vandyke. “Prison pussy!” He laughs, then takes a swig, putting more foam on his face.

Shouts escape from the hall where Markus leads his head into an open door. More screams roll out before he closes the door and returns to the bar.

“He’ll be out in just a minute. He’s in the middle of a meeting.”

He gestures to Vince.

“You. Out.”

“Fuck, man. We all work here.”

“No. I work here. You work the fuck out there. Help yourself to another drink on my shift, I tell J.D. Don’t need him on my ass again about your drinking.”

“Hey man, this isn’t for me. Its for him.”

He gestures to Dale.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t drink do you Dale? Shoot. Bart, you want it.”

Bart perks up. “What kind is it?”

Vince holds it up and spits in it. “Spitweiser tap.”

Bart shakes his head. “Dick.”

He shrugs, offers it around. “Markus, you want it? Shame to waste it.”

Markus ignores him, goes back to work. Vince shrugs, slurps the beer.

The muffled noise down the hall stops and the door opens. Three guys walk out: a bouncer big as Vince escorts a shaken middle-aged man to the front door, eyes red and swollen from tears. Vince sets the glass back under the tap, slides away from it. The third man, middle-aged, stocky, bald as a cue ball, walks up to the bar, shouting after the teary-eyed man. “Gonna ’see you on time next week, Nick?”

The man nods meekly before getting shoved out the door.

“Pleasure doing business with you. Say hi to Sally.”

Vince points to Dale.

“Here he is J.D.”

J.D. notices Vince for the first time, giving him a disapproving once over, then turns to see Dale sitting at the bar is all grins.

“Dale McGovern. You son of a bitch. Eight years and here you are in my fucking bar.”

“ J.D.”

J.D., a good two feet shorter, grabs Dale in a formidable bear hug. Dale returns it uncomfortably. “Eight fucking years? Can you guys believe it? Take a look at this man. This here is a survivor. This here is one tough Sonofabitch.”

The guy with the broom and the bouncer at the door stop to glimpse at Dale.

“ Look at you. Already you make this place more credible. You’re like a real-life fucking celebrity. Huh? Don’t you guys think?”

Bart and Vince glare at Dale.

“This is what I’ve been talking about, fellas. Star Power. You’re the biggest thing that ever happened to this place Dale, you know that. Not a single person in this shit town doesn’t know your name. And here you are in my bar. Damn it’s good to have you here! What do you want to drink?”

He walks behind the bar.

“Nothing, thanks.”

“We’ve got to celebrate. You want a beer? It’s just piss water, but what the hell! Markus, set this man up.”

Markus smiles, sliding Vince's glass over to Dale, shrugs.

"I don't drink, J.D."

"No shit? You don't drink?"

Bart and Vince shake their heads.

"Well, shit. I'll drink to you then."

He sweeps up the glass. "Here's to your health!" He swigs it, slams it down, looks at Marcus.

"Shit, this swill is getting worse. That's good business for you, goddammit!"

He leans across the bar, clamping a hand to Dale's shoulder.

"I'm glad you're back Dale. Take a look at this place. Hasn't changed a bit since you've been gone. Same old drinks, same old drunks. Well, got a couple of new additions, but not exactly what you'd call improvements you know what I mean." He nods to Bart and Vince, who stiffen at the implication.

"This place needs you! Brand-name recognition, that's what I'm talking about. Look at these lightweights. Not one among them carries the kind of cajones you got."

"Haven't you heard, all that stuff on TV is fake."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Takes a man with nards of steel to do what you did. I don't know why you did it. I don't care! I've never seen a man do what you did, and

I'd bet every penny I own there's not a guy here who could even come close. Take these guys."

He gestures around to everyone in the bar.

"I'll wager all of you right now he can clean the floor with the bunch of you.

C'mon Dale, show me something. Let me see you take one of these guys down. Any of them, I don't care."

"You want me to start a fight? In your bar?"

"Yes! No. Just throw the guys around a little. A demonstration. Shit, we have fights every night. This is just for shits and giggles. Be a sport."

Bart looks uncertainly at Vince. Vince slides closer to J.D. Markus looks at the bouncer who looks at the guy with the broom. Dale stays focused on J.D.

Bart tries to understand the situation, "So, you want us to beat him up?"

"No. I want him to beat *you* up. I want you guys to know why I respect this man so much."

"This is why you bought me here J.D.?"

"You know damn well why you're here Dale. I want you to work for me. You had your little run with Ollie, took in the city, did your time. Now you're back and I want you."

Vince squirms. "Shit J.D., you can't be serious..."

“Vince, your continued employment with this company rides on a very thin cord at this moment. Shut the fuck up while I’m conducting business. Look Dale, the Roadside needs you. This fucking dried up town needs you. What do you say?”

“ I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“I appreciate the offer, J.D, but I just got out. The last thing I want now is trouble.”

“You don’t seem to understand, the first thing you are going to get is trouble. I’m giving you the opportunity to get out of it.”

“This is about the money, isn’t it?”

“This is about business. We have a contract. You paid your dues with eight years in the penal system, fine, but you still owe me.

“I’m going to pay you back J.D. You know I’m good for it.”

“I don’t see your big future anymore Dale. No fancy cars, no TV endorsements. Sure, you’ll pay me back. When I’m a hundred fucking years old. I want it now. You don’t have it and that puts you in no position to negotiate.”

“I’m not going fight for you. All I can do is pay you back as fast I can. So, unless I’m worth more to you dead than alive....”

“Come on. Don’t get so melodramatic. This isn’t TV.” J.D. slips around the to the front of the bar. “While there are some here who might relish that idea, I can assure you

my interests are purely business. You have no other way to reciprocate. Let's put you on payroll, you can find a place to stay—shit stay with the goons for all I care—get back on your feet, pay off a few debts, get back in with the family. You're home Dale, and I want to be the first one to welcome you back.”

He walks up to Dale. “Tell you what, if you want we'll stick with the original installment plan for now, the way you want. Give you time to weigh your options. I had my book-jockey ring up the numbers. Brings, what, the original fifty, to a clean three twenty. With interest.”

He pats Dale's back and sides up to Bart.

“You guys all go way back, right? Tell you what, I'll let them handle your account. Pick up installment checks that kind of thing. Give you guys a chance to catch up. You know, Dale, these two boys really have a lot of potential. They just need the right opportunity to prove themselves is all.”

He pats Bart on the shoulder and reaches for the beer glass.

“It's great to have you back Dale. Really. Come by any time. Drinks are on me.”

Vince and Bart tensely rise from their positions, escorting Dale to the door.

“Oh, and guys, go ahead and pick up his first installment today. I know he's good for it.”

In the stifling heat of the drive back Bart breaks the silence.

“J.D. is such a fucking asshole!”

Vince pounds the wheel again. “Shit, you said it. Fucking dick! Where does he get off treating us like that? We’re his boyzzz, not his fucking *boys*.”

“One of these days the tables are going to turn.”

“ That’s right Bart. That’s right. See how he likes it when we’re swinging the big red ones.”

“And what the fuck was that about Dale back there? *Take us out* ?” He turns his thick neck to face Dale, his face slick and red.

Vince glances over his shoulder. “You were totally pissing your pants back there Dale. You see that, Bart? Dale was all afraid we were going to ream him. Lucky for you man he didn’t unleash us on you, huh Bart?”

“Fuck him, trying to dick us all around like that. Next time he wants something from us, he can go fucking do it himself.”

Hands slap the dash: “You said it, man. Fuck him!”

“ I need a drink. You in Bart?”

“Fuckin ’A. Hey Dale, think Ollie can set us up?”

Dale was taken aback. “Thought J.D. doesn’t want you drinking on the job.”

“Well I’m fucking punched out.”

Bart and Vince high five each other.

“Let’s get ripped. For old time’s sake. C’mon, Dale.”

“ I don’t drink.”

“Yeah, we fucking *know* that. So, you just sit there and watch us get ripped.”

Dale looked at the two mammoths seated in front of him, wondering which answer would be worse for him. “For old time’s sake?”

“That’s right!”

They pull up to the empty lot in front of Ollie’s’. Vince heads to the front door as Bart let’s Dale out of the back.

“ First round’s are on me, man!” Vince disappears inside.

Bart locks the car and walks with Dale to the front door. Gives him a tired look.

“Been a long time Dale.”

They stop at the front door. “I know, Bart.”

As Bart opens the door for Dale a chair swings full force into Dale’s face, dropping him to the ground. Bart drops the full weight of his boot into his back, slamming his face into the dirt.

“You fucking piece of shit!”

The chair comes down again across his back. An armrest separating, spiraling into the air.

“Fucking Dale! Fuck you fucking *fuck!*”

They trade blows—kicks and chair, until Dale is motionless in the settling dust, and the chair is two splintered pieces of wood dangling from Vince's shaking hands.

"Not so tough now, are you!?"

"How's it feel, Dale? Hurts in real life, don't it!"

Vince drops the remnants of the chair on Dale's head.

"See you next week, Dale. Hope you have the money then."

Shaken and out of breath, they high five each other and walk back to the car. Ollie runs out with a baseball bat just as the Mach 1 peels down the street.

"Dale! Dale!"

He rolls Dale over onto his back, a mask of blood and dirt plastering his face.

"Can you hear me? Jesus Christ what did they do? Hang on. I'm going to call County..."

Dale grabs Ollie, trying to pull himself up.

"Don't. I'm all right."

"Don't move for god's sake. I'll get help."

Dale keeps his grip on Ollie, lifts himself up. Shaking himself off he brushes dirt from his clothes.

"God, Dale..."

"Really. I'm all right."

He wipes his shirt over his face, mopping up most of the mess. A fresh trickle of blood streams down his forehead from an open wound.

“Can’t believe they actually chaired me.” He shakes his head, dabbing the trickle of blood with his soaked shirt. “Trust me. I’m fine. Used to do this for a living, remember?”

“ You want a bandage or something. Some ice?”

“How about some thread?”

Ollie looks down at the broken pieces of wood and sand-clotted pools of blood, then follows Dale inside.

Dale looks at himself in the scuffed graffiti-etched bathroom mirror. Not that bad once all the blood was wiped away. Took only five stitches. The thread, the only one Ollie could find, was black and made the injury seem worse than it was, but it was an adornment he was used to. The ringing pain actually felt good. It reminded him he was alive.

He stares at his reflection, straight on, then from one side, then the other. Had he changed? Truth was he didn’t even know who he was looking at half the time. He might get a glance at a passing reflection and not even know the glaring figure was him until the second or third look. Watching his own fights, he was indistinguishable from all the other guys, but the interviews were strange, because his face was still familiar and he could not trick himself into believing he was someone else. Past his distorted features—massive

neck, swollen muscles, the blunt chiseled features—past the villainous role he played, he still recognized something of himself. But is at times like this, alone with a mirror, that he sees his real self, who he was, who he is and then, as always, turns away.

He pulls the damp, pink-stained shirt from the bathroom sink, hangs to dry over the door, turns off the light. It's 7:00 and quiet in the bar. In light his first payment, Ollie decided not to open the bar that night so Dale could get his much-needed rest—also perhaps to avoid the risk of running into any further trouble. Dale sent Ollie home after his concern became exhausting. Professionally abusing his body for over seven years, he figured people would know he was used to the pain. But maybe it wasn't his pain they were so concerned about, but their own. If they couldn't stand pain themselves, how could they stand seeing it in someone else? All these years were people afraid of Dale because all of his injuries were just reflections of their own fear of suffering?

He drops down on the cot, flicking on the portable TV. Blurry black and white image fill the screen, and he lies back, propping his head on the ratty gym bag, and falls straight to sleep.

## **Chapter 2: Picking Up the Pieces**

He lays awake, large, calloused hands clasped behind his head. His dream fades like dying embers in the rising sun. As early morning light bleeds into his room, he dresses and goes out into the cool, still air.

He isn't sure where to go first. There is much he wants to see; much he has to do—none of it he wants to do. By the looks of things, a job is going to be the first matter of business, not only to get J.D. off his back but to also give him his first handhold on his new life. Yesterday had been less than a success after his botched pass at reconciliation. What else could he fuck up today? For the time being he at least had a place to stay. He didn't have to crawl back to Clare. Shit like that was even an option. Contrary to Ollie's optimism, he knew there would be no chance for his return. But he was right about one thing all right—the room stank.

Too early to look for work he reacquaints himself with the lay of the land. Little has changed—not in the last eight years, not in the last forty. Everything looks frozen in the stillness of the morning, indistinguishable from the images burned in his mind. When he wanders onto Jacobi Street he can no longer deny the impulse. He has to see it.

The store.

He had heard it closed down around the time he was put away, knew his father abandoned it a couple of years ago just before the news about the scandal broke. He still couldn't make sense of it. His father had raised that business like a child, giving it all the love and attention he never gave his own son, and as quick as a snake, the old man left town, leaving behind an even greater legacy than the great Taft business he'd built up for the last forty years. With his old man gone, what of the store? It still has to be here. It was as much a part of town as any person. Didn't matter that it was closed now. People didn't

leave town or become any less part of it when they died. They just moved below ground. Shit, most of Taft's residents were dead whether they were buried or not.

He comes to the corner of Washington, and as if on cue, sees it rise into view. Three feathers radiating skyward from the caricatured face, frozen in an open-mouthed, wide-eyed war cry, tomahawk swinging high from the bare-chested, moccasined 1940's cartoon Injun rising into view. High atop the weed choked pedestal stands Geronimo, of Geronimo's Automotive & Hardware Supply, twelve feet high, forty years strong, there wasn't a person in town that didn't know the big chief or have a special place in their heart for him. He was more than an icon of the town, a landmark, he was the town mascot, to Taft what apple pie was to America. He was the great mid-western success story, the child of innovation, hard work, and simple determination. Dale's father settled him here like one of history's great explorers. Staking him to the ground like a flag, and it was his father who took it all away.

He expects the store to be abandoned—windows broken, boarded up and graffitied, the parking lot a cracked bed of cement and weeds—a ruin. This is not what he finds. He sees the bright red and white stripes first, tall sparkling panes of glass, the smooth paved lot. He recognizes it instantly, but like his own reflection, its familiarity makes it that much more alien. Beacon's Hardware was one of the largest Hardware chains in the Southwest. Over 250 retail stores nationwide, they were guaranteed to show up in every new mall and retail center. They were everywhere, and now the fast-food chain of hardware stores had found its way into the negligible town of Taft.

He could not have imagined anything more out of place. In any other part of the country Beacon's were so commonplace they were invisible. But here it was an anomaly, a blight. How was it that a national chain could replace the one homegrown business successful enough to expand beyond the narrow confines of town? Perhaps success had its own smell and the chains, like sharks, could smell the blood of his father's modest success before it had even turned belly up.

It was a strange pairing, Geronimo and Beacon's. They couldn't have been from two worlds farther apart. The owners of the store must have found the mascot a novelty, figuring it could hawk their hardware as well as it had his father's. But something about it wasn't right—more than just the age and wear, the charging, war-painted Indian was no longer proud. He was screaming, fleeing captive, shackled to the world of the white man—slave to progress. Though his body still towered high in the air, his spirit was broken, falling limp behind him like a shadow. The Indian should have died with the store.

The sight weighs heavily on him, forcing him finally to turn away. He had been prepared for the feeling of loss at finding it dead and gone. But not this. This was more than a loss. It was a violation. He forces himself further on through town, past all the old buildings until the sight is left only in his mind. He passes new shops, new signs, but most remain the same—new paint jobs maybe, but still the same owners who had run them all their lives. A few cars roll by, early risers heading to work. When a couple of familiar faces pass by he turns away from the main road. His stomach aches and he

searches in a passing store window for a reflection to remind him he has not stumbled into the past.

The Top of the Morning Diner is open, as it always is, and though he doesn't feel hungry from his experience with the store, he knows he must eat. He orders at the bar, keeping his back to all the customers he knows are staring at him. The waitress he remembers from high school. He doesn't remember her name, but she had been nice enough then. She's not so nice now. He fills up on the breakfast special, with two sides of bacon, four slices of toast, juice, coffee, and water and realizes he has enough money to float himself for a week. He pays the check, chinsing on the tip—remembers she was a bitch in school—walks out past hushed tones and curious looks. He wants to get away from everyone and everything. Everybody but one.

He strays out onto Duck Lake Road, a windy two-laner that cinches through the west hills past Duck Lake. About the only traffic the road saw was during the peak months of summer when vacationers came up from the city to camp out on the lake and catch fish. Several years of drought had taken its toll on the lake and the vacationers dried up as quickly as the water. Not much happened up there now. Horton had a cabin out on the lake.

It takes him longer than he remembers to get there. He walks for three hours by the time he gets to the familiar driveway that curves up into the hilly nook. Pausing to wipe the sweat from his head and catch his breath, he realizes he should have called first, but damn if calling people wasn't becoming a bitch to do. All of his plans for his return

keep evaporating away. At least this gives him an out. No one is expecting him, he can just turn around with no one the wiser. But the return walk was going to be long, and he's in no hurry to hit the road again. He ties his hair into a ponytail, presses up the driveway, Top of the Morning Special sitting in his stomach like a rock.

When he sees the truck he is hit suddenly by both anticipation and dread. Horton's old pride and joy, the 64 Chevy pick-up juts from the driveway like an exposed fossil. How long has it sat like this, covered in dust and debris? Five years? Ten? He knows now he shouldn't have come. Anticipation turns cold and he turns to head back down.

*"Dale?"*

He glances up towards the cabin nestled in the trees and sees her watching him.

*"Lily?"*

*"My god! I don't believe it. What—what are you doing here? I thought..."*

*"I got out early, Lil. I'm back."*

She inches cautiously down the slope closer to him, looking for a moment almost the same.

*"I don't understand. Why are you here?"*

*"I was paroled early. I've come back home."*

She walks up to him, shaking her head as though not understanding. He then sees how much she has aged. Her salt and pepper hair now ragged clumps of white. She was still petite but had no more of the youthful energy she had carried her well into her fifties.

“But, why are you *here*, Dale?”

“I’ve come to see Horton. Is he...?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

She looks at him incredulously.

“Is he around, Lil? I’d like to talk to him.”

“How can you say that? How dare you stand here and pretend like you don’t know what you did to him.”

She raises her fist to hit his chest, then stops herself. She brushes back her hair and drops her hands back to her side.

“Sure Dale. You go see him. It will be good for you to see him.”

She turns around.

“Lil, where is he?”

“Where do you think? He’s out at the lake, where he always is.”

She walks back up to the small house leaving Dale there in stunned silence. He puts a hand to his chest feeling the pain of the blow she didn’t strike. She used to love him, cherish him, as he cherished her like the mother he never had.

He walks down the trail towards the lake. Though now overgrown he remembers the walk well. He weaves through long branches, crunching over dried pine needles, cones, and broken branches. Dappled sunlight opens to reveal the small pier that Horton used to tie his fishing boat to. The boat is gone now. So too is the lake.

Horton sits in a chair at the edge of the shallow muddy bank, fishing rod perched in his hands, line sagging into the few feet of murky water. Frogs and crickets wail in the warm air. He looks back to the cabin nestled in the trees, smoke trailing from a chimney. It was the closest thing he had ever come to calling home. Now it seemed so small, frail, hiding in the woods. He takes a breath and walks down to see the former sheriff of Taft County.

“The fish jumping today?”

His head turns slowly, lingering on Dale for a moment before drifting forward again. His voice as dry and cracked as the lakebed, “Salmon pass through here on their way upriver. Good fishing this time of year. Caught a ten-pounder yesterday.”

“That right? Horton? It’s me, Dale. I’m back.”

Dale knees down in front of him, to give his old eyes a closer look.

Horton gazes distantly at him, a sign of effort passes over his face, then is gone.

“Dale?”

“Dale McGovern.”

Dale smiles, grips the old man’s shoulders. Though Horton had not changed much with his long, broad frame and trademark silver hair, his once strong body was no more than bones in Dale’s hands. Looking into his eyes Dale could no longer see his old friend.

“I know a McGovern, now that I think of it. Runs the store down on Washington. Big Indian out front. Buy all my poles there.”

“That’s Bill, my father. I’m Dale. You know me. How could you forget? It hasn’t been that long.”

“Don’t know any Dale. Unless you’re Vinnies ’boy. Died in Vietnam.”

Dale drops his head. Horton tests his line. A cool breeze parts the heat around them and Dale looks out over the shrinking lake, the surrounding woods. He closes his eyes, feels the warm sun on his face. The weather was nice here, in the shade. It reminded him of the time Horton had brought him up here for his first fishing lesson.

“I remember when you picked that rod up from my dad when I was about fifteen. He’d be pleased you still use it.”

Dale opens his eyes, rises.

“I didn’t know. I just came be to see—to say I’m sorry. I—Take care.”

He puts his hand gently on Horton’s shoulder, and walks back up the path, leaving Horton and the lake, passing through the canopy of shade and light, the man shrinking from view in his mind, once and for all. He gives the house one last look, surrendering the desire to see it from inside one more time. As he passes the truck, Lily calls after him.

“He loved you Dale. He did everything in the world to help you, and when you left it killed him. Do you know that you never even said goodbye. Or thank you? You never even thanked him.”

“I know.”

“Did you see him?”

“Yes. How sick is he?”

“Alzheimer’s. Everything from the last thirty years is gone, just like that. Do you have any idea what that’s like?”

“I can guess.”

“You can guess...”

“Lily, I didn’t know.”

“No one knew. Not even me. It didn’t become obvious until after you left. That’s why he was really retiring. Doc Sheppard told me that. He knew he sick, but he kept it hidden until after you left town, then everything just fell apart and he wanted out.”

“That’s how Marlin took over?”

“Marlin didn’t take over, Dale. The council took over. They put Marlin in, wanted someone who would serve their interests. Someone not like Horton.”

“And that’s why he gave up?”

“He gave up because of you.”

The words loop through his mind like a tape he can’t turn off. He tries to drown it out with other thoughts, but it just grows louder. Still stiff from the last two days he walks through quicksand—the words pressing him down deeper and deeper. The sun aims lazily for a nook in the distant hills and he figures he has another two hours before dark. He should be back in one. The memories cascade through his mind and he does

what he can to blank them out, blank everything out. But then he is snagged by a familiar sight.

At the side of the road is a tree he recognizes for some reason. He doesn't place it at first. Its bark is scarred and knotted; a low thick branch looks amputated at the elbow with three younger branches growing from it. Then he remembers. It's not the tree but what happened to it. He steps over the guard rail onto a cushion of dried twigs and leaves and looks down the sharp grade into the canopy of trees and shrubs below. Then he sees it, right where he left it nearly twenty years ago. He skip-slides down the hill, knocks loose rocks and dirt clanking onto the rusted metal of his old '64 and a half mustang.

He has not set eyes on the car since the day he drove it off the road, in all this time has not given it a single thought. And yet here it is, in the very grave he had left it. The car sits nose angled down, caught between two trees that have since scarred over and grown around it. He tries opening the driver's side door, but it is jammed shut from damage or rust. He swings around the other side and yanks on the passenger door until it wrenches open far enough for him to wedge inside. He sits on the torn, cracked leather seat, exposed springs poking his ass. The car groans protesting his weight. He wipes away leaf draped spider webs, dead foliage, needles, pinecones, and dust. It is a strange feeling sitting there, knees pressed into the hard plastic dash, decaying fabric sagging from the ceiling onto his head, the smell of must and mold choking his nose. He looks through the splintered windshield nearly opaque with dirt and debris, abstract patches of light cascading through swirling dust.

Cicadas and birds blaze around him. The car is as he left it. Nothing has changed. Under the driver side visor over he finds the yellowed, crumbling registration, the year no longer visible. Gathered at his feet, rusted, crushed beer cans, the first and last serious drinking he ever did. In the dash—he has to wedge his fingers into it, pulling until it a hinge breaks and it cracks open—in the dash, everything he ever kept in there, whatever it had been, congealed and degraded into a moldy black mass. This was his first car. *His* car. Not the one his father gave him when he graduated from high school. This was the old car he bought—put back together over four years, invested with every adolescent dream he ever had. When the dreams came to a crashing stop, so did the car, and he never looked back.

An itch tickles the back of his throat and he tries to suppress it. He clears his throat, and the tickle turns into a spasm. He fights against it until it explodes into a coughing fit, and he is finally forced to escape from the decaying remains of his youth. He lands on the soft slope, catching himself against the tree to keep from sliding further down. He pulls the fresh air into his lungs and regains control of his breathing. Around him, nature presses on undisturbed as if the car were simply one more leaf that had floated to the ground twenty years ago. The desire strikes him to rest here a while. His legs and back throb from the two days of walking and riding. The sun slinks behind the slope, bathing him in cooling shade. But night is not far off. He can rest when he gets back town. He stands and drags himself back up the hill.

He mulls it in his mind the entire walk back, anticipating the angles, rehearsing answers for phantom questions, as he had the night before, the night before that, and the last eight years. Standing at Ollie's 'payphone, he drops the quarter in and dials. It picks up on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

He sighs, a weight falling from his shoulders.

"Clare. It's me."

Silence.

"Clare."

"Where are you? Are you here, you son of a bitch? Are you back? People are saying you're in town."

"I'm at Ollie's."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me you were coming? Why the fuck didn't you call me? How long have you been here?"

"A day. Two. I called, but..."

"But what? Did you talk to Hailey? Goodman you Dale, do not talk to her, do you understand me!"

"We didn't talk. I hung up... Look, I'm not here to cause any more trouble. I'm back. I'm starting over. I want to set things straight between us."

“Oh, is that right? You’re starting over. It’s a little late for that, don’t you think.

And why the fuck are you calling me at this hour?”

“Look, you want to talk or not?”

“You want to talk about the money, Dale? You ready to talk about that?”

“I’m getting a job, Claire. I’ll pay you everything I owe you. You know I will.”

“I don’t know what you will do, Dale. I never did. When you get the money, we’ll talk. Until then, don’t bother me, and do not bother Hailey. You have hurt her enough. Goodbye!”

“Wait, Clare...!”

The connection cuts off.

“How is she...?”

He sets the receiver down and stares out into the parking lot.

It’s busier than it was the day he arrived. Cars fill the small lot. No doubt word about his stay has leaked out. The place was probably full of people who wanted to see him--fans, old associates, troublemakers, or debt collectors. When he was on top, it seemed everybody wanted something from him. That much hadn’t changed. Then he notices the shiny black Camaro.

He doesn’t recognize the car; it’s the custom plate that draws his attention--BEAN. He looks around and steps up to the car, peering into the tinted windows. By the light of the neon sign and flickering lamppost above, it’s too dark to see into. The car is clean, V-

8, expensive. A babe magnet. Quintessential dick car. The same kind Dale and his friends used to dream about. And it was Dean's.

He walks around to the front of Ollie's, puts his nose against the small window to see if he is inside.

There he is, heading straight for him.

The door swings open, Dean walks straight out, flicks a cigarette butt to the ground, then turns the corner to his car. The Camaro starts up with a deep roar and pulls out of the lot. Dale watches the red lights disappear into the darkness from behind the corner of the bar. He looks down at the butt smoldering on the ground. It dies out, the last curling wisp of the smoke dissolving in the still air.

Seeing Dean had affected him more than he thought. They were old friends, had been, all of them, him Dean, Bart, and Vince. But he and Dean had been close. For a while, they were as close of friends as he ever had. Everything changed when he left. But thing between he and Dean had changed before that. Frankly he hadn't expected to see Dean again. Figured he would have pulled a disappearing act as each of their fathers had and since the day he left, Dale never thought of Dean again, as though he had already ceased to exist. Seeing him again, walking out of the mouth of Ollie's like Jesus walking resurrected from the tomb, Dean 'the bean 'Mackay alive and well and in the position a brand-new Camaro, obviously something in town had changed.

### **Chapter Three: Old Haunts?**

Dale hits the pavement looking for work, hitting nearly every business in town: restaurants, gas stations, retail stores, grocery markets, the motel, a warehouse, doctor's office, dentist office, fire station, town hall, the funeral parlor, ice cream shop, nursery, vet's office. He is met with suspicion everywhere he goes, whether they know him or not. Either the stories preceded him, or they simply didn't like the idea of hiring a towering bruised ex-con. Of those who know him, they pretend they don't, as though nothing had ever happened, he had never left. He used to care about what they all thought, but now he just wants to get on with his life and wants everyone to stay out of his way.

He hits the Top of the Morning for the third day in a row, falling into his old routine: two lunch specials with a large chocolate shake and side of coleslaw and beans. Sitting at the bar, in his regular since the age of twenty, he peels off his dust worn boots, shakes out a pebble on the black and white linoleum floor. His feet exhale a sigh of relief. The boots he had worn for six years straight before he was put away. Wearing them now, they feel like strangers, and for the past three days they've put a beating on his feet. Even they don't want him back.

He sits there as long as he can, before testing Val's patience. Val, the short, bald owner he's known since he was a kid. They had a thousand chocolate milkshakes between them. That meant enough to Val that he didn't give Dale any shit, though his presence did seem to put a damper on business. So, he tries to keep it in and out, so as to

spare Val's customers the discomfort of his presence. But this time he has a reason to linger. It's called stalling. He had put it off thinking he wouldn't have to do it, but now that every other option was exhausted, he simply did not want to do it. He stares at it across the street, and it stares right back at him.

The Now Hiring sign describes in glorious red and white trimmed detail, the illustrious benefits in joining the work force of the worldwide leader in household hardware. He looks over his shoulder at the towering sentry backlit in the late afternoon sun. A bird fidgets on the chief's head like a headdress feather bowing in the wind.

He steps from the shadow of the Indian into the red and white prefabricated world of Beacon's Hardware. Isles of hardware goods stretch from wall to wall, neatly stacked, displayed, and priced. He looks for something familiar, anything at all, but does not find it. A pock-faced teen sits behind a cash register, enthralled in an issue of Babe and Driver. He only looks up when Dale is standing right in front of him.

"Uh, can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'd like to fill out an application."

"Sorry?"

"I'd like an application."

"Uh...I don't know if we're hiring. Right now."

"You have a sign in the window."

"Oh. Yeah. I, uh, should ask my manager."

“Can I still have an application?”

He slips his magazine under the counter, fishes around, pulls out an application tablet that he slides over to Dale.

“Got a pen?”

“Yeah, uh...”

He fumbles around under the counter, until Dale pulls a pen from the teen’s shirt pocket. Dale fills out the form while the nervous cashier disappears down an aisle. He returns with a gum chewing bookish girl in her twenties.

“Can I help you?”

Dale looks up from the form and sees the Assistant Manager badge.

“Yeah. Hi. I’d like to apply for a job.”

“I, um. I don’t think we’re hiring right now.”

“There’s a sign in the window. *Now Hiring?*.”

“Oh yeah. I should check with my manager.”

She looks at the cashier who just shrugs then goes back to his magazine as she disappears down an aisle. She returns with a tall, slender guy in his early thirties, white shirt, black tie. Manager.

“Hi there. Can I help you?”

Dale rips the filled form from the top of the tablet, hands it to the Manager, hands the pen back to the clerk.

“Saw the sign out front. Just wanted to apply.”

“Oh, the sign. That thing still up, Janice?”

Janice nods anxiously.

The Manager excuses himself, goes to the front window, pulls down the sign and returns with it.

“I’m sorry. We meant to take this down last week. We filled the position already.”

“You did. The cashier position?”

“Yes.”

He smiles, nods to the teen reading his magazine.

“So the Stocker and Senior Manager positions are still open then.”

“Oh. Uh...”

He looks down at the sign in his hands. Dale reaches down, turns it over in his hand.

“What position exactly are you applying for?”

“Either of them. I could use the work. Look, I have experience.”

“I see. Well, leave your application with me. I’ll look over it when I have a chance.”

“Can you look at it now?”

“Were about to close, sir.”

“We don’t close until six today, Mr. Simmons.” The clerk volunteers from behind the counter. Mr. Simmons eyes the teen. The Assistant Manager jumps in taking a break from her chewing.

“Kenny, don’t read when you’re on shift.”

Mr. Simmons gives her a look and she quietly swallows her gum. He turns his attention back to Dale.

“Well, Mr. McGovern...”

“McGovern. Dale.”

“Dale. I’ll look it over today, and if I feel you are qualified, I will call you in for an interview. But we have hundreds of applicants, Mr. McGovern, so it might be some time...”

“How about now. You could interview me while we’re both here. Save you the trouble of calling me back in.”

“I—. Come with me.”

He leads Dale to the corner of the store. He scans quickly across the front, then flips it over.

“What it is this? You are on parole?”

“Yes, sir.”

“From an 11 year sentence in a state prison?”

“More like seven years. I got out on good behavior.”

“You are an ex-con?”

“Yes, sir. Ex, as in no longer. I’ve served my time. Now I just want to get back to work. If you look at the front you’ll see I have more than enough experience.”

The manager shakes his head incredulously, flips it over.

“Let’s see. Experience..., Work History..., you used to work here?”

“That’s right.”

“From... How long did you put down here? Fourteen years? Come now, Mr. McGovern. I find that hard to believe.”

“I worked here from age seven to twenty-one. I wasn’t really paid until I turned eighteen, but I worked all the same. Six days a week. I worked stock, shipping, cashier, service, repairs, sales, and management. You do know who I am, don’t you. Dale *McGovern*, Bill’s son. Of *Geronimo’s*...”

“I, uh, I’ve only been here since we opened last year. Part of the Managers Training Program. Look, this isn’t a *Geronimo’s* anymore. It’s a *Beacon’s*. Maybe you noticed the sign outside? We don’t sell whatever it was your father sold....”

“Hardware?”

“We specialize in selling recognized brand name household hardware appliances and goods, Mr. McGovern.”

“Hardware.”

“Hardware. I’ll put your application on file, Mr. McGovern. Thank you for your interest in joining the *Beacon’s* team.”

On the walk back to Ollie's', Dale cuts through the old drive-in to avoid any chance encounters. He's not in the mood for any familiar faces. Two tall movie screens stand like the battered sails of a ghost ship. The aquamarine brick projection and concession house is boarded up, graffitied, surrounded by weeds. The vast lot is a jigsaw of broken pavement, broken glass, crushed beer cans, discarded clothes, abandoned shopping carts, piles of shit--dog and human. Weeds sprout from the ruptured ground, swaying in the cooling evening air. The number two screen is tagged in tall cryptic symbols Dale cannot decipher. He kicks a bottle across the lot. The place is serene, stripped speaker posts spiking out of the ground like grave markers.

Stepping over the broken fence on his way out he notices the dog behind him. He doesn't know how long it has been watching him. It stands there unmoving, staring at him intensely, as though it might bolt or charge at any moment. It was a mangy dog, reminding Dale of the packs that used to run wild in the city, hunting through garbage cans in the middle of the night. Dale breaks eye contact to make sure the dog is alone, and when he figures it is not a threat he stomps his boot down on the fence and bounds over it back to the bar.