

Haunted by the past

The tabletop at Sleepy Joe's Café was sticky with spilled coffee and the ghosts of a thousand late-night confessions. Blind Willie Johnson crooned from the jukebox, his voice a mournful echo in the near-empty room. Outside, the rain hammered against the windows, a relentless drumming that mirrored the unease in Todd's heart. He'd been back in Darlington County for a week, and it felt like a lifetime. The place hadn't changed much. The same dusty roads, the same boarded-up storefronts, the same sense of faded glory clinging to the air like cheap perfume. But Todd had changed. He'd left town seventeen years ago, a skinny kid with a head full of dreams and a guitar case in his hand. He'd wanted to escape the suffocating smallness of Pine Ridge, to find his own Thunder Road, to outrun the darkness that had haunted his childhood. But the darkness, he'd learned, had a way of traveling with you. He took a long drag from his cigarette, the smoke curling around his face like a shroud. His eyes, the color of weathered denim, were fixed on the rain-streaked window, but he wasn't seeing the deserted street outside. He was seeing the face of his father, a man broken by hard luck and harder whiskey, a man who'd taught Todd everything he knew about running.

"You gonna sit there all night, brooding like a lovesick crow?"

Todd turned to see Sally, the diner's owner, leaning against the counter, her arms crossed, a cigarette dangling from her lips. Sally was a Pine Ridge institution, a woman with a voice like gravel and a heart of gold. She'd known Todd since he was a boy, and she had a way of cutting through his moods like a hot knife through butter.

"Just thinking about the old days, Sal," Todd said, stubbing out his cigarette.

"The old days?" Sally snorted. "The old days were full of bad haircuts and worse decisions. Trust me, you're better off forgetting them."

"Some things are hard to forget," Todd said, his voice low. Sally's eyes softened. She knew what he was talking about. Everyone in Pine Ridge knew. The whispers followed Todd like a shadow: the son of Bob the Drunk, the boy who ran away, the one who came back.

"You can't change the past, Todd," Sally said gently. "But you can decide what to do with the future."

Todd looked at her, a flicker of hope igniting in his eyes. Maybe she was right. Maybe he could find a way to outrun the darkness, to find some light in this town that had always felt like a tomb. He stood up, tossing a few bills on the table. "I think I'll take a drive," he said.

"See if I can find that Thunder Road." Sally watched him go, a worried look on her face.

She'd seen too many young men leave Pine Ridge chasing dreams, only to come back broken and empty. She just hoped Todd wouldn't be one of them.

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