

Sunny With a High of 75

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

–2 Corinthians 5:17

THE beginning, I’ve heard, is a good place to begin.

My eyesore of a life began with Duke

I’ve worked for Duke ever since I can remember. I never really knew my parents. It was Duke who raised me... Duke who taught me how to fish and shoot and hunt. Duke who taught me to steal.

Well, no one really needed to teach me. I was a natural, Duke said. First time I stole, nobody told me to do it. I just reached out and took a jar of pickles from the shelf. I don’t know how I didn’t get caught, but Duke sure laughed when he found out.

Then he told me he’d teach me to steal bigger things than pickles. Pretty soon I was stealing anything that wasn’t tied down. Garden rakes... fresh pies... fishing rods. When I got older, I moved on to cash registers, trucks, and cattle.

‘Course, it was all great fun for Duke and me. We were kinda known in town... well, they knew what we did, anyways. We never got caught.

Sheriff Holt had a mighty hard time with it. He always knew it was us, but he never could quite pin it on us. We always got rid of the stuff we didn’t need.

Well, I grew up before long, and I started getting out on my own. I left town to find bigger and better targets. But Duke was never far behind me.

It got kinda annoying after a while. I was grown, after all. I didn’t need Duke around anymore.

But he was always there. Appearing at my shoulder or around a corner every time I’d start thinking about stealing something.

Then I had to go and get myself caught.

I was alone in a city far from home. I'm pretty sure I saw Duke watching from a distance when they snapped the handcuffs on me, but he didn't make a move to help me.

All I could think about was how word would be getting back to my hometown, and they'd all know that it was me. Sheriff Holt would probably show the headline all around town, telling everyone that he always knew I was a thief.

I forget now how many years my sentence was. Enough that I'd be a lot older when I got out.

There was bail, of course, but it was a sight more than I could afford.

I guess I'd never been faced with the fruit of my actions until that moment. It was kinda a slap in the face. Made me think a lot about my life so far... about what a wreck I was.

And then I had maybe the first sound thought in a long time.

I didn't want to be here.

I didn't want to live my life like this. I wanted to be something more than a thief... even though I knew that's all I really was.

So I did the only thing that made sense. I started praying.

I'd never prayed before in my life, but I'd seen other people do it. My prayer wasn't nearly as smooth and proper-sounding as theirs were. I just told God I'd made a mess of things and I needed help.

I didn't really expect an answer... it was enough to know that He'd heard me.

But I guess He had something else in mind, 'cause next thing I knew, I was getting out. They told me I was free to go. Someone had paid my bail money—plunked down the whole kit and caboodle.

I found myself back on the streets, dazed and confused, but none the worse for wear.

I must've wandered around for a while, wondering what to do now. Finally, I found myself across the street from a shop. And in front of the shop was a car with its engine running and nobody inside.

My instincts told me to go get it. I'd done it so many times before.

But now I was standing there balking like I was five years old again.

And then Duke was there. He didn't say nothing about my arrest, or the handcuffs, or jail. He just asked me what I was waiting around for—the car was right there. I could be in another neighborhood before they'd even know it was gone.

I didn't really reply, just kinda turned away. That put a bee in Duke's bonnet, and he started following me, pitching words at me.

"You think you're better'n this now?"

"This is all you're ever gonna be... this is who you are!"

"You'll never be anything 'cept a thief!"

It went on 'til I couldn't stand it no more. I ran from him, but his words stayed with me. *You'll never be anything 'cept a thief.*

I didn't quite know what to do from there, so I just kept wandering. Days passed, and I went from city to city and town to town.

No matter how many times I lost him, Duke always seemed to know where to find me. I wanted to talk back to him, but I didn't really have a good answer.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I could never change. Maybe I could never be something different from what I'd always been.

But there was a little flicker of hope inside me somewhere that wouldn't let me go back.

'Cause even if I didn't believe in myself, someone else had believed in me. The person who paid my bail money must've thought there was a chance that I could change. That was the one thing that kept me going.

And then one day, I found myself back in my hometown.

I'd hitched a ride with a trucker, and we were driving along in quiet. That's how I liked to travel. I didn't much care to get to know people... maybe 'cause then they'd have to get to know me.

"Sunny with a high of 75," the man on the radio was saying, "The nicest day this year so far. Perfect for starting that new project you've been putting off."

Right then, my eyes took in the familiar wooden sign that welcomed new folks to town.

Before I knew what I was doing, I told the trucker to stop and let me out. He pulled over, wished me luck, and waved goodbye.

I stood on the side of the road as the truck pulled away, and I realized that it had been years. But I remembered every inch of that town just like it always was.

My feet took me to the diner on Main Street. A lotta meals, me and Duke ate there—sometimes skipping out on the bill if we didn't feel like paying.

I took a seat at the counter, thankful that the waitress was a woman I'd never seen before, and ordered a cup of coffee. I scanned the menu, trying to find a bite to eat that was cheap enough for the few bills I had left in my pocket.

I felt someone take the stool next to me, then a deep voice said, "Their fritters are tastier than the donuts. But maybe you already know that."

My head shot up, and I looked straight into Sheriff Holt's face.

It had been a while, but he hadn't changed except adding a few creases to his weathered face. He was looking at me with that wry grin of his that had always told me he knew what I was up to, even if he couldn't prove it.

I shrugged, doing my best to look easygoing. "Oh... thanks."

"No problem, son." Sheriff Holt turned smoothly back to his own menu, even though he probably didn't need it. He ate there almost every day, or at least he used to.

My mind was topsy-turvy as I tried to make sense of what he'd said. Did he know who I was, or was he just trying to make talk?

The sheriff slid a newspaper across the counter towards me. "They'll let anyone out these days, huh?"

It took one glance at the paper to see an article with my name in it, and my heart sank like a line without a bobber. "I'm not lookin' for no trouble."

"I didn't say you were."

The waitress set a cup of coffee in front of me, and I took a quick sip to keep busy. The steaming liquid burned on my tongue and throat, but I swallowed it anyway.

“You want anything to eat, hon?” The waitress asked, and I realized that she was still standing in front of me.

“Oh, uh...” I glanced around the diner, as though I’d get more answers from the booths and tables than from the menu in my hand.

Then my whole body froze as my eyes fixed on the truck parked on the curb outside. Passenger side mirror missing, rust climbing up the side, fishing rods in the bed.

And the color... gunsteel gray.

I swung off the stool, mumbled something at the waitress, and threw a few dollar bills onto the counter. I turned to go out the door, but someone was standing in my way.

He was standing in my way.

“Why are you here?” I asked, mad at myself for how shaky my voice came out.

Duke folded his arms. “Why are *you* here? You know you can’t come back here... not after everythin’ you done.”

I wanted to answer him, but it was the same as always. I didn’t really have anything to say. What could I say? He was telling the truth, after all.

I could run again. But only for so long. He’d just find me again. He’d always make sure I knew I didn’t belong. He’d always be there to tell me who I was.

“C’mon.” Duke jerked his head towards the door. “You can ride with me. We’ll go have some fun, like we used to.”

“I- I can’t,” I finally got out. “I don’t wanna do that no more.”

Duke laughed harshly. “You don’t get it, do you? This is what you were born to do. You can’t change who you are.”

I tried to stand up straighter, meeting his eyes with a challenge. “What if that’s not who I am?”

“Too bad, ‘cause it is.” He took a step in my direction. “You’ll always be who you’ve always been. A criminal. An outlaw. A thief.”

My shoulders slumped at his words. Was I just wasting my time trying to get away? Was this all I was ever going to be? Maybe it would be better for me to just swallow it instead of trying to run again.

But just as I was about to move—to follow Duke back to his truck—someone else stepped between us.

“Now just a minute, son.” Sheriff Holt looked from me to Duke and back to me again. “You don’t have to go with him.”

“Are kiddin’?” Duke laughed again, but this time it was forced. “Course he does. He works for me.”

The sheriff held my gaze. “I paid your bail money so you could go free.”

“What?” I frowned. “Y—you?”

“I knew you were stubborn. You wouldn’t take it unless there was something in you that wanted to change.” Sheriff Holt put a hand on my shoulder, gripping me firmly but not tightly. “When you walked out of that prison, you were a changed man. You’re not a thief anymore.”

“This is nutty.” Duke motioned to me. “C’mon, we’ve got places to be.”

Sheriff Holt turned to face Duke fully, his voice dead-set and stern. “He’s not going with you. Not if he doesn’t want to.”

“He don’t got a choice!” Duke said, but he took a little step backwards at the tone of the sheriff’s voice.

“Yes, he does.” Sheriff Holt reached into his pocket. “He doesn’t work for you anymore. He works for me.” He took out a folded piece of paper, handing it to me.

I took it, almost in a daze.

“Now, unless you have other business here, I suggest you get,” the sheriff said. He didn’t move towards Duke, but he stood tall and steady.

“Fine, then,” Duke grunted. He glared at me as he turned away. “But you’ll come back. You’re not gonna last here, you’ll see.”

Then he was gone. I heard the sound of his truck motor outside, but I didn’t even turn to see him drive away.

I remembered the paper in my hand and unfolded it. A job application stared up at me.

“I could use a fella to keep up with things at the office,” Sheriff Holt said. “Taking out the trash, cleaning, and such. It isn’t much, but it’s a start.”

Speechless, I looked down at the application again.

“You can start tomorrow at 9 am if you’re interested.”

“I– I don’t know,” I stammered. “I never had a real job before—not really.”

“Well, now you do.” He raised an eyebrow. “If you want it, that is.”

“No, I do, it’s just...” I didn’t dare to look him in the eye. “You think I can do it?”

“I sure do. Your crimes are paid for now. You don’t have to steal anymore.”

“Well, then I’ll be there.” I lifted my chin. “You can count on me.”

A proud smile spread across Sheriff Holt’s face. “I knew I could.” He grasped my hand firmly. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say. “See ya.”

Sheriff Holt turned back to his seat at the counter, but I headed slowly towards the door.

Duke always said we lived the freest life there is. But this was the first time in my life that I really felt free.

I stepped out into the open air, letting the sunshine fall onto my face.

Sunny with a high of 75, the radio had said.

I couldn’t help but grin.

Just right for new beginnings.