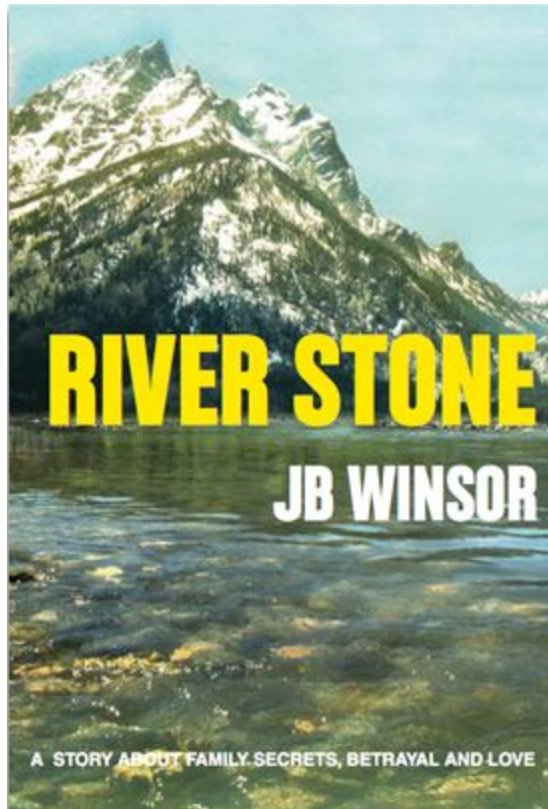


RIVER STONE

A Novel
by
JB Winsor

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River Stone

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Chapter One

Manhattan

“Dead.”

Battered by alternating waves of guilt and elation, Justin Thatcher leaned back in his desk chair, looked for patterns in the Oriental rugs on the floor of his office, at the two Renoirs displayed against walnut paneling and, on the other wall, at the forty-nine silver-framed “tombstones” announcing his business triumphs.

He fished the river stone from his pocket and rubbed its smooth patina. He remembered that evening before leaving the ranch twenty-eight years ago. He had walked the riverbank below the cabin to avoid another argument. Sunlight angled low from behind shadowed mountain peaks, penetrating the river’s blue waters, highlighting the stone. Intrigued by its color, he’d plucked it from the ice-cold river. He’d studied the stone, turning it in the sun’s last rays, watching the subtle change in the stone’s color, fingers caressing its smooth surface. He’d slipped the river stone into his pocket as a reminder to never return, hoping it would become a talisman to protect him from the memories of that place.

And he remembered the next morning, walking down the cabin steps and past the shed with his belongings packed in a black cardboard suitcase, watching his old man

rake up fresh horse manure between the cabin and Old Tan where Cody sat behind the steering wheel to drive him to the bus stop. Blocking his way for one last confrontation. Arguing. Showing his father the stone, saying it would be a reminder to never return. That's what triggered what had happened next.

He shook that memory from his head and thought about what Cody had said about their father's death - a suspicious accident.

Even so, Justin told his brother he would not return for the funeral. After twenty-eight years, he would not break his vow.

He heard laughter from his assistant's office: a man and woman, a happy sound, a bitter contrast to his brother's voice announcing their father's death, the laughter a reminder that life moves on, a reminder of the insignificance of one person's life within the grand scheme of things.

It was during the second phone call, the conversation with the attorney in Montana, when he agreed to go back, but he didn't tell Cody. He felt both responsible for tending to things, but at the same time surprisingly free of having to take care of anything at all. How could he explain that to Cody?

His assistant appeared in his doorway and said it was time for the meeting. A few minutes later, surrounded by associates and assistants, he sat at the conference room table across from three men who represented a buyer for one of the companies he controlled. He touched the river stone in his pocket for good luck as he pretended to read a thick sale document while he watched the men through his peripheral vision. Like predators before a kill, they leaned forward, watched and waited.

Even after all those years of silence, he'd recognized Cody's voice, tinged with apprehension and emotion. Their father gone, carrying away the nightmares, he hoped.

He flipped to the signature page, reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a fountain pen engraved with his initials. The men glanced at each other and grinned, predators about to become prey.

He put the pen down, flipped back a page, and then read a paragraph about the seller's representations and warrants. The buyers glanced at each other. He asked them to explain a clause. The lawyer began to justify the language in a rush of complex words and sentences that everyone in the room knew was elegant bullshit. That's why he earned a thousand bucks an hour. Carried by the torrent of words, the stench of his cigar breath spewed across the table. He could smell the lawyer's sour fear of losing the deal.

Justin loved this part of a negotiation, loved playing with buyers like a cat with a mouse. Nodding agreement, he picked up the fountain pen with his right hand and then used his thumb and forefinger to twist off the cap. He dropped the cap on the table, the sound sharp. The predators exchanged glances. When he lowered the pen toward the signature line, the attorney leaned forward, elbows on the table. Justin raised the pen and heard them hold their breath. He smiled and then signed the sale agreement.

The buyers exhaled. They laughed. They high-fived. One muttered, "Gotcha!"

Justin slid the document across the table to the leader, who checked Justin's signature and then gloated. "You had no idea how valuable that company was."

Justin stood and buttoned his coat. "I'm glad you're happy. So am I. You just paid seventy million more than anyone else offered."

Their smiles died.

"It was good to do business with you, gentlemen. My assistant will show you out." Justin walked from the conference room to his office. His ex-father-in-law and senior partner Thomas Farnsworth, a silver-haired man with a patrician face, waited for him.

“Close the deal?”

“Yes,” Justin said. “It’s finished.”

The smile faded from Farnsworth’s face as the full implication sank in. “Now you’ll have enough fees to pay off your loan.”

“Just before your usurious penalty clause would have kicked in.”

“I wouldn’t have enforced it.”

“Of course not,” Justin said.

“Do you plan to stay?”

“We’ll talk about that when I get back from my trip.”

The right corner of Farnsworth’s mouth twitched, the fleeting tic that appeared when he lost, a rare event. He nodded and then walked out of Justin’s office.

Justin could add another silver framed tombstone that announced this last deal, now fifty. Each one held a story of a special tactic he had utilized. The first time he had walked into this office, he had felt intimidated. Now this was his home. And now that his fees could pay off Farnsworth’s loan, he would no longer have to serve the man like an indentured servant. He would be free. And yet the implications of his father’s death cast a pall over this most recent victory.

In his private bathroom, he stripped off his shirt, washed his upper body and then rolled on deodorant. He opened his closet and counted the new shirts hanging from the bar. His assistant would have to order two dozen more. He took a shirt from the hanger, raised its fabric to his nose and inhaled its fresh starchiness. That scent reminded him how far he’d come. Everything would be all right. He smiled, slipped on the shirt and then buttoned it up.

A few minutes later, Justin’s assistant walked into his office and told him there was

an emergency. Ashley demanded they meet at once. He swore under his breath. Everything with Ashley was an emergency. He told his assistant to push back his next appointment one hour.

He arrived at the Harvard Club, surprised to see their eleven-year-old son with Ashley. William, wearing his school blazer, should have been at Collegiate. As always, Ashley looked perfect. She glanced at her watch, shook her head and then, without a word, marched to the center of the deserted Hall, orchestrating one of her drama-queen scenes he knew only too well.

They followed her. William had once told him Harvard Hall, with the elephant's head protruding from the wall, ears spread wide, trunk extended, and the room's three-story ceiling, dark beams, and molding-hung tapestries, looked like Harry Potter's Hogwarts School. Now he saw it the same way.

Still in full drama-queen mode, she sat in the middle of a red tufted leather couch, arranging herself, back rigid, legs crossed, fingers laced, forcing him to sit on an opposing couch next to William. His son shook the bangs away from his eyes, looked at his mother and then at him. Justin couldn't read anything in his look — a pure blank slate. The boy scooted back in the deep seat, and then jammed his heels on the edge.

"Take your feet off the seat," he said.

William slouched and then swung his feet back and forth, heels bumping against the leather.

Justin gritted his teeth — now was not the time to push the boy further. William began playing a video game on his portable player.

Ashley's hair was perfect, the result of a daily session with her personal stylist. She

favored outfits by top designers who personally draped her slim figure. She kept her hemlines a bit shorter than current fashion to show off her legs. She wore matching bright multi-colored high heels.

Justin thought of her shoes as her “fuck-me pumps.” When men looked her over, he’d noticed, their eyes started with the shoes, slithered up her legs and under her skirt to an imagined moist nirvana, except that he knew she was a cold bitch, in bed and out.

But that was harsh. Those were the things that first attracted him — the girls where he grew up sometimes combed their hair back into a ponytail, not for looks but utility — to keep it out of the way when they did chores, rode or roped. There, Wranglers were women’s standard fare, starched when they dressed up. Worlds apart. He suspected he’d been an innocent on her playing field.

Ashley had been schooled in the feminine graces and she was an expert at turning on the charm — like that Thanksgiving when her brother invited him from Harvard to spend the holiday weekend. Shortly after they were introduced, she decided she wanted Justin. She applied a full court press of charm that made her sexy and warm like a bonfire is warm, always making him gauge how close to get.

He wasn’t sure if he’d fallen in love with her or her manicured guise — either way, he’d fallen hard. He had also been impressed that her father, Thomas Farnsworth, owned the oldest family investment firm on Wall Street. Marriage hadn’t been what either one expected. Ashley had asked for the divorce and he hadn’t fought it. He had continued to work with Farnsworth, who valued a moneymaking junior partner more than a son-in-law.

Sometimes he missed having her accompany him to charity events — a woman who looked perfect and acted gracious — but other times like this, when she acted imperious

and judgmental, he couldn't stand to be near her.

Ashley poised on the edge of the couch, foot pumping. She smiled her tight-lipped little way and said, "I've been promoted to head the International Division of Lightner Advertising."

"That's wonderful," he said, and he meant it. Even during their marriage, she'd always wanted to prove to her father that she could be a "Farnsworth" type of businessperson.

Her smile turned serious. "My promotion means I'll be traveling most of the time. I'm opening an office in London. William will have to stay with you all summer, at least."

"No problem, he's enrolled in summer camp."

William cut him an alarmed glance.

Ashley's lips formed her I'm-so-sorry-smile.

"I have one more bit of news about *your* son."

William was *her* son when he did something she could brag about. Justin braced himself.

The boy's thumbs stopped tapping.

Ashley leaned forward as if the empty Hall had ears. It was not unlike the first time they'd kissed, she moving in with a determined, now in retrospect, conquering expression on her face, lips parting. But this time instead of the thrill of a mouth to explore, she spoke. "*Your* son has been expelled from Collegiate!"

"Expelled?" He looked at William. The boy stared across the hall at a massive fireplace.

"And from the school's summer camp!"

“Why?”

“He made a bomb.”

Justin turned to the boy. “A bomb?”

William retreated to the video game.

Ashley continued, “The headmaster evacuated the school and called the police. A SWAT team and bomb disposal squad swooped down upon them. William was accused and expelled. It will be so embarrassing for me.”

“I can’t take him,” Justin said.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m going to Cora in the morning.”

Her laugh became hysterical. “Don’t tell me you’re going to break your promise never to go back? Your father won.”

“My father died.”

“Oh! I can picture it now. The grieving son.” She laughed again. “There must be money involved.”

He felt his jaw twitch.

“William will enjoy seeing where you grew up.” She looked at her watch and stood up. “If I don’t hurry, I’ll be late for my mani-pedi. I’ll have to drop William off at my place so he can pack. Juanita will take him to your condo. He’ll be there when you get home from the party tonight. See you there.”

No doubt about it, the woman had bitch down to an art. Worst of all, she always got what she wanted. He might as well have not been in the conversation. He sat there like a fool watching her march out of Harvard Hall with William in tow.

Much later that night, Justin opened his eyes and stared into a void as black as the inside of a buried casket. He listened to his ragged breathing and the distant wail of a siren as he struggled to quell his rising panic at not being sure where he was.

There was a burst of red light. He tried to discern anything solid to anchor himself to reality. The light went out and his world plunged into black. Three seconds later, the light flooded back. A reddish glow and then a black void, on and off, red and black, black and red, a rhythm that matched his heartbeat.

His eyes began to focus.

A beam of light burst through a gap in closed drapes. He made out the corner of a ceiling and a dresser. A fractured face stared at him — a grotesque Dali print. This was no place that he knew, had ever known.

The room dropped into a black void that conjured up voices from the past, each a strand of a spider's silk sticking to him until he was trapped in its web, about to be dragged back to that god-forsaken place.

Seconds later, another spurt of light revealed tangled clothes strewn across the floor — a tuxedo shirt, bow tie, pants, and, near the door, a woman's black thong tangled in a high heeled shoe.

During the next blackout, splintered memories flooded his mind. His mother's eyes staring at him through a hole she'd wiped in the frost on the window above the kitchen sink. Her disappearing. The shed. His father.

Relief and regret pulsed with the reddish neon glow blinking outside the window, feeding his loneliness.

The next beam of light revealed a bed sheet crumpled against the footboard. Next to him, a woman lay on her back, snoring softly. Her lips quivered as she exhaled night

breath. The neon glow made her red hair look black. Pyramid-shaped nipples topped cantaloupe-hard breasts. He wondered what they had looked like before surgery.

He inhaled her scent, a blend of dried sweat and stale perfume. As with all the others, even Ashley, he knew, maybe had always known something was wrong, that she was wrong, that she smelled wrong, that she moved wrong and tasted wrong. He could never stop comparing the way it was with other women to the way it had been with his first love, but perhaps she had become a fantasy created by a long-ago memory.

The woman's snoring grew louder. He could not remember her name. He struggled to gather the right facts. This afternoon Ashley had chained an anchor to his leg, a burden he would have to drag with him tomorrow when he returned to his childhood home — if home was the right word. And then, at the MOMA charity dinner, Ashley had introduced him to this woman. He shook his head now at the irony of it all. After all these years, the marriage, the child, everything, he hadn't a clue as to what ran Ashley's chilly heart.

He now remembered he had called the woman "Red." She hadn't objected. He didn't want to know her real name, didn't want to go through the pretense of exchanging cell numbers, didn't want to play the two-faced game of saying it had been great, he'd call soon. He wanted to flee.

He slipped out of bed, picked up his clothes, dressed and then tiptoed out the door. He took the elevator down to the lobby and pushed through the door into cold air laced with a faint sewer stench. Steam rose from sidewalk grates, lost souls rising into the night.

He walked through shadows, heels striking a sharp sound that echoed hollow from brick walls. He turned the corner into the pulsing neon light. He looked at an electric

billboard mounted high on the wall of a Salvation Army building that hummed: JESUS SAVES.

He watched the sign blink on and off: JESUS SAVES. JESUS SAVES.

He stared at Red's seventh floor window and then at the pulsing sign. He felt lonelier than ever before. He touched the river stone in his pocket.

Washed by the blood red light, he spread his arms wide as if nailed to a cross, lowered his head and prayed — something he didn't do often. He waited. Nothing.

He glanced at his watch — nearly two in the morning. He had to get back to the condo, where his son would still be up, playing his damned computer games. He needed to get the boy to bed, pack their suitcases and then try to get some sleep. He ran his fingers through his hair, not sure why he'd chosen this night to do this, this night before going back to where it had begun. He pulled up his collar, jammed his hands in his pockets and shuffled through an empty night.

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Chapter Two

Early the next morning, Justin and William stood outside the Sherry-Netherland on 5th and 59th, waiting for a limo. They were dressed alike in khakis, sport coats and open-collared white shirts. The boy stared through sandy bangs at the screen of his game player, thumbs tapping a furious pace against the keyboard, lost as usual in a video game. Now that Ashley was leaving for Europe, William was his and he had to take the kid back with him. Troubles came in bunches.

William said something to him.

“What?” He regretted the irritated edge to his voice.

“Nothing.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want to go. Do I have to?”

“If you hadn’t gotten expelled, you wouldn’t have to go, would you?”

The corner of the boy’s lip curled upward in a dismissive way and then he returned to his computer game. Justin had no idea what to do with his son – especially after the disaster at school.

Justin paced next to the four-foot clock perched atop a fluted column and then glanced up the street for the limo.

The damn driver was late. Every time Justin turned he either saw William engrossed in his game or the clock moving ever-so-quickly forward. The limo was to take them to the Teterboro airport to fly more than two thousand miles west to Missoula, the closest airport to Cora and the ranch. He dreaded going back. He looked at his watch and then at Alex, the Sherry-Netherland's doorman.

"It's coming, Mr. Thatcher."

Alex had been staring at William. It wasn't often the boy was with Justin, and the doorman, like a keen eyed hunter, could tell arrangements had changed. They had, and Justin's life would be more complicated now.

A blasting horn – a taxi driver, impatient to move when the light changed, gave a motorist hell. Justin looked in vain for his limo.

"Yes!" William said.

"What?"

"I just beat level nine," the boy said without taking his eyes off the screen.

"That's just great."

William returned to his game.

Across the street, on the edge of Central Park, a squirrel scampered down the trunk of a maple tree and scurried across the sidewalk. It paused at the curb, tail flicking as it watched traffic, waiting for the light to change. The squirrel looked into Justin's eyes as if asking permission to cross. Justin felt himself tense.

The animal leaped into the street and scurried past still tires and then under a tourist bus. The light changed. Traffic spurted forward. The squirrel froze amid the spinning

wheels of machines rushing past and then made its decision. It hopped toward Justin, tail high. Justin saw the car and felt himself twist, knowing what was going to happen. A sedan's front left tire crushed the little animal flat. And then the back tire thumped over the body. Its tail rose from the blacktop like a quivering exclamation point.

William's laughter edged up at him.

"What are you laughing at?"

William nodded toward the carcass. "Looks like someone lost at Frogger."

"Don't you have any damned feelings?"

"For what, a stupid squirrel that runs across the street?"

Justin clenched his fists. His father would have done a lot more than clench his fists. His dead father. He watched his son return to the video game. William acted as though the squirrel's death was nothing more than a scene from one of his digital games, not knowing which was reality, not caring.

It was more than a lack of respect that bothered Justin – his son didn't understand social graces, the common thoughtfulness that allowed one to move through the world, the consideration that helps others give you what you want and what you need. William seemed to specialize on how to not get what he wanted.

Justin looked at the little body of the squirrel in the street and a pain shot through his chest. What dignity was there in being crushed to death between rubber and asphalt?

The doorman moved up beside him.

"Did you see what happened?" he asked Alex.

"Feed him every day. I'll miss him," the doorman pulled a peanut from his pocket, a single one on his open palm – and then Justin understood – the squirrel hadn't been coming to him, it was crossing the street for a peanut. For some reason, that made him

feel sadder.

He slipped Alex a twenty.

“Would you take his body over to the Park and bury it someplace?”

“Yes sir. Better than rotting in the street.”

The doorman opened a closet and found a long-handled pan used for picking up cigarette butts. He waited for traffic to stop for a red light, walked onto the street, scraped the squirrel’s body into the pan with the side of his shoe and then hid the pan in the corner by the revolving doors. The dead squirrel’s bushy tail protruded.

“I’ll bury him on break.”

William rolled his eyes. “Nobody buries squirrels.”

Justin clamped his jaw.

William returned to his game.

The limo arrived and the driver popped the trunk open. The doorman picked up William’s overnight suitcase and put it in. Next to it, he tossed Justin’s suitcase, containing starched shirts, two pair of boxer shorts and two pairs of socks. Eight new shirts should be enough for a three-day trip.

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Chapter Three

Several minutes later, the limo merged with traffic streaming toward the Lincoln Tunnel. They sat in the back seat, alone, silent, staring at the reflections of grimy buildings sliding past. During the drive, Justin wondered what William thought of him as a father. His own old man had been a terrible father. The boy had no idea how lucky he was.

Twelve miles later, at the airport, they checked in at the passenger desk of Atlantic Aviation before being ushered onto the tarmac where they walked through the pungent odor of jet fuel toward a waiting Cessna Citation X.

The jet's sensuous fuselage with the enormous air intakes in front of its radically sweptback wings made it the world's fastest civilian aircraft. Even though he didn't own it, Justin took a large amount of pride in that plane. It was Farnsworth's jet, built for work. Justin had crossed the country several times in it, head buried in work papers.

"We'll be flying faster than commercial jets. About seven hundred-miles-per-hour," Justin said.

"Whatever."

William was as accustomed to flying on a private jet as Justin had been to riding

horses as a kid. He wondered if the two experiences were that different. Deep down he knew they were — you were never totally in control of a twelve-hundred-pound horse — anything could happen, like the time a horse he was riding had stepped on a hornet's nest and bucked him off. Planes were safer.

The cabin smelled of leather, like a new luxury car. There was a small conference table in the front corner near the cockpit. Tan leather seats occupied each side of the twenty-four-foot-long aisle.

The co-pilot stowed their bags and asked them to take a seat. Justin let William choose his seat first — otherwise the boy would have distanced himself as far as possible. It was a dance they played, in restaurants, theaters, whenever they were together. William flopped into a seat and stared out the window. Justin sat across the aisle.

“Buckle up, son.”

“There's more work space up front. Why don't you sit up there?” William asked with tight lips.

Those lips came from Ashley, and although she was an undeniably beautiful woman, he'd come to despise the angles that defined that beauty. It was hard to see them on his son. As he tried to do with Ashley, Justin ignored him and stayed put.

Several minutes later, the jet rolled into position on their assigned runway. The pilot jammed the throttle to the firewall. The plane shuddered and then shot ahead. Gravity slammed William deep into the seat. The boy looked at the ceiling, eyes bright. His lips trembled and then he almost smiled. Justin remembered seeing that look on William when he was five and had righted himself on a two-wheeler. In this, he could see his son's love of a thrill, a challenge, and he felt that under all those layers of his mother's DNA of disdain there was something of him in William.

Justin closed his eyes and felt the power of the jet engines propelling them to Montana. The fastest transportation at the ranch had been Old Tan, the ancient truck that was grouchy as an old lady wracked by rheumatism.

In no time, the jet reached an altitude of 32,000 feet above a solid cloud deck. William played the video game, the tapping of his thumbs a counterpoint to the sound of the engines.

Justin drifted into his adult concerns. He'd been suffocating under a mountain of debt from the failed internet IPO, the divorce and their lifestyle. That had changed, now that he had closed this last deal. After paying off Farnsworth, he would be free to leave with the equity he'd earned. That would be enough for a luxurious retirement, but he wanted more. That opportunity had presented itself last week when Brad Duncan, Chairman of the world's largest private equity firm, invited him to join as a senior partner and promised he'd have a shot at the chairmanship.

Justin pressed his forehead against the plane's window and watched clouds billow upward with explosive fury. Justin turned toward his son, still engrossed in the video game.

"Let's talk about the bomb."

The kid's thumbs didn't falter. "Let's not."

Justin reached across the aisle, grabbed the game and put it on his lap. "What *do* you want to talk about?"

"I want my game back!"

"After we talk."

The boy folded his arms across his chest and glared out the window.

Justin jammed the game player in the chair-back pocket. If this were a test of

William's patience, Justin would win. Years of negotiating had given him more than enough experience to out-wait an eleven-year-old addicted to video games. He leaned back, closed his eyes and waited.

He had assigned his assistant the impossible task of finding another summer camp. Most were booked years in advance. He told her to offer a generous bonus for a last-minute acceptance. Money talked, but apparently not this time. The private system was tight; one phone call to his school revealed the bomb incident, and no one in a post-9/11 world wanted to accept the boy. His last assignment for his secretary had been to find a boarding school.

Justin heard a gagging sound. William held his hands over his mouth.

"What's wrong?" Justin asked.

"I throw up on planes unless I can concentrate on a video game," the boy muttered between his fingers.

Justin watched him gag and couldn't tell if he was telling the truth or pretending. If this were a power play, the kid would threaten to throw up every time he didn't get his way. He realized he didn't know his son very well. If he had pulled a stunt like that when he was William's age, his old man would have laughed and said, "Fine. Who cares?"

William gagged louder.

He had the choice of giving in or taking the risk of flying the rest of the way with puke smell.

"Okay, I believe you get sick on planes, but don't try to pull that trick anywhere else." He gave William the game player.

The boy made a miraculous recovery.

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Chapter Four

When the jet touched down on the runway in Missoula, Justin reset his watch from Eastern to the Mountain time zone. They had gained two hours. Now 9:30, there was more than enough time to get to the funeral. The pilot taxied to the terminal, parked and shut down the engines. The co-pilot opened the fuselage door. Crisp mountain air flooded into the cabin. Justin smiled – he'd forgotten the smell of clean air.

He rented a car, bought sandwiches and pop to go, and then they drove toward Cora. A half hour later, William fell asleep. Justin turned on an empty blacktop under an intense blue sky and sped through country filled with sagebrush, bunch grass and Black Angus. He lowered his window and smelled the bitter-pleasant fragrance of sage, an almost forgotten scent. Later, the boy woke up and reached for his game.

“This would be a good time to talk about school and the bomb.”

“I don't want to talk about it.” William thumbed his game.

Justin counted the highway center stripes. After he'd counted two hundred, he said, “Put it down. We need to talk.”

“Not!”

Impaled on the barbed wire of fences lining both sides of the road, white plastic grocery sacks fluttered like handkerchiefs. Windblown tumbleweeds jammed against the fences. He slammed on the brakes. The car veered and then skidded to a halt.

“Okay.” William put the game in the back seat and Justin pulled back onto the road.

As they accelerated, tumbleweed bounced across the pavement, and shattered on the front grill, showering brittle pieces over the hood and against the windshield.

The boy whooped. “Hit another.”

Three minutes later he spotted a huge weed tumbling across a field far ahead. “See that one off to the right? Bet I can hit it.”

“Not. The fence will stop it first.”

“I hit it, you talk.”

The boy looked at him for a long moment. “Yokay.”

He slowed, timing his speed to intercept the tumbleweed.

William leaned forward. “It won’t get over the fence.”

The weed hung on the barbed wire and then a gust of wind lifted it up and over onto the road’s shoulder. Justin tightened his grip on the wheel and floored the gas pedal. The car spurted forward. There was no traffic on the long straight stretch. The weed tumbled across their lane. He swerved into the oncoming lane and onto the far shoulder and smashed into the tumbleweed. It shattered into hundreds of needles that reflected sunlight as they ricocheted off the windshield like hail. William flinched.

The right front tire hooked the pavement and the car’s left tires rose as it spun a three-sixty across the blacktop. He fought the steering wheel and skidded the car into the road, going sixty.

William’s arms were braced against the dash, face white. “That was sick!”

He kicked the speed up to seventy and a few silent miles later smashed another tumbleweed. He waited for the boy to live up to his end of the bargain.

”Who taught you to do that?” William asked.

“Who taught you to make a confetti bomb?”

“Googled it.”

“Can’t Google how to smash tumbleweeds.”

“You sure?”

Justin shrugged. “So tell me how you made it?”

“Just followed the web page instructions.”

“Enlighten me.”

“I got some film canisters from a picture processing place and found a can of that stuff used to blow dust off of computers and then I scooped up a couple handfuls of those paper dots from the hole punch they use at school,” William said, becoming more animated. “Then all I had to do was turn the air duster can upside down and squirt some liquid into the canister. I filled it with confetti and then snapped on the canister lid tight. It takes anywhere from five seconds to a minute to explode. It’s really cool.”

“Any particular reason you felt like doing that?”

William’s words gushed out. “This kid with a locker next to me is a big bully. He’d been picking on me, so I took the stuff to my locker and made the confetti bomb and put it on top of his locker just before he opened it up. He shoved me out of the way, like always, and the bomb went off and he got paper holes all over his head and when everyone was laughing and watching him brush the paper out of his hair, I stuck the big bomb inside his locker.”

He cut a look at his son. “Big bomb?”

“You didn’t think they’d kick me out for a little confetti explosion, did you?”

He took his foot off the pedal and let the car slow. “So, how’d you learn how to make that big bomb?”

“I just used my imagination. I got this old tin box and I bought a stolen cell phone . . .”

“You bought a stolen cell phone?”

“Sure, you can buy stuff like that from people on the street.”

“How much?”

“Twenty. I downloaded a bomb ring-tone for the phone, set the answer for the maximum rings, put it inside the box. And then I taped two batteries with snap-on connectors on the top of the box, punched a hole and ran red wires from the batteries into the box. It was pretty simple.”

“Let me see if I have this figured out. It looked like a bomb and sounded like a bomb, but it was fake.”

“What, you think I wanted to kill someone? I just wanted to see him shit himself.”

“Watch your language. OK, so when everyone was looking at the bully, you hid the fake bomb inside his locker. And then what happened?”

“I didn’t think anyone saw me put it there and I was going to call to make the ring-tone go ‘bang’ the next time the asshole opened his locker.”

“Language.”

“Yeah. So I was in class when the fire bell rang and we were herded outside. Then the SWAT team and bomb guys arrived. When they were inside, I thought it would be fun to use my cell phone and call the phone in the locker.”

“Is that when you were caught?”

“Everybody was calling their parents, so no one noticed me.”

“How did they catch you?”

“They said the bomb guys were opening the locker when I called and the phone

ring-tone went off – ‘Bang’! I guess that really scared them, because they were really pissed off.”

“Watch your language. So how did they catch you?”

“Some girl saw me hide the bomb in the bully’s locker and she squealed. They didn’t see anything funny about it and they didn’t care if I was getting even.”

“Some adults have no sense of humor.”

“Yeah, but a lot of the kids think I’m a hero.”

“What do you think?”

“Maybe it went too far.”

“Got to agree. And now we’re stuck with each other.”

“You got that right,” the boy said.

He drove for several miles, thinking about the incident and how he should react. His old man wouldn’t have had to think about reacting. It would have been shed-time.

“Sometimes bullies need to be taken down a notch, but why didn’t you talk to me about the problem?” Justin asked.

“You wouldn’t have cared,” the boy said with a new tone to his voice.

“Of course I would have.”

“Haven’t before.”

“That’s not true,” Justin said, but he knew how the boy could feel that way. He’d been so busy.

“You didn’t come to my birthday party.”

That was true, but he was terrible about remembering dates and Ashley, in her typical passive-aggressive behavior, hadn’t told him about the party. She loved making him look bad.

“I meant to be there, but I put it my schedule for the next day,” he lied.

“You don’t care about me. Mom doesn’t care about me, either. She left you. Now she’s leaving me.” He began to cry.

He thought about pulling over and holding him, but the boy was too old — he’d never been hugged at William’s age. Better to reason with him.

“Your mother hasn’t abandoned you.”

“She has.”

He didn’t know what else to say. “It’s not the end of the world. It’ll be okay, son.”

“No . . . it . . . won’t. It won’t be the same, ever.”

Justin knew he was right. What’s more, there was something about his son’s sobbing gasps for breath that tore at him. Justin finally recognized the sound — it had the same feel as the wind howling through cracks in the window frame next to his bed on lonely winter nights after his mother had disappeared.

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