

Weathering the storm

by Tanaqui

"We're not gonna get into trouble for this, are we?" Stanley kept glancing back over his shoulder. Below and behind them, a sliver of light showed around the door at the bottom of the narrow staircase they'd just climbed.

Jake didn't much care if they did get in trouble: at least it'd give Dad something real to yell at him about, instead of whatever stupid crap he'd dreamed up that week. But it wasn't fair to drag Stanley into all of that. He shook his head as he worked the catch on the door out onto the roof. "Long as we get the key back in Dad's office before he's done with that stupid function downstairs, we'll be fine." He pushed the door wide open, leaning his back against it so that Stanley could pass him and step outside first. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah." Stanley walked forward, carefully navigating the rows of fireworks that had been laid out on the roof ready for the Fourth of July display the following evening. Reaching the parapet, he leaned his hands on it and peered over the edge. "Everything looks different from up here...."

"Uh-huh." Jake gave the door a final shove with his shoulder, making sure it was pushed as wide as it would go, before he followed Stanley toward the edge of the roof. Dusk was falling rapidly, the clouds to the west streaked with a few last traces of red and orange near the horizon. Above them, purple thunderheads were massing darkly. Reaching Stanley, he pulled a hip flask from an inside jacket pocket and held it out. "Here."

Stanley raised his eyebrows. "Where d'you get that?"

"Dad's drinks cabinet." Jake turned his head, looking for the dark smudge of woods to the east. The ritual of the flask coming out at carefully prescribed intervals had been part of their hunting trips for as long as Jake could remember. *Don't tell your mom*, Dad used to whisper, finger to his lips. Jake would nod solemnly in reply. The last trip, his father had even tipped a few drops into Jake's coffee when they'd shared the thermos they'd brought with them. Jake had felt very grown up.

Swinging back to face Stanley, Jake pushed the flask toward him. "Don't worry. I doubt he'll miss it. He hasn't used it in, oh, three, four years." Not since he'd been elected mayor.

Stanley accepted the flask, his expression still doubtful. Unscrewing the cap, he took a swig. He spluttered as the liquor hit the back of his throat. "Thanks," he managed to gasp as he handed the flask back.

Jake grinned, taking a more cautious swallow. The whiskey burned a trail down to his stomach, but he managed not to cough. "Come on. Let's take a look from the other side."

They made their way around the edge of the roof. Stanley eyed the fireworks. "Are those things rigged?"

Jake nodded. "The guys from the mine were up here yesterday." He took another drink and passed the flask back to Stanley. "You wanna come out to the airfield with me next week?"

Stanley made a face. "Can't. Ever since Mom found out your grandpa let you fly that rustbucket, she won't let me go near him."

Jake leaned one hip against the guard rail that overlooked the parking lot to the rear of the building and crossed his arms. "Don't tell her?" A cop car turned in, the beam of its headlamps lighting up the wall below them for a few seconds while they lurked unseen in the darkness above.

"Is that your answer for everything?" Stanley frowned at him from under lowered brows.

"Pretty much." Jake watched Sheriff Dawes climb out of the car and disappear into the sherriff's department through the rear entrance. He resisted the urge to pick up a pebble and aim it in the Sheriff's direction. Right now, nobody knew where he was, and no one was yelling at him or bugging him about something. He wanted to keep it that way. "We could go out to Shaw Creek instead?" he offered. "See if there's any fish biting?"

"When?" Stanley offered him the flask back. Out to the west, a flash of lightning made the sky glow violet for an instant, while the wind picked up, stirring up dust devils at their feet. Somewhere toward the front of the building a door banged shut, and the lines on the flagpoles began to chatter.

"Wednesday?" Jake watched as another flash of lightning marked the sky, wondering what it'd be like to fly in weather like that. Not that he'd get a chance any time soon; neither Grandpa nor the cropduster had an instrument rating. And for all Grandpa would bend the rules now and then, like when he let Jake take charge of the controls in the cropduster's training seat for a few minutes once they were up in the air and when the weather was fine—but ready to take over again at the first sign of trouble—he'd impressed on Jake that you never pushed the limits of what you or your plane could do.

"Sorry, Jake." Stanley scuffed his toe along the ground. "Mom says I gotta help with the produce stall one day a week for every D I got this year."

Jake grimaced. "Guess we shoulda done a bit more study in those study sessions...."

"S'ok for you and Em. You guys can goof around as much as you like and still get straight As." Stanley dragged a hand through his hair. "Mom's right, though. If I don't start getting at least Cs, I won't have even half a chance at that football scholarship."

"Hey." Jake punched him lightly in the arm. "We won't goof off next year, okay? I promise." Truth was, Jake was bored out of his mind half the time at school, and often as not finished up his homework from one class during another, but he knew things didn't come so easily to Stanley. He wouldn't be much of a friend if he didn't try to help him, would he?

He jumped as a sudden splash of water hit his cheek, followed by a second droplet. The storm that had been rumbling in the distance was moving closer and it was starting to

rain. "We should head down."

"Huh?" Stanley looked around, his expression confused, before raising a hand to wipe away another heavy bead that had landed on his forehead. "Right."

Jake screwed the cap back on the flask and shoved it into his jacket pocket, before following Stanley round toward the front side of the small, square enclosure that capped the top of the stairs. Rounding the corner, he found Stanley pulling fruitlessly at the edge of the closed door.

Jake's stomach lurched. "You shut the door?" His voice cracked, rising an octave to the squeaky treble he'd mostly left behind.

"It was... like this... when I got here," Stanley puffed, still digging his fingers into the edge of the door and trying to drag it open. "Can't figure... out how—."

"You can't." Jake closed his eyes for a moment, sending up a silent curse. Trust him to screw up even something like this. Maybe Dad was right. Maybe—.

"What?" Stanley's horrified squeak dragged Jake's thoughts back to their present predicament.

"It doesn't open from outside," Jake explained flatly. That was why he'd pushed the door open as far as it would go, trusting it would stay like that. He was remembering now the sound he'd heard earlier, of a door slamming; the damn thing must have slowly swung closed until a gust of wind had caught it. He should have found something to prop it open with.

"We're stuck up here?" Stanley's words were punctuated by another flash of lightning, this one much, much closer. He gave a high-pitched squeal and pressed himself back against the door.

"Don't—." Not taking the time to explain, Jake pulled Stanley away from the low building. The lightning conductor was attached to the side of it, and the door was metal.

"You want me to get closer to the fireworks?" Stanley pointed at the rows of pyrotechnics on either side of them as Jake dragged him across the roof.

"No. I want you to get away from the big pointy metal thing designed to attract lightning." Not that Jake was particularly happy to be heading through the middle of the fireworks while another bolt of lightning flashed almost overhead either, but he reckoned the outside of the roof was a far safer place to be.

Reaching the edge, Jake leaned on the parapet, eyes closed. *Think*, he told himself. *Think. Where—?*

Stanley grabbed his arm and wheeled him round. "So we're just gonna stay up here, in the middle of a couple of tons of explosives, in the middle of a freaking lightning storm?"

Jake glared at him. "No, you idiot. There's a fire escape ladder somewhere. I'm just trying

to remember which corner of the building."

"Great. You want me to climb down a metal ladder in the middle of a lightning storm instead?" Stanley pulled away from Jake and leaned out over the parapet, eyeing up the pitched roof covering the pediment over the main door. "We should jump...." Another flash of lightning split the sky and he let out a second squeal. "Jake, we really, really need to jump." He raised one leg, preparing to straddle the parapet.

"Don't be stupid." Jake pulled him back. "We'll be fine. We just need to wrap our sleeves round our hands as we climb down and we'll be fine."

"You sure?" Stanley gave him a doubtful look.

"I'm sure." Jake wasn't at all sure, but Stanley didn't need to know that. "I was the one got an A in science, right?"

"Right," Stanley mumbled, not looking convinced.

Jake put his hands on Stanley's shoulders for a moment. "We'll be fine, okay? Come on." He tipped his head to indicate Stanley should follow him, before setting off around the edge of the roof to where he thought the ladder was. He kept close to the parapet, giving the fireworks as wide a berth as possible.

To his relief, he found the ladder quickly. It was at the far end of the building from the Sheriff's Office, near to where a mess of cardboard boxes and other trash had been piled up in a dimly lit corner. With any luck, no one would see them climbing down, not with the rain coming down hard now and the blinds closed all along the row of windows on the floor below.

Another flash of lightning made him jump. He began pulling the sleeves of his jacket down over his hands. "We gotta kick the bottom to make it slide down the last few feet," he explained. "I'll go first."

"Okay." Stanley's hair was plastered across his forehead, his bangs dripping wetly into his eyes. He reached up a hand and pushed them out of the way. "Just hurry up."

Jake nodded. He thought the lightning was dying away but there was no way to tell when the next flash would come. Scooting over the edge of the roof, he began to carefully make his way down the slippery rungs, making sure each foot and hand was secure before he took the next step.

He was halfway to the ground when he felt the ladder shudder under Stanley's weight. *Should've told him to wait until I was down*, he reprimanded himself. Well, too late now. Besides, a glance down told him, it was only two more steps until he reached the bottom, still ten feet above the ground. Reaching the last rung, he kicked hard at the catch. With only a slight groan of protest, the ladder slid down. He scurried the rest of the way, taking a step back when he reached the ground and tipping his head up to anxiously watch Stanley follow.

Stanley had just swung away from the ladder and Jake was about to step forward to push

it back up—it was supposed to catch and hold—when the lightning flashed again. Jake let out a squeak and grabbed Stanley's arm.

Stanley gave him a puzzled look as he straightened his sleeves. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Jake let out a half-laugh at his own expense. "Just thinking we cut it a bit close with the lightning there...."

Stanley's expression turned suspicious. "I thought you said we'd be okay?"

Jake shrugged. Stooping, he grabbed the bottom of the ladder and pushed it up. It took a second shove before it caught and stayed in place. "I might've... lied a bit," he admitted as he took a pace back.

Stanley's eyes narrowed for a second, and then he gave Jake a gentle jab in the chest. "Remind me never to trust you about anything ever again."

Jake playfully prodded him back. "I always get you out of trouble, don't I?"

"After you've gotten me into it...." Stanley tried to look fierce, and failed.

"Talking of which...." Jake fumbled in his pocket for the key to the roof access. "I need to get this back. Wait for me down the road. We'll go back to my place to dry out."

The key safely returned—Jake had long ago learned the best route for getting into Dad's office without being spotted from the Sheriff's department—he was soon hurrying down the road after Stanley. Mom'd find them frozen pizza and they could watch a video. Stanley's turn to pick, which'd likely mean they'd be watching *Red Dawn* again for the twenty third time....

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