

WHITE WATER RULES

"There aren't as many cars in the parking lot this summer," said Justin's grandmother.

"That means we'll go a lot faster, right, Gran?"

"We'll go pretty fast."

"Cool. I can't wait to get down there!"

"Down there" was a glittering ribbon of water, deep and fast-moving, almost 150 feet below them, called the White Salmon River. It was the second summer that Justin and his grandma, Celia, were rafting on this river.

Lumbering down the winding footpath that would lead them to the water, they watched as the raft was lowered to the launch site on huge cables that were powered by an engine in a nearby boathouse. Their heavy gear made walking slow, but there was no way the helmets, life vests, or wetsuits could be left behind. At 40 degrees, the water could be downright dangerous.

At the launch site, Justin waved to Matt, the guide who had accompanied them the year before. Matt was already helping somebody into the raft, when Justin noticed that one of his rafting mates was almost his own size. This deserved a closer look, since he was a curious ten year old. The newcomer was a *girl*.

"I'm Justin Kelley," he told her. She smiled, and he liked her right away.

"I'm Casey Randall. Where are you from?"

"Texas. I'm here with my grandma for the summer. Have you rafted before?"

"Lots of times. You?"

"Sure. We were here last year. It was great."

Casey's dad helped her into the raft, then gave Justin a friendly grin and a hand up. They sat on opposite sides of the raft, with her dad behind them and Celia in front. A friend of Matt's, named Jimmy, joined them. Everyone took a paddle, while Matt gave them a word of warning.

"Listen up now, we'll be hitting rapids of grade 3 or 4, and you know that grade 6 is the roughest. We don't have a full raft today. Less people means we'll move faster through the water. Just hang onto your paddles and don't panic at the rough spots. This will be really run if we all keep an eye on each other, okay?"

Celia watched appreciatively as Matt's powerful arms easily bore his paddle into the water and out, setting a brisk, but regular, rhythm the others could imitate. She could not guess his age, afraid to admit the difference between their years; admiring his well-proportioned physique was the highest compliment her nature would permit.

Behind her, Justin and Casey were talking easily, becoming friends. Celia supposed that ten year olds never ran out of things to say, were never self-conscious or afraid of approaching others. She must have been ten years old herself, but it seemed long ago. The clear voices of the children carried far over the bright water.

Scant moments later, the raft approached a slight bend in the river where the current quickened, and the water suddenly had a will of its own.

“First rapids!” shouted Matt. “Grab your paddles!” And then the water claimed them.

After a heart-stopping sideways lurch, the raft vaulted forward, its nose returning to the water’s surface with an audible “thwack,” rewarding the riders with a face-full of frigid river. It was no time to be self-conscious about one’s appearance.

Celia dug her paddle into the roiling current, as they all did, in an effort to keep the raft from overturning, listening for sounds of distress from Justin, since she could not spare a glance at him. The only sounds he made, however, were great whoops of excitement (“Gran, this rocks!”), and she realized that nothing ever scared this kid.

The rush of water became a great roar as they progressed down the canyon at breakneck speed, each rafter intent on keeping afloat, teeth clenched against the chill until, as suddenly as it began, the current calmed and they drifted for a time.

Matt turned to his raft-mates, laughing out loud as he saw five people simultaneously wilt like dead flowers after the initial rush had passed. Celia liked his laugh; it was spontaneous and friendly, as he was.

“Looks like we all made it,” he grinned. “Everybody okay?”

A few people groaned, but the general response was positive. Casey’s dad, Ken, groaned loudest. “And that was just the first rapids.”

“It’s my dad’s first trip,” Casey said to Justin.

“We came through that canyon so fast, I didn’t really get to see it,” Ken said. Matt nodded, knowingly.

“Don’t worry, though,” he said. “We still have about ten miles to float, and it isn’t entirely rapids. You’ll get a good look at everything for the next few minutes, and the view is worth it.”

The scenery *was* splendid. The canyon walls on either side of the river, massive, rough-hewn and very high, narrowed in varying degrees. Bright splashes of color jutting from the rock gave evidence of blooming bushes, and pine trees thrived in unlikely crevices. Closer to the water, tree branches stretched over the river in long arms that threatened to unseat an unwary rafter.

The craft floated with a minimum of paddling, allowing greater ease of conversation. While Celia and Ken discussed the two children, Matt and Jimmy laughed together, and Justin regaled Casey with tales of Texas. She was genuinely surprised that horses were not part of his life.

“Well, we do have cities, you know,” he said.

“Hey, look over there,” Casey pointed across the water. “There’s another raft.”

“Right,” Matt smiled at her. “The tour company sends out several rafts at a time. We’ll meet everyone down river for lunch, in a couple of hours. Ken, don’t take off your life vest. Rapids are coming up in a few minutes. Are you doing okay, Celia? I hoped we’d see you again this year, since you liked it so much last summer. Glad to have you back.”

He said it so genuinely that she blushed. And decided that she could show up next year, too.

The riders, now an efficient team, were prepared for the next stretch of white water, the rough current visible long before they reached it. The raft hurled itself over the next couple of miles in a brazen mixture of lurching, sloshing, seat-thumping gallops that challenged not only one's ability to hold onto a paddle, but his balance as well.

Near the end of this stretch, Celia, who sat at the head of her raft, noticed the rocks jutting sharply from the water on their left, and the people-laden raft just ahead, veering dangerously close to them. She quickly glanced back at Matt, whose attention was also focused there.

"Gran, look at that man up there," said Justin. "He's sitting too high on the edge—he'll go over!"

Celia opened her mouth to respond, but what she intended to say was lost entirely. The raft ahead of them was delivered into the rocks with a visible smack. Momentarily, everyone on board lost seating—all but the man at the rear who, as Justin predicted, did a graceful back-flip into the icy river. Because he wore a wetsuit, the cold was not immediately threatening, but the now-vicious current repeatedly slammed him into the rocks. If the man were rendered unconscious, the water could carry him down river at such a pace that he would surely slip past any raft remotely close enough to pull him in before he drowned. Matt immediately gathered his team into a rescue effort.

“Right forward, left back!” he shouted. Ken, Casey and Celia paddled frantically forward. Justin, Jimmy and Matt began a strong backward stroke. This began to line up the raft to come alongside the rock ledge.

“Lean into it! Don’t slow down!” Matt moved from side to side, assisting both groups at paddling. The rocks were soon within their reach.

“Now, reverse. Right back, left forward!”

The current was fierce here, batting the raft in a sideways motion, ever closer to the sharp rocks. They could just as easily puncture the raft as overturn it. The man in the water bobbed above the surface, conscious but visibly injured from a badly bleeding gash in his forehead. Matt quickly moved forward, attempting to reach over the side to collar the man, but without his weight to maintain the balance at the back of the raft, it wobbled badly, taking a throat-clenching shimmy that nearly unseated them all.

Celia half-turned then, just in time to see her incredibly calm grandson lean over his side of the raft.

“Justin, no!” she shrieked, her voice white with terror.

He paid no attention, his young face completely intent on the man in the water. Quick-thinking Justin extended the long handle of his paddle, shouting, “Grab on!”

It took a couple of tries, but eventually the injured man got his hands around the paddle. Justin, his arms clasping the broad base, pulled him to the raft. Matt

instructed Jimmy and Ken to continue paddling backward, while he hauled their comrade to safety.

And just beyond the rocks lay smooth water. Matt's deep voice resumed its calm cheerfulness.

"Everybody forward now. We'll bank right up there for lunch. You did great!"

My hair is turning gray at this very moment, Celia thought. How can they possibly think about *lunch*?

Her hands had mostly stopped shaking by the time they pulled the raft up to the shore. Other rafts and riders were already here; an enormous picnic was spread out for them, consisting of barbequed beef, corn on the cob, salad and crusty garlic bread, and gallons of tangy-sweet lemonade.

The injured man was not seriously hurt, but he was taken to a nearby ranger station for first aid. That settled, Celia went in search of Justin, intending to either praise or admonish him for his wonderful, risky behavior out there. She found him being adored as Casey's personal hero ("Listen, Tex, you can raft with me anytime,"), which seemed more important than all the bragging Matt was doing about him, and decided that he deserved this attention. Her heart lifted to an incredible high, having caught a glimpse of the man he would become. She resolved to tell the boy more often that he mattered so very, very much to her.

Celia left Justin in Casey's capable hands and slowly made her way to the lunch area. She removed her helmet and fluffed out her hair, the sun revealing

thick, full locks of vivid color – a bright, rich copper on top, warmed underneath by shades of cinnamon and russet. Unfashionably long, it framed her face perfectly even when wet, a perfect complement to the peachy-rose tint of her skin. She hardly looked old enough to be someone's grandmother, and had no idea that this same thought was currently on the mind of the young man who observed her movements.

Matt approached her with a cup. "How about some lemonade?"

"Perfect, thanks," she smiled. "I wonder if the rest of the trip will be as exciting as the first half?"

"Maybe not that exciting," he laughed. "but you're up for it, right?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Justin was great. You were all great. This kind of thing doesn't happen too often. We have a good team this trip."

"He scared me to death, leaning out like that," she confessed. "I have a couple of new gray hairs to prove it."

"I don't see them."

"Well, no. I pulled them out."

"Sounds painful," he said, enjoying this encounter.

"It was that, or wait until I could color over them," she said tartly. "I'm just not a person who likes to wait."

"I've had a couple of gray hairs myself," he said archly. His black hair showed no evidence of that. "We have something in common, Celia."

"You mean besides yanking out gray hair?"

“That, and river rafting.”

“I may have to start rafting without Justin. I could end up without hair of any color after too many days like this one!”

“Let me know when you’re ready to do that,” Matt said quietly, and her heart fluttered in a way that it had not in a very long time.

“I will,” she told him.

After an hour of the most satisfying lunch ever made, the rested rafters returned to their crafts for the last leg of the trip. Matt hustled off to oversee their raft being put afloat, as did his counterparts. None of the rafts would push away from the shallow water until all of them were ready.

Celia caught up with Justin at the river’s edge, where Casey still shadowed him. She hugged him briefly when he said under his breath, “I think we should get started before she falls in love with me.”

“Really. How do you like this hero stuff?” Over Justin’s dark head, Celia caught Matt’s twinkling eyes. He had obviously overheard this exchange.

“It’s great, Gran. White water rules!”