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My Stint with the Wilderness

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□ **Day One**

My experience with Red Cliff Ascent wilderness therapy program began, as usual, with me pulling away from the house 45 minutes late. I had to be in Enterprise at 8:30, and unless my '87 Chevy Cavalier was going to sprout wings like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, I was not going to make my appointment on time. It was already 8:15, for crying out loud.

I hunched over the steering wheel and imagined Steve Schultz, the Red Cliff media rep and the one who would be escorting me around in this wilderness camp, standing in the Enterprise Office, looking at his watch and huffing and puffing.

"Why isn't she here yet?" I imagined him saying, tapping a wing-toed shoe. "We need to get out there now!"

That image of Steve, and my obsessing with time and lateness, was two of the many illusions that would be shattered in the next three days.

When I pulled up to the Red Cliff offices at a quarter after 9, I had little idea what was awaiting me. But the first thing was a hearty handshake from Steve, decked out in a T-shirt, shorts and hiking boots. The second thing that was awaiting me was a four-hour delay before getting out into the field.

"We don't run by watches around here," Steve said to me later. "You do what you do until it's done."

I relaxed for the first time that morning. I was on Red Cliff time, and that didn't mean obsession over the watch hands. I was safe.

I got a full tour of the offices and warehouse. I noticed that everyone was calling each other by these Indian-type names, "Earth names," they called them. I decided to ask Andrea Burgess, the executive director, about it. Her Earth name was "Morning Dove." "Um, Morning Dove?" I asked, and held my breath.

No one looked at me funny or laughed at me or really noticed at all, so I gathered that it was OK and even commonplace to call people by their Earth names if they had them. I decided I would try that again, just to get used to it.

"Morning Dove?" I said again.

"Laurie, you can call me 'Dove.' Everybody calls me 'Dove' for short," she said.

"OK," I said, exhaling a bit.

We sat and chatted, Steve - whose name was "River Stone," I found out in this conversation - and Dove and "Doc Dan" Sanderson, the clinical director of Red Cliff, and I. They gave me the full rundown of the program, any history I cared to hear, and answered all the questions I could think of. An hour and a half later, I left the conference room with a slight headache and Steve, bless his heart, took me to lunch.

After lunch I got fitted out with rations and all the gear I needed to finally go out in the field. By this time it was about noon, and my nervousness was creeping up on me again. Steve suggested I go over to intake, the sort of "check in" point for the new students, and ask the coordinators a few questions. Apparently intake was a real process, since some of the kids are brought to Red Cliff by a transport service, which is basically the parents signing a form saying they'll let a couple bouncer-type guys yank their child out of bed in the middle of the night and drag them to Red Cliff.

I went in to the intake room with Jared Priebe, a tall, muscular, tanned guy with tattoos on his forearms and earrings in both ears.

No wonder he does the intake, I thought. He looks tough as nails. I bet the kids wouldn't stand a chance against this guy. (I found out later that Jared used to work for a transport service before settling down at Red Cliff. I wasn't surprised.)

"Basically we ask the kids to strip down to their underwear and then outfit them from the skin out," he said.

"What do you do if they fight back?" I asked, expecting a "we bash 'em over the head and sit on them" type response.

"We use PCS, which stands for 'Positive Control Systems,'" he said. "It's stuff like bending the wrist back, just until it hurts, but no further. There's no way you'll harm a child if PCS is done correctly. But usually you can get a child compliant just by talking to them."

Well, there went my "boot camp" illusion of wilderness therapy. These people actually care about the kids.

Jared went on to say that the kids are given clothes and gear, and if they have a high risk to run away, they're given a bright red jumpsuit. "It makes them easy to spot," he said. "With the other students, we take their pants and boots every night for the first 20 days, or if there's a run risk."

I guess they've thought of it all. I'm still soaking this all in, and my head starts to ping a little bit again.

I finally throw my now-loaded pack into the back of a truck and Iron Butterfly and Mountain Lynx - I'm starting to get the hang of this Earth names thing - drive me and Steve out to the field. On the way Mountain Lynx explained to me the crux of Red Cliff "experiential therapy," the six ego states every student must progress through to reach emotional adulthood. They are, in order of least mature to most mature, Natural Child, Adaptive Child, Rebellious Child, Little Professor, Critical Parent and Nurturing Parent. After that comes the Adult ego state.

When we got out there, we had to hike in a ways to get to camp. They radioed for one of the counselors to come meet us on the trail, so the kids don't quite know where we came from. Titanium Elk comes stomping down the trail, bronzed and friendly.

"What are you here for, exactly?" he asks me.

"I'm actually a reporter for The Spectrum newspaper in St. George," I tell him. "I'm writing a story about Red Cliff."

"You might not want to tell the students that," he said. "They'll probably act out if they know you're a reporter."

I agreed, but the thought of being undercover in any way just made me more nervous.

My stomach was tight by the time we reach camp. Elk introduced us just as visitors, and the students didn't pay much attention to us. I relaxed a little bit and, after setting my pack down, I go around to do my little bit of interviewing on the sly.

I finally got my first good look at the group - six students, all boys, and four staff: Titanium Elk, Cedar Hawk, Canyon Aurora (Yes! I thought. I'm not the only girl out here!) and Andy, the intern. Talking to the staff and later the therapists, I find out that these particular students are mostly children of six-figure families from New England. Some of these kids own all the toys and goodies their parents could possibly afford.

Looking and talking to these kids, it was hard for me to see that. They're hard-working, smart, funny, and largely pretty cool. I'm thinking this group has more of a Boy Scout dynamic than a Penitentiary.

We hung out for the day, the boys doing their phase work and working on making fires and stuff. I walk over to Joel, who is hunched under a juniper tree, trying to prop up a rock on a twig.

"Whatcha doing?" I ask him.

"Making a trap," he says.

On a hike to water, I talk to Joel and Charles, another student, about their experiences at RCA.

"So, what are you getting out of this, Charles?" I asked.

"I'll never take anything for granted ever again," he said, dragging his water jug through the top of a sage bush. "I had no idea how lucky I was."

"Fair enough," I said. "But what do you think you're gaining from this?"

I was shocked to hear him give a standard fuzzy-feel-good response about how he really felt like he was making big changes, like RCA was giving him the tools to make better decisions in his life. This coming from the guy who, only two minutes before, was complaining mightily about being there? I thought.

I turned to Joel and asked him the same question.

"I feel like I'm gaining tools to help me control my own life and destiny," Joel rattled off.

"So," I said, "what are you guys *really* getting out of this?" This was my first time experiencing

"adaptive child" - a student who tries to get through Red Cliff telling the staff and therapists only what they think they want to hear.

When we got ready for dinner, I broke out my food sack with rations in it. I got the same fare as the boys, and I follow their lead in making their nightly pot of rice and lentils. Hunter watched over my shoulder as I doused the pot liberally with some beef bullion and cut up an onion in the stuff. I tasted it every few minutes, and finally set it on the coals to simmer.

"Wait, you're eating our same food?" Hunter asked, unbelieving. I chuckled. "Well, yeah, Hunter," I said. "That would be kind of mean for me to come out with KFC and rub it in your faces."

"Oh," he said, thinking for a minute. "Are you going to sleep out here too?" I assured him I'll be eating the same food, doing the same work and sleeping on the same spot of ground with them for the next few days. He looked surprised.

After our pots were scrubbed out with dirt, the guys practiced for Shin Dig, the quarterly celebration and talent show at the amphitheater at Outpost. Every group has to have a song and dance, and the group with the best presentation gets two boxes of Pop-Tarts apiece. After a month of whole grains, the boys will do just about anything for some junk food.

As it gets dark, we sit around the campfire, the boys writing in their journals, me scribbling in my reporter notebook.

"Pens officially do not write on tuna oil," Charles said, wiping the residue from lunch off his notebook. I chuckled.

We talked about the ego states. Titanium Elk asks the boys to share what ego state they were in before they got there, and what ego state they feel that they're in now. Everyone participates in this fess-up of sorts.

Aurora and Elk gather up everyone's pants and boots for the night and hide them somewhere. I spread out my bedroll and look up at the stars for a while before almost drifting off to sleep.

"Laurie," I hear Aurora whisper beside me.

"Yes?"

"If you hear something, it's usually the boys crying," she says.

A lump catches in my throat for a second. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah," she whispers. "They usually don't cry in the daytime, so they wait until night to cry, when nobody's looking. So don't be worried if you hear them crying."

"OK."

I worry down the fist-sized lump in my throat, and a tear slides, unbidden, down my face before I fall asleep.

