

PRWC 1- “Wild Beginning”

*“Oh, my baby, when you're older
Maybe then you'll understand
You have angels that stands around you shoulders
'Cause at times in life you need a loving hand”
~ “Come To Jesus” Mindy Smith*

Six months. Well, six months and 23 days if you want to be exact. That’s how long Starlight Academy had been open, how long I had been attending Reefside University, and how long it had been since I had seen my boyfriend, Jay.

I can’t say life had been that bad. I actually enjoyed working with the students at Starlight. My group was making more progress everyday. Of course there had been changes I had to make in myself. For one this was the first time I hadn’t had Melody or my other friends around. That was the hardest part. I also saw all these kids with issues I never dreamed of. Abuse...drug use...the list goes on. It was very taxing at first but I got into the swing of things. Living at the Academy wasn’t so bad either...except for Julie, my annoying room mate (more about her later). But the real highlight of my life at Starlight was my group. My Wildcats (every group at Starlight had a name. That was ours.)

First was April Snyder. She was 16 and a real hard case. April never knew her birth father. When her mother remarried it was to a low life scumbag who did drugs and eventually raped April. She turned to drugs herself as her way of coping. Eventually she ran away. When she was caught by authorities for streetwalking her mom was forced to do something. She took their lawyer’s advice and sent her here, it was the only way to keep her out of juvenile hall (juvie). She’s been here for all 6 months of the school’s existence and she’s made amazing progress.

Next we have Jesse Foster. He’s 16 also and unlike the others he wasn’t abused nor was he self destructive. Jesse actually had a very loving family at one time. That was before his parents were killed in an auto accident. After that he was sent to live with his aunt. She didn’t want him but she did want the money that came with him (his parents had a great life insurance policy). She spent 2 years neglecting him before she heard about Starlight as a cheap alternative to having him in her way. Most of Jesse’s issues deal with abandonment and self esteem. Jesse has only been here 3 months and slowly, but steadily, he’s making progress.

Then there’s Chris Hayes. He’s only 15 but his troubles run deep. His father was very abusive to his mother. He grew up seeing that and ended up a violent person himself. He also saw his father’s constant drinking and when he got into high school he starting drinking, experimenting with drugs, and even went as far as to get involved with gangs. Chris has been here for 5 months and...well he’s still a work in progress. I haven’t given up hope though.

Finally, we have Tiffany Jennings. She’s 14 and on the surface you would think this girl had it all. Her parents were both very important CEOs of major

corporations. Tiffany could have anything and everything she wanted, except time with them. They would always be busy with work functions and they would give Tiffany money to keep her satisfied. Eventually she started to think her parents didn't love her. She believed it was because she wasn't perfect enough. She started to purge her food in order to fit the perfect model description. When that didn't get their attention she fell into deep despair and didn't know how to deal. Her answer was to turn to cutting to release her feelings. When she passed out from malnutrition the doctor recommended sending her to us. She's only been here for 2 months and it's hard to measure her progress because she still hasn't let go of her perky front and let us in on her deeper problems too many times. I'm confident that will come with time though.

Remember I mentioned my roommate Julia? Yeah, her. She has a troubled past herself. I guess she was abused by her stepfather and she ended up doing drugs and running away after she tried to off him with a piece of sports equipment. She got a scholarship to a school that was like this one and it turned her life around. Working here is her way of giving that gift to someone else. I respect her for what she's doing. I just find her to be very annoying.

I'd have to say my best friend since I moved here would have to be Josh McKnight. He's the son of two of my Mom's former team mates. Josh also attends Reefside U and he helps out at Starlight quite often. He's a really cool guy and is a total blast to hang with.

And that covers mostly everyone around here...except my family of course. My parents seem very happy with their work here. They are head masters of Starlight. They are also in charge of the Wildcats most of the time since I'm at school most of the day Monday-Friday. My baby sister is 3 now, she's talking somewhat. She's walking (and as my mom told me, she did learn to walk without me pushing her) and she brings so much joy into lots of the student's lives. She's a spunky kid. You can tell she belongs in this family.

Today happened to be a Saturday and that meant no classes. It also meant it was hiking day and I got to spend more time with my kids.

"How much further?" Tiffany whined.

"Don't start Tiff. We haven't even gone a mile yet." April said.

"You can't expect any less from Princess." Chris said.

"I'm not a Princess." Tiffany said getting defensive.

"Whatever you say...Princess." Chris said laughing.

"Don't start you guys. Tiff, you don't need to complain. It will only make the hike seem longer." I said.

"How long is it today?" Tiffany asked.

"You know the drill. 3 miles each way for a total of 6 miles. Today is no different." I said.

"Ugh." Tiffany whined.

"Don't start Tiff." I said as we continued our hike.

"We're going to have to listen to her all day!" April said covering her ears.

"Probably." I said as I heard a voice come over my two way radio.

“Harley, come in...” Mom said.
“Mom? I’m here. Go ahead.” I said into the radio.
“How far out are you?” she asked.
“About a mile or so.” I said.
“I figured about that. Turn around and get back. We have a new student coming in and I am placing him in your group. You need to help us with introduction and admission.” Mom said.
“Ok, it’ll take me about an hour.” I said.
“I know. That’s fine. That’s about when he’ll be here.” Mom said.
“Ok, got it. Harley out.” I said putting the radio away. “Well Tiff, looks like your prayers were answered. We’re turning back.” I said.
“Why? I couldn’t understand what was being said on the radio.” Tiffany asked.
“We’re getting a new student in our group and I have to help check him in.” I said.
“What? A new kid? Ugh, just great.” April said.
“April, don’t be that way. I want you to welcome the new kid. Remember, you were new once.” I said.
“Yeah, whatever.” April said.
“Let’s head back.” I said getting everyone to turn around.

An hour later we got back to the Academy.

“Ok guys, you all can have some free time. Stay in the lodge though so I can find you when I need to.” I instructed.
“Fine by me.” Tiffany said walking into the lodge. Once I saw they were all in I walked over to my parents’ office.

“OK, I’m here.” I said.
“Good, just in time. We just got a call. Your new student is 5 minutes away.” Dad said.
“Ok. What’s his name? I could use some background info.” I said.
“Ok. His name is Derek Hall. He’s 17 and he’s here because of being busted for drugs. He was an athlete at school and had good grades until the past couple of year. Something happened in him and he changed almost overnight according to his coach and teachers. Our job is to find out what.” Dad said.
I nodded. “Ok, got it.” I said as there was a knock on the door.
“Come in.” Dad called.
A social worker walked in with this guy. He was tall and had blonde hair. He looked like your typical jock. Actually he sort of reminded me of my friend Alex, except Alex never was messed up.
“Welcome to Starlight Academy.” Mom said standing up to greet the boy.
“We can take it from here. Thank you.” Dad said as the social worker left.
“I’m Michelle Bradley and this is my husband Hunter Bradley. We’re the head masters to the Academy. That is our daughter Harley Bradley and she will be your group leader.” Mom said.
“How sweet. It’s a family business.” Derek said.
“We like to think it’s pretty nice. Now we have to get you checked in. Harley, show Derek to his room and find one of the males to do the search.” Mom said.
“I thought you guys did the search and seize.” I said.

"I trust the dorm monitors to do it. I've had them do the last few and it's working out well. Hunter trained some of the staff to do it. I have to finish his paper work and Hunter is going to wait in the clinic so Derek can get his physical." Mom said. "OK. Derek, this way." I said as I walked out with the new kid behind me. "I think you'll find it's not so bad here once you get used to it. I'm not sure if you've been informed of all the rules. We do follow a strict schedule here. We also don't allow drinking, drugs, or sex obviously. We also monitor any public displays of affection to make sure it is not upsetting to anyone. We assign chore duty and there is allotted time for them to be done. One Sunday a month everyone has to help deep clean the lodge and dorms. If you have any questions I'm your group leader. You can ask me or another group leader or monitor. Any questions?" I asked.

"No. I think I'm good." He said.

"Ok..." I said as I saw Josh. "Hey, Josh! Wanna do me a favor?"

"Har, what's up?" he asked.

"I need someone to do the search and seize on Derek here." I said.

"Ah, a new kid. Welcome to Starlight. I'm Josh McKnight." Josh said.

"Derek Hall. So what's your job around here?" Derek asked.

"Um, I don't have an official title. I just help out." Josh said.

"How noble of you." Derek said.

"Anyway, can you do the search?" I asked Josh again.

"Of course." Josh said as he started walking with us. "Did you hear Coach Daniels quit?"

"What? Why?" I asked. Coach Daniels had been our sports coordinator.

"Because Mark Williams hit him in the head with a baseball for making him run laps. Coach said he couldn't take anymore of...well let's just say he was angry."

Josh said. I guess the Coach said something insulting about the students and Josh didn't want Derek hearing it.

"Wow. We need a new coach." I said.

"Yeah, I'll say." Josh said.

"I wonder why my parents didn't tell me about this." I said.

"New student stress." Josh said as we walked in the dorm.

"Ok, you'll sleep in this bunk. Josh is going to check your bags now and make sure you don't have any contraband on you." I said stepping back so Josh could work.

"You think I'm stupid enough to bring anything to a place like this?" Derek asked.

"It's procedure." Josh said as he started the search.

"Yeah...right." Derek said as he stood back and let himself get searched.

When Josh was done with the search (we found nothing to seize) I took Derek to the clinic.

"Ok, go on in. My dad is in there with the doctor. I'll be right here when you get done." I said.

"Yeah...fine." Derek said going in.

15 minutes later he came out with Dad.

"Ok, surprisingly his clothes are appropriate and fit dress code so that's not an issue...he's all yours Har. You can take him with the rest of your group now." Dad said.

“Great. Let’s go Derek.” I said leading him to the lodge. We got in and I found the others all sitting around playing cards.

“Good, glad to see you all making an effort to act as a group. Guys, this is our newest Wildcat, Derek Hall. Derek, this is Tiffany Jennings, Jesse Foster, Chris Hayes, and April Snyder.” I said.

“Hey.” He said.

“Hey Derek. Welcome to Starlight!” Tiffany said in her normal perky voice.

“Yeah, thanks.” Derek said sitting down.

“Ok, well it looks like our hike isn’t gonna happen today. I’m sure you’re beyond disappointed. Instead we’re going to do a group talk until lunch.” I said

“Ugh...” April groaned.

“Hey, it’s better than hiking.” Tiffany said.

“Ok, first off, Jesse, you’re going to be Derek’s buddy for the first week. Show him around, make sure he gets adjusted.” I said.

“Ok, not a problem.” Jesse said softly.

“Now, let’s start with the emotion circle. Derek, what we do here is everyone goes around and tells how they feel in one word then we go back and elaborate. You’ll catch on fast. Tiff, since you’re so keen on this you can start.” I said.

“OK. I feel happy. Chris...”

“I feel...tired. April...”

“I feel annoyed. Jesse...”

“I feel nervous. Harley...”

“I feel excited. Derek...”

“I feel confused.” Derek finished.

“Ok good job. Now Tiff, why do you feel happy?” I asked.

“I feel happy because we don’t have to hike today. Chris...”

“I feel tired because we’re never allowed to sleep in here. April...”

“I feel annoyed because I hate these emotion circles. Jesse...”

“I feel nervous about being Derek’s buddy because I don’t want to mess up. Harley...”

“I feel excited because we have a new Wildcat. Derek...”

“I feel confused because I’m still trying to figure out what the hell is going on here.” Derek finished.

“Derek, we don’t use language like that here.” I said.

“Ok, heck then.” Derek corrected with a hint of sarcasm.

“Thank you.” I said.

“Har, your dad wants you.” Josh said coming in.

“Oh, ok. Can you hang with them for a bit?” I asked.

“Sure, no problem.” Josh said sitting down. I got up and ran into my parents’ office.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Can you handle getting lunch out by yourself today?” Dad asked.

“Sure. Why?” I asked.

“Because Felicity is sick so your mom had to take her to the clinic and I have to come up with some lessons plans for Monday.” Dad said.

“Lesson plans? For what?” I asked.

“I’m the new coach for now.”

“You? Why?”

“Because your mother won’t let me hire the one person who’s already applied.”

“Who’s that?”

“Conner McKnight.”

“Josh’s dad?”

“Yeah.”

“Well he’s a great coach at RHS. If he wants to work here wouldn’t that be great?” I asked.

“That’s what I thought but your mom won’t let me hire him.” Dad said.

“I am not working side by side with Conner McKnight for the rest of my life. Not a chance. Hell will freeze over before I hire him.” Mom said.

“Mich, you’re acting like your 15. Conner is a good coach and he’s willing to work here. We’d be lucky to have him.” Dad said.

“No, no, no, and oh yeah, NO!” Mom said.

“Don’t worry about lunch Dad. I got it covered. I hope you figure out the coach thing.” I said as I walked out. When I got out I noticed the sky was darker. A storm must be heading in.

I got in to make lunch. I watched my Wildcats from a distance. I was truly excited to have Derek. I just hoped he’d fit in with this bunch...I hoped I could help.