

It's Not All Rainbows and Ponies

By Laura Shepperd

Chapter 3

There's no denying the magnificent beauty of the Texas Hill Country, even if you're on your way to Rehab, five hundred miles from home. Traveling southwest from the Piney Woods of northeast Texas where we live, the two-lane roads cut a path through dense forest, then rise to hilltops where rolling green pastures dotted with horses and cattle are occasionally interrupted by oil and gas wells or trailer parks that quickly flash out of view as more pine trees either fill the hillsides or block the horizon completely. Further south, the trees first begin to thin out, then they get shorter as the wind picks up through the plains of Central Texas, which soon begin to roll down towards the Texas Hill Country. What the Hill Country is lacking in tall, lush trees, God made up for in beautiful rolling hills, and the roads cutting through create a roller coaster view of limestone cliffs and green valleys, all leading in and out of nowhere, then into important cities like Austin and San Antonio, and then back out again. Harley riders and deer love this countryside, and boats and fish fill the lakes and streams.

Alli drove me down – eight long hours. We talked everything we dared about Rehab. We talked about everything *but* Rehab. We played amateur designers and pieced together Alli's dream apartment after she gets on her feet financially. I received a lecture on how my life and certain friendships would have to change when I returned home. *When I return home. So far and foreign, I can't even think of it.* Alli's college roommate was a nurse who had worked briefly in a substance abuse wing at a hospital. She told Alli I probably would live like a hospital patient when I first arrived. In a right-side-up world, parents talk to each other about these embarrassing concerns for their children. But there was no horror at the thought of Alli telling her friend. No shame.

I had imploded. The world shrunk. I was oblivious to anything external. Once combative and controlling, now diminished to a submissive recipient of fate. I need not question or inquire about the external. I wasn't worthy of an answer anyway.

I pondered what my detox would entail. "Mom, you think you'll have to be detoxed? Really?" Her face showed fear and panic and her voice, disbelief that this shit could get worse.

"Yes. I didn't think about it at first, but yes." I had visions of being strapped down in a white room. I bit my lip, looked out the window and asked, "Do you think they'll be nice to me?" but Alli never answered.

As we traveled further from cities and closer to my new home, the winding roads narrowed, and what had been intermittent rain turned to buckets of water slapping our car and blocking our view. Mud and rain flowed across the blacktop road into the Guadalupe River on our left.

"Really?" I said. "No rain all damn summer, but it's going to rain as I enter Rehab? It's so cliché!" I lit up a cigarette and looked out the window. I wasn't steel with resolve, but I wasn't weepy either. I'd like to say I was gutted up for the battle of my life, but it wasn't like that. I was battered and busted. Defeated. I was leaving my world behind, heading for isolation, and I couldn't find one single morsel of me. The old me—the real me—the one hidden somewhere inside, would have been strong and determined, ready for the race. The drunk me, well, she would've had a drink! But I didn't. I just sat all hollow inside and fidgeting and fretful on the outside. Occasionally, a wave of panic would rush in, and my organs felt like separate living beings, wriggling against each other inside my shell. I would lean over with my head between my knees and mash my fingers against my temples really hard, and an involuntary low, breathy moan would come out of me. Alli finally had enough.

"What is *that*?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't know. I'm just getting so nervous." I was rocking back and forth.

"Well, we're not doing that anymore. You can do something else."

"Okay. Sorry. Really, I don't know what the hell," I said.

Alli just shook her head and kept concentrating on the road. Later, it struck me as funny because my moaning probably sounded sexual to her. As if this day weren't weird enough, now her mom is making involuntary sexual moaning sounds. Poor girl! But rather than acknowledge that, I nodded in agreement and released a heavy sigh (*sans* moaning). I shifted in my seat and lit yet another cigarette.

We continued down the winding road through the sheets of rain. Top and bottom, everything was gray, with the low clouds above us, and the steam rising up from the road below. The middle—the trees and grass—were a lush green. The Guadalupe rushed along beside us to our left, and a wall of earth to our right closed us in on the narrow road. We could see houses up beyond the wall. Some of them were beautiful large homes, and others were simple weekend bungalows. All of them had beautiful, well-groomed yards, and the grass and trees would have giggled with delight at the rain if they could. Instead, they just pushed all their green to the front, and it was brilliant. I was wondering how close we were when my phone rang.

“Hello?” I covered my other ear to block back the sound of pouring rain. Alli turned off the radio. “Yes, this is Laura.” It was someone from Rehab.

“Are you driving?” she asked.

“No, my daughter is driving me down,” I answered, looking at Alli with a shrug.

She wanted to know when to expect me and asked where we were. I assured her I would be arriving on time, but she gently corrected me. Between the rain and our current location, there was no way we would be there at my expected three o'clock check-in time. *Crap. Late as usual.*

“Oh, I'm so sorry, but it has been raining on us the last couple of hours.”

“No problem at all, Laura. Just be careful, and we will see you when you get here. Are you doing all right?”

Am I doing alright? Let's see. My daughter is driving me to Rehab five hundred miles away from home, so no, it's not my best day.

“Yes ma'am. I'm doing just fine.” I looked at Alli, and we both shrugged.

“What's the deal?” Alli asked after I hung up.

“Just checking on me and wondering when we'll be there. Weird.”

“That's not weird. I think it's nice.”

We continued on, mostly in silence. I dug through my purse, counting cigarette packs, lighters, and money. I looked at my lipstick. I pulled out bundles of unpaid bills and threw them in the backseat. I unbuckled my seat belt, turned around and rifled through one of my bags in the backseat.

“What are you looking for, Mom? Thought of something you forgot?”

“No. I don't know. I'm just looking.” I turned back around and stared out the window. My stomach felt hollow. “We're really close. We're getting really close.”

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The guard house at the entrance gate was barely visible through the rain, but I could see its red roof and the yellow and black reflector stripes on the vehicle guard arms, down on either side to stop traffic headed in and out. Alli slowed the car, and I said, “It's a guard shack, and there's a guard in there. Hmmph.” We locked eyes for a moment, and she eased up to the gate.

“How y'all doing on this fine rainy day?” An older man leaned out of the window to greet us with a big smile.

“We're good,” Alli said. *Good as it gets in the situation, I guess. How the hell do you think she's doing on this fine rainy day, dropping her mom off in Rehab?*

“Who have we got there with ya?”

“Her name is ...”

“Laura Shepperd,” I interrupted. *She shouldn't have to answer that, like I'm so pitiful I can't speak for myself.*

“Well, welcome! Welcome, Laura!” He checked his clipboard, stretched through his little guard shack window out into the rain and extended his hand to me as I leaned across Alli to meet his.

“You are welcome here, Laura S., and thank you, little lady for giving her the ride down!”

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Alli and I smiled and laughed awkwardly, but his smile was genuine and his presence, calm and reassuring. He pointed us to the administration building just to the right past the gate.

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“Let me take your picture, and then I'll give you two a few minutes,” the admitting lady said turning a camera on her computer monitor towards me. *Probably have to wear an ID so orderlies can call me by name when they chase me back into my room.* I imagined this was how someone would feel being locked up against her own will. *All rights revoked, shut the fuck up and climb on in!* I didn't know that, but I didn't ask because I felt unworthy of answers. I'd waved the white flag, after all. She stuffed my paperwork in a folder and came from behind her desk and headed toward the office door. “Do you have a phone?”

I went cold. “Uhh ... I do. I was going to send it home with my daughter ... I mean, if that's okay. Can I call my husband and let him know we're here, please?”

“Sure you can!” she said smiling.

Whew! I had really worked up some bizarre scenarios in my head over the phone and other restrictions I'd read online about my Rehab. No cell phones, computers, iPods, radios or other electronic devices of any kind allowed. Would they back me in a corner, making demands, snatching and grabbing things from me? I had primed myself for anything.

“It's not a problem. Take as long as you need, and I'll give you two a moment for goodbyes as well.” She shut the door behind her.

“She seems nice,” Alli said. “And this place seems nice.”

I felt like a kid on the first day at school. This role reversal was too bizarre. *The lobby and this office are probably showy, clean facades like those motel lobbies with beautiful staircases leading to nowhere. They do this to make our families feel better. They're probably dumping me in a cold, white-tiled basement once Alli is out of sight.*

Alli and I stood as the lady left the room, stared hard at each other for a few seconds, and then

practically dove into each other. Neither one of us had cried until that goodbye hug.

“I love you, Alli,” I whispered in her ear. “I love you so much. Thank you.” Our bodies were shaking, and soft sobs were breaking through our strongest efforts.

“I love you too, Mama. It's good. This is good.” She was barely able to speak through her tears, and it broke my heart. My soul honestly hurt that I was putting her through this pain.

“I'll be good, I promise,” I said pulling away and flashing a quivering smile. She laughed through tears, and we both knew we had to stop this now if it was ever going to stop. “Please be careful, Alli. You know I wish you would make a stop and not drive all the way back tonight. You could stop and stay with Nana, and ...”

“I know, I know.” She was still wiping away tears as she opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

“Everyone okay?” the administrator asked. We gave her a nod, flashed a glance at each other, and then my Alli was gone.

The letting go had begun. I'd let go and admitted I needed help. Now I had to let go and trust that Alli would make it home safely, even without phone calls and texts from me. I had to let go and trust that my family would hold together and lean on each other while I was away. Most of all, I had to let go and trust that these people knew what the hell they were doing, and that they could help me get better.