

WILD RIVER

A NOVEL

Rodman Philbrick

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1.

Crazy River, Here We Come

It starts out as the best day ever. For a kid from a small town in New Hampshire, Montana is freaking awesome. The place has mountains high enough to scratch the pure blue sky, ranches half as big as the entire state of Rhode Island, and grizzly bears and mountain lions and herds of wild buffalo. And the best part? They still have real live, actual cowboys. I mean, think about it!

Deke pretends to be bored, but most of us kids are staring out the van windows like we can't believe our eyes. Our white-water guide, a really friendly dude with a bushy blond beard and a matching ponytail, has been pointing out the sights. Mostly mountains and canyons with strange names, and glints of creeks and rivers way down in the steep ravines.

"Couple more miles," he says cheerfully. "Sorry our primary destination didn't work out, but the Crazy, you have my word it will deliver the goods."

Crazy is the name of the river we're heading for, and we've got our fingers crossed that it won't be as low and dry



as the first choice. Can't have a white-water adventure without white-water rapids, right? So it's worth driving a hundred miles farther into the wilderness for what Sky promises will be "the rafting ride of a lifetime."

Strapped into a seat in the third row, Mia raises her hand and waits until one of the grown-ups spots it in the rearview. "Yes?"

"When do we eat?"

Sky shakes his head and chuckles. "Girl, you must have a hollow leg. We had a big breakfast, and you had a big lunch. Two helpings of ice cream, as I recall. To answer your question, next meal will be over a campfire on a sandy beach. Until then, you'll find snacks in the blue cooler."

Mia makes an impish face. I doubt she's really hungry. Just making herself known. Deke gives her a sullen look. She crosses her arms and ignores him. Tony sleeps with his head leaning against the window, oblivious as usual. And our famous soccer player, Cindi Beacon, the one they call Tiny Dancer because of her size and her moves, is playing a game on her phone. No cell reception out in the wilderness, or she'd probably be reporting back to her agent, which she does a lot. From what I can tell, it's pretty complicated being a celebrity. Still, she's really nice and down-to-earth, and doesn't brag about being famous.

The van turns onto an even smaller road, more like a rutted trail. We left the pavement long ago, but this is a lot bouncier.



“Over there!” We strain to see where Sky is pointing. “Through those trees. Big Medicine Dam, one of the oldest in the state. Built for purposes of irrigation, and retrofitted for flow control in the 1950s. Some want to tear it down and free the river. Others think it needs to be rebuilt for safety. All we care is that it feeds the Crazy.”

The van comes to a stop, seemingly at no place in particular, surrounded by forest.

Once we’re all out, Sky claps his hands together. “We’ll hike down from here. Cindi and I will portage the raft. Everybody else, take a pack. And while you’re strapping up, we’ll give the sat phone another try.”

Sky and Cindi bend over the satellite phone, punching buttons and shaking their heads in frustration. After a brief discussion, they nod in agreement.

Sky strides back to us, clearing his throat. “Listen up, people! We had to make a decision. Base was duly notified about abandoning our first destination. But the phone is still down—looks like the battery croaked—so we can’t contact them to let them know the Crazy is our final choice, understood? It’s not as if we’ll be alone on the river. Bound to cross paths with other tour groups, who are likely to have a working sat phone. In light of that, we have decided to proceed with our plan to raft the Crazy, and make contact later.”

We all cheer, even Deke. Crazy River, here we come.

