



*The
Wilderness
of
Girls*

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FRANKLIN

Chicken
House

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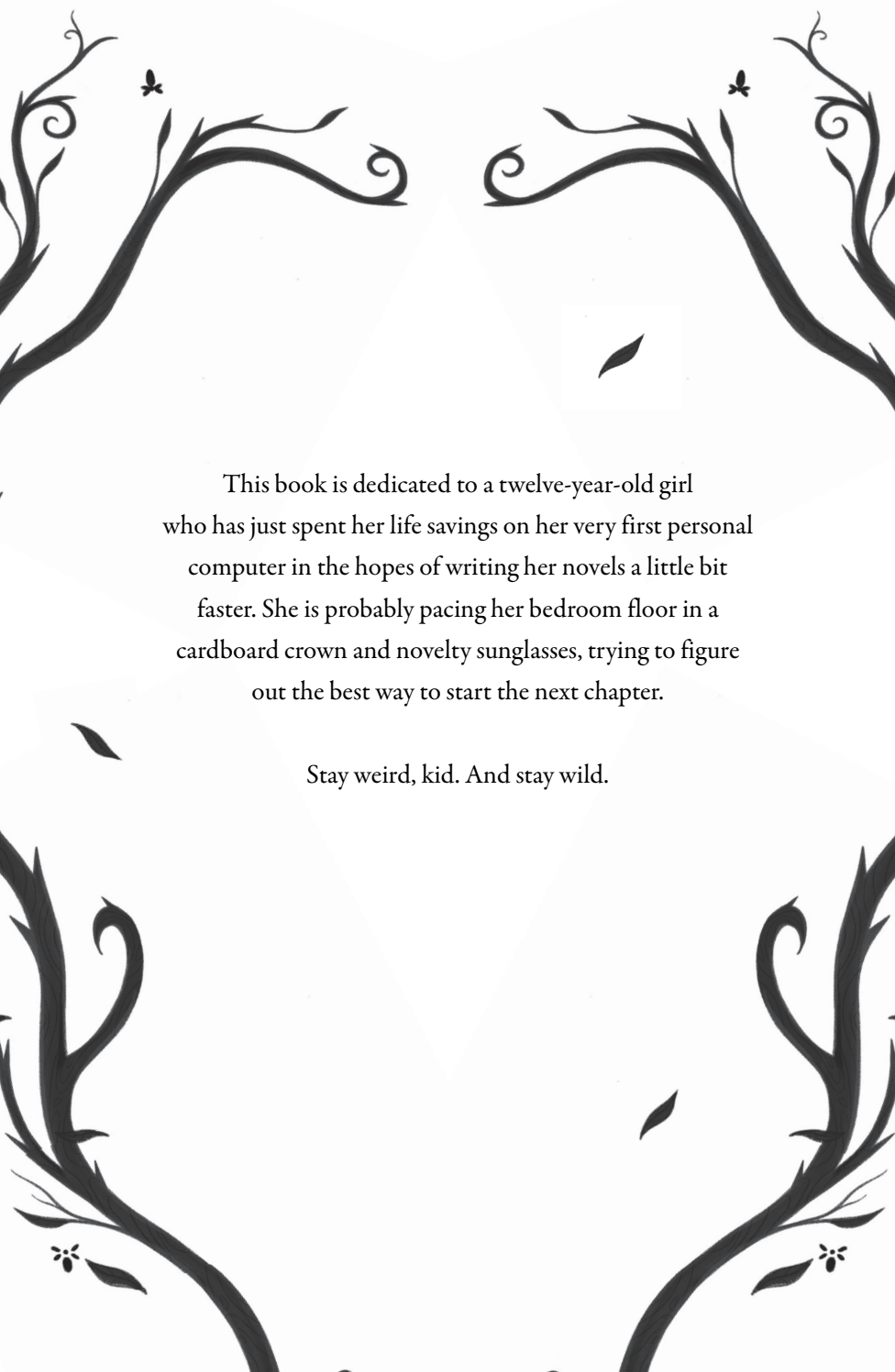
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This book is dedicated to a twelve-year-old girl who has just spent her life savings on her very first personal computer in the hopes of writing her novels a little bit faster. She is probably pacing her bedroom floor in a cardboard crown and novelty sunglasses, trying to figure out the best way to start the next chapter.

Stay weird, kid. And stay wild.



A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

I wrote this novel for many reasons: the native compulsion of a storyteller, the raw rage of my awakening feminism, my love of and confusion about natural magic and how it fits into my worldview. What I didn't realize until I struggled to write this story for several years was that I was writing this novel to express some very deep wounds. And unfortunately, if I wanted to tell this story, I had to do the healing work. (Likewise, if I wanted to heal, I had to write this story.) None of the specific events of this novel actually happened to me, but fiction is often a harmonic of our lived reality, passed through several filters, sharpened and balanced, the noise cut away to create a satisfying narrative melody.

Given what I know about the all-too-common wounds that were explored to write this book, I feel it would be irresponsible as a storyteller not to inform you, Reader, that these pages contain moments that may bring up strong, uncomfortable feelings. While I hope this book heals or strengthens something in every reader who comes to it, please be aware of the following content warnings and take care of your personal well-being.

This book portrays, describes or discusses in detail: complex PTSD, suicide and suicidal ideation, disordered eating, body shaming, family and domestic violence, emotional abuse, cannibalism and sexual assault.

IN THE BEGINNING, WE WERE WILD

Excerpted from *Savage Castle*:

A Memoir of the Wild Girls of Happy Valley

ONCE UPON A TIME, deep in the wilderness, in a land beyond maps and borders and human-claimed things, there was a beautiful castle.

This castle was not like other castles in tales you may have heard; it was wild and alive, hewn from the earth itself, grown and shaped over hundreds of years, just for us. Our castle was the hollowed body of an ancient tree, wrapped and latticed in an exoskeleton of vines and magic. It was a giant of a tree. A mountain of a tree.

And it was our home.

The castle protected us: four untamed princesses and, sometimes, a wise old man named Mother. Mother was more than just his name; he was our prophet, our protector, our teacher. He gave us the gift of magic, the truth of naming, the treasure of stories. He gave us the mooring of a past, and the promise of a future. Mother was our heart, the castle our bones. Together, they held us upright through every storm.

In the wilderness, we lived in perfect rhythm and harmony, like the wilderness itself. When we were hungry, we hunted with our wolf-kin, the forgiving earth beneath our hardened feet, the hot slick of the kill on our jaws. After long days of foraging and play, we slept peacefully in the shelter of our castle, with only the stars to light our dreams. We woke with the sun as it broke over

the mountain, flooding our forest with the streaming gold promise of a new day. We gorged ourselves on bear fat and tree nuts in the dying season, and crawled through the frozen months in a haze of hunger and dreaming, snowbound days and dogpiled nights. Come the return of green and light, we plucked fish from the streams with our bare hands and ate them raw, errant scales painting rainbows around our mouths.

We were a part of the wilderness and all it contains. We were a part of the magic in the unfurling of new leaves, the power that cleaved the world when lightning cracked the sky. We were a part of the spiral dance of life and death; the wonder of light dancing on the water and leaves on the wind; the mystery of seedlings and cool black earth; the beauty of decay, the violence of life. We were a part of the magic of it all.

Until, one day, the spells were broken. One day, the castle fell.

One day, we left the only home we had ever known, and our beloved wilderness betrayed us.

Once upon a time, there was the wilderness. There was violent beauty and devastating calm. There were clouds in migration, the punishing sunshine, the gemstone sky.

Once upon a time, there were four young girls and a man named Mother, the wolves we called family, a tree we called a castle and the forest we called home.

Once upon a time, *we were* the wilderness. And then, we were caged.



The night her father is arrested, Eden is sitting on the long side of the dinner table, facing the wall that separates the dining room from the kitchen. Her back is to the broad picture window that looks out on to the manicured backyard that abuts the edge of the forest.

This is her seat. When Eden was a child, her stepmother, Vera, couldn't stand how Eden would stare and stare into the trees during dinner, so she made Eden face the wall instead. The wall in question is blank; no pictures of friends or family; no commemorative plates or interesting artwork – certainly none of Eden's artwork from childhood.

Of course, Eden is not a child any more. She knows how to survive, now. She learnt long ago not to remark upon, or even think about, the bare white walls. She learnt long ago not to look over her shoulder for a glimpse of the wilderness.

Eden's father and stepmother are sitting to her left and right, respectively, each at a head of the table. A glass of water and a glass of red wine sit at each place setting. Vera always says alcohol is an appetite suppressant in moderation, and it seems to be true for her. She sips her third glass of wine tonight, her salad sitting mostly untouched as she glares back and forth between the window, Eden and Father.

Eden is acutely aware of the tension at the table. Father has been on his phone for the entirety of the meal, arguing with one business partner or another. His tone is aggressive and sharp, even though he is not yelling. There is a grilled cut of red meat on his plate that smells divine, but he has barely cut into it. The soft pink of it is so alluring to Eden's senses, it is almost vulgar.

Eden wishes there was something she could do to distract Vera from Father's rude behaviour; she wishes there was something she could do that would get Father to put his phone away and pay attention to his unhappy wife. But to please either parent would mean potentially angering the other, so instead Eden focuses on her salad of bitter greens and grilled white chicken meat. She discovers their cook, Mariya, has hidden a little pool of herbed olive oil beneath the salad, which Eden carefully dips pieces of chicken into before sticking them to the greens to cover the shine. Vera would be furious if she suspected Eden was going off her 'diet'.

Black coffee and half a grapefruit for breakfast, two hard-boiled eggs mid-morning. Lean meat and vegetables for lunch and dinner. Protein shake after a workout, but only if the workout is more than sixty minutes. Raw broccoli for snacks – the fibre will fill you up faster. No fats after seven o'clock. And red wine at dinner. It helps with digestion.

That is how Vera lives her life, so it's how Eden lives, too.

She was only six years old when Vera first started criticizing her body, restricting her food, bringing Eden with her to the gym. She is now sixteen years old and cannot eat even so much as an apple without recalling its caloric density. Vera has made sure of that.

If it wasn't for Mariya hiding liquid calories beneath her 'approved' foods, or her stepbrother, Kevin, sneaking her treats at night when he stayed with them, Eden thinks she might have wasted away by now. She is always tired, always hungry. She fantasizes about food constantly, and not even anything special: furtive spoonfuls of peanut butter, a classmate's ham and cheese sandwich, butter on her steamed vegetables, a fucking slice of fresh-baked bread.

Staring at her salad, Eden takes a silent deep breath and lets her anger go. Anger doesn't help. It only makes her suffer more. The only way to keep going – to have any hope of escaping this house someday – is to feel nothing at all.

Eden takes a sip of her wine. She likes how it warms her, how it makes her brain soft, open, fuzzy. Eden thinks she understands her stepmother better when she's had a glass of wine or two. Like she's tuned into a different radio station and can finally hear what Vera is really saying.

'This chicken is dry,' Vera mutters, prodding it with her fork. *I'm unsatisfied.*

'Mariya had better not be using frozen chicken breasts. I've told her over and over again that it ruins the texture.' *Why don't I have any control over my life?*

'For what we pay her, she should be able to make chicken that isn't dry.' *I have everything I want and none of it makes me happy.*

Vera puts her fork down and takes a long drink from her wine glass.

She glares hard at Father when she's done. *I blame you.*

She glances at Eden, briefly, before turning back to her wine. *And you.*

When the doorbell rings, Father rolls his eyes heavily, still talking on his cell phone and ignoring his family. Eden tenses, wondering who could possibly be at the door, wondering how infuriated Vera will be at the interruption. She would answer the door herself, but Vera hates it when Eden does the housekeeper's job for her.

Nearly a minute passes before the noise at the front of the house makes its way to the dining room, before the sound of several pairs of footsteps moving purposefully across bare marble floors registers as aggressive – as an invasion.

Two suited men appear in the archway behind Vera, flanked by four police officers, hands on their guns, ready to draw. She twists to see them, confusion and anger on her brow, but the men flow around her, past Eden, so swiftly that Father doesn't even have time to put down his phone as shock flashes in his eyes.

'Lawrence Chase,' one of the suited men says loudly as the officers take hold of Father's arms. 'We have a warrant for your arrest.'

Father's phone clatters to the floor as the officers haul him to his feet and pin his arms to his back. He doesn't struggle, but he doesn't make it easy for them, either. Father's body and limbs are stiff, every muscle clenched as if he believes that if he can just keep his body under his own power, they can take no rights away from him.

But to Eden's astonishment, that's exactly what they do. She thrills as they read him his Miranda rights and accuse him of crimes she isn't surprised to hear he's committed: embezzlement, money laundering, drug trafficking. Her stepmother,

furious at first, soon begins sobbing loudly, picks up her phone to call her lawyer, and hurries from the room without a backwards glance.

As Father is manoeuvred out of the dining room and towards the door, he looks ahead like a soldier, blank and cool. Never once does he look in his daughter's direction.

One of the suited men – a detective, maybe? – puts a hand on the back of Eden's chair, causing her to jump. He leans down a little to say, 'Sorry to interrupt dinner, sweetheart. Daddy's been a bit of a naughty boy.'

Eden looks up at him with what she thinks is an expressionless face, but whatever the detective sees in her eyes makes him whip back to his full height and snatch his hand away from her chair. Whatever self-satisfaction he had been wearing on his face slips away as he nods coolly to Eden and follows his men out through the archway.

Mariya is standing in the kitchen doorway, twisting a kitchen towel between her hands, her dark eyes tracking the detective as he leaves. When the front door slams shut and quiet settles over the house, she says to Eden, 'He will be fine. The system is made for men like him. Here.' She comes around the table and picks up Father's plate, then sets the steak down in front of Eden. 'No sense in letting good food go to waste.'

Eden senses the goodness in the gesture, the affection, the maybe-even-love, but what she wants is for Mariya to put her hand on her shoulder, or to wrap her in a hug. Not because she is sad about Father being arrested, but because she is *starving* for human touch – to feel just a tiny bit connected to someone in this world.

But Eden has known for quite some time now that the hunger for human touch is the most dangerous appetite of all.

She cuts into the steak with her fork and her father's knife, like a girl whose father has not just been arrested, who is not starving for human connection, who is not aching for the love that comes easily to those who belong. She is only starving for food, Eden tells herself. Her body only needs food, water and shelter to survive. That's it.

That is it.

That is all you need to survive.