



# *Out of the Wild*

a novel by  
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RAZORBILL

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Young Readers Group  
345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)  
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)  
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi –  
110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Printed in the United States of America

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For my father and my daughter

Thank you to all the fairy godmothers/godfathers who waved their magic wands over this book, including Andrea Somberg, Jessica Rothenberg, Ben Schrank, Tamora Pierce, Bruce Coville, Sara Crowe, Matthew Snyder, Jess Michaels, Pamela McElroy, Laura Schechter, and all the other amazing people at Penguin Young Readers. Unending thanks to my family and friends, as well as my Book Ninjas Extraordinaire (you know who you are!). And a fairy-tale kiss to my husband, Adam, for sharing this dream with me. You are my hero and my happily-ever-after.



## ***Prologue***

*Warped through glass, she saw blue sky, a smear of leaves, and seven bearded faces pressed against the glass peering down at her. She tried to scream, and her lungs squeezed. Air! She needed air! She was enclosed: glass on all sides. She pounded on it. She kicked. "Let me out! Please, let me out!"*

*She heard a click, and the glass coffin opened.*

*"My Snow White," a boy's voice said.*

*The dwarves pulled her out of the coffin. "Run!" they shouted at her. "You can't let him kiss you! The kiss ends the story! Once he kisses you, you'll lose your memory! You'll be trapped!"*

*She couldn't move. She felt as if she were coated in concrete. Run, she told herself. Run! But the Wild had control of her.*

*Suddenly, the prince was there.*

*No! she tried to shout, but she couldn't make a sound. She couldn't even exhale. She fought against her own body.*

*Gently, he placed his lips on hers. She tried to pull back, to pull away, to stop, stop, stop! Inside, she was screaming and screaming, but her body didn't move. The prince released her.*

*"And they lived happily ever after," he said in an empty voice, a voice that Julie knew well—the voice of the Wild speaking through the boy's lips as if he were no more than a puppet.*

Julie woke in a sweat. She tossed her blankets off and flicked on the light. She was home in her makeshift bed on the living room couch. She wasn't in the Wild. She was safe. It was over. Life was back to normal.



## Chapter One

### ***The Third Blind Mouse***

Three blind and tail-less mice catapulted through the cat door, skidded over the linoleum kitchen floor, and collapsed in a furry heap at Julie's feet.

"Uh, hi," Julie said to the mice.

The cat door bashed open again as Julie's brother, Puss-in-Boots, launched himself inside. Close on his heels (or more accurately, hind paws), his girlfriend, Precious, entered the kitchen. Squealing, the mice scrambled over each other as the two cats beelined toward them.

"Whoa," Julie said. She jumped in front of the mice to block the cats. "No eating the Three Blind Mice!" The mice darted across the kitchen and into the living room.

Boots shot her a glare. "You'd make a lousy cat," he said. He and Precious ran through her legs after the mice. From the living room, Julie heard her best friend, Gillian, shriek over the beat of hip-hop music, "Mice!"

Oh, no, Julie thought. She sprinted toward the living room and saw

- (1) three mice racing toward the TV,
- (2) two cats bounding after them,
- (3) one girl (Gillian, in a pink T-shirt that read, Northboro: Fairy-Tale Capital of the World) climbing onto the back of the couch, and
- (4) a nine-foot grizzly bear executing a perfect pirouette in the middle of the living room rug.

Just your typical Saturday morning, Julie thought. And then she plunged into the fray. “Catch them!” Boots shouted as he bounded after one mouse. He pinned it against the ottoman. Precious darted after the second and third mice, who zigzagged underneath the coffee table. They spurted out the other side as Julie ran toward them. “Watch the bear!” she cried.

Jiggling one furry leg in the air, the bear lost his balance as the cat and two mice raced in a circle around his hind paw. Precious cornered one mouse against the radiator as the grizzly bear slowly toppled. “Julie!” Gillian cried.

Julie scooped up the third mouse and then sprang backward as the bear crashed down on top of the coffee table.

*Crack!*

The coffee table’s legs snapped, and the table flattened beneath the bear. Magazines and remote controls scattered across the room.

Everyone froze, mice included. Julie felt the pat-a-pat-pat of the mouse’s tiny heart beating fast against her fingers. The bass from the music continued to shake the room. The bear squatted on the carpet and danced just his paws up and down. Quiet movements.

Julie started to laugh. It’s not funny, she told herself. Don’t laugh. The coffee table was smashed. The mice were petrified. Mom would be furious. But she felt the giggle bubble up from the pit of her stomach. On the couch, Gillian began to laugh too.

She heard Mom’s footsteps on the stairs. “Is everyone all right?” Mom came into the living room. Seeing the coffee table, she sighed.

“Sorry about the table, Mrs. Marchen,” Gillian said. “He can’t help it.” She was right—the bear couldn’t help dancing whenever he heard music. He was still under a spell cast on him while he (and everyone else in central Massachusetts) was trapped inside the Wild. Hopping off the couch, Gillian fitted headphones on the dancing bear and affixed an MP3 player to his fur before shutting off the stereo.

“Your mom was just on the phone. She wants you home for lunch, preferably without the bear,” Mom said to Gillian. She paused, and Julie saw her read Gillian’s T-shirt. Frowning, Mom said, “I’d rather you didn’t wear that here.”

Gillian gulped. “Sorry!”

Looking at Julie, Mom raised her eyebrows. “Julie, did you know that you’re holding a mouse?”

“We rescued the Three Blind Mice!” Boots said.

“I see that,” Mom said. As Boots filled her in on their heroic rescue (involving dumpsters, dogs, and a ride on a motorcycle), Julie helped guide the bear back to his “cave” in the basement and then walked Gillian to the kitchen door.

“Sorry about the T-shirt,” Gillian whispered. “Do you think she’s mad?”

Julie hesitated. Yes, she thought Mom was mad. The T-shirt reminded Mom that her worst nightmare had come true. Six weeks ago, someone had made a wish in Grandma’s wishing well that had caused the Wild to escape. It had transformed most of Massachusetts into a fairy-tale kingdom, trapping everyone in its stories, before Julie was able to reach the magic wishing well and stop the Wild with her own wish. As the guardian of the Wild, Mom blamed herself for everything that had happened. She didn’t need a T-shirt to remind her, especially when she was working so hard to encourage everyone to forget.

“It doesn’t give away any secrets,” Gillian said.

“Just please don’t wear it again.”

“I wish you’d trust me,” Gillian complained.

I wish you’d understand, Julie thought. Something as awful as fairy tales didn’t belong on a T-shirt. Why didn’t

Gillian get that? Out loud, she said, “Did you bring the story?”

Sighing, Gillian pulled a folded wad of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Julie. It was a school assignment—they’d been instructed to write a story about what had happened when their town was transformed into a fairy-tale kingdom. (The school counselor thought it would help the students cope with their memories.) Julie and Gillian had planned to lie, of course, but Mom wanted to review both Julie and Gillian’s stories before they handed them in. “Um, maybe you can wait until she’s done being mad about the shirt and the coffee table before you show it to her?” Gillian asked.

Julie slid the story into her own back pocket to deal with later, when she wasn’t holding a squirming blind mouse. “I will,” she promised. Mom wanted to make sure there were no clues to what really happened in their stories. She didn’t want anyone to know about Julie’s involvement or about the magic of the wishing well. And she certainly didn’t want anyone to know that some of the Massachusetts residents who had been trapped in the Wild were actually *from* the Wild. Julie’s family and their friends wanted everyone to believe they were ordinary people. Even without T-shirts or school assignments, it was, Julie thought, kind of an uphill battle.

Without warning, the mouse in her hands shouted, “Ring around the cities!”

From the living room, another mouse piped up, “Pocketed by kitties!”

The last mouse cried, “Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down!” As if on cue, the mouse in Julie’s hands tossed its head back and threw out its tiny paws like a fainting heroine in a melodrama.

Gillian grinned. “Call me later?”

“Sure,” Julie said, and shut the door behind Gillian. Carrying the limp mouse back into the living room, she asked, “Um, what’s wrong with them?”

“Aside from being blind, tail-less, and bad poets?” Boots said.

Mom frowned at him. “Poor things never recovered from their time in the Wild: chased and maimed over and over again.” Julie shuddered and tried to shake the image from her head as Mom added, “The return of the Wild clearly didn’t help their mental stability.”

All three mice lifted their heads. “No, no, no Wild!”

Julie stroked the third mouse between the ears. “It’s okay,” she said. “You’re safe now. The Wild’s gone.” Well, sort of. Okay, really, it was right upstairs, underneath Julie’s bed, lurking like a leafy octopus.

And that, Julie thought grimly, is my fault. When she’d made her wish in the wishing well, she’d had the chance to destroy the Wild completely, but she had chosen to wish for her “heart’s desire.” Her heart’s desire had been

to have her normal life back. As she’d later discovered, for her, “normal life” meant: a father who was lost inside the Wild, a mother who was Rapunzel, a brother who was Puss-in-Boots, and the heart of fairy tales (reduced to a tangle of vines) under her bed. She, Mom, and Boots were back to being the guardians of the Wild, responsible for ensuring that it didn’t grow large enough to trap people in its fairy tales ever again. And Julie was sleeping on the couch and having nightmares every night. Oh, and lying to poor, frightened mice.

“You’re with friends,” Mom told the mice. “It’s me, Rapunzel.”

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair!” the mice chanted.

Mom flinched as if she’d been struck. A second later, as quickly as if she had put on a mask, she was again the unflappable and serene Rapunzel. But Julie had seen the flash of pain on her face. Julie tried to think of something to say. Sorry I didn’t save Dad. Sorry you had to relive your worst nightmare. Sorry our town is crawling with doctors and scientists and reporters and police who would love to discover that real fairy-tale characters exist . . .

“Rude mousies,” Precious purred. “Can we eat them now?”

The mouse in Julie’s hands trembled from the tips of his pink ears to the pale stump that should have been a tail.

One of the other mice sang, “Rock-a-bye, mousey, in the cat’s paws . . .”

“No, you may not,” Mom said to the cats. To the mice, she said, “We aren’t going to eat you. We’re going to take you home. Remember home? Your nice, safe cage in the library with that nice, sweet librarian Linda who feeds you—”

At the name Linda, all three mice squealed. The third mouse twisted violently in Julie’s hands, and Julie felt a sharp pain in her index finger. “Ow!” She dropped him. “He bit me!”

Bouncing on the carpet, the mouse scurried across the room. Mom tried to grab him as he ricocheted off her foot and then doubled back toward Julie. “Catch him,” Mom cried, “before he hurts himself!”

Hurts himself? What about her finger? Julie grabbed for him as he bounced pinball-like off her sneaker. She missed, and he veered toward the stairs. Yes! They had him! Mice couldn’t climb stairs—

The mouse leapt. His front claws dug into the edge of the step, and his hind legs scabbled behind him, propelling him up onto the first step. Okay, so maybe mice *could* climb stairs. As Julie started forward, Mom said, “Let him go. We’re scaring him.”

She’s right, Julie thought. He was terrified. From the base of the stairs, Julie watched as the little rodent climbed:

leap and scabble, leap and scabble, leap and scabble. He hoisted himself up onto the top step and then disappeared around the corner.

“He’ll calm down on his own,” Mom said. “He’s safe enough in the hallway.”

Right. He could bounce off the walls up there until he calmed . . . Oh, no. Julie froze. “I left my bedroom door open.”

“Julie!”

She always locked it when they left the house! But on weekends . . . She’d been hoping that the Wild would decide to leave her bed voluntarily. Couldn’t it live in a different room? Maybe a closet or the garage? Or even the dining room? So far, they hadn’t been able to budge as much as a leaf, and she wanted her room back. “I’m sorry! But I’m sure he won’t—”

“He can’t see it.” Mom ran past Julie up the stairs. “Don’t move!” she called to the mouse. “Wherever you are, don’t move! Just wait!”

Julie pounded up the stairs after Mom. “Mouse, stop! The Wild is up there!”

Mom halted in the doorway to Julie’s bedroom, and Julie skidded to a stop behind her. “Everyone, stay calm,” Mom said.

The mouse was less than a yard from Julie’s bed. Underneath the bed, the green leaves of the Wild rustled as they

shifted and writhed. One vine uncurled, reaching out past the dust ruffle toward the mouse.

“Don’t be frightened,” Mom said softly and evenly, “but the Wild is directly behind you.” Piles of clothes, books, and papers created a canyon that led directly to the bed. If he ran . . . “Come toward my voice.”

The mouse quivered. Its fur shuddered in gray ripples. “No more knives. Please, please, please, no more knives.” A leaf crept closer.

“No one here has knives,” Mom said.

He inched backward. “Run, run, run, as fast as you can. You can’t catch me!”

Another tendril of green snaked over the carpet.

“Stop that,” Mom said sharply to the Wild.

At her tone, the Wild shrank back, and the mouse skittered closer to the green. “Not you!” Julie said to the mouse. “Do you want to go back to life in the Wild, back to being controlled like a puppet, back to living the same story over and over again, back to losing all your memories and everything that makes you who you are?” Julie had chosen to abandon her father, the father she had missed her whole life, rather than live trapped like that. “You have a life here outside the Wild, a home—”

“She knows!” the mouse cried. “She knows we know! She knows we know she knows! She knows we know she knows we know!”

Okay, he was totally insane. Who knows what? What was he talking about?

“You’re agitating him,” Mom said in a singsong voice. “Come toward my voice. You’ll be safe if you come to me. I’ll take you home to the nice, safe library—”

Squealing, the mouse tripped over his hind paws in his efforts to scramble away. The leaves rustled in anticipation. “Or no library!” Julie said quickly. Why was he afraid of the library? It was the perfect place for the mice—their friends could visit easily and discreetly, plus Linda, the children’s room librarian, kept the mice safe, warm, and fed.

“She’ll bring it back again!” the mouse cried. He was now framed on all sides by green. Like a wild animal, the Wild was poised to pounce. “She won’t stop. She wants it back.”

“Bring what back?” Julie asked. Did he mean the Wild? And what did he mean “again”? Was he talking about the person who made the wish? Did he know who was responsible for bringing the Wild back? No one had confessed yet.

Was it someone in the library? Was that why he didn’t want to return there? Was it . . . It was a crazy thought, but . . . Could it have been a librarian? Three blind mice might not have noticed the presence of a quiet librarian after hours. They could have sung or talked. A librarian could have overheard something she shouldn’t have. “Did the children’s room librarian make the wish that set the Wild free?” Julie asked.

“Linda?” Mom said, startled. “Not Linda.”

“You know!” the mouse shrieked.

It *was* Linda! Oh, wow, how was that possible? Linda? Smiley, friendly, ordinary Linda? She made the wish that set the Wild free? She was responsible for Julie nearly losing her family, her home, everything? But how—

“She’ll know you know!” He stumbled backward, and his hind paws touched the green. Instantly, the vines snapped around him. Leaves fanned over his face, and the Wild swept him under Julie’s bed. He vanished in a knot of green shadows.

“No!” Julie rushed forward.

Mom grabbed her arm. “Stop! It has a character! It’s going to grow!” She pulled Julie back into the hallway. “Boots! Precious! Get the pruners!” Mom spun Julie around by the shoulders and aimed her toward the stairs. “Go!”

“Only if you go,” Julie said. “You go; I go. You stay; I stay.” She was not—repeat, *not*—going to lose Mom to the Wild again.

Before October, Mom wouldn’t have listened. But now she nodded and released Julie. Side by side, Julie and her mom stood in the bedroom doorway. Green undulated under the bed, pulsing. Julie swallowed. Her mouth felt papery dry. It could happen again—losing her family, losing herself, all of it. She couldn’t let it happen again.

Julie heard *thump, thump, thump*. Dragging two pairs

of pruning shears, Boots and Precious came up the stairs. They dropped them at Julie and Mom’s feet. Eyes on the Wild, Mom reached down, picked up the longer shears, and held them ready. Julie picked up the smaller clippers and snapped them open and shut.

Precious pranced into the bedroom. “I see no new growth.”

“It ate the third mouse,” Julie said.

“Oh. Best be going.” Flicking her tail in the air, the white cat bolted out of the room and down the stairs. A few seconds later, Julie heard the cat door in the kitchen creak.

Boots hesitated. “Coming?”

Mom hefted the pruners. “We have to try to cut it back as soon as it grows. Once it grows too much, it will be too strong to stop.”

Boots inched backward. “Since there are only two pruners and only two people with opposable thumbs . . .”

“You can go,” Mom said.

Boots fled, a streak of orange fur.

A minute passed, and then another and another. Julie’s arms began to ache from holding the pruners. Her palms sweated on the handles until they felt slick.

“What’s it doing?” Julie asked.

Mom shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s had enough time to force the mouse into a fairy tale. It should be growing by now.”

They watched deep green shadows writhe under Julie's bed in a mass of tentacle-like vines. She heard the *shush-shush* of leaves rubbing together. But it didn't grow. Why not? What was it doing? "Let him go!" Julie shouted at the green. "Give him back!"

The Wild burst out from under the bed. Julie's heart slammed against her rib cage. Oh, no, oh, no. She gripped the shears as leaves and vines spilled across the carpet—

And then just as suddenly, the green retreated. In its wake, it left behind a huddled lump of red and blue velvet.

The velvet moaned. Julie saw hands reach out of the fabric to press against the rug. The figure pushed upward to kneel in the center of Julie's carpet. He raised his head.

Beside her, Julie heard her mom suck in a breath. The pruning shears slipped from Mom's fingers and clattered to the floor.

"Rapunzel," the man said.

"Dad," Julie said.

Chapter Two  
***Rapunzel's Prince***