

LAUREN BLACKWOOD

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*WITHIN THESE WICKED WALLS*

NEVER  
BETRAY  
A WILD  
HEART.

# WILDBLOOD

A  
NOVEL





**WILD**



# BLOOD

A NOVEL

LAUREN  
BLACKWOOD



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## CHAPTER 1

**B**unny is getting strong for fourteen. It takes my whole weight to hold him down tonight, hands and chest on his back, knees braced against the dirt floor. My muscles shake from the effort.

“You are loved,” I whisper, even though I can’t quite reach his ear like I could a year ago. “Come back, my little Bunny.”

Maybe he can’t hear me—enough rain to drown the island pours from the sky, splashing through our glassless window as it slides off the tin roof, and he screams loud enough to wake the whole jungle, even a mile off.

His wild blood flashes near my face—a small, bright yellow crackle like lightning—but his blood science has never burned very hot, so I ignore it. I focus on keeping him pinned, even with his kicking and cries. I stay on the side of his good eye, so when he wakes he knows me.

Huddled on their floor mats, our ten hut-mates sleep through it, or at least they try. It’s the second time this month Bunny

has raged. No one asks why anymore. A Wildblood's science flares out of control with overuse, and everyone just waves it off as Bunny being a reckless kid. But I don't think recklessness has anything to do with it.

"I'm getting my promotion tomorrow, Bun," I whisper, my voice harboring an edge of panic. "To team leader. Remember? Everything will be okay now."

Even mindless, Bunny knows I'm a bad liar. Everything won't be okay. Not if he keeps overusing his science and making his blood go wild. Not if he rages and I can't bring him back . . .

His screams shut off like a faucet. My ears ring in their absence, but I don't let up on my pressure. Not until his muscles soften, until he whines my name to make me stop. And then I lie there on his back to catch my breath, relieved to feel him breathe evenly, even if I can't.

He fishes for my hand in the dark, and his body only relaxes once he's found it. I squeeze tight, shifting to lie beside him.

"You scare me, Bunny," I say, and pat his back with a force between a soothe and a smack. "You can't keep raging like this."

"I have to rage, Victoria," he murmurs, closing his one beautiful dark brown eye. "Rage is all I have left."

*Rage is all I have left . . .*

I should be so lucky.



Ad in the *Wilmington Gazette*,  
4 June 1893

**THE EXOTIC LANDS TOURING COMPANY**

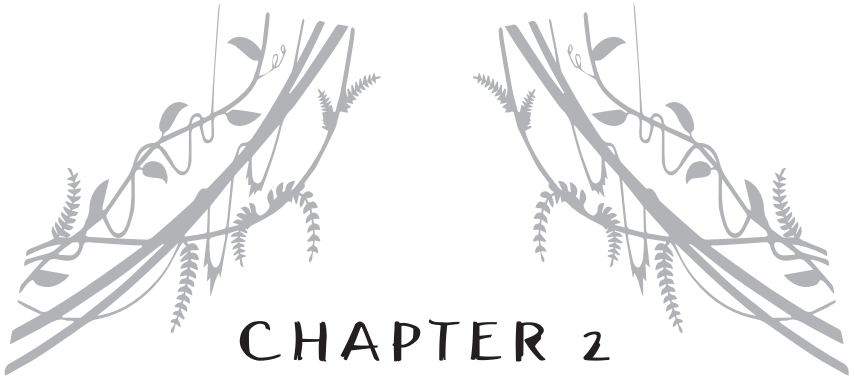
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**A COMPANY YOU CAN TRUST TO KEEP YOU SAFE**





## CHAPTER 2

**V**ictoria.

I wake to a whisper.

The jungle always whispers, when the rain isn't there to block it out.

The storm cleared out sometime before dawn and the sounds of gulls and breeze through the branches find their way in the open window.

Bunny makes it a point to sleep in on our days off, but he needs it more than ever after last night. I, on the other hand, have a list of things to get done, even if the only work-related one is finally asking for my promotion.

Finally? I was owed it when I turned eighteen last week. The boss promised.

*Like when he used to promise he'd never punch you in the face and punched you in the stomach instead.*

Carefully, I pull Bunny's sleeve up, and immediately deflate.

Tiny cuts litter his arms, closed but still pink, some of them not quite scabbed over yet. He's been picking again. Just enough to expose a little blood, to use his own blood's energy to play with his science. It's why he's tired all the time—stealing energy from the body takes its toll. It's why he rages so often.

I take a deep breath and get up carefully so as not to wake Bunny, dress quickly.

One problem at a time.

The ground is still wet from last night, making the sandy stone of the square look like the bed of a drained lake. But the sun is already warm, and it'll be dry before noon. Beyond the square, a much-too-long mile off, lies the thick jungle.

Vibrant, damp, the breezes rustling its leaves. *Victoria*, it hums through my body. Part of me wants to answer that call, escape what I must do.

Escape. Poor choice of word. No one escapes the Exotic Lands Touring Company, unless one would call deciding how they'd like to die "escaping"—shot trying to climb the twenty-foot wall between us and civilization, or dead somewhere in the jungle in any number of ways exceedingly worse than a shot to the head.

I've been here since I was six, and in that time, only five people have tried running. Maron, Wiles, Liz, Benji, John. I remember their names, if not their faces. They each chose the wall, because the next day we had to look at their bullet-nested bodies in the square. Each time, the boss wouldn't let us take away their bodies until they stank of rot in the mid-day's scorching sun. Just once I wanted someone to choose the jungle . . . no bodies involved. No memories. No rage burning



in my belly. I could imagine the only reason I never saw them again was because they'd made it to the other side, alive and well and living free.

Me? I'd choose the jungle in a heartbeat. And I do, without the risk of running—I spend twenty-seven days a month on the road that runs through it, and I'd spend more if I wasn't forced to take days off. Unfortunately, no one ever travels on Sundays. I'd do anything in my power to get away from the boss and Dean, and volunteering for tours is the only thing in my power.

I should take more days off—what's happening to Bunny could very well happen to me if I'm not careful. It could happen to any of us. But I *am* careful. And my science has always had more endurance than anyone's.

No, I'm not worried about raging.

Though I'd prefer that to what I'm about to do.

*Do it for Bunny. When he's safe, and away from here, you never have to take another day off again.*

I turn away from my view of freedom and walk toward the office, leaping over scattered puddles. The main office is about a half mile from our huts and hidden behind a lumber fence—as if the jungle isn't angry enough in the first place about us clearing a bit of its majesty away to build on. But the boss doesn't want clients seeing where we live. It ruins the touring experience, he says.

There are about forty Wildbloods in the company—half here and half on the other side of the jungle road. For the moment, Bunny is the youngest in the camp; the oldest of us, Jim, is somewhere in his fifties. He had a head injury a few years back and can't seem to keep track of details anymore, so

we decided fifty-three sounded fair. I pass some of my fellows hanging laundry on flimsy clotheslines, reading, kicking a ball around. No one says good morning or wishes me luck, even though I'm certain everyone knows what I'm about to do given how many gossips there are among us.

Not that I expect them to—no one has trusted me since I was twelve years old and used my science to bust a guard's eardrum, sending blood gushing from his ear and everyone running away screaming. It was self-defense. The man would've beaten me for something as simple as getting too close to the trees, but that didn't matter to them. To them, an inability to control your science was close enough to raging to shun me—a danger to everyone who should not be associated with. As if raging is contagious and not just an unfortunate quirk of one's own body.

What they don't know—or just can't stomach—is that what I did to that guard was 100 percent in my control. I meant to do it. But I was young. I didn't know it would hurt him so badly. That there'd be so much blood. That he'd be deaf in that ear for the rest of his life. But it was me or him. He'd meant to beat me, and if any of my injuries had been lasting, the boss wouldn't have had use for me anymore.

I may be the most powerful Wildblood, but out on the relatively uneventful journey by road that doesn't matter much. The boss only allows me to go on as many tours as I do because of my looks. What he doesn't know is that on tours I wear baggy men's clothing and a wide hat to make sure no one ever sees the Rare Beauty they're getting.

I glance up at the armed guard strolling atop the stone walls. Unlike my peers, he waves as if he knows me. He's a wall guard,

so I don't know his name—and with the sun glaring I'd never recognize him even if I did. I wave back, the gesture meaningless and empty. I don't want to say hello to a man who can and will shoot me if I step out of line, but better to obey and not cause a scene. Not now, when I'm so close to what I need.

Someday, when Bunny is safe, I'll defy that threatening wave by simply not responding to it.

I arrive at the office and look up at the painted wooden sign over the door. THE EXOTIC LANDS TOURING COMPANY WELCOMES YOU, it reads. Seems a flock of birds disagreed and decided to drop their breakfast on it sometime this morning, so the *L* and *S* are whited out, making it THE EXOTIC AND TOURING COMPANY.

What's exotic about Jamaica, anyway? Having never lived anywhere else, I can't say. The English seem to think it's accurate, despite having occupied the island for centuries. Strange that it isn't normal to them yet.

Now that I'm here, my stomach aches. Like every organ in me is trying to knot itself small enough to hide. I don't want to do this. After avoiding the boss for so long, it feels like a betrayal of myself to walk into the snake pit again.

God, I don't want to do this.

But Bunny needs me.

I swallow back the urge to cry then grab the doorknob, pressing my eyes closed for a moment.

*Good morning, sir. I want to remind you that you said you'd promote me to tour leader when I turned eighteen. You already prepared the contract on my last birthday. I have it with me. If you'll just sign here . . . Thank you, sir.*

I take a breath.

The bell on the door chimes as I push it open and step into the reception area. No one is there to occupy the ten seats arranged about the room, but even if clients were waiting Louis would find some reason to scowl at me from over his typewriter.

“Mr. Spitz can’t see you now,” he says. As usual, he doesn’t give a reason. He’s already sweating in his neatly pressed shirt and jacket as he peers over the desk at my feet. “Good Lord, girl.”

My feet aren’t that dirty—I avoided all the puddles—but I wipe them carefully on the mat anyway. “I can wait.”

“You’re going to, whether you can or not,” he says, going back to his loud typing.

The boss never meets with clients this early. Louis has no reason to keep me away. And besides, unnatural sounds, like the slamming of those keys, grate on my nerves. Give me insect wings and birdsong and water dripping through leaves any day.

The opposite end of the small reception area has another doorway, leading to a hall laid with hardwood floors. Ten feet down, the boss’s office door sits to the right; ten more feet to the left, his bedroom. My body is trying to revolt, but I don’t have time to lose my nerve. All I need to do is get to that first room.

“Did you see that birds disrespected the sign?” I ask.

Louis immediately looks up, like I swore at him. “What?”

“Shat”—I spread my hands as if smearing the stuff on the air—“all over it.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “Still legible?”

“Um, well . . .” I can’t lie if I look at him, so I pretend to fix

a stack of pamphlets on his desk. "Maybe. I mean, if you know what it's *supposed* to say."

"If it isn't one thing, it's another," he grumbles, shoving up from his desk. He stomps away, heading outside.

As soon as he clears the door, I rush down the hall.

I halt before knocking.

Voices.

So he really is with a client? This early? Strange.

I sigh and stand against the opposite wall to wait, teetering a bit before stepping toward the door again. If their consultation just started there's no point in wait—

I scramble backward at the shifting of wood against wood, pressing my back against the wall.

A young man halts in the doorway, and I see his eyes light up right before I drop my gaze to the floor. I hate when they do that. Gawk. Because I'm light-skinned Black. Because my great-grandmother or great-great- or great-great-great- or maybe all of them were raped by some slimy slave owner who thought no better of her than a dog, and somehow that makes me more desirable.

Or maybe I look away because this young man has skin the color of blackstrap molasses, eyes black as ackee seeds, dimples in his cheeks without even trying . . . and because I don't feel sick like I do when other men look at me.

From the corner of my eye, I see him remove his bowler hat. "Morning, miss," he says, then moves away quick with a small jerk, shoved casually by the man behind him. I look up in time to see that man sneer at me, eyebrows raised, like he wants an explanation for why I'm bothering his friend.

I'm used to that look, too.

Out of all the many races of people who live on this island, there's one thing for sure they have in common—everyone hates a Wildblood.

I watch them walk away, the beautiful one looking over his shoulder at me, and I feel myself blush at his unmannerly curiosity. Both are Black, which is strange for clients, but I have no time to wonder about that.

The boss's hacking cough carries into the hall and anxiety swims in my head.

I'm here for a reason.

I turn my attention to the office and my blush is replaced by heated loathing.

Dean has his arms crossed and is leaning against the desk, glaring at me. His skin is almost as pale as the boss's—if the boss didn't get so red in the sun—like a tree with the bark shaved off to a nutty cream inside. His gray eyes hold the same hateful, questioning expression the man from a moment ago had, tangled with panic.

I relish that panic.

We were both taken from our families younger than most, both Black, both light-skinned. Level ground, until you consider his science is next to nothing compared to mine. Level again, when you consider he's a boy and can pass as white to the whites when his hair is cropped short. The boss will always favor Dean above me because of that. Let him have it—I built a figurative altar to God the day he became Dean Spitz, lone adopted son and heir to the boss's company and fortune, and the boss finally stopped summoning me to compete for the coveted position.

But the thought that laying eyes on me can stir fear of losing his beloved inheritance, that I can torture him just by entering

a room . . . I'm not a vicious person, but I hate him enough to enjoy this.

Maybe that *does* make me vicious.

But he isn't the one making my heart twist with anxiety, pound painfully in my throat.

The boss drinks his morning cup of rum, reading one of the papers on his desk. Even standing in the doorway of the room he's in makes my skin crawl. But I can't turn back now.

Louis calls my name, chastisement in his voice, but the door to the office is still open so I knock without his permission.

"Come in," the boss says, without looking up from his paperwork.

I try not to look at Dean's hateful expression as I step inside. Quickly, before I can back out. Before I'm eaten alive by nerves.

"Good morning, sir," I say in a steady stream, just like I've been rehearsing to myself all week, "I want to remind you that you said you'd promote me to tour leader when I turned eighteen—"

"Isn't it your day off, Victoria?" the boss says more than asks. *Warns* more than states.

"Yes, sir." My head hurts. I take a deep breath, collecting myself. "B-but, um, you did already—um, you prepared the contract on my last birthday. I have it with me." I take the contract out of my pocket, holding it out to him. "If you can just sign here . . ."

Dean tilts his head, raising his eyebrows slightly. *Well played*. Tour leader isn't anywhere near as prestigious as protégé, but it's a degree of freedom, a pay raise, guaranteed opportunities to get me out onto the jungle road and away from this suffocating place.

And for all those reasons, I know Dean is going to make sure I don't get what I want.

But, for now, he doesn't make a move.

The boss looks up from his papers, removing his reading spectacles. My muscles tighten painfully under his gaze. He smiles, but that's never meant anything. "I'm afraid I've already promoted someone today, Victoria." His voice is coarse from years of cigar smoking, and frighteningly calm from years of trampling on the hopes of children. "We won't need another leader for some time."

I swallow, my courage dwindling. This is not the response I was expecting. "I get very high reviews on my client surveys, sir. And you promised me."

Dean scoffs, and I hate him even more. But he's right—I used the *P*-word. To the boss that has as opposite a meaning as his smiles.

"This client is too high profile for your lack of social skills, and the tour will be off the marked path. It requires men who can stand that sort of rough environment."

My courage surges a little. "That's me, sir. I lived in the jungle for a year, you remember. I know all the dangers, how to navigate—"

"As a feral child," the boss says, and it's his turn to scoff. "Not an experienced tour guide."

"The important thing is to remember the way. I do."

I don't. That was a long time ago, and I barely remember anything before coming here. But it's better than what Dean can do. *Anything* is better than what Dean can do. He hasn't stepped foot on the jungle road for a year and has *never* wandered beyond



it. And who knows, maybe certain landmarks will spark my memory.

Besides, the jungle will guide me if I continue to respect it and ask politely.

The boss has another coughing fit into his handkerchief before sighing. It only started happening in the past few months, the coughing. I told him all that smoke in his lungs would kill him one day.

God, I hope it does.

"The *important* thing," he says when he's finished, "is to make a good impression. As you know, Dean is taking over ownership of the touring company, since I have no children of my own. And the best way for him to be an effective leader is to know all the ins and outs—that includes leading tours."

I gape before he's even done speaking. "Dean? But sir—"

"Do you have a problem with my decision?"

My stomach turns. His tone is no longer calm. For a moment I think of the loaded gun he keeps in his desk. He's never used it on me before . . . but then, I've never questioned his decisions.

"N-no—" I stutter, then press my lips tight to shut myself up. It's over. I feel my heartbeat ticking in my wrists, and I can't be sure intelligible words will come out of me next time I speak.

"Enjoy your weekend." The boss shoos me away. "Shut the door on your way out."

I nod instead of trying to speak and turn on my heel.

The words *Bunny is counting on you* hammer in my mind to the pounding of my heart, and I stop myself before heading down the hall, taking a deep breath.

*You idiot. Get away while you can.*

I ignore my own sage advice and burst back into the office.

“Dean’s science is pathetic,” I say, my voice coated in desperation. “And he’s never wandered off the marked path. How can he lead a tour to the center of the jungle? He’ll get everyone lost, or worse—”

The boss presses on the arms of his chair to help himself stand, and it’s like there are three gates between us and one has been thrown wide open. He’s stocky, the remains of a retired boxer—a skill he’s demonstrated on me enough times that I don’t want him to open that second gate. But he does, by stepping around the desk toward me, and I have to adjust my breath to seem calm. If I back away, he’ll never give me what I want.

*Be brave. Bunny needs you.*

The coaching barely helps as he comes closer.

“You foolish little girl . . .” he chides.

*Please don’t touch me . . . please please please . . .*

When he’s close enough, he takes my chin in his hand.

The third gate has been breached.

I freeze, bracing for that caress to turn into a fist. I’m taller by a few inches, but his presence is massive and consuming and I can’t breathe . . . Lord, have mercy, I can’t breathe . . .

I glance behind him at Dean, though I don’t know why I expect he’s going to intervene for me. But he could say *something*. Admit that I’m right, at least. Or do something other than grip the desk as if he’s about to be beaten instead of me.

But it’s been a year since I could trust him to do right by me.

“I know the jungle better than Dean,” I try again. Or I think I do. The boss’s touch is so repulsive, his presence filling me with so much anxiety, I might die right here and now.

“That’s not the point,” he says, his voice calm enough to make

my stomach turn. “What would it look like if a quiet little girl who can’t even speak without stammering was leading the pack? Who would hire me again, with my reputation tarnished? No, you’re a follower, girl—and good at it, too. Let’s not change a system that isn’t broken. Besides, these are the most prestigious clients we’ve ever served.”

My stomach swims. The one thing I know I have to offer is the thing I’m also dreading.

“Then I’ll help make Dean look good,” I say, silently thanking God my words cooperate.

I’d felt the beginnings of the boss’s clamping grip tightening on my chin, but he pauses. Whatever I fill this pause with will mean victory or destruction.

“I’m the most powerful Wildblood,” I say quickly. “And I’ve faced the dangers of the deepest part of the jungle. Give me my promotion, and I’ll make Dean look like the best tour leader you’ve ever had.”

I’m surprised I didn’t falter during my speech. Deliberately working with Dean. Closely, as a team. After the way he betrayed me? Being torn apart by rabid dogs would be a kinder punishment. But if I can swallow my emotions and pull it off, Bunny will never have to go on another tour again.

The boss releases me slowly, and I let out a small breath of relief, wanting more than anything to tear all the skin he’s touched away and burn it with my own lightning. “Now there’s an idea.”

Behind him, Dean stands upright, shocked and fuming. “The clients requested strong guides, not antisocial little girls.”

I use those fumes to fuel my own fire. “My brand of strength is more useful in the jungle than the strongest man in the

world. Besides, don't these prestigious clients deserve the best protection and service Jamaica can offer? My blood science will provide that."

The boss paces, stops abruptly. "One condition. The client has to come back singing Dean's praises and *unaware* that you were assisting."

That's two conditions, but I'm too relieved to care. "Yes, sir," I say, holding back a smile—but I do hold out my unsigned contract. He grabs his quill and signs it without question, high on his own ego. Or just high, probably—the office reeks of ganja.

Dean, wisely, says nothing.

"I want to be paired with Bunny, if that's okay," I slip in, seeing as the boss is in a good mood.

"Ask your tour leader," he says, and falls into more coughing, no longer interested in looking at me as he heads back to his desk.

I take a second to swallow before I look at Dean. He's more pissed off than usual, if that's possible, but thankfully not stupid enough to start an argument in front of the boss—not with his own promotion on the line.

"He's your responsibility," he grumbles.

I nod. "No problem." And I leave quickly, before the boss changes his mind.

I trip to a stop around the corner, just out of view. My legs tremble, and I have to grab the wall to keep myself upright. My lungs ache as I release a heavy breath, taking a few deep ones to give my nerves a moment to settle.

I did it. I actually did it.

Well, almost.

One more trip, first.

*Don't screw this up, V.*

The sound of creaking wood alerts me to Dean, even if his footsteps are as quiet as mine. “What do you want, Dean?” I ask, walking toward the waiting area quickly—Dean wouldn’t dare try anything in front of Louis, who reports all “hooligan behavior,” as he calls it, to the boss.

But I barely make it a few feet before a strong hand clamps around my wrist, his touch, his presence igniting my fighting instinct immediately. He tugs me around, and I lift my open hand just as he lifts his fist.

I feel my wild blood spark like an ember within my gut, feel the warmth of my irises shifting to a glowing red with power, but shove my energy back under the coals just as quickly. It’s not worth the trouble to fight back. Not when I’ve already gotten what I wanted. I drop my hand, my eyes cooling to light brown again. My hate-filled stare is stronger, anyway—I know, because he twitches while his fist lingers in the air, passively.

His science really is pathetic when compared to mine. I know it, he knows it. Which is why I know to threaten him with it, seeing as, if he had the mind to, he could easily beat me bloody with that callus-hardened fist. He wasn’t so much taught how to fight as forced to learn by boxing with the boss twice a week. It’s why most of the bones in his face have been broken at one time or another, one cheekbone lower than the other, his nose twisted. The boss never promised not to punch *him* in the face.

We both know our strengths. All I need to do is pull a drop of blood from his pores—more easily his gums, since they’re softer—and fashion it midair into a needle to drive through

his eye, maybe all the way into his brain. He's gripping one of my wrists while the other is cocked away, fingers closed off from summoning his science, which puts him at a deadly disadvantage against my open hand.

I've won the round in the office *and* this one in the hall.

Overall, it's been a satisfying morning.

"Don't you ever," he says, low, because the door is still so close and wide open, "embarrass me in front of the boss again."

"You don't need my help to embarrass yourself," a braver, stupider Victoria would say. For Bunny's sake, I say nothing. When he's safe and off the island, living a life where he doesn't have to stress over long journeys and using his science, maybe I'll find some way to get back at Dean. But there's too much riding on this trip for me to make trouble now.

He releases my wrist, and I hide my trembling revulsion in my pocket.

"You'd better not mess this up for me," he says, then storms back into the office and, blessedly, away from me.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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