

Wayward Girls

By Penny Koepsel and Claire Maturro

Dedication

Dedicated to wayward girls everywhere, who suffered in silence, whose voices were unheard; and whose lives were forever changed. To those girls who were sent to “special boarding schools” because their willfulness, tenacity, and individuality were mislabeled as psychological flaws, instead of strengths, or as being a natural part of puberty, attainment of autonomy, or a strong sense of self—those traits we see and commend today in successful women. This is also dedicated to those kids whose parents were lulled into a false security by unethical people who promised to turn their wayward girls into proper young ladies. Unfortunately, they never shared with those parents exactly how they would do that, or at what cost - emotional, physical and otherwise.

Wayward Girls is a book of fiction. However, it was inspired in part by actual and documented reports of a private, profit-making coed boarding school for "troubled teens" in East Texas – and other affiliated schools. The State of Texas closed the school down after reports of abuse, neglect, and the death of a female student – and soon after other school closings followed.

Warning: parts of *Wayward Girls* may be disturbing, but so were some of the documented abuses of these students.

Chapter One

The Trial

Jude slouched against the wall, a deputy sheriff a fraction of an inch away, his hand on his nightstick, his eyes watching her closely. *Yeah, right.* Like she was going to try something in a room full of men with guns.

In front of her, William, her public defender, balanced on his single metal crutch and glared at the state attorney as the man ranted about some plea bargain crap. A bailiff shouted for everybody to take their seats, court was in session. Up front, the judge—an older man with a big bullfrog face—banged his gavel. William snapped out, “Twenty-years, my ass.”

Jude pushed off the wall, dodged the deputy, and slung herself down in the hard wooden chair behind the defendants’ table.

Her fingers sunk into her long red hair, all twisted up and captured in barrettes. She found a strand and yanked, relieved somehow at the sting of pain in her scalp. After throwing the hair on the floor, she rubbed the long, narrow scar on her face. William reached over and took her hand, forced it back to her lap, squeezed her fingers, and let go. “Sit on your hands if you can’t leave it alone,” he said, his voice harsh and low.

Jude sat on her fingers, cutting her eyes first at William, then at the judge as he told the bailiff to bring in the jury.

“Try to look sweet, okay,” William whispered.

Innocence—yeah, she got it. That’s the look William wanted her to have. She tried to find that expression of virtue she’d worn praising Jesus at the House of Noah, palms up and opened for the Holy Spirit, the air full of patchouli incense that tasted like burnt salt on her tongue. But her poker face was the best she could do as she glanced at the four men and two women who would decide whether she went to jail—or finished high school.

Be glad, Camille’s fat-faced attorney had said, that the State of Florida didn’t press for the death penalty even though the state had put teenagers on death row. Yeah, Camille. Cam. Cammie. Her co-defendant, her best friend, sitting beside her now at the defendants’ table, nervously nibbling the inside of her lip and looking like a scared rabbit. Her and Cam, former students at Eton Park’s bat-crap-hole boarding school, Talbot Hall School for Girls, on trial now for murder and arson. Being tried as adults. Setting a man on fire took you right out of juvie court.

The judge did all this courtroom crap to start the trial. Didn’t take Hamilton Buchanan, the state attorney, long to get started after that. Old Ham sucked in his gut and puffed out his chest as he paced before Eton Park’s so-called fire marshal, then flashed before and after photos of what the Talbot girls had called the Big House—guess it’d be the Big Ash Pile now. Jurors passed the photos to each other while darting glances at her and Camille. Before: in the middle of a huge orange grove, a fake antebellum mansion with columns and porticos. After: a pile of cinders and rubbish, with the chimney and fireplace still standing.

“Why’d the house burn?” the state attorney asked.

Eton Park's fire marshal dropped his head, studying his notes like he didn't remember or didn't know. Then he babbled some kind of fire science stuff about temperatures and micro-climates, and why fabric burns but marble doesn't.

Jude's legs jerked beneath the defendants' table, up and down as if she were trying to run in place. The state attorney spun around, glaring at Jude as if he thought she might sprint for the door. William rested his hand on one of her knees, and she stopped jiggling.

Looking back at the fire marshal, the state attorney asked, "Yes, but why did it burn so fast—and so completely?"

The fire marshal stammered out something about accelerants.

Maybe they could just ask Jude. Nothing like an eye witness.

Chapter Two

December 13 Talbot Hall

The fire started when the Persian rug lit up quicker than global warming on butane.

No, that wasn't true. The fire started when the man's jacket flamed up.

Only later, after all that screaming, the rug ignited from the sparks the man shed as he ran howling and flailing out the patio doors. The drapes caught like they'd been torched and flames leap-frogged around the room. "My God, come on," Camille yelled as she jumped toward Jude and Twitch, their palsied housemother. "Run."

"Twitch can't run," Jude said, struggling to hold her up. "Help me." The old lady, thin as Jude, suddenly weighed a ton as she collapsed against her.

The mahogany desk groaned as it caught fire. The mirror above the fireplace shattered from the heat as sparks showered and burned through Jude's sleeves and stung her skin.

"Leave me, get out, go," Twitch said, her voice coming out in strangled gasps. Noble as hell, but she didn't mean it, clinging as she did to Jude. Her old biddy hands wrapped around Jude's arms while flames spun around the room like something out of *Game of Thrones*, everything turning forty shades of bright red and smelling like Armageddon, all brimstone and burnt flesh.

"No way, you're coming with us." Camille grabbed Twitch's right arm and shifted some of the woman's weight onto her shoulder.

Jude hadn't dropped Twitch's other side, although in a fleeting moment of raw panic and nausea, she damn sure thought about letting go and sprinting for the open air. Just run and keep running. Run all the way to the Pacific Ocean and never, ever, go back.

But she couldn't leave Cammie alone to haul their housemother away from the flames. Camille wouldn't abandon Twitch even if they both burned up.

And, down deep in the raw part of her soul where she could still hear Jesus whisper at her, Jude knew she carried her share of Twitch's weight to safety because of Twitch. Jude could stand before God unrepentant about that stinking, smoking corpse, but not for running off and leaving an old woman to burn up with the antiques and the Persian rug and those documents she'd dropped.

They dragged Twitch outside through the opened patio door, swerving around the man's smoldering body, Camille limping from the gash in her foot. Jude's cut cheek throbbed. Her lungs felt scalded. She knew she was going to go to hell. The real hell, the eternal one, not this earthly bad-trip one.

Camille gagged and stumbled. Righting herself, she gasped, then said, "They'll blame us, the crazy girls, the ones who lie."

"I'll tell them I did it," Twitch said.

"Get in the orange grove, hide," Jude yanked Twitch away from the house and toward the sheltering darkness among the citrus trees.

"But, they'll know," Camille said, "our shoes—"

"The shoes'll burn up," Jude said.

As they lurched into the grove, sharing Twitch's weight and hurrying away from the flames, Jude twisted around to glare over her shoulder. Like Lot's wife turning to a pillar of salt, but in a fire storm like that house was making, she had to look back.

What she saw, too late, were those bloody footprints. There, by the French doors, smeared tracks leading to one perfect print of Camille's bare size five foot.

And Elizabeth, Talbot's famous tattletale and Camille's ex-roommate, standing on the side of the Big House, her hand cupped over her mouth and her glasses reflecting the flames as she turned toward Camille, Jude, and Twitch. That damn dead body on the patio a few steps away from Elizabeth.

Nothing to do but keep running.

Chapter Three

The Trial

William plunked down in the plastic chair, popped the metal cup of his crutch from around his arm, and let the whole contraption drop to the floor. Jude flinched as the metal clattered on the linoleum in the stinky little room in the jail where lawyers and clients met. He didn't even try to pick the crutch up.

His black, wiry hair was roped back in a ponytail, and he rested his hands on the card table in front of him. His fingers were still.

Jude stared, waiting for him to talk. She wondered why he'd come by so late.

She also wondered why she had thought he looked like Jesus when they'd first met. Back then, she'd even thought Jesus might come back to save her, all decked out as an Iraq veteran like William with a bum leg instead some fancy dude in a glowing robe. But William wasn't Jesus. She got that now.

William stared back at her. Dark eyes, long lashes, he was a sexy guy, except for the bad leg and all, and Jude leaned forward, catching a hint of sandalwood, but mostly trying to read his expression.

Not good. Jude leaned back. "Okay, what?" She didn't bother with all that hello-how-are-you crap. Camille was super polite. Look where that got her—same stinky jail.

"I'm quits with the public defender's office. Today, happened right after trial, when I went back to my office."

"You can do that? I mean, quit them in the middle of a trial?"

William's eyes closed and opened in a kind of slow motion. Yeah, those eyes of his, looking like she'd imagined Jesus' eyes would look. Like they knew stuff nobody else knew.

"Actually, I'll be honest with you—not that you seem to feel any particular need to be truthful with me, but still—"

"Hey, you—"

"Listen. Okay?" William seemed to sag as he spoke. "I got fired."

Jude jerked forward in her chair and clutched at his hand, then felt stupid and let it go. "You mean you can't be my attorney anymore?"

William grinned. "Thanks for saying you're sorry. Or asking why."

"Yeah, okay, I'll go to princess school or something when I'm out of jail, but right now, I want to know if you're still my attorney or not." Jude pulled her hand away from him and swallowed hard.

"Short answer, I can still be your attorney. I'll have to file some papers with the judge, work out some details. But I'm planning to stick with you. So relax. Could be this is better. Now you'll be my only client and have my undivided attention."

"Who'll pay you? I can't." Jude bent her head down and studied the names scratched on the table where she sat. "And my parents won't."

"You can make it well worth my time."

Jude glanced up at William, then down to her worn flip-flops. So, what was he going to ask for? Sex? Her first born? So much for him being like Jesus.

"If I get you off, my name'll be all over the media. Then the paying clients, especially the guilty ones, will run to me."

“So you’ll keep on defending me for the publicity?” *Yeah, nice to know he cares about me, huh?*

“And because you and your little running buddy are getting a raw deal here.” He slid a legal pad with long, yellow paper toward her. “One more thing. Here’s how you pay me. Write it down, your whole story.”

Real quick, she gave him a what-the-hell look and shifted in her chair so that she was off-angle from him, her face staring at the locked door. She hadn’t even *said* what had really happened, and he wanted her to write it down? *No way.*

“You’re going to trade the exclusive rights to your life story for my defending you. And Camille, same deal if she wants me instead of that attorney her parents hired.”

Yeah, Chip. Jude made a rude noise, down deep in her chest. *How useless is he?* Camille dubbed him Chip because he looked like a chipmunk, goofy, tufts of hair, toothy.

“If Camille agrees, she can sign on as my client too.” William rolled a pen across the table toward Jude, pointed at the legal pad. “She can keep her other attorney if her parents insist and have both of us representing her. Or she can fire him. I get the idea she doesn’t like him much.”

“About as much as he likes her, I guess.”

“I’ve got a legal pad for her too. I can hire a ghost writer to polish what you two write. Already have an agent sniffing around for a book publisher.”

“A book? You think you can get a book out of this?”

“Hell, yeah. This trial’s a big deal. Too bad they won’t let me bring my iPad in, I could show you the blogs and tweets on this trial. Two hot teen babes accused of killing a man by setting him on fire, you bet we can get a book.”

Hot babes? Yeah, Cammie was cute, big-eyed, petite, all that auburn hair—but, seriously? A babe? Camille might be 16, but she looked 12, especially in those stupid little kid clothes her attorney made her wear. And Jude, too tall, too skinny, too pale, that bright red hair. *A babe?* Her and Cam both fitting in here at the jail about like Mona Lisa in an Andy Warhol poster.

“I’ll get you and your little friend off and when the book comes out, I’ll give you ten percent, both of you. They make a movie, twenty percent. Your faces will be splashed across magazines like *People* and *Star*.”

Jude turned back around so she was facing him. “Yeah, so? What then? That state attorney gets what I write down and uses it against me?”

“Attorney-client privilege. You write that at the top of each page in large letters, attorney-client privilege, and that you are writing this at my request to help with your defense. At the top of every page.” He reached over and took the legal pad and wrote it down, just what he’d said, and shoved it back toward her.

Jude didn’t look at it. She could remember that. She wasn’t stupid. Even that jack-off court-appointed shrink testified she and Camille were both smart and that they could be tried as adults even though Cam was only 15, and she was 16, when they got arrested.

“You listening?” William leaned toward her and Jude caught another whiff of sandalwood.

“So yeah, you publish a book and they haul my ass right back in here, try me over. Not a great idea, you ask me.”

“Nobody talked about double jeopardy in your civics class, I take it?”

“Nobody talked about anything in civics except how great America is.”

He laughed, a gritty sound like his vocal cords were covered in wet sand. “Double jeopardy means that the state can only try you once for the same crime. You get acquitted, you can write a book that flat out says you went to the Big House that night intending to commit murder, and nobody can do a damn thing about it.”

While Jude was thinking, he tapped his finger on the legal pad. “To start off, tell me about Elizabeth. She’s the state attorney’s key witness, and I need to know her, inside and out, if I’m going to trap her on cross.”

“Fifty percent for Cam and me,” Jude said. “Movie or not.”

William snickered, then said, “Sixty for me, you and Camille split the rest.”

In the end, Jude shook his hand and agreed, mostly because he had those Jesus eyes. Jude hoped Camille would agree to let William represent her too. Why wouldn’t she? They both thought William was cool. Plus, back at Talbot, Cammie, the hotshot overachiever with her big college plans, was always scribbling stuff in her journal. Writing down a story for William ought to be just her thing.

They’d just leave out the stuff they didn’t want William or the whole world knowing.

Chapter Four

Late August Talbot Hall

Camille wadded up her dress and threw it on the closet floor. She was so pissed she wanted to scream and she was damn tired of smiling and being polite to everyone. And she'd only been at this horrid boarding school a week.

“Return to Traditional Values in Education and Behavior”—that’s what the brochure and webpage said. What they really meant was time-travel back to 1950.

“You better hang that up,” her roommate Elizabeth said. “You’ll just have to iron if you don’t.”

Camille kicked the dress, then slammed the closet door. The school made them wear dresses to class. Nobody’d had to wear dresses to classes since, when? The Sixties?

“I think it’s good for us to wear dresses and act like ladies, put down our cell phones and talk face to face, and make our own beds, things like that,” Elizabeth said, and smoothed out the spread on her twin bed. “But you’re going to have to do better than that.” She pointed at Camille’s bed. “Your sheets are showing under the bedspread.”

Ignoring Elizabeth, Camille walked over to her wall and marked off the day on the calendar. Damn, how in the world was she going to get through this year with Miss Prigg as her roommate? And worse, without any iPod, iPhone, or iPad, there’d be no Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, email, or texting for nine months. No popping in the earbuds and shutting out the world with music. And no air conditioning in the dorm room—how were they going to ever survive?

Inhale. Focus.

Only 272 days to go until summer vacation. *“This too shall pass.”*

“You know you aren’t supposed to nail that calendar to the wall. Or those posters,” Elizabeth said.

For a minute Camille thought about nailing something else to the wall, like Elizabeth’s tongue. Twitch really screwed up putting them together as roommates just because they were both petite and each had skipped 5th grade. As if that would make them friends.

“I’m heading out for a while,” Camille said. Elizabeth ignored her. Halfway out the door, Camille turned back and grabbed her guitar. Try outs for the school’s choir were later in the week, and if she was going to be stuck in this hell hole, she might as well build up her resume for her college application. She was going to Notre Dame. She had her heart set on it. Maybe Vanderbilt if somehow she didn’t get in at Notre Dame. But nothing less.

After running down the hallway to the stairs, Camille darted outside, heading toward the fountain in the center of the circle driveway in front of Talbot. She sat down on the hard rim of the blue fountain before she realized that weirdo girl, Jude, was scrunched up on the bench next to it. Jude’s red hair tangled around her shoulders and her blue-tinted granny glasses rested halfway down her nose—like she thought it was 1969 or something. She was drawing in a sketchbook with a piece of charcoal and her fingers were smudged gray.

“Hi, Jude,” Camille said, wishing she’d gone to the pier instead. *Is anybody in this school even remotely normal?*

Jude mumbled “Praise the Lord,” and rolled the charcoal sideways, making wide, swiping passes over the paper. Then she took her finger and rubbed the lines softly, but never looked at Camille.

Camille wanted to laugh at Jude, but she didn’t. All that Jesus stuff was so different from Camille’s upbringing. Her own gold St. Christopher’s medal rubbed against her chest, hidden by her blouse. Back in her room, she kept her St. Maria’s Rosary in her nightstand and would pray with it when she was alone. But she didn’t have to act like some poster child for the Catholic Church, did she?

When Jude didn’t say anything else, Camille played a few chords of Taylor Swift’s “Ours” singing under her breath and wishing again she had gone to the pier. Not her kind of song exactly, though she loved the line about throwing rocks. Regardless, Camille figured it’d be a good audition piece.

“That’s pretty,” Jude said, her voice so low the gurgling water in the fountain nearly drowned her out. “I wish I could play the guitar.” She pressed down on the charcoal so hard she broke the tip. Slamming the busted stick down, she wiped sweat off her face with the tail of her T-shirt.

Camille stopped playing and wondered how she could get away from Jude without being rude.

Jude pulled a pack of Virginia Slims from a leather drawstring pouch she wore around her neck. “You?” she asked, without looking at Camille, but offering the pack.

“Sure.” Camille reached over and took the cig, let Jude light it, and hoped Twitch couldn’t see them from the school. They weren’t allowed to smoke anywhere but in the

student center, which the girls called the Monkey Lounge because of the jungle prints with chimpanzees on the walls.

“So, um, how’ve things been going for you the first week?” Camille asked.

“Okay, I guess. You?” Jude pinched her cigarette between the tips of her thumb and index finger and drew down hard and deep.

“Mostly all right.” *Yeah right.* “I’m liking Elliot’s English class. It’s so awesome the way he wants us to call him by his first name and how he wear those scarves.”

“Yeah, he’s cool,” Jude said, but she didn’t sound like she really meant it.

“So classes are good.” Camille heard that fake little chirp in her voice, and paused. Maybe she didn’t have to act like everything was all right? Certainly not around Jude, anyway.

“Classes,” Jude said, but she made it sound like she’d just said a curse word.

“They don’t suck much worse than my old school.”

Camille relaxed. No need to act like she was being interviewed by some college rep. “But having Elizabeth as a roommate’s a royal pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, Elizabitch. I’d want to drown her in the bathtub.” Jude inhaled and blew a perfect smoke ring out toward the lake.

Camille tried to match it but blew out a crooked puff of smoke that drifted apart almost immediately. She inhaled, ready to try that smoke ring again. But the crunching sound of a car on the crushed shells of the circle driveway made her look at the front of the school.

“Hide the ciggies, incoming,” Jude said.

A white Honda Pilot with a Talbot Hall School for Girls magnetic sign on each side pulled in by the front security light and stopped.

Jack Morrish crawled out of the driver's side and jerked open the back door. He was the night watchman and campus handyman. Camille had nicknamed him Igor the first time she saw him because he was creepy. His greased back hair and narrow, squinty eyes made him look like some perv out of an old B & W movie like that *Cape Fear* she'd watched on TMC back home.

Camille snubbed out her cigarette on the concrete rim in case Igor saw them smoking and reported it. He'd have done it too because he seemed to like getting the students in trouble.

A girl scrambled out of the back seat of the car and jumped out of the reach of Igor as he put a hand out toward her.

"Now what?" Camille asked. "You think she's a new student?"

Jude snubbed out her cigarette and shoved the butt under her sketch pad.

Camille squinted at the new girl, who was about as short as she was, but looked skinnier, her chest flat as a teen-age boy's. Her chopped-off hair was a tacky bleached blond and she wore short cut-offs and a button-down man's white shirt.

"Twitch'll have her on room restriction for those cut-offs before she get unpacked," Camille said.

Igor pulled a frayed green backpack from the backseat and tossed it at the girl.

"Man, he practically threw that at her," Jude said.

The girl put her hands on her hips, turned toward them. "What're y'all staring at?"

Camille waved. "Sorry. Just not expecting to see new people around here."

“Well, get used to it,” she yelled back. “Tell the other girls that Wanda Ann’s here all the way from Panama City Beach and the fun’s fixing to start.”

Camille laughed, suddenly feeling better. “She’s from the Panhandle like me.”

Jude stared, but didn’t say a word.

“Hey, anybody got a Salem I could bum?” Wanda Ann shouted over at them.

The other back door of the station wagon opened and Dr. Richard Hedstrom, the headshrinker himself, got out.

Crap, him again. Did he follow me here? Camille made herself sit still. Don’t let him—or Jude—see how you feel.

But inside her chest, her heart seemed to constrict and her stomach felt queasy, like she might puke. She’d dubbed him Dr. Dickhead when her parents forced her into seeing him for counseling, but switched to Dr. Head in case she slipped up and called him that to somebody.

Dr. Head seemed to take up a lot of space as he stretched, then shut the car door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money and handed it to Igor without even looking at the creep. When the girl tried to grab some of it, Dr. Head pulled her around to face him. She held out an opened right palm and grinned. Dr. Head laughed and pulled out more money and pressed the bills into her hand.

“Did you see that?” Camille wheeled around toward Jude, trying to keep her voice low. “He gave that girl a handful of cash.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Why would he give her money?” Camille asked.

Jude shrugged. “Who knows? Who cares?”

Igor marched up next to Wanda Ann. “I’ll be watching you.”

“So what,” she snapped. “You can’t be pulling your crap here.”

Dr. Head shoved between Wanda Ann and Igor and said something to Igor that Camille couldn’t hear. Igor nodded, gave Wanda Ann a dirty look, and got into the SUV.

Wanda Ann shot a bird at Igor’s side of the car. Dr. Head shook his head and she dropped her hand. He picked up Wanda Ann’s backpack, put his arm around her shoulder, and they walked to the front of the main Talbot building. As they disappeared inside, Igor peeled off like he was sixteen and in his daddy’s car for the first time.

Camille wished she had her iPhone so she could call somebody to come get her. Her boyfriend Grant would drive down and pick her up, she was sure of that. She absolutely could not stay here if Dr. Head was going to be here.

But Twitch had collected everyone’s cell phones, iPads, notebooks, PC, laptops—anything with a link to the outside world—and tossed them into the bottom of a big plastic box and locked it in the school’s safe. If the girls even wanted to make a phone call, they had to do it from Twitch’s landline—with her sitting right there—or drop piles of quarters into the antique payphones hanging on the walls on each dorm’s hallway.

This is a prison.

But if I run away, I won’t get into Notre Dame.

How I am ever going to survive the next nine months?

