

UNTAMED

GLENNON
DOYLE

Author of the #1 New York Times bestseller

LOVE WARRIOR

untamed

glennon doyle



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This is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some names, identifying details and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed. In addition certain people who appear in these pages are composites of a number of individuals and their experiences.

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prologue

cheetah

Two summers ago, my wife and I took our daughters to the zoo. As we walked the grounds, we saw a sign advertising the park's big event: the Cheetah Run. We headed toward the families scouting out their viewing spots and found an empty stretch along the route. Our youngest, Amma, hopped up on my wife's shoulders for a better view.

A peppy blond zookeeper in a khaki vest appeared. She held a megaphone and the leash of a yellow Labrador retriever. I was confused. I don't know much about animals, but if she tried to convince my kids that this dog was a cheetah, I was getting a Cheetah Run refund.

She began, "Welcome, everybody! You are about to meet our resident cheetah, Tabitha. Do you think this is Tabitha?"

"Nooooo!" the kids yelled.

"This sweet Labrador is Minnie, Tabitha's best friend. We introduced them when Tabitha was a baby cheetah, and we raised Minnie alongside Tabitha to help tame her. Whatever Minnie does, Tabitha wants to do."

The zookeeper motioned toward a parked jeep behind her. A pink stuffed bunny was tied to the tailgate with a fraying rope.

She asked, "Who has a Labrador at home?"

Little hands shot into the air.

"Whose Lab loves to play chase?"

"Mine!" the kids shouted.

“Well, Minnie loves to chase this bunny! So first, Minnie will do the Cheetah Run while Tabitha watches to remember how it’s done. Then we’ll count down, I’ll open Tabitha’s cage, and she’ll take off. At the end of the route, just a hundred meters that way, there will be a delicious steak waiting for Tabitha.”

The zookeeper uncovered Tabitha’s cage and walked Minnie, eager and panting, to the starting line. She signaled to the jeep, and it took off. She released Minnie’s leash, and we all watched a yellow Lab joyfully chase a dirty pink bunny. The kids applauded earnestly. The adults wiped sweat from their foreheads.

Finally it was time for Tabitha’s big moment. We counted down in unison: “Five, four, three, two, one...” The zookeeper slid open the cage door, and the bunny took off once again. Tabitha bolted out, laser focused on the bunny, a spotted blur. She crossed the finish line within seconds. The zookeeper whistled and threw her a steak. Tabitha pinned it to the ground with her oven-mitt paws, hunkered down in the dirt, and chewed while the crowd clapped.

I didn’t clap. I felt queasy. The taming of Tabitha felt...familiar.

I watched Tabitha gnawing that steak in the zoo dirt and thought: *Day after day this wild animal chases dirty pink bunnies down the well-worn, narrow path they cleared for her. Never looking left or right. Never catching that damn bunny, settling instead for a store-bought steak and the distracted approval of sweaty strangers. Obeying the zookeeper’s every command, just like Minnie, the Lab she’s been trained to believe she is. Unaware that if she remembered her wildness—just for a moment—she could tear those zookeepers to shreds.*

When Tabitha finished her steak, the zookeeper opened a gate that led to a small fenced field. Tabitha walked through and the gate closed behind her. The zookeeper picked up her megaphone again and asked for questions. A young girl, maybe nine years old, raised her hand and asked, “Isn’t Tabitha sad? Doesn’t she miss the wild?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you,” the zookeeper said. “Can you ask that again?”

The child’s mother said, louder, “She wants to know if Tabitha misses the wild.”

The zookeeper smiled and said, “No. Tabitha was born here. She doesn’t know any different. She’s never even seen the wild. This is a

good life for Tabitha. She's much safer here than she would be out in the wild."

While the zookeeper began sharing facts about cheetahs born into captivity, my older daughter, Tish, nudged me and pointed to Tabitha. There, in that field, away from Minnie and the zookeepers, Tabitha's posture had changed. Her head was high, and she was stalking the periphery, tracing the boundaries the fence created. Back and forth, back and forth, stopping only to stare somewhere beyond the fence. It was like she was remembering something. She looked regal. And a little scary.

Tish whispered to me, "Mommy. She turned wild again."

I nodded at Tish and kept my eyes on Tabitha as she stalked. I wished I could ask her, "What's happening inside you right now?"

I knew what she'd tell me. She'd say, "Something's *off* about my life. I feel restless and frustrated. I have this hunch that everything was supposed to be more beautiful than this. I imagine fenceless, wide-open savannas. I want to run and hunt and kill. I want to sleep under an ink-black, silent sky filled with stars. *It's all so real I can taste it.*"

Then she'd look back at the cage, the only home she's ever known. She'd look at the smiling zookeepers, the bored spectators, and her panting, bouncing, begging best friend, the Lab.

She'd sigh and say, "I should be grateful. I have a good enough life here. It's crazy to long for what doesn't even exist."

I'd say:

Tabitha. You are not crazy.

You are a goddamn cheetah.

part one

caged

sparks

Four years ago, married to the father of my three children, I fell in love with a woman.

Much later, I watched that woman drive away from my home to meet with my parents and share her plan to propose to me. She thought I didn't know what was happening that Sunday morning, but I knew.

When I heard her car return, I settled into the couch, opened a book, and tried to slow my pulse. She walked through the door and directly toward me, bent down, kissed my forehead. She pushed my hair aside and took a deep breath of my neck, like she always does. Then she stood up and disappeared into the bedroom. I walked to the kitchen to pour some coffee for her, and when I turned around, she was right there in front of me, down on one knee, holding a ring. Her eyes were certain and pleading, wide and laser focused, sky blue, bottomless.

"I couldn't wait," she said. "I just could not wait another minute."

Later, in bed, I laid my head on her chest while we talked about her morning. She'd told my parents, "I love your daughter and grandchildren like I've never loved before. I've spent my entire life searching and preparing myself for them. I promise you that I will love and protect them forever." My mother's lip quivered with fear and courage as she said, "Abby. I have not seen my daughter this alive since she was ten years old."

Much else was said that morning, but that first response from my mother jumped out at me like a sentence in a novel begging to be

underlined:

I have not seen my daughter this alive since she was ten years old.

My mother watched the spark in my eyes fade during my tenth year on Earth. Now, thirty years later, she was witnessing the return of that spark. In the past few months, my entire posture had changed. I looked regal to her. And a little scary.

After that day, I began to ask myself: *Where did my spark go at ten? How had I lost myself?*

I've done my research and learned this: Ten is when we learn how to be good girls and real boys. Ten is when children begin to hide who they are in order to become what the world expects them to be. Right around ten is when we begin to internalize our formal taming.

Ten is when the world sat me down, told me to be quiet, and pointed toward my cages:

These are the feelings you are allowed to express.

This is how a woman should act.

This is the body you must strive for.

These are the things you will believe.

These are the people you can love.

Those are the people you should fear.

This is the kind of life you are supposed to want.

Make yourself fit. You'll be uncomfortable at first, but don't worry—eventually you'll forget you're caged. Soon this will just feel like: life.

I wanted to be a good girl, so I tried to control myself. I chose a personality, a body, a faith, and a sexuality so tiny I had to hold my breath to fit myself inside. Then I promptly became very sick.

When I became a good girl, I also became a bulimic. None of us can hold our breath all the time. Bulimia was where I exhaled. It was where I refused to comply, indulged my hunger, and expressed my fury. I became animalistic during my daily binges. Then I'd drape myself over the toilet and purge because a good girl must stay very small to fit inside her cages. She must leave no outward evidence of her hunger. Good girls aren't hungry, furious, or wild. All of the things that make a woman human are a good girl's dirty secret.

Back then, I suspected that my bulimia meant that I was crazy. In high school, I did a stint in a mental hospital and my suspicion was confirmed.

I understand myself differently now.

I was just a caged girl made for wide-open skies.

I wasn't crazy. I was a goddamn cheetah.

When I saw Abby, I remembered my wild. I wanted her, and it was the first time I wanted something beyond what I had been trained to want. I loved her, and it was the first time I loved someone beyond those I had been expected to love. Creating a life with her was the first original idea I'd ever had and the first decision I made as a free woman. After thirty years of contorting myself to fit inside someone else's idea of love, I finally had a love that fit—custom made for me, by me. I'd finally asked myself what I wanted instead of what the world wanted from me. I felt alive. I'd tasted freedom, and I wanted more.

I looked hard at my faith, my friendships, my work, my sexuality, my entire life and asked: How much of this was my idea? Do I truly want any of this, or is this what I was conditioned to want? Which of my beliefs are of my own creation and which were programmed into me? How much of who I've become is inherent, and how much was just inherited? How much of the way I look and speak and behave is just how other people have trained me to look and speak and behave? How many of the things I've spent my life chasing are just dirty pink bunnies? Who was I before I became who the world told me to be?

Over time, I walked away from my cages. I slowly built a new marriage, a new faith, a new worldview, a new purpose, a new family, and a new identity by design instead of default. From my imagination instead of my indoctrination. From my wild instead of from my training.

What follows are stories about how I got caged—and how I got free.

apples

I am ten years old, and I'm sitting in a small room in the back of Nativity Catholic Church with twenty other kids. I am at CCD, where my parents send me on Wednesday nights to learn about God. Our CCD teacher is my classmate's mom. I do not remember her name, but I do remember that she keeps telling us that she is an accountant during the day. Her family needed service hours, so she volunteered to work in the gift shop. Instead, the church assigned her to room 423, fifth-grade CCD. So now—on Wednesdays between 6:30 and 7:30 P.M.—she teaches children about God.

She asks us to sit on the carpet in front of her chair, because she is going to explain to us how God made people. I hurry to get a spot in front. I am very curious about how and why I was made. I notice that our teacher does not have a Bible or any other books in her lap. She is going to speak from memory. I am impressed.

She begins.

“God made Adam and put him in a beautiful garden. Adam was God's favorite creation, so He told Adam that his only jobs were to be happy, rule over the garden, and name the animals. Adam's life was almost perfect. Except that he got lonely and stressed. He wanted some company and help naming the animals. So he told God that he wanted a companion and a helper. One night, God helped Adam give birth to Eve. From inside Adam's body, a woman was born. That is why she is called woman. Because women came from the womb of man. Womb—man.”

I am so amazed that I forget to raise my hand.

“Wait. Adam gave birth to *Eve*? But don’t people come from women’s bodies? Shouldn’t boys be called woman? Shouldn’t all people be called woman?”

My teacher says, “Raise your hand, Glennon.”

I raise my hand. She motions for me to put it back down. The boy sitting to my left rolls his eyes at me.

Our teacher goes on.

“Adam and Eve were happy, and everything stayed perfect for a while.

“But then God said there was one tree they couldn’t eat from: the Tree of Knowledge. Even though it was the only thing that Eve wasn’t allowed to want, she wanted an apple from that tree anyway. So one day, she got hungry, picked the apple off the tree, and took a bite. Then she tricked Adam into taking a bite, too. As soon as Adam bit into the apple, Eve and Adam felt shame for the first time and tried to hide from God. But God sees everything, so God knew. God banished Adam and Eve from the garden. Then He cursed them and their future children, and for the first time, suffering existed on the earth. This is why we still suffer today, because Eve’s original sin is inside of all of us. That sin is wanting to know more than we are supposed to know, wanting more instead of being grateful for what we have, and doing what we want to do instead of what we should do.”

That was some careful accounting. I had no further questions.

blow jobs

My husband and I began working with a therapist after he admitted that he had been sleeping with other women. Now we save up our problems throughout the week and take them to her on Tuesday evenings. When friends ask me if she's any good, I say, "I guess so. I mean, we're still married."

Today I've asked to see her alone. I'm tired and jittery because I spent all night silently rehearsing how to tell her what I'm about to tell her.

I sit quietly in my chair, hands folded in my lap. She sits upright in the chair across from me. She wears a crisp white pantsuit, sensible heels, no makeup. A wooden bookshelf crowded with textbooks and framed degrees climbs the wall behind her like a bean stalk. Her pen is poised above a leather notebook in her lap, ready to pin me down in black and white. I remind myself: *Speak calmly and confidently, Glennon, like a grown-up.*

"I have something important to tell you. I've fallen in love. I am wildly in love. Her name is Abby."

My therapist's mouth falls open, just enough for me to notice it. She says nothing for an eternal moment. Then she breathes very deeply and says, "Okay."

She pauses, starts again. "Glennon, you know that whatever this is—it's not real. These feelings are *not real*. Whatever future you're

imagining here: That's not real, either. This is nothing but a dangerous distraction. It won't end well. It has to stop."

I start to say, "You don't understand. This is different." But then I think about all the people who have sat in this chair and insisted: *This is different*.

If she won't let me have Abby, I need to make my case, at least, for never again having my husband.

"I cannot sleep with him again," I say. "You know how hard I've tried. Sometimes I think I've forgiven. But then he climbs on top of me, and I hate him again. It's been years and I don't want to be difficult, so I close my eyes and try to float away until it's over. But then I accidentally land back inside my body, and what I land in is white-hot fiery rage. It's like: I try to go dead inside but there is always a little life left in me, and that life makes sex unbearable. I can't be alive during sex, but I can't get dead enough, either, so there's no solution. I just—I don't want to do it anymore."

I am furious that tears come, but they do. I am begging now. Mercy, please.

Two women. One white suit. Six framed degrees. One open notebook. One pen, poised.

Then: "Glennon, have you tried just giving him blow jobs instead? Many women find blow jobs to be less intimate."

directions

I have a son and two daughters, until they tell me otherwise.

My children believe that the shower is a magical portal of ideas.

My youngest recently said to me, “Mom, it’s like I don’t have any ideas all day, but when I get in the shower my brain is full of cool stuff. I think it’s the water or something.”

“Could be the water,” I said. “Or it could be that the shower’s the only place you’re not plugged in—so you can hear your own thoughts in there.”

She looked at me and said, “Huh?”

“That thing that happens to you in the shower, babe. It’s called *thinking*. It’s something folks did before Google. Thinking is like...it’s like googling your own brain.”

“Oh,” she said. “Cool.”

That same child steals my expensive shampoo once a week, so the other day I stomped to the bathroom she shares with her teenage brother and sister to steal it back. I opened the shower curtain and noticed the twelve empty bottles littering the tub’s edge. All the bottles on the right side were red, white, and blue. All the bottles on the left side were pink and purple.

I picked up a red bottle from what was clearly my son’s side. It was tall, rectangular, bulky. It yelled at me in bold red, white, and blue letters:

**3X BIGGER,
DOESN'T ROB YOU OF YOUR DIGNITY,
ARMOR UP IN MAN SCENT,
DROP-KICK DIRT, THEN SLAM ODOR WITH A FOLDING CHAIR.**

I thought: *What the hell? Is my son taking a shower or preparing for war in here?*

I picked up one of the girls' slim, metallic, pink bottles. Instead of barking marching orders at me, that bottle, in cursive, flowy font, whispered disconnected adjectives: *alluring, radiant, gentle, pure, illuminating, enticing, touchable, light, creamy*. Not a verb to be found. Nothing to do here, just a list of things to be.

I looked around for a moment to ensure that the shower was not, in fact, a magic portal that had somehow transported me back in time. Nope. There I was, in the twenty-first century, when boys are still being taught that real men are big, bold, violent, invulnerable, disgusted by femininity, and responsible for conquering women and the world. When girls are still being taught that real women must be quiet, pretty, small, passive, and desirable so they'll be worthy of being conquered. Here we all are. Our sons and daughters are still being shamed out of their full humanity before they even get dressed in the morning.

Our children are too vast to fit themselves inside these rigid, mass-produced bottles. But they'll lose themselves trying.