



WILDER



ALSO BY PENNY CHRIMES

Tiger Heart

The Dragon and her Boy

PENNY CHRIMES

WILDER

Illustrated by Manuel Šumberac



Orion[★]

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**For Reginald Braithwaite Chrimes.
Who never stopped fighting for a better world.
Never forgotten, Dad.**





PART ONE





The child – if child it was – came naked out of the wild-ness.

It came out of the sparse bleak marsh beside the village where few dared go and none came back.

‘No good ever came from that place,’ is what the villagers said. ‘The marsh takes and takes and never gives back.’

For the slither of marsh silt and the creep of marsh grass had been stealing the shining river from the villagers and their fishing boats lay idle and rotting in the mud. They were bitter people and narrow as the barren strip of land that was all they had left.

Some women, rising early to draw well water, found the child standing alone at the edge-lands on a winter’s dawn.

It was staring at the huddled houses with such hunger in its eyes.

‘As if it would devour us all,’ went the whisper between them.

Its shock of hair was the yellow-white of the blast-bleached grasses – a colour not seen on the dark heads of these villagers – and as coarse and tangled as briar brambles. Its legs were scarred and marked with swirling patterns like lashings and stings. And the sounds it made were the sounds of the wild wind, as if it had never before heard the speech of man.

The women crossed themselves with superstition-born fear and called their men, who would have driven the child back into the wild-ness from which it came.

But a mother, whose son had walked into the marsh one moonlit night and never returned, pushed her way between them and put her arms about the child. Like a fledgling fallen from a tree, it shrank into her softness and nested in her emptiness. Its black eyes were watchful as the unblinking glare of the falcon that wheeled high, unseen, above its head.

‘She has been sent by the river,’ the mother said. She was known as a Wise Woman who saw things beyond seeing, and her green eyes flashed a challenge

to any that would argue.

‘I shall call her Rhodd*,’ she said and the name was soft as breathing between her lips.

‘Wrath?’ muttered one, because that is the way the name sounded to their ears. And why – after all – would you call a child ‘anger’?

‘It means “gift”,’ the mother replied, but in what deep and ancient language she did not say.

And so the villagers grew accustomed to the creature and allowed that it was a girl, for the sake of their own peace of mind. But they did not forget from where Rhodd came.

And they whispered that there was no knowing whether she was sent as a blessing or a bane.

* Pronounced ‘Roth’



Go safe, child.

Hide from its eyes until you grow strong.

But never forget your wild-ness within.

Nor the wild-ness without.



CHAPTER 1

‘A is for Apple, B is for Book, C is for Cat, D is for Dog, E is for Egg . . .’

Rhodd yawned. Was it worth a scolding from Ma for escaping her chores, just for such dull stuff as this?

In her sun-pooled hiding place behind the schoolhouse, the drone of bored boys blurred with the drone of a bee. Distracted, Rhodd shifted her gaze from her stolen alphabet book to the bee’s eyes – and she saw in that instant exactly as the bee saw.

Gone were the soft muted shades of the spring flowers, the gentle pinks and blues of the champions and the columbines. There was now a brilliance at the throat of every flower, unseen by the human eye; a brilliance that seduced the bee into the very heart of the bloom. The

flower dazzled the bee's five eyes, dusting its fine hairs with grains of golden pollen like tiny suns.

Try that one, Rhodd told the bee and it changed direction and followed her nod with a buzz of thanks.

The bee began to drink itself daft on nectar. Rhodd was swaying, her senses blurred.

'Enough!' Rhodd pulled her eyes back from the bee's eyes and shook her tousled head impatiently, rewilding the sun-bright mane that Ma tried daily to tame into plaits. A flurry of small creatures scattered from her lap – timid mice and whiskered voles and long-nosed shrews that had gathered about her skirts for the crumbs she brought from breakfast. But it wasn't Rhodd they were fleeing. A dark wide-winged shadow had fallen from above.

She lifted her gaze to the cloudless sky.

'There you are!' she breathed, though she had no need of words with him. Wheeling high in the blue skies, almost beyond human sight, was her falcon and her eyes were now his eyes, sweeping and scouring the earth below. Clean, clear, knife-sharp. Savage. No creature crept or flew beneath that fierce gaze without his knowing. Some he let live.

An invisible thread stretched between falcon and girl, a thread that had never broken since Rhodd had walked out

of the marsh on a winter's dawn, all those years before. That thread anchored her, still, in the wild-ness, even though she had no thinking memory of what her life had been before she came here. Three years old – that had been her mother's guess about how old she was when she arrived at the village. But by what magic she had reached that age, nobody knew. Nor what she had been escaping.

Through the falcon's eyes she saw the village below, laid out like a faded, tattered ribbon along the skirts of the marsh. One long street – with houses only on one side – leading to nowhere. For that is what this place had become. Nowhere. Nobody came here from the country beyond. There was nothing to come for, with the river gone.

Midway along the street stood the pub, next to the village green. It had once been a busy coaching inn but only moths slept in its beds now. Behind it, the cobbled square of the stable yard no longer echoed with the sound of horses' hooves – her falcon-ears could hear only the creaking of rotted half-doors on broken hinges. The next strong wind could take them off but nobody cared enough to lift a finger to mend them.

Even now, with the sun barely dipping from its noon height, there was a cluster of men leaning against the walls

of the pub. As if the effort of standing was too much trouble. 'Lazy do-nowts,' Ma called them, lips pursed in disapproval, but the truth was that there was nothing to do since the marsh had swallowed the river.

This desolate place had once been a thriving port, where boys went out to sea as sailors or stayed home and lived a good life from the fishing. But when the river left them, so did the fish and now the marsh barred the way to the sea.

A huddle of bedraggled houses slouched along what had once been a busy riverfront, full of cries and calls and bustling travellers and tradesmen. Their bleary windows stared past the ribs of boat skeletons and out over the blank expanse of flat marsh. No man's land, where no man went who planned to come back. On a winter's night you could hear the pale ghosts of those who had ventured too far, wailing with the wind. But the doors and shutters of their old homes were barred tight against their return.

At the dead end of the street, like a pair of outcasts, stood a couple of cottages even more ramshackle than the rest. One of those cottages was the place Rhodd called home. And from the sky her falcon-eyes spied Ma standing outside the door. Hands on hips, elbows bristling.

'Rhodd! Where are you? Plague take the child!'

Even from the other side of the village, tucked behind the schoolhouse, Rhodd's falcon-ears could hear the impatience in that voice. Impatience over chores left undone, dishes left dirty, floor left unswept.

'Ma . . .' Rhodd scrambled guiltily to her feet, sending a last vole scurrying for shelter in the long, sweet-smelling grass. The alphabet book tumbled to the ground. She sighed and picked it up. No matter how hard she studied it – and she *did* study it hard, because she hated to be outdone by numbskull boys – the shapes of the letters written on it meant nothing to her.

How could 'A' be for apple, when 'A' looked like nothing but the distant blue hills? How could 'O' be for owl when 'O' was the sun or the fat full moon above her head? 'W' was easier, because that was waves made by wind on water, and she was prepared to allow 'T' to be a tree with bare branches stretching below the sky . . .

But these words – owl, sun, moon, waves, tree – they were not her words. In Rhodd's head, there was no need for language for such things. They just were and always had been. Ageless and of the earth.

She felt the falcon soar away and leave her, and her heart dropped back into her chest, earthbound once more.

'I wish . . .' But the wish was too big for words.

She longed to soar with him, envied him the wind beneath his wings. The air was his element. She ached to escape this human body and fly, to free-wheel on the air currents, up and up towards the sun. But she always turned her head away when he flew out over the marsh, always snatched back her gaze before she could see that whole wild expanse spread beneath.

She was not ready to remember the truth of that place. Not yet. Even though she knew in her heart that something waited for her out there, brooding. And that one day she must face it.

A fluttering and anxious tweeting and twittering from the beech hedge stole Rhodd's attention back from the sky. Between the shimmering fresh green of the new leaves poked the head of a sulky little bundle of barely grown feathers. A mother sparrow followed, nudging her reluctant fledgling out of the nest that was hidden deep in the tangle of branches.

The baby bird teetered nervously out on to a thin branch, which it clearly did not believe for a moment could hold its weight. It was still almost as much fluff as feather, and as Rhodd watched, it ruffled up the fluff and gaped its wide mouth to make itself seem more helpless. It was clearly hoping that its mother might change her mind and

feed it and then that they could go back to the cosy nest. Instead of this horrible misunderstanding that it was time for it to fly.

Rhodd switched her gaze to the fledgling's gaze, saw through its eyes the dizzying drop to the ground. She could feel all the little bird's terror and bewilderment over being ousted from a safe warm world with a steady supply of worms.

Be brave, Rhodd told it. **You can do it, you're ready. You must have courage!**

It fluttered its untried wings, wobbled, panicked. **No, I can't, I can't . . .**

You can! I know you can!

And then, quite suddenly, it could.

Rhodd gasped as the fragile framework of blood and feather and bone trusted, against all reason, that the empty air would hold it. It fluttered, flapped. Caught a wing-hold on the breeze. And flew.

She lay back to watch the mother sparrow supervising her baby's first unsteady flights. Rhodd had been holding her breath with the fledgling – now she smiled. **I told you that you could do it.** But it was already gone, rejoicing in its new-found freedom.

The freedom to fly . . . Ah! How she envied it.

A bell rang. Rhodd didn't need her falcon's eyes to know that a dozen village boys were tumbling out of the front door of the schoolhouse, eager to escape. All shapes and sizes. All looking for some smaller creature to pick on, after hours of struggling with their lessons.

A slick of quick sweat made her shiver – she was normally so careful to be gone before now. She shoved the precious schoolbook under her smock. She had stolen it a few weeks before from one of the boys, and she'd grinned with her sharp little white teeth as she'd listened to him taking a scolding from the schoolmaster for losing it.

A sound gathered in the girl's throat that was closer to a snarl than anything human. By instinct, life was a matter of fight or flight for Rhodd.

Her fingers flexed like the talons of her falcon. But experience told her she could not take on the village boys when they hunted in a pack. And Ma had said she must stop fighting or they would both be driven from the village.

'Rhodd! What you still doing here?' A head, shaggy with dark hair, peered round the side of the sandstone building. 'You need to get gone, quick, afore they find you!'

CHAPTER 2

The hissed whisper had come from a boy a little taller but even skinnier than Rhodd. He glanced behind him before darting round the corner to join her. He often found her here, listening to the lessons she wasn't allowed to join.

'Come on – we need to scarper – the Johnsons are all riled up 'cos they got the cane for spitting on the floor . . .'

Rhodd scrambled fast to her feet, pulling down the long smock to hide the dark marks on her legs. Even Gar, her best – in fact, her only – friend, had never seen them. The strange scars hadn't ever faded since she walked out of the marsh, in spite of her mother's physicking, and Ma had warned her to keep them hidden under her skirts from curious eyes. Clothes had been a battle between her and

Ma in those first weeks. The wild child had torn them, snarling, from her back and fled outside to roll naked in the mud until the smell of them was gone from her skin. But in the end, she'd learned she must wear them, like she'd learned so much else.

'They've no more wits between them than a coot, them three,' Rhodd sneered.

Gar was used to the slight halt in her speech that made it sound like she was translating from another tongue. The village children called her 'slow top' – amongst other insults – but the truth was that her instincts flew ahead of human thoughts, too fast to turn into words.

'Don't reckon they care much about wits, the Johnsons,' Gar replied now. 'Got fists for brains, that lot.'

Rhodd nodded. Gar was right. Two fists each. She didn't need to go to school to know that made six. And even the smallest of the Johnson brothers was twice her size. At least that's how it felt.

'What'll us do, Rhodd?' Gar gazed at Rhodd with complete trust. They were like two halves of a whole. He was the practical one, the clever one. But she was the one with the wildest ideas. A perfect partnership. He'd never known Rhodd fail to get them out of a scrape. Or, at least, almost never.

Rhodd shrugged. ‘Dunno.’ But a grin twitched at the corners of her mouth.

Something flickered, deep, savage, in her fierce black eyes. That something made Gar shiver sometimes, even though he’d known her for so long and she had never once turned her savagery on him. Her irises were so dark you couldn’t see the pupils and so large you never saw the whites, but he was used to that as well. Even the bright yellow rims of her eyelids beneath her dark lashes didn’t bother him. It was just one of the things that made her different, and Gar liked different.

Gar was the only child in the village who’d ever been allowed to play with the wild girl. The rest of the mothers reckoned they’d done enough by not driving the strange creature back where she had come from. The truth was, they feared her, and they’d brought their children up to fear her too. They’d never got over the suspicion that she was somehow linked with the marsh, the marsh that had swallowed their river and was killing their village.

Rhodd and Gar had grown up as neighbours, always in and out of each other’s homes. Like Rhodd and her ma, Gar and his mother had been pushed to the edge of the village – to the most ramshackle cottages that nobody else wanted – because they were different. Because

Gar didn't have a pa. Or at least no pa who would admit to him. And his ma had never told him who his father was, not even whether he was dead or alive. She kept that secret close.

Rhodd and Gar could hear the shouts of the boys larking about in the street, pushing and shoving one another in trials of strength. But they were evenly matched, all of them. It was only a matter of time until they got bored and looked about for a smaller victim to pick on.

'Where's that teacher's pet snuck off to?' someone shouted. They resented Gar because he was smarter than any of them. He could even read, which most people in the village regarded as the nearest thing to witchcraft. None of the other boys bothered to pay attention to their lessons. They knew their parents cared as little as they did for learning.

'He'll be off with mud girl . . .'

Rhodd planted her feet firm, pulling courage up from the earth like a tree pulling water from its roots. Wary, alert. If she'd had whiskers, they would have been twitching. She knew Gar had risked a beating by coming to warn her – he could have just sneaked off home without checking she was safely gone. But the pair of them always stuck together. They always had.

The one-room schoolhouse was a square sandstone building at the opposite end of the long village street from Ma's cottage. It was the old customs house, but nobody used it for trade now because no ships came here any more. Since nobody needed it, the man who owned the village, Lord Stanley, had begrudgingly paid for an out-of-work schoolmaster who wanted to move in and run it as a school. But the villagers had no faith in learning – and they certainly wouldn't waste it on their daughters, who were kept home to do chores. They saw it just as a way of keeping the boys occupied and out from under their feet.

Immediately behind the schoolhouse rose steep sandstone cliffs that loomed over the whole length of the village. All the houses in this one-street village faced out over the marsh, with the cliffs at their backs. The only way home for Rhodd and Gar was down the high street. And past the gang.

Gar watched Rhodd's face. He knew she saw things he did not see. He recognised the almost imperceptible twitch about her yellow eyelids now, as she cast about for an escape.

Rhodd's focus had fallen on one of the mice that had benefited from her breakfast crumbs. She needed to borrow its eyes, to see what her enemies were doing.

I need a little favour, she asked the mouse.

Rhodd did not have to speak out loud – and in fact her conversations with creatures never took on the form of words in her mind, but rather mind-shapes that floated between them.

If you wouldn't mind . . . ?

The creatures of the village had long cradled and protected Rhodd, ever since she walked out of the wild. They were well used to helping her out of trouble. Besides, the mouse was an obliging creature, and it had enjoyed the crumbs. It nodded, and in a moment it was scurrying along the side of the schoolhouse, towards the boys.

Without question, the mouse allowed Rhodd to use its eyes, to see what it saw – and in that instant grass stalks became tree trunks and hummocks of soil became hills. Mouse nostrils snuffled in damp earth and mouse whiskers brushed against daisies and dandelions. Even after Rhodd had lost sight of the creature, she saw as the mouse saw and heard as the mouse heard.

At the front of the schoolhouse, the little animal hid under a large dock leaf to watch the boys. Four of them – giants to the mouse's eyes – had gathered in a gang around the three brothers. The Johnsons were always the ringleaders.

They smell of danger, the mouse told Rhodd.

'Where's Mister Clever-Clogs gone?' one of boys was saying.

'We'd have seen him if he'd headed home. He can't have gone far. He'll be with her . . .' Another of the boys nodded round the corner. 'Marsh girl hides back there . . . I has seen her skulking about . . . spying on us . . .'

Mouse ears twitched. Rhodd mused idly to herself that mice's ears were really much too big for their tiny bodies. They were like great saucepans fastened to their heads. But this was no time to waste on thoughts like that. She lifted her head and looked at Gar. 'They're coming.'

The boys' heavy boots crunched towards them, down the side of the schoolhouse. The mouse fled. Rhodd snatched up a dead branch, pronged with brittle branches.

'Run, Gar,' she whispered. 'Round the other side.'

'I ain't leaving you, Rhodd!'

They both knew it was too late to run anyway. And the boys would outrun them, even if they did.

'There you are, mud worm!'

The Johnson brothers stood at the front of the gang like three identical clothes pegs, in descending order of size. All barrel-chested, narrow-hipped, with little eyes gawping out of red cheeks, under mops of greasy black hair. The

Johnsons were the only family in the village well off enough to keep a pig, and they were living proof of the old saying that people always ended up looking like their animals. Although to Rhodd's certain knowledge pigs were a lot kinder than the Johnsons. And cleaner.

Rhodd's hands clutched into claws, holding her nails ready. Rage rose in a snarl and growled low in her throat until Gar nudged her. 'No, Rhodd – remember what your ma said.'

She sighed. Forced herself to find words. 'Idiots! Numbskulls! Clodpates! Nick-ninnies!' These were words Rhodd liked and collected. She could see the point of them. She could hurl them like weapons.

The largest of the brothers took a step closer. 'Marsh girl!' he yelled. His breath stank like bad fish.

'I'm not a—' Rhodd's retort was lost as a frog chose that moment to hop out of the pocket of her smock.

Startled, the boys took a step back.

Rhodd's vision flickered for a moment. Frog eyes saw nothing but sheer stone as it leaped towards the walls of the schoolhouse. Clammy frog skin sensed damp . . . water . . . safety.

Where are you going? she asked the frog.

Follow me . . .

The youngest Johnson brother, seeing something small and helpless, stuck out his foot to squash it beneath his boot.

'No! Don't . . .' Rhodd screamed and shrank away as if it was her own body that was about to be crushed. But then she felt a thrust of energy surge through her own body as the frog's powerful back legs propelled it towards the long grass at the bottom of the wall. The boy's foot stamped down on nothing.

Rhodd stood tall and laughed at the boys' baffled faces. The frog was gone.

Gar stared at Rhodd. He was as baffled as the rest of them.

'Down there, Gar. Follow the frog.' Brandishing her stick like a weapon at the eyes of the closest Johnson boy to keep him back, she shoved Gar down on to his knees behind her, towards the spot where the frog had disappeared.

Gar wriggled into the thick clump of grass at the bottom of the school wall. He was guessing at the way the frog had gone. A gap appeared in front of him. It was the opening to a rainwater drain – and it was just wide enough to crawl into.

'Go on,' Rhodd urged. She gave him a gentle kick of encouragement.

‘There’s nothing down there but . . .’

The gang gaped as Gar vanished, head first. Rhodd was already flat on her stomach wriggling backwards after him, still brandishing her stick at the boys like a sword.

Gar’s wail was swallowed in a splash from below.
‘. . . water!’