

1



enny Wilson wanted a baby of her own in the worst way. That's what I figure, because she was only supposed to watch me for an hour and a half, and obviously she loved me a little too much. She must have hummed a lullaby, fondled each tiny finger and toe, kissed my cheeks and stroked the down on my head, blowing on my hair like she was making a wish on a dandelion gone to seed. I had my teeth but I was too small to swallow the bones, so when my mother came home she found them in a pile on the living room carpet.

The last time my mother had looked at Penny Wilson she'd still had a face. I know Mama screamed, because anyone would have. When I was older she told me she thought my babysitter had been the victim of a satanic cult. She'd stumbled upon stranger things in suburbia.

It wasn't a cult. If it had been, they would have snatched me away and done unspeakable things to me. There I was, asleep on the floor beside the bone pile, tears still drying on my cheeks and blood wet around my mouth. I loathed myself even then. I don't remember any of this, but I know it.

Even when my mother noticed the gore down the front of my OshKosh overalls, even when she registered the blood on my face, she didn't *see* it. When she parted my lips and put her forefinger inside—mothers are the bravest creatures, and mine is the bravest of all—she found something hard between my gums. She pulled it out and peered at it. It was the hammer of Penny Wilson's eardrum.

Penny Wilson had lived in our apartment complex, across the courtyard. She'd lived alone and worked odd jobs, so no one would miss her for days. That was the first time we had to pick up and move in a hurry, and I often wonder if my mother had an inkling then how efficient she'd become. The last time we moved she packed us up in twelve minutes flat.

Not so long ago I asked her about Penny Wilson: *What did she look like? Where was she from? How old was she? Did she read a lot of books? Was she nice?* We were in the car, but not on the way to a new city. We never talked about what I'd done right after I'd done it.

"What do you want to know all this for, Maren?" she sighed, rubbing at her eyes with her thumb and forefinger.

“I just do.”

“She was blond. Long blond hair, and she always wore it loose. She was still young—younger than I was—but I don’t think she had many friends. She was very quiet.” Then Mama’s voice snagged on a memory she hadn’t wanted to find. “I remember how her face lit up when I asked if she could watch you that day.” She looked angry as she brushed the tears away with the back of her hand. “See? There’s no point thinking about these things when there’s nothing you can do to change any of it. What’s done is done.”

I thought for a minute. “Mama?”

“Yeah?”

“What did you do with the bones?”

She took so long to reply that I began to be afraid of the answer. There was, after all, a suitcase that always came with us that I had never seen her open. Finally she said, “There are some things I’m never going to tell you no matter how many times you ask.”

My mother was kind to me. She never said things like *what you did* or *what you are*.

Mama was gone. She’d gotten up while it was still dark, packed a few things, and left in the car. Mama didn’t love me anymore. How could I blame her if she never did?

Some mornings, once we’d been in a place long enough that we could begin to forget, she’d wake me up with that song from *Singin’ in the Rain*.

“Good morning, good moooooooooorning! We’ve talked the whole night through . . .”

Except she always sounded kind of sad as she sang it.

On May 30th, the day I turned sixteen, my mother came in singing. It was a Saturday, and we had planned a full day of fun. I hugged my pillow and asked, “Why do you always sing it like that?”

She flung the curtains wide open. I watched her close her eyes and smile against the sunshine. “Like what?”

“Like you would’ve rather gone to bed at a reasonable hour.”

She laughed, plopped herself down at the foot of my bed, and rubbed my knee through the duvet. “Happy birthday, Maren.” I hadn’t seen her that happy in a long time.

Over chocolate-chip pancakes I dipped my hand into a gift bag with one big book inside—*The Lord of the Rings*, three volumes in one—and a Barnes & Noble gift card. We spent most of the day at the bookstore. That night she took me out to an Italian restaurant, a *real* Italian restaurant, where the waiters and the chef all spoke to each other in the mother tongue, the walls were covered in old black-and-white family photographs, and the minestrone would keep you full for days.

It was dark in there, and I bet I’ll always remember how the light from the red glass votive holder flickered on Mama’s face as she raised the soup spoon to her lips. We talked about how things were going at school, how things were going at work. We talked about my going to

college: what I might like to study, what I might like to be. A soft square of tiramisu arrived with a candle stuck in it, and all the waiters sang to me, but in Italian: *Buon compleanno a te.*

Afterward she took me to see *Titanic* at the last-chance cinema, and for three hours I lost myself in the story the way I could in my favorite books. I was beautiful and brave, someone destined to love and to survive, to be happy and to remember. Real life held none of those things for me, but in the pleasant darkness of that shabby old theater I forgot it never would.

I tumbled into bed, exhausted and content, because in the morning I could feast on my leftovers and read my new book. But when I woke up the apartment was too still, and I couldn't smell the coffee. Something was wrong.

I came down the hall and found a note on the kitchen table:

I'm your mother and I love you but I can't do this anymore.

She couldn't be gone. She couldn't be. How could she?

I looked at my hands, palms up, palms down, like they didn't belong to me. Nothing else did: not the chair I sank into, not the table I laid my forehead on, not the window I stared through. Not even my own mother.

I didn't understand. I hadn't done the bad thing in

more than six months. Mama was all settled into her new job and we liked this apartment. None of this made sense.

I ran into her bedroom and found the sheets and comforter still on the bed. She'd left other things too. On the nightstand, paperback novels she'd already read. In the bathroom, almost-empty bottles of shampoo and hand lotion. A few blouses, the not-as-pretty ones, were still hanging in the closet on those cheap wire hangers you get at the dry cleaner's. We left stuff like this whenever we moved, but this time I was one of the things she'd left behind.

Trembling, I went back into the kitchen and read the note again. I don't know if you can read between the lines when there's only one sentence, but I could read all the things she hadn't said clearly enough:

I can't protect you anymore, Maren. Not when it's the rest of the world I should be protecting instead.

If you only knew how many times I thought about turning you in, having you locked up so you could never do it again . . .

If you only knew how I hate myself for bringing you into the world . . .

I did know. And I should have known when she took me out for my birthday, because it was too special not to have been the last thing we'd do together. That was how she'd planned it.

I'd only ever been a burden to her. A burden and a horror. All this time she'd done what she'd done because she was afraid of me.

I felt strange. There was a ringing in my ears like you get when it's too quiet, except it was like resting my head against a church bell that had just chimed.

Then I noticed something else on the table: a thick white envelope. I didn't have to open it to know there was money inside. My stomach turned over. I got up and stumbled out of the kitchen.

I went to her bed, burrowed under the comforter, and curled up as tight as I could. I didn't know what else to do. I wanted to sleep this off, to wake up and find it undone, but you know how it is when you desperately want to get back to sleep. When you desperately want *anything*.

The rest of the day passed in a daze. I never cracked *The Lord of the Rings*. I didn't read a thing besides the words in that note. Later on I got up again and wandered around the house, too sick even to think of eating anything, and when it got dark I went to bed and lay awake for hours. I didn't want to be alive. What kind of life could I have?

I couldn't sleep in an empty apartment. I couldn't cry either, because she hadn't left me anything to cry over. If she loved it, she took it with her.

Penny Wilson was my first and last babysitter. From then on my mother kept me in daycare, where the employees were overwhelmed and underpaid and there was never any danger of anyone taking a shine to me.

Nothing happened for years. I was a model child,

quiet and sober and eager to learn, and over time my mother convinced herself I hadn't done that horrible thing. Memories distort themselves, turning over into truths that are easier to live with. It *had* been a satanic cult. They'd murdered my babysitter, bathed me in blood, and given me an eardrum to chew on. It wasn't my fault—it wasn't me. I wasn't a monster.

So when I was eight Mama sent me to summer camp. It was one of those places where the boys and the girls live in cabins on opposite sides of a lake. We sat apart in the dining hall too, and we were hardly ever allowed to play together. During arts-and-crafts hour the girls wove key chains and friendship bracelets, and later we learned how to gather kindling and build a campfire, though we never actually got to have one after dark. We slept in bunk beds, eight girls to a cabin, and every night before bed our counselor would check our heads for ticks.

We swam in the lake every morning, even on cloudy days when the water was cold and murky. The other girls only waded in up to their waists and stood listlessly in the shallows, waiting for the sound of the lunch bell.

But I was a good swimmer. I felt alive in the cold dark water. Some nights I even fell asleep in my bathing suit. One morning I decided to swim all the way across the lake to the boys' side just to say I'd done it. So I swam and swam, reveling in the feeling of my limbs cutting through the bracing water, only dimly aware of the life-guard whistling for me to turn back.

I paused to check my progress, and that's when I saw

him. He must've had the same idea about reaching the girls' side. "Hi," he called.

"Hi," I said.

We stopped there, treading water maybe fifteen feet apart, just looking at each other. The clouds seethed overhead. The rain would start any second. On both sides the lifeguards whistled frantically. We swam a bit closer, close enough to reach out and touch fingertips. He had bright red hair and more freckles than anyone I'd ever seen, boy or girl—so freckled you could hardly see any paleness underneath. He flashed me a conspiratorial grin, as if we already knew each other and had arranged to meet here, at the dead center of a lake no one else wanted to swim in.

I glanced over my shoulder. "I think we're in trouble."

"Not if we stay here forever," he said.

I smiled. "I'm not that good a swimmer."

"I'll show you how to stay up for hours. All you have to do is rest easy and let your brain float. See?" He leaned back and let his ears sink beneath the surface. All I could see was his face in the water, turned up toward the sky where the sun should have been.

"You never get tired?" I said, louder so he could hear me.

The boy came up and shook the water out of his ears. "Nope."

So I tried it. We were close now, close enough that he reached out and touched my hand. I bobbed up again

and laughed as I drummed my fingertips up and down his arm. “I know,” he said. “I’m awfully frecksy.”

The lifeguards on either side of the lake went on blowing—I could hear the whistles even when I let my ears go beneath the surface—but we knew they wouldn’t jump in and drag us back. Not even the lifeguards wanted to swim in that water.

I have no idea how long we stayed that way, but I guess it couldn’t have been as long as I remember. If this were anyone’s story but mine, it would have been the first time I met my childhood sweetheart.

His name was Luke, and over the next few days he found ways of reaching me. Twice he left a note on my pillow, and one day after lunch he led me around the back of the rec hall with a shoebox under his arm. Once we’d found a sheltered place he took off the lid and showed me a collection of cicada shells. “I find them in the bushes,” he said, like it was some great secret. “It’s the exoskeleton. They shed ’em once in a lifetime. Isn’t that cool?” He plucked one of the shells out of the box and put it in his mouth.

“They’re pretty tasty,” he said as he munched. “Why are you making a gross-out face?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Don’t be such a girl.” He took out a second shell. “Here, try one.” *Crunch, crunch.* “I gotta grab a salt shaker at dinner, they’ll be even tastier with some salt.”

He put the shell in my palm and I looked at it. Something flickered then, in a dark corner of my mind: I knew about things that weren't meant to be eaten.

Then the whistle blew for afternoon roll call. I dropped the locust shell in the shoebox and ran away.

That night I found a third note under my pillow. He'd written the first two like he was introducing himself to a new pen pal: *My name is Luke Vanderwall, I'm from Springfield, Delaware + I have 2 little sisters, this is my 3rd summer at Camp Ameeewagan + it's my favorite time of the whole year. I'm glad you're here. Now I'll have somebody to swim with even if we have to break the rules to do it. . . .*

This one was short. *Meet me outside at 11 o'clock, it said, + together we will go 4th + have many adventures.*

That night I had my bathing suit on under my pajamas. I lay in bed until I heard everyone breathing evenly, and then I unlatched the screen door and slipped out of the cabin. He was already there, standing just beyond the arc of the porch light. I tiptoed down to meet him and he took my hand and tugged me into the dark. "Come on," he whispered.

"I can't." *I shouldn't.*

"'Course you can. Come on! I want to show you something." Hand in hand, we stumbled past the rec hall back to the boys' camp. After a few minutes I could see the cabins through the trees, but then he drew me away from them, deeper into the darkness.

The woods were alive in a way I'd never noticed in the daytime. The slip of an old moon hung above the

trees, giving us just enough light to see by, and fireflies hovered all around, flashing their green-gold lights. I wondered what they were saying to each other. There was a night breeze, so cool and fresh that I imagined it was the pines sighing out the good clean air, and the forest hummed with an invisible orchestra of cicadas and owls and bullfrogs.

A whiff of woodsmoke tickled my nose. Outside Amee-wagan, but not far off, someone was having a campfire. “I could sure go for a hot dog,” Luke said wistfully. A moment later I saw a glimmer of something ahead, but as we came closer I could see it wasn’t a fire.

There was a red tent in the woods, all lit up from within. It wasn’t a real tent—the kind with retractable metal rods and a zipper that you could buy in a store—which made it seem all the more mysterious. He’d found a red tarpaulin and cast it over a length of clothesline strung between two trees. For a moment or two I stood there admiring it. From here I could pretend it was a magic tent that I could step inside and find myself in the thick of a Moroccan bazaar.

“You made this?”

“Yeah,” he said. “For you.”

This is the first time I can remember feeling it. Standing next to Luke in the darkness, I breathed in the warm night air and found I could smell him down to the lint between his toes. He still had the stink of the lake on him, dank and rotten-eggy. He hadn’t brushed his teeth after dinner, and I could smell the chili powder from the sloppy joes every time he breathed.

It trickled over me then, making me shudder: the hunger, and the certainty. I didn't know anything about Penny Wilson. I just had a feeling I had done something horrible when I was little and that I was on the verge of repeating it. The tent wasn't magic, but I knew one of us wasn't coming out again.

"I have to go back," I said.

"Don't be a wimp! Nobody's going to find us. Everyone's asleep. Don't you want to play with me?"

"I do," I whispered. "But . . ."

He took my hand and led me under the flap.

For a makeshift hideaway, it was pretty well stocked: two cans of Sprite, a package of Fig Newtons and a bag of Doritos, a blue sleeping bag, his shoebox of locust shells, an electric lantern, a Choose Your Own Adventure novel, and a deck of cards. Luke sat cross-legged and pulled a pillow out of his sleeping bag. "I thought we could spend the night here. I cleared out all the sticks. The ground's still hard, but I figure it's good wilderness survival training. When I grow up I'm going to be a forest ranger. You know what a forest ranger is?" I shook my head. "They patrol the forests and make sure no one's cutting down trees or shooting animals or doing other bad stuff. So that's what I'm gonna do."

I picked up the Choose Your Own Adventure: *Escape from Utopia*. On the cover were two kids lost in a jungle, the ground crumbling into an abyss beneath their feet. *Choose from 13 different endings! Your choice may lead to success or disaster!*

Disaster. I had a feeling.

“Sprite?” He popped open a can and handed it to me. “Here, have a Fig Newton.” He took one for himself and nibbled around the edges. “But before I become a forest ranger I’m gonna do triathlons.”

“What’s triathlons?”

“That’s when you run a hundred miles, bike a hundred miles, and swim a hundred miles, all in one day.”

“That’s crazy,” I said. “Nobody can swim a hundred miles.”

“How do you know? Did you ever try?”

I laughed. “Of course not.”

“Well, now you know how to float forever. That’s a good start. I can float forever but I’ve got to be able to swim forever too. So I’m going to train and train, for as long as it takes, until I can. And then I’m gonna ride my horse across the Rockies and fight forest fires and live in a tree house I built myself. It’s going to have two stories, like a real house, except you’ll climb up to it with a rope ladder and come down again on a sliding pole.” He frowned as something occurred to him. “The sliding pole will have to be made of metal though, so I don’t get splinters.”

“How are you going to eat? You have to have a kitchen, but then you might burn your house down.”

“Oh, I’ll have a wife to cook for me. I just don’t know yet if the kitchen will be on the ground or up in the tree.”

“Will your wife have her own tree house?”

“I don’t think she’ll need her own house, but she can

have her own room on another branch if she wants it. Maybe she'll be an artist or something."

"That sounds nice," I said sadly.

"What is it? I thought you liked being outside."

"I do."

"I thought this would make you happy."

"It does. But you're going to get in trouble if you don't go back to your cabin."

"Oh, I don't mind wiping tables in the mess hall tomorrow," he said with a careless wave of his hand. "This is worth it."

Tomorrow. The word sounded strange, like it didn't mean anything anymore. "That's not what I meant."

"You can worry about it in the morning. Sit down next to me and we'll play some old maid before we go to sleep."

I sat down beside him and he picked up the deck of cards. We began to play. He held up his cards, and I picked one (the old maid, sure enough). I stuck it into my hand and offered it to him, and he shook his head and told me to shuffle. I couldn't think about the game. I just kept smelling the chili powder and the rotten eggs and the cotton lint. His eagerness, his spirit, his thirst for the outdoors: all that had a smell too, like wet leaves, and salty skin, and hot cocoa in a tin cup that knew the shape of his hands.

"I don't want to play anymore," I whispered. *He won't grow up. He'll never be a forest ranger. He'll never ride another horse. He won't fight forest fires. He'll never live in a tree house.*

Luke dropped his cards and took both my hands. “Don’t go, Maren. I want you to stay.”

I didn’t want to. I really, really wanted to. I leaned in and sniffed him. Chili powder—rotten eggs—cotton lint. I pressed my lips to his throat and felt him stiffen with anticipation. He put a hand to my ponytail and stroked it, like he was petting a horse. He breathed on me, I smelled the chili, and just like that there was no going back.

I stumbled out of the red tent toward the lake, out to the edge of the dock, and flung the grocery bag into the water. Then I pulled off my pajamas and threw them out as far as I could. I watched my *Little Mermaid* T-shirt sink below the surface of the lake, heard the plastic bag gurgling as it filled.

I fell onto the dock, rocking back and forth with my hands clamped over my mouth to keep the scream in, but it pounded against my face until I felt like my eyeballs were going to pop out. Finally I couldn’t hold it in anymore, so I lay down on the boards, dunked my head, and let it out until the water came up and burned my nose.

It was only as I walked back up the path through the pine trees—wet, cold, and shivering on the outside, horribly warm and full underneath—that I thought of my mother. *Oh, Mama. You won’t love me anymore once you hear what I’ve done.*

I crept back into my cabin as quietly as I could and put my spare pajamas on over my bathing suit. If anyone asked I'd say I'd only gone to the bathroom. I lay in bed shivering, curled up tight as if I could keep the world out. I wanted to be a cicada. I wanted to pull my skin off and leave it in the bushes and nobody would recognize me, not even my own mother. I would be a completely different person and I wouldn't remember a thing.

In the morning it was raining, and my fingernails were rimmed in red. I put on my poncho, hid my hands, and ran to the bathroom. I scrubbed and scrubbed under the faucet, and even then I could still see it. Somebody came out of the stalls to wash her hands and gave me a funny look. My nails were as clean as they were going to get.

I followed the other girls to the mess hall, so numb I couldn't feel the ground beneath my feet. I stood in line at the buffet counter. I took a waffle, but I couldn't taste it. The camp director stood up in front of us and switched on his microphone. "We are very sorry to have to tell you that one of your campmates is missing. For your safety we have notified your parents, and all of you will be picked up this afternoon. In the meantime you will finish breakfast and return to your cabins. No one will be allowed anywhere else on the campsite until their parents arrive."

We filed out of the mess hall and found vans from the

local news stations in the parking lot. The camp director wouldn't speak to the reporters.

The girls in my cabin huddled around the picnic table at the center of the room. "I heard the director talking outside the bathroom," somebody whispered. "They think Luke was murdered."

The others gasped. "Why would they think that? Who did it?"

"Girls," our counselor cut in from across the room. She was standing with her arms folded at the screen door, watching the rain turn to mud in the walkway between the trees. "I don't want to hear any more of that talk. That's enough, now." She'd been fun before, always willing to braid our hair or go in on a game of go fish. It was my fault she wasn't smiling anymore—my fault Luke was gone—my fault everyone had to go home. I lay on my bed facing the window, pretending to read.

The storm rages on, the water rising to your waist in a river of mud. You wander through the jungle for days, unable to find a dry place to sleep. Exhausted, you close your eyes and slip beneath the surface, and the current washes you away.

THE END.

I closed the book with a heavy sigh. *I wish.*

"He said Luke was out in the woods by himself last night," the first girl continued, quieter this time. "They found his sleeping bag and it had blood all over it."

"I said *that's enough.*"

No one spoke again. The others started new friendship bracelets while I lay in the corner wishing I could disappear. After an hour the first parents came, and the girls went out with their duffel bags one by one.

My mother arrived, pale and silent, and led me out to the parking lot. Other parents stood in groups, arms crossed or nervously jingling their key chains. They whispered among themselves, but I could hear some of what they said.

“ . . . ran wild . . . had no business being out in the woods . . . no discipline in this camp whatsoever . . . That director’s got his thumb up his ass all right. . . . I’m just thankful my Betsy is better behaved. . . . They say it definitely wasn’t a bear. . . . The sleeping bag was positively drenched in blood; they say there’s no way he’s alive. . . . Suppose they’ll be dredging the lake. . . . I hear they’re interviewing everybody within a ten-mile radius—they think it must be someone who lives nearby. . . . ”

Where were *his* parents? If they showed up before Mama could take me away, would they look at me and know I’d done it? I dropped her hand and ran back to the cabin.

Everyone had gone, and all the bedsheets lay in a pile on the floorboards. I stumbled to my bunk in the corner and fell onto the bare mattress, burying my face in the lumpy old pillow. My mother came in and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Maren,” she murmured. “Maren, look at me.”

I lifted my face from the pillow, but I couldn’t bring myself to look her in the eye.