

“This book will devour you.” —Robin Wasserman,
author of *The Waking Dark* and the *Cold Awakening* series

SOON TO
BE A MAJOR
MOTION
PICTURE



a novel

bones & all

Camille DeAngelis



BONES
and **ALL**



CAMILLE
DeANGELIS



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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 freckly.”

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 Ameewagan + 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.

“Look at me.”

I looked at her. She was eerily calm for a person who knew her daughter had eaten somebody. “Tell me it isn’t true,” she said.

Again I hid my face. “I can’t.”

She had to carry me out to the car. *Poor girl*, the parents said. *She’s taking it awfully hard.*

Mama wanted to leave right away. Camp Ameewagan was a three-hour drive, but the director had our address on file, and if they found out I’d been with Luke that night they could trace us back. Calmly she explained all this to me and said I’d have to gather my things as quickly as I was able.

“We’re just going to leave?”

Pulling some slack on the seatbelt, I leaned forward and rested my chin on the front seat. I watched the wipers squeak across the windshield and the asphalt vanish in a blur under the hood of the car until my eyes milked over. I felt strange. Going to third grade at a different school?

“I don’t know what else to do.”

“You said I should always tell the truth.”

She sighed. “I did, and you should. But I’ve thought about this, Maren. We can’t tell anybody. No one will believe it.”

“But if I tell them about Luke, and you tell them about Penny . . .”

“It isn’t that simple. Sometimes people confess to a murder they didn’t commit.”

“Why would they do that?”

“For the attention, I guess.”

We drove on in silence, but Mama’s words hung in the air: a murder, and I had committed it. That made me a murderer. I thought of Luke and his horse and his tree house and his hundred-mile swim. I tried not to think of his fingers or the sloppy joe or how his blood was warm and tasted like old pennies.

There was a cicada in my ear. It wriggled out of its shell and sat humming behind my right eye. I slumped in the seat and leaned my forehead against the window, but that only made the humming worse.

I’m frecksy. Don’t be such a girl. I gotta learn how to swim forever.

My ear began to hurt, but I told myself it was nothing compared to what he felt. “But you said nobody ever really gets away with anything,” I mumbled.

For a minute or two she didn’t reply, and I thought maybe she wasn’t going to. “Someday you’ll have to answer for this,” she said, her eyes on the road. “Someday someone will believe you.”

I’d much rather answer for it now, I thought. I rubbed at my ear. *Take me away, piece by piece. My life for his.*

Mama looked at me through the rearview mirror. “What’s wrong?”

“My ear hurts.”

By the time we pulled into the driveway the ache had

all but eclipsed the horror of the night before. I could hear her muttering as she pulled me out of the car—“I *knew* that lake was polluted. . . . I don’t suppose they ever gave you ear drops after swimming. . . . I never should have let you go to that stupid camp. . . .”—but she sounded strange, like she was miles underwater. She put me to bed and shook a couple of Tylenol out of a bottle.

That night a man knelt by my bed and jabbed me through the eardrum with a knife so sharp it was invisible. Of course, I couldn’t see the man either, but I knew he was there, sticking me in time to the beating of my heart. *Knife, twist, knife, twist*. I dreamed he showed me my eardrum, stuck on the tip of his blade, and pressed it to my lips. His fingers were long and bony, and his breath was cold. Mama had left the light on in the hallway, but I couldn’t see his face. Maybe he didn’t have one.

I turned over, and a shadow fell across the doorway. “Maren?” My mother darted to the bed and put her finger in my mouth, just like when I was a baby. “What is it? What are you chewing?”

My eardrum.

She dropped to her knees, laid her cheek on the bed, and began to cry. *She sees him*, I thought. *She knows who it is, but she can’t make him go away.*

In the morning I heard her phone the temp agency and tell them she wouldn’t be able to finish her assignment. Then she came in with a glass of ginger ale, stirring out the bubbles with a tablespoon. “I know he’s punishing me,” I said.

She looked at me curiously. “Who is?”

“God.”

“Maren . . .” Mama sat on the edge of my bed, closed her eyes, and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “There isn’t any God.”

“How do you know?”

“Nobody knows. But I think it’s pretty safe to say God is something people invented to make sense of their lives. So there’s somebody to blame when terrible things happen.”

The words she stopped short of saying hung in the air once she’d left me alone. *If there is no God, our lives make sense.*

I didn’t eat for days. I didn’t drink the ginger ale, and I pressed my lips tight when she tried to give me an antibiotic. Spots swam across my vision, my lips shriveled and cracked, and there was a desert in my mouth, but I didn’t care. The pain in my ear had eased into a dull throb. I could hardly hear my mother when she begged me to drink.

“You’re so dehydrated.” She took me by the shoulders and tried to make me sit up, but I was a lead weight. “If you keep this up, I’ll have to take you to the hospital.”

I didn’t listen. I didn’t move. Soon enough I closed my eyes and everything fell away.

When I woke up I was in the pediatric ward. Mama was sitting in a chair beside my bed, nibbling on her thumbnail and staring at nothing, a dog-eared paperback splayed

across her knee. A nurse hovered at my other side, smiling vaguely as she fiddled with the needle stuck into the inside of my elbow. "It's all right," the woman murmured, smoothing my hair back from my face as if she knew me. "You're going to be all right now."

Mama put the paperback on the windowsill and leaned in as the nurse moved to the far side of the room to fill a little paper cup from the faucet. She took my hand, but she didn't say anything. Mama wouldn't try to comfort me with things that weren't true.

"Why did you bring me here?" Even after what I'd done, she wanted me to live.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I had to."

"Because you love me?"

She hesitated so briefly that no one else would have noticed it. "Of course," she said, and let go of my hand as the nurse came back with the cup of water.

"You must be awfully thirsty," chirped the nurse.

Later that day a woman who was not a nurse appeared in the doorway and asked to speak with my mother. They went down the hall together and were gone for a long time.

The nurse came in again with a new IV bag. "Well! I'm glad to see you've got some color back in your cheeks. Now that you're awake, we can give you some real food. How about a hamburger for dinner? Jell-O or ice cream for dessert?" She hit the foot pedal on the medical waste bin and tossed the empty IV bag. "Or maybe Jell-O *and* ice cream?" She flashed me another smile, *our little secret*. "Tomorrow, as long as you start eating and drinking again, we'll take you off the IV. You're a lucky girl, Maren."

There was nothing lucky about it. A strange woman called me by name in a place full of odd smells, brisk voices, and mechanical ticks and beeps. My name in her mouth made me cringe. “I want my mother,” I said. “Who was that woman who went with my mother?”

“She’s a social worker. She wants to work together with your mom so that you can get well.”

A lie, of course. I just looked at her until she averted her eyes and hurried out of the room.

After maybe an hour Mama came back. She looked really, really tired. “What did she want?” I asked.

“She thought I wasn’t feeding you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth—the better part of it, anyway. I said you were upset because you had a friend at summer camp who’d been . . .” She sighed. “I had to give her the details, otherwise she wouldn’t have believed me.” She pressed her thumb and forefinger together. “You came *this close* to going into foster care.”

I stared at her, amazed. I could have been somebody else’s problem.

“Please, just eat and drink everything they bring you so we can get out of here, all right?”

Early the next day, before Mama arrived, the social worker came back with her clipboard. She shook my hand, told me her name was Donna, and asked me questions about Mama and what our life was like. I told her Mama had always taken good care of me, that I always had plenty to eat, and Donna watched me as I prodded my scrambled eggs with a plastic fork. Finally she ran out of

questions and left me alone. She'd never asked about summer camp.

I was discharged the next day. Mama put her arm around me as we walked out to the car, and when we got there I saw one side of the backseat filled to the ceiling with garbage bags and cardboard boxes. There were more bags in the front passenger's seat and, no doubt, plenty more in the trunk. While I was eating Jell-O out of a plastic cup, she'd been stuffing our car with as much of our lives as would fit.

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

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