Elinor FLORENCE

WILDWOOD, CHAPTER ONE

I turned my back for a minute, and she was gone.

Of course, mothers always say that when their children are missing.

How many times had I seen weeping parents on television, assuring the world that they hadn't been careless? How many times had I assumed they were lying?

But not in this case. Bridget had been within my reach — if not a minute ago, then definitely not more than five minutes.

I saw her through the open door, sitting on the back steps playing with her kitten Fizzy, just before I opened the oven in the old cookstove, pulled out an unappetizing tuna casserole, and set it on the counter.

When I turned around, she wasn't there.

At the time I wasn't worried, not in the least. It never crossed my mind that she would leave the sanctity of the steps. I walked to the open doorway. "Bridget, come inside for supper!"

Although we had been here for a month, I still felt a sense of wonder at seeing the wild, majestic landscape that surrounded us. The sun was high on this northern summer evening, shedding its molten radiance on the overgrown yard, the long grass mingled with brightly coloured weeds and wildflowers, the cool air fresh with the scent of resin.

Stepping back inside, I pumped two glasses of icy well water using the green hand pump over the enamel sink, and set them on the table before calling again. "Bridget!"

Had she slipped back inside without my noticing? I stopped and listened, but the old house was silent. There was no sound but the call of an unseen songbird from the windbreak at the edge of the yard.

She must be in the toilet. I went down the path and around the corner of the barn to the biffy, built of small vertical logs, now grey and weathered, flanked by a couple of huge lilacs. The toilet door hung lopsidedly on leather hinges.

She wasn't there.

"Yoo-hoo! Bridget, where are you?" I walked over to the log barn, its double doors fastened shut with a piece of bone like a skeleton's finger. The catch was too high for a four-year-old to reach, so I didn't open them.

Beside the barn was an old log cabin, my great-aunt's first home. I poked my head inside. The squirrels had been busy in here and there was a pile of leaves and twigs in one corner, but the cabin was empty.

"Bridget, come out right now! If you're joking, it isn't funny!"

That's when I felt the first flicker of fear.

Surely, she wouldn't have gone down to the creek by herself.

I dashed across the back yard and through the knee-high grass toward the creek. The poplars, their green leaves already tinged with gold, shook their branches in the breeze as if they were trying to frighten me away.

In contrast, the creek moved slowly and dreamily through the fragrant silver willows and bullrushes lining the banks. Along both sides, ferns leaned into the flowing water, as if their hair were streaming out behind them.

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"Bridget!" My voice was rising now, matched by the mounting panic in my chest.

The creek made a lazy curve before it widened into a large pond. At the far end was a beaver dam, a small fortress of branches and mud as high as my head. The pond looked like a dark blue mirror lying in the green grass, a few fluffy cloud reflections floating on the still surface.

There was no sign of her.

Running back to the house, I reassured myself that I would find her waiting inside. I sprang through the back door, but the kitchen was empty. The cooling casserole looked less appealing than ever.

I flew up the stairs to the second floor. She wasn't in the front bedroom where we slept, nor was she hiding in any of the unused rooms. I could tell by looking at the layer of dust on the staircase leading to the third floor attic that she hadn't been there.

She must be outside, but where? I vaulted down the stairs again, through the kitchen and out the back door.

"What's the matter?" Wynona's low voice startled me. I whirled to find our new friend from the nearby reserve standing beside the steps.

"Wynona! Did you see Bridget when you came down the driveway?"

She shook her head silently.

I moaned aloud, turning in all directions as I tried to decide where to look next. "I can't find her! She's disappeared!"

Wynona's face was impassive. "I can help you look."

"I don't know where to start! She never leaves the yard, she hardly lets me out of her sight!"

"Did you check the other buildings?"

"Yes. She isn't even big enough to open the barn doors!"

"Maybe she fell asleep in the grass." She pointed to the wild overgrown garden. "You look over there, and I'll walk around behind the barn."

Although Wynona was only twelve years old, I felt slightly comforted. Why hadn't I thought of that? Bridget was probably tired from playing outside in the fresh air all day. It wasn't very long since she had stopped taking her afternoon nap. Surely it was only yesterday that she had been a tiny baby in my arms!

I waded through the jungly garden area, and looked under the row of poplar and spruce trees that marked the eastern edge of the yard. There were flattened patches of grass below the trees where the deer often slept, but these were empty.

Running to the opening in the windbreak, I took another look down the long driveway that divided the grain field. The wheat had been cut down on both sides, leaving nothing behind but ankle-high golden stubble. There was nowhere to hide.

Now I felt a spurt of anger. If she were playing a trick on me, I swore that I would punish her for the very first time in her short life for giving me such an awful scare.

As I ran back toward the house, I heard a faint call. "Over here!"

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Wynona had found her! I tore around the side of the barn, my knees weak with relief, but I didn't see my precious daughter. Wynona was standing at the western edge of the yard beside a row of old wooden granaries, their red paint peeling and faded.

As I came panting up to her, she pointed at the wall of forest behind them.

"I think she went into the bush."

The only forest I had ever seen — the sparse ponderosa pines of northern Arizona — was quite different from this dense boreal forest. The leafy poplars with their gleaming narrow white trunks grew as straight as power poles while they fought for elbow room with the tall, pointed spruce trees. Woven in and around them was a tangled mass of underbrush, forming a thick stockade.

I stared at it, shaking my head in denial. There was no way that my timid daughter would venture into such a forbidding place.

"What makes you think so?"

Wynona didn't speak, she simply gestured. There was a slight track through the tall grass leading toward the trees, no more than a disturbance, as if a small animal had moved through it recently.

Or a small child.