

### Chapter 3

For a little over an hour at Caffè Ladro, I listened as Ryan told me the story of her senior year and its shocking end. What for most people would be a sad story to tell, she told with exasperated good humor. Just before the end of classes, about two weeks ago, Tony invited her over to his apartment for dinner. She had known something was up, but couldn't (or wouldn't) guess what it might be. He had been "distant" for the past month or so, and he had only ever cooked dinner for her once before, the night he proposed. (The irony of this was probably lost on him, but not on Ryan.)

She'd shown up for dinner "wearing a slinky black dress," and found Tony wearing jeans and a T-shirt. After a dinner of roast chicken (dry), potatoes (undercooked), and bagged salad (ranch dressing), a dinner whose conversation started and stopped, started and stopped, Ryan finally said, "What's the matter, Babe?"

At this point in her account, Ryan paused for effect, sitting straight up in her chair and smirking. Then she said, "Seminary."

"Huh?" I said, my mouth full of pastry.

"He wants to be a priest."

"Seriously?"

She nodded, her eyebrows raised, lips pressed together, an expression that said, "Afraid so."

"Holy shit," I said, spraying crumbs. "So it's off?"

Again she nodded

"So what are you going to do?"

“I’m still going back to school. Just—you know, *not with Tony.*”

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She drove me back to my house. The rain had stopped. Two rental cars on the street and my BMW and Dad’s Subaru in the driveway confirmed that everyone was at home. Walking in front of the house, I peeked into the kitchen window to see if anyone was there. It was empty. I looked back at Ryan’s car at the end of the driveway, and she was cracking up, pounding on the steering wheel. I waved, walked into the garage, and eased open the back door.

Inside, I didn’t hear any voices. I slowly pulled the door shut, wincing at the scratch of the weather stripping. I literally tiptoed through the kitchen, though I felt like a fool doing it. Through the kitchen door was the living room and the stairs to the second floor. No one was there, so I made for the stairs. Three up, a board squeaked.

“Is that Mark?” It was my father. He came into the living room from the direction of the TV room. “Come say hi to your grandparents.”

In a low voice, I said, “I thought they were coming Wednesday.”

Quentin said, “Things got done...early,” and shrugged.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Now he shoed me back into the kitchen so we could talk at a normal volume. “The police—they said it’s ‘open-and-shut.’” He made quote marks with his fingers.

“And?”

“Can we talk about this *later?*”

“*No.*”

Now he whispered again, “*Murder-suicide.*”

“Seriously? Holy shit.”

“That’s it.”

“That’s it?”

He nodded.

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Meeting my grandparents for the first time was far less eventful than I had expected. They’d been divorced for over twenty years, but in their old age they shared the room easily. Grandpa Charlie was a brittle, stooped old guy with an oxygen tube in his nose for his emphysema. He wore pleated khakis and a long-sleeved plaid button-down. The clothes looked expensive. He was a sharp-eyed Bostonian, though, with a booming, aristocratic voice. “Marcus,” he said, gripping my hand in the manliest handshake I’d ever felt: firm, full-handed, powerful. “Good to meet, son.”

“You , too, sir,” I said.

Grandma Jo stood up smiling ear-to-ear. She was tall and thin, wearing a white cotton sleeveless knee-length dress with a blue ribbon around her still-shapely waist, and her hair was pulled back in a painful-looking silver bun. She almost danced over to me and gave me a big hug. “Oh,” she said, “It’s been so long!” She held me at arm’s length and looked me up and down. “I remember you when you were just this big,” she said, holding her hands about eight inches apart.

We all sat down on my father’s leather furniture, my grandparents each choosing one of the club chairs on opposite sides of the oak-paneled room. Dad and Laura sat on the couch between them, and I plopped down into the loveseat adjacent to the couch. The furniture made a sort of misshaped “L” facing Dad’s forty-eight-inch projection TV. A golf game was on with the sound turned off.

“So!” said my grandmother, her voice full of high spirits. “Your father tells us you’re going to France this summer. Isn’t that *wonderful!*” She was beaming at me. I think she was on anti-depressants.

“That was the plan,” I said. “Now I’m not sure, though, you know?”

“Oh,” said my grandmother, and she started to say something else but didn’t. A confused look passed over her face, and my father shot me a glare that would kill a flock of doves.

“I probably, will, Grandma. This is just a tough time.”

Her face immediately brightened again. My grandfather began to snore. He’d turned off the oxygen. The rest of us sat in the relative quiet and watched the golf game. I found it to be an exceedingly pleasant way to spend the afternoon. Tiger Woods was in the lead at five under par. Watching it like this, without the incessant whispering chatter of the commentators, gave me a new appreciation for televised golf: it really was extraordinary what these men were capable of. Before long, Dad and Laura had fallen asleep, too, with their heads cocked toward each other on the couch and their feet on the coffee table. Laura was not tall like Marianne and her mother. She was what you’d call petite, the sort of woman most other women today can’t stand. She had straight blonde hair that hung to the middle of her back and east coast, District of Columbia good looks, long neck, high cheekbones, angular jaw line. She wore a white and baby blue sleeveless shirt that showed off her Pilates-toned arms and white Capri pants. By the time Tiger had birdied the seventeenth hole, Laura’s head had slid down onto my father’s shoulder. I didn’t like the look of them sitting there like that. It struck me as some mild form of incest. Kissing cousins, or something. My grandmother was still awake, doing the crossword from the newspaper. I noticed she did it in ink and kept smiling when she would figure out an answer.

The rhythmic breathing of the three sleepers was making me drowsy, so before I, too, nodded off, I stood up, waving to my grandmother when she looked up at me with her eyebrows raised, walked up to my room, and climbed into bed.

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Wednesday. When I woke up, it was past midnight. Suddenly wide awake, I decided to go downstairs for a bottle of wine. What I had in mind was a syrah from the short-term stock in the kitchen in the glass-fronted stainless steel multi-zone chiller. Stepping into the kitchen, though, I found Laura sitting at the small kitchen table beneath a single low light. She had pulled her hair back and tied it in a loose knot. She wore reading glasses and held what I supposed was a film script in her left hand. In her right hand was a lit cigarette. She had the look of a studious, pleasantly exhausted schoolteacher. In front of her on the table was a bottle of Bordeaux from the cellar and a half-empty glass.

“How is it?”

She jumped, looked at me, and sat back in her chair. “Shit,” she said. She put the hand with the cigarette on her chest. “You scared me.”

“Sorry,” I said, frowning. “Didn’t mean to. How is it, though?”

“What?” she said, looking around.

“The wine,” I said in a tired, emotionless voice.

“Oh,” she said, relieved. “I thought you meant the script, which needs a lot of work. But the wine’s good. It’s fine.” Then she turned back to her script, and I grabbed the bottle and held it up to the light. There was enough for another glass, so I took a glass down from where Dad’s large collection of varietal-specific crystal hung over the chiller.

I don't know what exactly I must have looked like to her at that moment, although she was doing a pretty good job of ignoring me. My lean frame often looks frail and sickly when I'm tired, as I've mentioned, and I was exhausted during those days, no matter how much I slept. My hair must have been matted from the pillow. I was wearing my glasses instead of contacts. I hadn't showered since the morning after she'd arrived.

I sat down across the table from her and sipped the wine. It was perfect, exactly what you'd expect from decades-old Bordeaux. I'm not going to pretend to remember all the details of the wine, its tastes and colors and smells. But I remember thinking it was too good to be drunk by two sad people at almost one in the morning. Or maybe it was just the thing.

Laura glanced up at me but said nothing and went back to her reading as if I weren't there. Laura is a documentary filmmaker, a director. You've probably seen her work without knowing it on PBS, the Discovery Channel, or HBO. She's had a couple films make it into art house theaters. The one that comes to mind is *Searching for Van Gogh*, a collection of interviews and relic home video footage. It's the story of a painter named Dale Foyerhan, who lived in Duluth, Minnesota, and who could easily be played by Steve Buscemi in a biopic. He worked as a night security guard and painted during his off-hours and on weekends. He had no true friends. People in town knew him simply as Dale and interacted with him only as he ran errands during the late afternoon hours before his shift started. The postal workers knew him especially well. "Every day," said one, "he came in and mailed ten or twenty hand-addressed letters, mostly to big cities. New York, Chicago, L.A." Dale Foyerhan sent his letters to artists and gallery owners, many of whom had kept them. They were beautifully written, praise-filled epistles. He loved art and anyone involved with its creation or dispersal. The recipients of his letters were often moved to write back, and they often asked him to send Polaroids of his work.

But he never did. No one interviewed could guess why, although mental illness is what the film's narrator suggests. He committed suicide in 1993, leaving behind a houseful of photographs and paintings. One art critic interviewed in the film declares Foyerhan to have had "a singular vision of the world" and another says, "He is a superb example of that type of genius which is manifested only in the untrained mind." The film is called *Searching for Van Gogh* not because Foyerhan's style evoked Van Gogh's, but because here we have yet another undiscovered artistic genius who died in obscurity.

I wondered, as I sat there across the table from my unknown aunt, thinking about her work, what dictates the subject matter? How do storytellers choose what to film or write about or paint or sculpt? How much of the decision is purely objective (dramatic potential, ironic exploitability, etc.) and how much is subjective (illumination of the creator's own fears and neuroses)?

Laura looked up at me then, perhaps sensing my stare. She flipped the script closed and set it on the table and sipped her wine.

"What're you doing up so late?" she asked.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Me neither, not after that afternoon nap. Golf puts me right to sleep."

I nodded.

Laura said, "We've met before. Do you remember?"

"Really?" I said. "No...I don't remember."

"Twice. Once when you were only three and once in Napa. You were maybe nine or ten. You and your dad were down on a business trip, and I drove up. We met at Mondavi. Remember?"

I remembered the trip vaguely, but not Laura. I doubt we were properly introduced. I wondered why on earth the sister of my father's ex-wife would've driven all the way from Los Angeles to Napa Valley to drink wine with my father and me.

"What're you thinking?" she said.

"I'm thinking this is all very strange."

"It must be, for you."

It was. It was like seeing behind the scenes of a TV show or movie. All these people had impacted my life in some way I was totally unaware of.

Laura said, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry." She said this while maintaining constant eye contact, and I had no idea what she was talking about. It did not seem like the way a lot of people say they're sorry when a family member dies or when something generally bad happens that they have no control over. It's just something you say to the grieving when there's nothing else to say. It usually has no meaning whatsoever. But that's not what Laura was saying to me, here. Her apology meant something; I just didn't know what it was.

She finished her wine and gathered up her things and said, "I'm going to bed."

"Good night," I said.

"I doubt it," she said and walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the guest room.

I took a bottle of Columbia Valley merlot from the top shelf of the chiller and retired to the living room with the new issue of *Wine Enthusiast* and waited for morning.

At six-fifteen I heard a car pull into the driveway and looked out the window to see my grandparents getting out of their rented Crown Victoria. They were staying at the Westin downtown (in separate rooms). I went upstairs to take a shower and put on some clean clothes after putting the two empty wine bottles from the night before in the trash.

At noon, after we had all eaten a brunch of eggs benedict prepared by my father, we all changed clothes and drove into the city for the visitation. We took two cars, Laura and my grandparents in their rental, and Dad and me in the Subaru.

At the funeral apartments, I stood in the back and let Dad, Laura, Charlie, and Josephine deal with the crowd. As expected, a good deal of my father's coworkers and acquaintances showed up, as did a lot of strangers who wanted to finally see the face of the writer they so loved, though there were not as many of these as I had feared.

When the room finally emptied and after my grandfather had a few words with the director, we drove back to the house. It was mid-afternoon when we got back. Laura went to the TV, my grandfather sat smoking (!) in the kitchen, Grandma brewed a pot of coffee and sat in the living room with Dad, and I retreated to the back porch. I sat staring into the trees, staring through the new leaves to the house behind Dad's.

My thoughts were afire with the predictable questions. When I grew bored mulling them over on the plastic deckchair, I went back inside and sat with Laura on the couch watching a James Bond marathon. In the middle of *The Man with the Golden Gun* I went upstairs and collapsed into bed, exhausted.

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I was awakened by moans and quiet, swallowed yelps from down the hall. Lovemaking sounds. I sat up in bed, blinked my eyes, waited for my head to clear a little, and listened. I had not dreamed it. I walked out of my room and down the hall, my body still stiff and slow. The sounds came from behind my father's closed door. I frowned in the dark hallway and went back to my room and looked at the glowing green letters of the alarm clock next to the bed. It was just

after four a.m. I dragged both hands over my face and back through my hair, trying to wake up and process everything.

I felt sure Laura, who was in the other guest room, would hear it, but that's not what really troubled me about this perverse scene. She seemed like she would understand, or at least find it somewhat humorous. What troubled me was the who and the why. *Who* was Quentin with? *Why*, at a time like this? What is it, stress-relief sex?

It was no great shock to me to hear my father going at it in the midnight hours. I'd heard it all before. Quentin has had a lot of "girlfriends" over the years, and he has never been bashful about bringing them home. During the occasional dinners at the house, I'd always felt peripheral. I assumed that if what Quentin and his women had wanted was marriage, I would've played a much bigger part in these relationships: family-oriented movies, baseball games, picnics, cheeseburger and French fry dinners. But what they always wanted was to try to recreate carefree young love, if only for a little while. In the long run, of course, they always failed at this. History, played by me, always got in the way.

As I had learned to do years before, I dug my CD player from my bag and put on my headphones and drifted back to half-sleep to the oddly soothing mechanical sounds of Nine Inch Nails.

I dreamed in fragments that I was late for an exam for a class I hadn't bothered to attend all semester. I dreamed about jumping off the swings at the playground and flying too far and not hitting the ground.

When I woke up again the headphones were silent. The whole house was silent. Outside my window yellow streetlight mingled with the predawn.

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Thursday—Funeral Day. Early at the breakfast table I sipped coffee and tried to catch my father's eye. My grandparents had arrived from the hotel wearing tracksuits and carrying plastic garment bags. No one spoke. Laura read the paper. Dad watched the muted news on the little white kitchen TV. Grandma did the crossword puzzle. Grandpa smoked and looked out the kitchen window. I drank coffee and watched everyone else. Laura gave a sly kick to my father's calf. She looked at him with narrowed eyes and a sliver of a smile. I thought then that I was right, she had heard the antics from the night before, but, unlike me, she approved. (I, too, stared at my father with narrowed eyes—beetle-browed, unsmiling.) Laura kicked him again, and he looked up at her with a big ol' plain-as-day shit-eating grin on his all-telling mug.

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It was a clear day. It doesn't rain as much in Seattle as people think it does, but it would at least be appropriate today. Instead it was sunny and cool and dry, dry, dry and beautiful. We changed clothes after what would have been lunchtime and waited in the front yard for the limousine. When it arrived silently, as though on a cushion of air, the driver opened the back door and we filed heavily in. The vertigo of riding in a big car facing backwards but moving inexorably forward to a granite-built Catholic church.

I don't remember a word of the funeral mass. I remember a long line of people paying their respects. I remember a strange woman's face in the casket. Another silent limousine ride, silent graveside service, silent ride back to the funeral parlor. No, not actually silent. Silent in my memory. People spoke to me, offered me what were probably meant to be reassuring, comforting words, but the syllables echoed into dead caverns.

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The morning after the funeral I woke up hungover. In the kitchen downstairs Dad was making a batch of buckwheat pancakes. I poured a cup of coffee and said, “Morning.”

“Sleep well?” said Dad.

“No. You?”

“No. But I don’t, these days, generally.”

“I’ve got a headache out to here,” I said.

“I’ll make some bacon.”

I sat down at the table and noticed the shoebox and the plane ticket. “What’s this?”

Dad looked over his shoulder. I was examining the ticket. SeaTac to Detroit-Metro.

“That’s for you,” he said. I opened the box. It was full of letters. Facing the stove, Dad said, “Read them later. Not now.” I picked up one of the envelopes and examined it. “Later,” said my father, his voice full of Zen-like compassionate authority. He had always had this ability to stop people in their tracks. His tone said he knew something others did not. He knew what was best. I looked up, and he was standing with his back to the stove looking at me over the counter with his heavy stare. I smelled burning pancake batter, but he didn’t turn around. He held my eyes to his, and I put the letter back in the box and replaced the lid. Then he turned around, lifted the burnt cakes from the skillet with the spatula, and dropped them into the trashcan. He ladled more batter into the pan and sipped from his coffee cup.

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I’d always thought of my father as a friend. This is an artifact of our situation. Growing up, just the two of us, I got away with a lot more than I might have if I’d had a mother to deal with, or a brother or sister. I felt that I held a special place in my father’s world, exalted above the level of a child to that of one of his peers. Along with this exaltation came higher

expectations, expectations I understood very early on. Along with the knowledge that my mother had gone away came accelerated maturity. I took pride in my relationship with my father, because I sensed it was different and somehow better than what most kids shared with their parents. He was on my side. We didn't need that bitch, my no good mother. It was me and Dad, a team, buddies.

That morning after the funeral I understood something new about my father. He was not really my friend. He had been a parent all along, shielding me from reality, protecting me. It was a ruse, an act, a calculated strategy. It was a lie.

The return address in the top left corner of the envelope I had taken from the shoebox on the kitchen table read *Marianne Caxton, 722 East Ann Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.*