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Wild Game

My Mother, Her Lover, and Me

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Chapter 1

Ben Souther pushed through the front door of our Cape Cod beach house on a hot July evening in 1980, greeting our family with his customary, enthusiastic “How do!” In his early sixties at the time, Ben had a full head of thick, white hair and calloused hands that broadcast his love of outdoor work. I watched from the hallway as he back-patted my stepfather Charles Greenwood with one hand and, with the other, raised high a brown paper grocery bag, its corners softening into damp, dark patches.

“Let’s see what you can do with these, Malabar,” Ben said to my mother, who stood in the entryway beside her husband. He presented her with the seeping package and gave her a peck on the cheek.

My mother took the sack into the kitchen and placed it on the butcher-block counter where she unfolded the top and peeked inside.

“Squab,” Ben said proudly, rubbing his hands together. “A dozen. Plucked, cleaned, I even took off the heads for you.”

Ah. So the wetness was blood.

I glanced at my mother, whose face registered not a trace of revulsion, only delight. She was, no doubt, already doing the math, calculating the temperature and time required to crisp the skin without drying the meat and best coax forward the

flavors. My mother came to life in the kitchen—it was her stage and she was the star.

“Well, I must say, this is quite the hostess gift, Ben,” my mother said laughing, appraising him with a tilt of her chin. She gave him a long look. Malabar was a tough critic. You had to earn her good opinion, a process that could take years or not happen at all. Ben Souther, I could tell, had gone up a notch.

Ben’s wife, Lily, followed close behind, bearing a bouquet of flowers from their garden in Plymouth, and a bagful of wild watercress freshly picked from the banks of their stream, peppery the way my mother loved it. About a decade older than my mother, Lily was petite and plain pretty, with graying brown hair and a lined face that spoke of her New England practicality and utter lack of vanity.

Charles stood on the sidelines smiling broadly. He loved company, delicious meals, and stories from the past, and this weekend with his old friend, Ben, and Ben’s wife Lily, promised an abundance of all. I’d known the Southers since I was eight, when my mother married Charles. I knew them in the way that a child knows her parents’ friends, which is to say not well and with indifference.

I was fourteen.

The cocktail hour, a sacred ritual in our home, commenced immediately. My mother and Charles started with their usual, a tumbler of bourbon on the rocks, had a second, and then progressed to their favorite aperitif, which they called the “power

pack:" a dry Manhattan with a twist. The Southers followed my parents' lead, matching them drink for drink. The four of them meandered and chatted, cocktails in hand, from the living room out to the deck, and then later, across the lawn to the wooden stairs leading down to the beach, where they could best enjoy the pelagic abundance before them: brackish air, a sky glowing pink with sunset, the ambient sounds of boats on moorings, seagulls, and distant waves.

My older brother, Peter, made his entrance after a long day's work as a mate on a charter fishing boat that took tourists out of Wellfleet. He was sixteen, blond and tan, his lips split from too much salt and sun. He and Ben talked striped bass: what they were eating (sand eels); where they were biting (past the bars but still close to shore). It was understood between them that this type of sport fishing, with its lowbrow chumming and high-test fishing line, was not the real deal. Ben was a fisherman's fisherman. He tied his own flies and made annual trips to Iceland and Russia to fish the world's most pristine rivers. He had already caught and released over 700 salmon in his lifetime, with a goal of making it to 1,000 before he died. Still, a day on the water—even one spent with beer-guzzling tourists—was a day on the water.

"When's dinner, Mom?" Peter asked. A late bloomer physically, my brother was endlessly ravenous, always impatient.

That was all it took to get everyone back into the house. We all knew what was coming next.

My mother flicked on the kitchen lights, rinsed her hands, and busied herself unwrapping the headless birds and lining them up on the countertop, where she blotted their cavities dry with a fresh kitchen towel. The rest of us settled onto the sturdy, high-backed barstools, our elbows resting on the green marble counter, where we faced into the kitchen and could enjoy a clear view of Malabar in action. On the enormous butcher block island directly in front of us, aromatic herbs—basil, cilantro, thyme, oregano, mint—sprouted from a vase like a floral arrangement. A rectangle of butter had softened into a glistening mound. A giant head of garlic awaited my mother's knife. Behind us stretched our living room, framed entirely by sliding glass doors that opened onto a panoramic view of Nauset Harbor, where islands of marsh grass and sandbars were visible at low tide. Beyond the harbor was the outer beach, a strip of khaki sand punctuated by hills of dunes that buffered us from the Atlantic Ocean. From time to time, my mother would look up from her mincing or stirring or grating to take it all in, and smile with satisfaction.

My mother had been coming to this very town in Cape Cod since she was a young girl. Orleans is located at the elbow of what from the sky resembles an enormous arm pushing sixty-five miles out into the Atlantic before flexing back toward the mainland, narrowing all the way to the curled hand of Provincetown. As a child, Malabar lived in Pochet; while married to my father, she owned a tiny cottage in Nauset Heights; and a few years ago, no doubt with some assistance from Charles, she'd bought a couple of acres of waterfront with expansive views. She'd had a major renovation done when she bought the house, and it was no coincidence that the kitchen had the sightlines.

If the image of a woman in the kitchen calls to mind a sweet homemaker in a ruffled apron, or a world-weary mother, dutifully fulfilling her obligation to feed her young family, you're picturing the wrong woman in the wrong kitchen. Here at the very last house on a winding road to the bay beach, the kitchen was command central and Malabar its five-star general. Long before open-kitchens were in vogue, she believed that cooks should be celebrated, not relegated to hot rooms to labor alone behind closed doors. It was in this kitchen where meringues were launched onto seas of *crème Anglais*, perfectly seared slabs of *fois gras* were drizzled with fig reductions, and salads of watercress and endive were expertly tossed with olive oil and sea salt.

My mother rarely followed recipes. She had little use for them. Hardwired to understand the chemistry of food, she needed only her palate, her instincts, and her fingertips. From a single drop of rich sauce placed on her tongue, she could detect the tiniest hint of cardamom, one lone shard of lemon zest, some whiff of a behind-the-scenes ingredient. She had an innate feel for composition and structure, how temperature might change all that, and most of all, a keen awareness of the power of this gift, particularly where men were concerned. Armed with sharp knives, fragrant spices and fire, my mother could create feasts whose aromas alone would entice ships full of men onto the rocks, where she would delight in watching them plunge into the abyss. I knew all about the sirens from reading Greek mythology and marveled at my mother's powers.

Candles were lit, illuminating the room from within, and the happy creak of corks announced dinner was ready. Six of us assembled around the table and dug into our first course: a large bowl of steamed, soft-shelled clams that my mother and I had plucked from a nearby sandbar at low tide earlier in the day. We pried open the shells, rolled the skin off their elongated necks, dunked the bodies into hot broth and melted butter, and popped them into our mouths. A burst of ocean.

Then came the *pièce de résistance*: Ben's headless squab served family-style on an enormous carving board with grooves that caught their abundant juices. Using long tongs, Malabar scooped up a tiny pigeon for each plate. Roasted to medium-rare, the meat was silky and tender, fine-grained and richer than I expected. The skin was fatty like a duck's and as crisp as bacon. As accompaniment, my mother had made a savory corn pudding, some collision of kernels and eggs and cream, which she dolloped onto each plate. The flavors were complementary: sweet and salty, with a certain succulence that gave a nod to ferment.

At the first bite, my mother moaned with satisfaction. She never shied away from enjoying the fruits of her labor.

"This," Ben said, closing his eyes, "is *perfection*." Seated beside Malabar, he placed an arm around the back of her chair and raised his glass. "To the chef!"

"To Malabar," Lily seconded.

We all clinked glasses. My stepfather beamed and said, "To my sweet." Charles adored my mother, his second wife, nearly fifteen years his junior. They had

both been married to other people when they met through friends and fell in love. Charles appreciated that my mother had stuck with him through an arduous divorce and the debilitating series of strokes he'd suffered just before their wedding, which had left him partially paralyzed on his right side. He now walked with a shuffle, and had learned to write and eat with his left hand.

Charles and Ben had been boyhood friends, brought together by a shared love of the town of Plymouth where Ben, a direct descendant of the Mayflower pilgrims, lived and where Charles had spent summers in his youth. They were an unlikely pair—Charles always in his head, Ben so very physical—but the friendship had thrived for decades. They were within six months of each other in age, but intense and magnetic Ben seemed years younger. A hunter, a fisherman and a conservationist – as well as a successful business man, Ben had an encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world, and shared it enthusiastically. Over dinner, I pummeled him with questions: *How do horseshoe crabs mate? What causes the annual spring migration of herring? How do Paper Nautilus lay eggs?* I tried to stump him, but to no avail. Answering questions about the environment and its inhabitants was his party trick.

As we devoured our meal, Ben schooled us on pigeons, which he had been raising for more than thirty years.

“Did you know that they couple up to breed? The babies are brooded and fed by *both* parents,” he said, aiming a petite drumstick my way.

“So, these are, like, city pigeons?” I asked, curious if they were the same grimy creatures I knew from New York, where I was born and where my father still lived.

“Yes and no. Pigeons and doves are from the same family: Columbidae,” Ben said, touching my arm as he spoke. “The birds we raise are white doves.”

“Oh, the flock is so gorgeous, Rennie,” Lily said. “You’ll have to visit sometime and see for yourself.”

“I’d love that,” I said and looked at my mother, who nodded in agreement.

“So, how do you kill them, exactly?” Peter asked.

Ben air-twisted a tiny, invisible neck.

The evening went on, electric and full of small surprises. Ben was a vigorous man who spoke with his hands and explained things thoroughly, but also listened intently to whoever was speaking. I noticed how his gaze kept returning to my mother throughout the meal. My mother seemed to delight in these glances, giving equine tosses of her head and laughing readily. At one point, I watched as she dragged her fork across the dome of her corn pudding. We both looked up to see if Ben was watching. He was. She shot me a conspiratorial smile and poured me a glass of red wine. Then she poured one for Peter.

“The Pinot goes perfectly with the squab,” she said to us as if she regularly paired wine with our meals.

When I looked surprised, she shrugged, amused. “If we lived in France, you would have had wine with dinner starting when you were eight!”

Ben chuckled approvingly, and my mother followed his lead with a throaty laugh.

Charles and Lily, unperturbed by my drinking, unfazed by their spouses’ flirtation, erupted in laughter, too.

On this night, everything was so damn funny.

At around 9 o’clock, I grew restless. Even with the fans on, the dining room was uncomfortably warm and the back of my legs were stuck to the chair. I stole glances at the grandfather clock. *Where is he?* When the rap on the door finally came, I gave Peter a pleading glance. He didn’t budge from his seat.

Please, I begged my brother with my eyebrows raised. *Come on. Just do this.*

Peter rolled his eyes and shrugged half-heartedly, but then gave in and went to the door.

“Can I be excused?” I asked my mother. “I need some fresh air.”

She nodded, barely registering the request.

As I stood to clear my plate, I felt tipsy from the wine. I sped upstairs, brushed my teeth and hair, and rushed to the door, slowing down as I neared it to appear composed.

My brother and our neighbor, Ted, were standing on the front porch, shooting the breeze. We knew the drill: Peter said goodnight and eased back inside, and Ted and I drifted around the house and down the wooden steps to the shore below. We didn't have much to say, this boy and I, so we didn't talk. We went to our usual spot, lay down on the coarse sand and started to make out as we'd been doing every night for almost a week.

Soon a couple walked past, hand in hand, unaware of our presence on the sand behind them, and settled in against a rock near the water's edge to admire the moon's reflection on the inlet. Instead of pulling apart, as we usually did when someone intruded, Ted clamped a salty hand over my mouth and, with a tug, jerked my tank top up and over my breasts. I lay flattened on the sand, stunned by this unexpected maneuver. Ted's grinning face, illuminated in the bright moonlit sky, was full of adolescent lust and greed. His eyes feasted on my chest. Dark blond hair peeked out from his armpits and the muscles in his shoulders twitched. Then he started: first one breast and then the other, grabbed and released, causing sparks to flare in my chest and a warmth to gather between my legs.

By the time I returned home, my mother's dinner party was winding down. Lily was clearing the dessert plates and my stepfather looked exhausted. Even Ben and my mother seemed subdued. I slipped past unnoticed and went upstairs.

When I crawled into bed, I couldn't keep my encounter with Ted from looping through my head. Ted had surprised me down on the beach and I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd done. The rules of teenage sexual engagement were unambiguous: there was no going back. I knew that a new starting line had been drawn and the next time we snuck off together, my exposed breasts would be understood as a given.

The curtains in my bedroom were opened, windows cranked as wide as they could possibly go and even so, it was sweltering. My hair, damp with the humid salt air, stuck to my neck, and threadbare cotton sheets, gritty with sand, clung to my legs. The moon was the only thing that looked cool, like a cold piece of metal that I wanted to press against my face. Outside, there wasn't even the slightest breeze to tug the fishing boats against their moorings or provoke my mother's wind chimes. The house was silent, too. My parents and their guests must have gone to bed finally.

So much had changed in my body over the last year. I used to have to chase boys to get their attention. Now all I had to do was be around them, hang onto our porch railing and arch away from it, push my toes into the soft sand, or lift my eyes, squinting as if into the sun, and they were rapt. After a long stretch of stillness, my body had burst—breasts erupting, hips expanding, skin stretched taut over new horizons of flesh. My insides had gone wild, too.

I cramped and bled each month, but no one had told me about the rest of it: how dank and loamy it was in there, how even when I didn't have my period, so much was always going on, shifting and softening, leaving slippery clues for me to follow. As I drifted toward sleep, I dreamily replayed the night's events again and again—hand on mouth, shirt up—until an utterly new commotion unleashed itself inside me. An unfamiliar wave swelled from a center deep within and ricocheted through me, licking every nerve and cell along the way.

What just happened?

I felt fully awake again, trying to figure out the steps I had taken, wanting to memorize the path to this extraordinary place, but already it eluded me. I drifted in and out of a fitful sleep.

“Wake up, Rennie.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and pulled the sheet over my head.

“Rennie, please.”

Even before I turned and saw her face, I could hear a peculiar quaver in my mother's whisper and the remnants of the Pinot Noir. Her voice sounded hesitant and desperate. The mattress sank where she lowered herself beside me and my

body stiffened against the depression. I kept my eyes shut and steadied my exhalations.

“Rennie!” The whisper, more urgent now, still held an unfamiliar tremor. She pulled down the sheet. “Please, wake up.”

Even with her beside me, hovering over me, her breath warm against my ear, my mind didn’t want to abandon thoughts of Ted. Why was my mother in my room in the middle of the night? For a moment, I panicked: did she have some sixth sense that I’d just made my first foray into sex? Or maybe Peter had betrayed me and told her that I’d been sneaking off, getting into trouble. I turned away from her, half-asleep, in no mood for a lecture. Still floating from the sensation of what had just happened, I didn’t want to lose track of it.

“Rennie, wake up. Please, wake up.”

Just go away, I thought.

“Sweetheart. Please. I need you.”

At this, I opened my eyes. Malabar was in her nightgown, her hair mussed. I sat up.

“Mom, what’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

“Ben Souther just kissed me.”

I took in this information. Tried to make sense of it. Couldn’t. I rubbed my eyes. My mother was still there, beside me.

“Ben kissed me,” my mother repeated.

A noun, a verb, an object—such a simple sentence really, and yet, I couldn’t fathom it. Why would Ben Souther kiss my mother? It wasn’t that I was naïve; I knew that people kissed people they weren’t supposed to. My parents had not shielded me from stories of each other’s transgressions during their marriage and divorce, and in this way, I knew more about infidelity than most children. I was four when my parents broke up, six when my father remarried, seven when that new marriage started to fall apart, and eight when my mother was finally able to wed Charles, who’d been long-separated from but still married to his first wife when they met.

Ben was married, too, of course, to Lily. The Southers had been married for thirty-five years.

Mom and Charles. Ben and Lily.

The four of them had been couple-friends for as long as my mother and my stepfather had known each other, almost a decade by now.

That’s what really stumped me about the kiss—the friendship between Ben and Charles. The two men adored each other. Their affection went back some fifty years, maybe more, to a time when they were young enough to skip stones across the flat, gray water of Plymouth Bay, where they pretended to be pilgrims and built forts in the dunes, fending off imaginary savages with stick muskets. Over the years,

they hunted and fished together, dated each other's sisters, ushered at each other's weddings, and became godfathers to each other's sons.

"What do you mean, Ben kissed you?" Suddenly I was fully awake. I pictured her slapping him in response. That was something my mother might do. "What happened?"

"We took a walk after dinner, just the two of us, and he pulled me into him, like this." My mother crossed her arms around herself, simultaneously demonstrating Ben's caress and embracing its memory. Then she collapsed the rest of the way down, smiling, and stretched out alongside me on the bed.

Apparently, there had been no slap.

"I still can't believe it. Ben Souther kissed me," she said.

What was it about her voice tonight?

"He kissed me, Rennie."

There it was again: joy. A sound I hadn't heard from her since before Charles' strokes. Joy had fallen from the night sky and landed in my mother's voice. One kiss—the gleam and shine of it; what it might portend—had changed everything.

"He wants me to meet him in New York next week. He has a board meeting—some salmon thing—and Lily plans to stay in Plymouth. I don't know what to do."

We lay on our backs, facing the ceiling, heat emanating from our bodies.

"What do you think I should do?"

We both knew this was a rhetorical question. Malabar was a planner. She had already made up her mind.

“I’m going to need your help, sweetie,” she continued. “I need to figure out how to do this. How to make this possible.”

I lay as still as a corpse, unsure of what to say.

“Of course, I don’t want to hurt Charles. I’d rather die than cause him more grief. That’s my top priority. Charles must never find out. He would be devastated.” She paused as if to consider Charles one last time and then rolled on her side to face me. “You have to help me, Rennie.”

My mother needed me, but I was uncertain. I knew I was supposed to fill the space in the conversation, but the words weren’t coming. I didn’t know what to say.

“Aren’t you happy for me, Rennie?” my mother asked, rising onto an elbow.

I looked at her face and into her eyes, dark and dewy with hope, and all at once, I was happy for her. And for me. Malabar was falling in love and she’d picked me as her confidante, a role I hadn’t realized I’d longed for until that moment. Perhaps this could be a good thing. Maybe someone as vital as Ben could startle my mother out of the malaise she’d been in since Charles’ strokes and, at times, in the years before. Perhaps in the fall, when school started, my mother would get dressed for carpool. No more coat over her nightgown, or sheet marks across her puffy morning face. Maybe she’d brush her hair, smear some gloss across her lips, and greet the children on our route with a cheery, “Hello,” like all of the other mothers.

“Of course, I’m happy,” I said. “I’m so happy for you.”

Her reaction—grateful tears—emboldened me.

“After all you’ve been through, you deserve this,” I told her.

“Sweetie, you can’t tell anyone. Not a soul. Not your brother, not your father, not your friends. No one. This is serious. Promise me that, Rennie. You must take this secret to your grave.”

I promised immediately, thrilled to have landed a starring role in my mother’s drama, oblivious I was being outmaneuvered for the second time that night.

The people who occupied the bedrooms around us: my brother Peter, my stepfather Charles, Ben and his wife Lily, were all peacefully asleep in their beds. They had no idea that the ground beneath them had shifted. My mother had narrowed her vision and chosen happiness, and I had willingly signed on, both of us ignoring the great truths on either side.

When dawn spilled through my open windows and the sun climbed up and over the outer beach, that long spit of sand and dunes that separate our inlet from the Atlantic, the sky turned a brilliant fuchsia streaked with red confetti strands. I

awoke full of hope and no longer thinking about Ted. I already knew that when he showed up on our porch later that evening, I would not sneak down to the beach to feel the determined pressure of his pelvis against mine. Instead, I would stay at home and bear witness to my mother's seduction.