

## Prologue

JANIELLE: I want to tell you a story. It's the story of my "Dad Character." The problem is: I can't. Because I don't know it. I don't know my Dad, and I've never known the story of why he wasn't in my life. A few years ago, I got his email address and started drafting him a message, drafting and redrafting. Before I could send him anything, he died. He was declared dead on my birthday. And I found out none of his friends knew I existed. (So. Then. This story's a bit on-the-nose with its details) A pit of grief opened up inside me. Perhaps you know the kind of pit that I'm talking about. A feeling of loss I couldn't put words to, about a man whose absence I couldn't explain, and a reconciliation that was still a series of sentences I'd been typing and deleting in my mind.

JANIELLE: From inside this pit I made a decision: I want words. I want to finally know my own story. I've always been braver as a writer than I have as a person, maybe if I can't make emotional sense of this, I can at least make *narrative* sense of it. I decided to extend myself the same dignity I would to any protagonist. I decided to find a meaningful resolution. (...even if I have to write it myself).

JANIELLE: So before I knew what I was doing, that's what I was doing. Shortly after my father died, I started interviewing experts in my life who could help me understand myself as a character, and interviewing experts in my Dad's life who could help me understand him as a character, and experts who just know how to craft really good stories. Pretty early on, my good friend and favorite director, Carson McCain, joined me in these interviews.

CARSON: Hey, that's me, I'm Carson.

JANIELLE: And now, together in a booth, we're taking years worth of interviewing, grieving, and creating, putting it all together, examining it, activating it, and figuring out my story. Four years of the grieving process smushed into eight or so chapters, each with a different narrative theme. By the end of this, I'll have reckoned with my Dad Character, found that meaningful narrative resolution, and I'll finally (*finally*) know my own story. That's what you're about to hear. Now this is the Prologue, where we get you ready for all of that.

CARSON: Exactly, so what all do people need to know to get ready for Chapter 1?

JANIELLE: Y'all need to know how time works, in grieving and in creating, time is just a snake eating it's own tail. Each episode is organized by theme, not by chronology. You'll hear us interviewing people from four years ago, and then us immediately debriefing then, and then you'll hear us in the booth now commenting on it.

CARSON: And because we've been working on this for four years, we pretty incorrectly often say how long ago this interview has been, so just forgive us for all the times we say two years ago when we mean four years ago. We get it. We know.

JANIELLE: Abandon all chronology ye who enters here.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: The other thing you need to know in this prologue is who you'll hear from. So you're gonna get to hear from people who know me very well.

CAROL: I love you, and I'm very proud of you, and I thank God that he chose me to be your mom.

JANIELLE: And you'll hear from people who knew my Dad Character.

CHARLEY: Yeah, I, I see a lot of him in you. Which is a good thing.

JANIELLE: You'll also hear from people who are helping me understand narrative, and what makes a good story and a great resolution.

ROBERT: The key is that you ask the right questions, and that you don't settle for easy answers.

JEANNE: Maybe this is the way you get to know your dad now.

TAYLOR ANNE: Say whatever you want to say"

ROBERT: And none of it is melodrama, it's just human.

JANIELLE: And you'll also hear from people who just stumble their way into the story.

YODER: Yeah, sure, I guess I-- That's fair to say. I'm an expert in burying your father.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Next thing you need to know, your hosts are us. So I'm Janielle, I grew up "Jan-yell," nicknamed "Jan," so all of this much illegitimacy makes. What's my real name?

CARSON: You'll hear every kind of version of Janielle's name. Uh, in addition to that, my name is Carson, but my nickname is "Cat," "Carson-Cat," "Kitty-Cat"--

JANIELLE: "Kitty Cat" for special occasions.

CARSON: Yes

JANIELLE: Get excited

CARSON: It's all me!

JANIELLE: All of this is us.

JANIELLE: In each of these chapters we pick a narrative theme to look at, and my job is to figure out what does my character need to learn from that theme, whether it's "Plot," or "Genre," or "Script"... And Carson's job is to keep us honest and on track, and you also make sure that we activate each of these themes.

CARSON: Yes, everything that you learn that you want to take from these themes, we have to find some way to integrate it into your story, so we call that activation.

CARSON: Ooo, I wrote this down, here's something we could do.

JANIELLE: I think we should activate it by a bunch of men being nice to me.

YODER: So I don't read the stage directions?

JANIELLE: I'll read stage directions.

JEANNE: Why not have an interview with a cat?

JANIELLE: This thing, the grieving process, it's a lot like the creative process. The highs are high...

JANIELLE: Sean! Hi! Aw, that's so sweet!

JANIELLE: I did it!

JANIELLE: The lows are low...

JANIELLE: "I'm going to blow my snotty nose into this luxurious Target bath towel.

CARSON: This is a really hard story.

JANIELLE: Why did we never talk about this?

JANIELLE: And, in both the grieving process and the creative process, the breakthroughs aren't what you expect them to be...

JANIELLE: I don't know, does it matter?

CARSON: Does it matter to you?

JANIELLE: Oh. That's a better question, isn't it?

CARSON: That was much more affecting to me than to you!

JANIELLE: I don't know what to do now.

CARSON: I don't, either.

JANIELLE: Oh, you know what I'm doing? I'm grieving!

JAN: Now as for this story we're trying to figure out, here's what we know so far at the beginning of this thing, and what you need to know.

CARSON: First thing our story needs: a protagonist. And we've got one.

JANIELLE: Protagonist is me. We call me "Jan Character" most of the time, because, I'll be honest, I wanted to disassociate.

CARSON: Next, we need to know the backstory, so everyone has the same working details that we do to start off with Chapter 1.

JANIELLE: So, these are the facts of our Jan Character's life abridged.  
[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Our Jan Character is born to a Mom Character who loves her a lot. And a Dad Character who's not in the picture, and she doesn't know how or when he wrote himself out of the picture.

CARSON: When she's a kid, she has these, sort of, snippets of memories of when her dad would show up. So when she's a toddler, he comes to her house and refuses to read a book to her.

JANIELLE: Yes, it was *Strawberry Shortcake*. Later, he comes to a school play of her's, it was *Peter Rabbit*.

CARSON: When she's in junior high, there's a Father's Day lunch, and it's kinda awkward.

JANIELLE: And she gives him a book of Farside comics. And then in high school, she gets a birthday card from him, it's signed "Dad/Rick," and that's the last time she hears from him. Another important fact, her Dad Character doesn't pay child support for most of her life, and her Mom Character takes him to court periodically, and more often than not, he doesn't show up.

CARSON: And when she's a pre-teen and a teenager, her friends start to sort of ask her, you know, "What's the deal with your Dad Character?" and she just sort of shrugs it off and doesn't really say anything.

JANIELLE: And in that, the people in her life assume she doesn't wanna talk about her Dad Character, but the truth is, she doesn't know *how* to talk about her Dad Character, even if she tried.

CARSON: Next, you graduate from theatre school and start a career as a writer--

JANIELLE: Not *me*, I don't know who this "me" is you're talking about.

CARSON: Goddammit!

JANIELLE: It's a "Jan Character."

CARSON: UGH.

JANIELLE: But yes, Jan Character does go to theatre school, where she meets a Carson Character. And she decides she wants a career as a writer and as a performer, and this is probably dumb, but she doesn't care, because she really loves stories.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: When she's 24, her Dad Character finally shows up in court, and her mom sees him there, gets his email address, and passes it off to Jan Character. Mom Character says, "You should email him." She has a premonition that Dad Character doesn't have much time left, but Mom Character often has premonitions, so Jan kind of blows this off. But still.

CARSON: Then, when she's still 24, Jan Character decides she's gonna reach out to him.

JANIELLE: Yeah, she starts drafting that email in her mind to him, again and again, drafting and redrafting. Next important fact, she turns 25 and gets an email. The subject line says, "(Her Dad Character's name), Deceased." She learns that he's dead. That's a fact. She learns that none of his friends knew she existed. That's a fact. She shows up to his memorial services as his surprise, bastard daughter. That's a fun fact. She doesn't know who she is anymore. A pit opens up and threatens to swallow her whole. Fact, fact, fact.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: So not a great story. But we're working on it.

CARSON: Yeah.

JANIELLE: We'll make it a good one. Now you know all the details I'm working with at the beginning of this story. Everything I know, you know. This isn't S-Town, you already know the big plot twist: my dad died. This isn't Serial, you've got all the important details at the top, like, my version of the Best Buy phone booth is that Strawberry Shortcake book, cell phone tower is the Peter Rabbit play... And my Dad Character's death doesn't have a cool true crime angle, no mystery, we're not going to find out he's Richard Simmons. This is just a sad thing that happened. There are lots of sad things

that happen. There are lots of people with bad dads. There are lots of deaths every minute. But I think each of those sadnesses, each of those bad dads, each of those deaths, are worthy. We just have to figure out what makes them a good story. So my dad's death is just a thing that happened. But it happened to me. And now we're going to make it a story, so maybe I can find some kind of meaning.

[MUSIC]

JANIELLE: Years ago, I heard Roger Ebert say, "A film is not about its subject. It's about *how* its about its subject." And I've thought about that ever since. The details that we're starting with, that's just what happened. Not sending an email, regretting it, a pit of grief opening up, not knowing who you are anymore, that's just what happened. But a story isn't *what* happens, it's *how* it happens. I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you MY story. But first: we have to figure out how it happens. Welcome, to my Untitled Dad Project.

ROBERT: What is the inciting incident? You have a lot of choices.

JANIELLE: I asked my mom when I was young, I said, "What do I tell my friends when they ask why I only have a mommy, and not a mommy and a daddy?" And she said, "Just tell them it's not your story to tell."

ROBERT: Ah, see that's, see, now it's becoming interesting.

JANIELLE: How did it feel that that dad never came?

CAROL: How did it feel?

ROBERT: You don't know you know anything until you can write it down.

[MUSIC]