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ALREADY TOO LATE

by

Abigail Logan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Secondary Education)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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ABSTRACT

Already Too Late (Dec. 2021), in its beginning stages, is a novel that explores the intricacies of trauma response within the context of creative writing that appeals to both older and younger readers alike. This thesis consists of a complete story outline, four well-established chapters, and a disquisition that examines my motivations, methodology, and the research related to the content of this project. The novel is a dual-perspective narrative that interweaves 17-year-old Avery Landon's traumatic experiences with sexual assault with her father Marty's overwhelming grief and his coming to terms with his failed parenting. When Avery is raped at a summer party, she struggles to put the pieces of that horrific night back together. In the weeks that follow, however, the memories come flooding back, progressively sinking her into a deep depression that soon becomes inescapable. As life becomes more and more difficult for Avery to bear, she decides that the only way to escape her struggles is by committing suicide. Interspersed with Avery's chapters is Marty's storyline, which begins at Avery's celebration of life. After first losing his wife Marilyn, Marty spent all of his time writing in the efforts of holding on to his last connection to his soulmate. Because of this, Avery and her brother Tony are left to navigate their lives without him, and he doesn't realize how badly they need him until it's already too late. The two stories switch off with one another, showcasing the realities of trauma, grief and regret, until both characters eventually find peace in their own complex ways.

PREFACE

This thesis is written in this specific order intentionally to provide readers with an understanding of the complete storyline and how the relevant subplots of the narrative progress from the beginning of the novel to the end. With this knowledge, readers can then explore the completed, polished chapters to get a sense of the narrative voice, creative writing techniques, and what this novel will eventually look like once it's completed. These pages are in no way meant to represent the novel in its entirety, but simply a foundation for what this novel is destined to become as I continue working on it after I graduate college.

I have every intention of getting this novel published someday, because I'm incredibly passionate about bringing awareness to the realities of trauma response and the intricacies of the parent/child relationship that are rarely discussed in literature. My end goal is for people who read this thesis to eventually find the completed version of this novel on a bookshelf someday and be able to read how the story ends in narrative form, which is how this story is truly meant to exist.

Please be advised that this thesis depicts graphic and intense sexual assault and suicide events that may be difficult for some readers to experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though there are a multitude of people to thank for getting me to where I am today, I quite literally wouldn't be here without the unwavering and gracious support of my lovely parents, who have read every wild story I've ever written since I was old enough to hold a pencil. Thank you for telling me that my stories matter, that they're worth being read, because I never would have pursued creative writing without your continuous encouragement.

I'd also like to thank my wonderful sister who jokingly told me she'd disown me if I didn't finish this project, because she saw my potential long before I ever saw it myself. You kept telling me that all of the stress and anxiety would pay off once the project was finally completed and, as hard as it is for me to admit it, you were completely right.

I'd also like to offer my most sincere thanks to my thesis advisor, Chris Mares, who generously took on the role for me right in the middle of all the madness. Thank you for being able to see my vision and offering me dynamic ideas that led me to even greater success in my writing. I truly appreciate all that you have done for me.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, thank you to my aunt Patricia, who was my first and most significant supporter of this project. It breaks my heart that you never got the opportunity to read it, but I could feel your spirit with me as I wrote each word. You are a part of this story, now and forever, and I hope I was able to make you proud.

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THE OUTLINE

- I. Chapter 1: Introduction to Avery's character before her assault and the first day of school
 - A. The reader sees Avery getting ready for her first day of school and how she's so excited to finally be a senior
 - B. The audience meets her brother Tony and their chef Simon, and they get to see how life is like at home without Marty there for them
 - C. On the first day, the audience sees her popularity at school because she's a soccer player
 - D. Wholesome personality, kind and generous to those around her
 - E. Goes through the day all excited and buzzing because it's her last first day and she can't wait to see what senior year has to offer her
 - F. Chapter ends with her falling asleep that night, thinking about the coming school year and how amazing it's all going to be for her
- II. Chapter 2: BEFORE - Introduction to Marty's character before Avery's death
 - A. Shows his character flaws, his bad parenting, and his general prioritization of his work over his family
 - B. Introduces the death of Marilyn, his wife, and how he became a work horse to cope with her death

- C. Marty is very dedicated to his job, and that has led to a very serious lack of parenting in the Landon household
- D. The audience sees how Marty's brain works as he travels on the subway
 - 1. There's an internal monologue to show what he's thinking about during the ride to his publisher's office
 - 2. He gets reminded of his family because of the people on the train
- E. The audience sees interactions between Marty and his publisher, which provides some insight into the industry that Marty is a part of and how toxic it seems to be
- F. Introduction to the four-month long book tour that Marty has to go on to promote his book
- G. After the meeting with the publisher, Marty and Dom go out to celebrate the book being done

III. Chapter 3: The party and the assault

- A. It's Saturday, and Avery and her friends are getting ready for the big party that they're going to that night
- B. The girls are getting all dolled up, and they're really excited to see how great the party is going to be
- C. They're dancing around the room and having a great time just getting ready
- D. They go to the party and see all of the fun people they've been missing
- E. Avery meets a boy she's never seen before, and they hit it off

- F. They go off alone, so they can talk to each other privately, and they go down to the beach for a walk
- G. Once they get about a quarter mile from the house, they sit and listen to the ocean crash on the shoreline, and they start kissing
- H. The story then progresses through the assault, and how Avery doesn't want to have sex, but the boy doesn't seem to care
- I. The chapter ends with the guy walking away, leaving her there half-naked and covered in her own blood, and she passes out without soon after

IV. Chapter 4: AFTER: Avery's memorial

- A. Starts with Marty waking up, dazed and numbed by his feelings
- B. Commentary on the world as it exists, i.e. weather, neighbors, things that make him even more depressed
- C. Marty has a phone call with his mother that explains why he was so dedicated to his writing
 - 1. He tried so hard to hold onto his connection with Marilyn that he decided to give up his parenting responsibilities
- D. Marty explains how things feel *different* and wrong throughout the morning
- E. Marty and Tony have contrived, brief conversations that don't amount to much, mostly small talk to try to fill the massive void they're both feeling
- F. As they go to leave, Marty and Tony argue about Avery's car in the garage, and how it's causing problems because no one wants to do anything about it

1. Tony thinks it's stupid that Marty won't park his car in the garage bay next to it, even though there's space for it
 2. They both know that it's because it's too hard for them to think about the fact that Avery will never drive it again
- G. Once Marty and Tony show up at the celebration of life, Tony gets out of the car and Marty unexpectedly drives away
- H. Marty takes Avery's urn to the local ice cream place where he used to take the kids before Marilyn died
- I. He gets her an ice cream even though she's not able to eat it, and the chapter ends with Marty having ice cream with his little girl for the last time
- V. Chapter 5: The day after the assault and going back to school
- A. Avery wakes up on the beach in the early morning with blood all over her legs, and she's confused about what happened to her
 - B. She's in intense pain but manages to get to her car and gets home
 - C. Tries to put the pieces of the night together throughout the day
 - D. Skips school, her friends reach out asking why she's not there
 - E. She stays silent about what happened until she has a better idea of what exactly went down
 - F. Avery goes back to school to realize that everyone's talking about her and how she hooked up with a guy who attends a private school at the party the weekend before

- G. She draws people's attention in ways that she is unaccustomed to, and it immediately begins to bother her
- H. Her friends ask her about bruises, scratches on her body but she says it's just from a biking accident
- I. The "biking accident" is the reason why she missed school the day before
- J. As she hears the rumors about her swirl through the school, she realizes that she was raped and that everyone thinks she's a slut because of what happened to her
- K. No one saw what really happened, so she maintains the story that people are spreading so that she doesn't have to admit that she was assaulted

VI. Chapter 6: Marty finds the journal

- A. While sitting in Avery's room after her memorial, Marty notices a loose floorboard that is slightly ajar near her closet
- B. He pops the board up to see a collection of Avery's most prized possessions and, with them, all of her journals that she maintained religiously
- C. He's conflicted about whether or not to read what she'd confided in the pages, but he soon realizes that it might be the only way he can learn more about who his daughter was and why she chose to commit suicide
- D. Marty learns about Avery's assault and struggles to understand how he let it happen to her
- E. From here on, the story will follow Marty's exploration of Avery's journal and see how it alters how he lives his life and parents Tony

- VII. Chapter 7: Avery's first interaction with her abuser post-assault
- A. Opens with a passage from her journal, told from a first person present tense perspective
 - B. Avery begins to settle into her classes despite struggling with what happened to her
 - C. She walks into her senior English class when she notices a new student who already seems to be getting into people's good graces
 - D. She recognizes him as the guy from the party, her assaulter, and the audience hears his name for the first time (Drew Conrad)
 - E. He makes eye contact with her from across the room and it sends chills down her spine
 - F. She immediately begins to register all of the memories from that night with a new sense of clarity, and it makes her sick to her stomach
 - G. She gets sent home by the nurse, and spends the rest of the day scrubbing her body in the shower because she wants to get every trace of her assault off of her
 - H. She hides from her brother and pretends to be asleep so that she doesn't have to check in with him about her day
 - I. The chapter ends with her crying herself to sleep
- VIII. Chapter 8: Marty breaks down
- A. As Marty reads through Avery's journal, he sinks further and further into a grief-ridden, depressive state

- B. This chapter focuses on what is happening inside Marty's head as he attempts to process all of his feelings
 - C. Sharp shifts between sadness and anger
 - D. This chapter is going to feel incredibly disjointed and confusing, because that's how Marty is feeling
 - E. The chapter will end with Tony coming to comfort him, and this will cause him to completely break down
- IX. Chapter 9: Avery speaks up
- A. After seeing Drew wander the same halls as her, Avery really begins to struggle with the constant reminder of her trauma
 - B. She becomes more reserved and less like her usual cheerful self
 - C. Her feelings only become more confounded when Natalie, her best friend, admits that her and Drew are beginning to build a romantic relationship
 - D. After hearing this news, Avery decides to tell Natalie and their other friend, Harper, about what actually happened that night, because she can no longer keep it to herself
 - E. Natalie immediately becomes defensive of Drew and refuses to believe Avery, and she claims that Avery is just jealous because Drew rejected her after they had sex at the party
 - F. Harper is much more compassionate and believes Avery, which causes a rift to form between the friends
- X. Chapter 10: Marty makes a plan

- A. After having his complete breakdown over Avery's journal, Marty decides that he wants to learn more about who his daughter was before she died
- B. He uses her journal to guide him through the parts of her life that he was never aware of, grasping for anything to help him understand her better
- C. He reaches out to some of Avery's friends, including Natalie and Harper, to see what they have to say about the entire situation, and it's weird and a little creepy
 - 1. Natalie still maintains that she doesn't believe that Avery was raped but does admit to greatly missing her friend
 - 2. Harper feels really guilty for not being more supportive of Avery and for not helping her find a healthy outlet for her struggle
- D. Harper and Marty bond in their collective grief, and it helps them both to hear what each other has to say about Avery
- E. Throughout the chapter, there will be little bits of Marty's notes and what he's thinking about as he talks to Avery's friends

XI. Chapter 11: Avery seeks help at school

- A. It doesn't take long for Avery to completely shut down from her trauma, and she finally realizes that she needs to talk to someone about it or else she'll never feel better
- B. She takes her study hall period to go to the guidance counselor, and when she sees her, it's clear that something is wrong
- C. Mrs. Hernandez, the school's counselor, sits Avery down and asks her what has been going on to put her in such a difficult mental space

- D. Avery struggles to verbalize her thoughts, and Mrs. Hernandez begins to push her to share what's made her so distraught
- E. Avery really struggles to get the words out, because saying them out loud makes them real in a way she hadn't conceptualized before
- F. Mrs. Hernandez pushes harder, because she really wants to help Avery in any way that she can
- G. She finally musters up enough courage to tell her that she was raped, and that the perpetrator was wandering the halls of the school as if he did nothing wrong
 - 1. She can't say Drew's name and doesn't even care if he gets in trouble, but she just wants someone to make her feel better and tell her that everything is going to be okay
- H. Mrs. Hernandez tells Avery that she has to file a police report, but that there's nothing they can do about it without her giving the name of her perpetrator
- I. Avery explains that she doesn't need anything to happen, she just needs someone to talk to because the weight of her trauma is too much for her to bear alone
- J. Mrs. Hernandez struggles to believe what Avery has told her because she's unwilling to provide a name to the police, but she does her best to offer advice to make her feel better in any way that she can

- K. Mrs. Hernandez keeps pushing Avery to name her abuser, and Avery soon realizes that the counselor won't offer her the emotional support that she needs because she's too focused on filing her report for the police
- L. The chapter ends with Avery leaving the guidance counselor's office with a single tear rolling down her cheek, succumbing to the realization that no one is going to be able to help her

XII. Chapter 12: Marty's fury at the school

- A. Marty reads about the terrible experience that Avery had with the guidance counselor, and it makes him so upset that he immediately goes to talk to her
- B. Mrs. Hernandez and Marty have a heated argument about what happened, with Marty blaming her for not being more responsive to Avery's struggle
- C. Mrs. Hernandez admits that she should've done more to help her, and that she feels incredibly guilty for not noticing all of the signs of Avery's depression
- D. Mrs. Hernandez breaks down and apologizes to Marty, saying that she would change everything if she could
- E. After talking to the guidance counselor, Marty makes his way to the principal's office to see why there wasn't more to curb the harassment and bullying that Avery was experiencing
- F. The principal, Mr. Dakota, tries to console hysterical Marty by giving him generic affirmations and formal apologies, but Marty is not having it

- G. Marty screams at Mr. Dakota, claiming that he failed her and that it's because of his lack of control over the school that Avery is dead
- H. Marty makes a huge scene that attracts a lot of attention from students and other staff
- I. The chapter ends when Mr. Dakota refuses to take more of Marty's flack, and kicks him out of the school

XIII. Chapter 13: Avery tries, and fails, to talk to Marty about her life

- A. The day after Avery visits Mrs. Hernandez, she calls her dad who's in the midst of another book signing to see if he's available to talk to her
- B. She feels like she has no one else to turn to, and that he's the only one who will be able to make her feel better about the whole situation
- C. He answers the phone with exasperation, annoyed that she is interrupting him during an important book signing event and that he doesn't have time for her today
- D. She tells him that something bad has happened, and that she really needs him to come home because she's not doing well
- E. He responds that he won't come home because his work is what's paying for everything that they have, his stories are more important than the life he's missing out on, and that she'll just have to deal with whatever was going on without him
- F. Marty is rude and short with her, and she knows that if she pushes it any further, he'll just get very angry, so she pretends like it's something she can handle on her own

G. In this chapter, Avery officially feels like she has no one to talk to, so she's effectively given up on getting help

XIV. Chapter 14: Marty's recollection of the previous chapter

A. When Marty reads about Avery's recollection of this experience, he thinks back to that call and how he remembered it happening

B. He recalls just how disinterested he was, and how he only ever cared about his work and being a successful writer

C. He asks himself how he could possibly have missed the pain in her voice and how desperate she was to talk to him about what happened

D. Marty heads to a local bar on the outskirts of town to drown his sorrows and escape the reality of his terrible parenting

E. He gets really drunk and wallows in the life that he has developed, and he chooses to vent to a stranger about his dead daughter

F. At this point in the storyline, Marty hits his lowest low, and really takes some time to evaluate his role as a parent to Tony, vowing to be more present and active in his life

G. Marty thinks about what would've happened if Marilyn was still alive, and how different things would have been had she been there to support Avery

H. He begins to realize that family is the most important thing, and that nothing else even comes close to the happiness and comfort that family brings

I. At this point, he's done caring about his career and wants to make sure that he doesn't ruin the little bit of family that he has left

XV. Chapter 15: Avery turns inward and begins to shut down

- A. After trying to reach out to the important adults in her life and failing to receive any helpful feedback, Avery feels incredibly alone and begins to isolate herself from society
- B. She goes to school, but doesn't pay attention to teachers and lacks all motivation to keep up with her academics
- C. Her friends have welcomed Drew into their crowd, which further alienates Avery, because she doesn't want to be around him or associate with him in any way
- D. She becomes very alone and chooses to sit outside by a tree during her free time instead of with her friends in the cafeteria, where she journals and considers the circumstances of her life
- E. At this point, she's sinking further and further into her depression; she isn't eating or sleeping much, and she has dissociated from every person she was once close to
- F. Harper, the friend who once believed Avery, has given up trying to help her because Avery refuses to be helped and won't open up to her in the way that she needs
- G. The only one who notices Avery's decline is Tony, and he checks in with her to make sure she's okay, but by this point, it doesn't seem to do much
 - 1. They have an entire conversation about death and loss, and Tony thinks it's because Avery misses their mom, but it's also because Avery is considering suicide for the first time

H. Simon also chooses to quit working for the Landon family in this chapter, because he thinks that it will influence Marty to come home and play a more of an active role in his children's lives, but it leaves Avery feeling even more alone than she ever did before

XVI. Chapter 16: Marty and Tony bond over their loss

- A. When Marty gets home from the bar and drowning his sorrows, he notices Tony sitting in the living room, right next to Avery's chair (the chair that she claimed as hers when they were little and would yell at people for sitting in)
- B. They begin to talk about the chair, mentioning every little element of its appearance and how it's worn perfectly to the shape of Avery's body
- C. Their analysis of the chair is meant to symbolize the void that Avery left in their lives and emphasize how they both share the same missing piece
- D. Tony unexpectedly mentions the conversation he had with Avery about death, and how he wished he realized that she was struggling
- E. Tony confides in his father, talking about how much he misses her and how guilty he feels for not being a better friend to her, because he was the only one that she really had growing up who didn't expect anything from her or want her to be something that she wasn't
- F. Marty realizes that his son is struggling just as much as he is, and that he needs to be there for him in the way that he wasn't there for Avery

- G. Marty makes a promise to Tony, telling him that he will always be there to support him and to listen to him when he needs someone to talk to, because he is done being absent in his life

XVII. Chapter 17: Avery confronts Drew

- A. At this point, Avery has reached her lowest point, and the only thing she wants to do is to ask Drew why he raped her
- B. She corners him in the cafeteria, in front of the entire school, and calls him out
- C. He calls her crazy and says that she's just upset that he isn't interested in her; that he was only interested in having sex
- D. She says that she didn't want to have sex, and that he forced her into a situation that she was uncomfortable with
- E. He claims that she was moaning his name, asking to be intimate with him
- F. She asks him why he didn't stop when she started to bleed or when she went unconscious, and he argues that she's lying to make herself feel better about being a one-night stand that "wasn't even that good"
- G. She pushes him even further and claims that he knew exactly what he was doing, or else he would've caught on to her discomfort and anguish while it was happening
- H. She calls him a rapist, and that really sets him off and triggers the fury that she recalls from the assault
- I. He calls her crazy, and says that he never should've slept with her because there's too much emotional baggage with her

- J. The chapter ends with Avery storming out of the now completely silent cafeteria, satisfied that she managed to show some of his true colors to the entire school but also upset that no one will ever believe her

XVIII. Chapter 18: Marty finally understands how Avery was feeling

- A. After Marty reads through every entry in Avery's journal, he begins to conceptualize her death as her way of cutting ties with the pain that she'd been feeling after her assault
- B. Though he is still incredibly sad by the situation, he realizes that she felt like she had to do this, because she had no other choice or way to break free from her pain
- C. He uses this realization to completely alter his way of thinking
- D. He calls his publisher and tells him that he's retiring immediately, and that he's no longer going to prioritize writing over his family
- E. He calls to Tony and asks him if he wants to get some ice cream at the place they always went to when Marilyn was alive
- F. They go get ice cream, and order one for Avery, because she was never truly going to be gone from their lives if they don't let her be
- G. This is meant to serve as Marty's resolution; him realizing the importance of family and making sure that there's a good support system regardless of what is going on anywhere else
- H. This chapter will allude to Avery's suicide, but it won't specifically speak it into existence, so that the following chapter can detail what exactly happened

- XIX. Chapter 19: Avery makes her decision to commit suicide, her only way out of the misery she's been feeling
- A. After months of struggling with the weight of her trauma, Avery decides that she can't take the burden anymore
 - B. She begins going through the stuff in her room and decides that she wants to give some of her most valuable possessions away to the people she loves most
 - C. She walks over to her record collection and scans through them, remembering that most of them were once her mothers and recalling important memories that they hold for her
 - D. She calls Tony into her room and hands him the records, telling him that they're taking up too much space, so she wants to give them to him
 - 1. This is very important, because she used to cherish the records that used to be their mothers and her parting with them emphasizes her dissociation from reality
 - 2. Tony is really excited to finally have the records, and his excitement distracts him from the significance of the gesture that Avery is making
 - E. Tony takes the records to his room and immediately begins playing around with them, leaving Avery alone to continue going through her stuff
 - F. She then takes her vintage collection of classic literature and puts them in a box with "for Dad" written on it, because she knows that he'll appreciate them and take good care of them when she's no longer there

- G. She takes the box and leaves it by Marty's bed, knowing that he'll see it the next time he comes home
- H. Without another look, she closes her door and makes her way into the bathroom, where she grabs a bottle of painkillers
- I. She hollers back up to Tony that she's taking a walk, telling him that she loves him and that she'll see him around, but she doesn't know if he hears her, because he's listening to a Rolling Stones record
- J. She wanders her way through the entire town, passing her old friends' houses and thinking back to all of the good memories that she used to have there
1. However, she no longer feels happiness from the memories; her trauma has made her numb to all facets of her emotions
- K. She makes her way to the river's edge, where the kids in town always swim in the summertime, and she sits on the bank to admire the power that the river has
- L. She sits for awhile, thinking about how easily the water could swallow her up and take her away from the pain she's been dealing with for months
- M. She takes six of the painkillers out of the bottle and swallows them, one after another
- N. She then positions herself on the riverbank so that, once she passes out, her body will roll into the water and she'll finally be free from life
- O. The chapter ends with her fading into nothingness, but the audience sees her finally at peace, which is her final resolution

- XX. Chapter 20: Marty on the one-year anniversary of Avery's death
- A. Marty and Tony visit Avery at the cemetery, and give her an update of their lives in the year since she passed away
 - B. Tony talks about getting into his dream college (NYU) and how excited he is to be starting classes in the fall
 - C. He tells her that he did it for her, because he wanted to make her proud
 - D. Marty talks about how proud of Tony he is, and how much he wished that she and Marilyn were there to see just how amazing he is
 - E. They lay a bouquet of lilies on her gravestone and exist within the silence of the cemetery, holding onto the connection that they have with her without needing to say a single word
 - F. After a few minutes, Marty looks over at Tony with a tear in his eye, grabs his hand, and gives it a gentle squeeze as the two of them share in their combined grief that may never truly go away completely

1. AVERY

“So, what do you think I should wear to Matt’s party this weekend?” I ask my best friends Natalie and Harper over a FaceTime call. I’ve always been notoriously bad at planning outfits and, since my mom’s not around to help me, I tend to rely on the support of my fashion-forward, supermodel-esque best friends whenever we have a party to go to. It’s the day before our last first day of school, and yet all I can think about is looking good this weekend. Matt Healey is the youngest of the Healey sons, and they’ve been known all over town for their end-of-summer bashes that they throw every August at their family’s beach house. Everyone and anyone in town knows about the Healeys, and for the last decade, people have flocked from all over to attend what’s always known to be the party of the year.

“I think you should go with that navy skirt that shows off your long, tan legs. You never know who might be there, and I think you deserve to find someone to hook up with before you’re busy with soccer practices and whatever else you’ve got going on this semester,” responds Natalie. Natalie Shaw is my oldest friend. We’ve been friends since preschool, because we were the only two kids in the class with a dead parent and the school thought we could bond over it. It inevitably worked because, all these years later, we’re still in each other’s lives.

“Ooh, yeah! And wear your black blouse with the open back. You’ll look hot yet classy, in an understated kinda way,” chimes Harper, who has always known how to complete an ensemble no matter the occasion. Now, though Natalie has been in my life

longer than anyone else, Harper Daniels is my best friend. She's been the one to get me through every trial and tribulation throughout high school, and she understands the way my mind works in ways that no one else does. She can read my emotions and body language, and she tells me exactly what I need to hear whenever I'm struggling to adequately process my thoughts. By all rights, she's like my other half.

"Are you sure I won't look like I'm trying too hard? I don't want people to think I'm desperate or anything," I retort as I hold up the potential outfit they've picked for me. It's cute, I'll admit, but I want to make sure I don't look like a complete slut.

"No, no, don't be silly! I think it'll look great and you'll attract the right kind of attention," Harper assures, selling me on the outfit.

"And once you curl your hair, you'll look like a hotter version of Selena Gomez. You'll look great, I promise you," Natalie adds, and as I picture the look in my head, I get really excited. It's my last Healey summer party, and I want to leave a lasting impression. I thank them again and end the call so I can get all of my school stuff ready for tomorrow, making sure everything's organized and in its rightful place so I'm not left scrambling in the morning.

It doesn't take me long to realize that Dad's not home. I really shouldn't be surprised—he's been gone for the entire summer and keeps making excuses when I ask him when he's coming back to see us. Still, though, I thought that this week was going to be different. He's never missed our first day of school. I wander down to the kitchen and see my younger brother Tony perched on a stool by the kitchen island, staring intently at the chess board in front of him as he plays a game with our in-home chef Simon.

“You know that you’re about to lose, right?” Simon says to him with amusement thick in his voice, and I see the frustration in Tony’s face as he ponders his next move.

“You seem awfully cocky for someone who lost his queen on the second move,” replies Tony, with a hint of a grin peeking through his steely bravado. “I know what I’m doing, believe me.”

Tony moves one of his bishops across the board to capture Simon’s last knight, and Simon curses silently under his breath, playing into the intensity of the game. I roll my eyes at the two of them and make my way to the fridge to see what we’ve got to snack on.

“We don’t have the stuff for special pancakes in the morning,” Tony says to me with sadness thick in his voice. I turn towards him and shrug, pretending that I wasn’t intentionally looking for those ingredients in the fridge.

“It’s fine. I’m sure Simon here can make us some kick-ass pancakes that’ll be way better than Dad’s anyway,” I reply, determined to hide my own disappointment by the fact that Dad won’t be here in the morning. “Besides, we knew that there was a good chance Dad wasn’t going to make it, remember? He had that interview with “Good Morning America” yesterday, so it was gonna be hard for him to get home in time. We’ll be okay, I promise.”

“But we’ve never started school without those special pancakes. We’re breaking a decade-long tradition here. It feels like bad juju or something,” retorts Tony.

“Juju? Really, Tony? I think we’re old enough now to realize that pancakes won’t keep all our problems away, you know. Besides, we should be able to get ready for school without our daddy helping us. You’re a junior now, buddy. You can handle it.”

Tony looks over at me with a disgruntled look but doesn't say anything else. I feel a little bad for diminishing his emotions, but he's been disappointed by our father so much over the past several years that he needs to realize that Dad's never going to change. He needs to stop believing that Dad is a superhero, because he's proven that he really isn't.

"What makes these pancakes so special, anyway?" Simon asks in an attempt to break the tension in the room.

"Dad makes them with special Belgian chocolate and makes a strawberry syrup to put on top, like a fancier version of IHOP. They're amazing," Tony responds.

"Well, I know I'm not your dad, but I do know how to cook. I'll do my best to make your special pancakes tomorrow, Ton. Don't worry," Simon says, and I appreciate him trying to make Tony feel better. I don't have the heart to tell him that it just won't be the same, that it was because our dad made them that they were so special.

Tony slides a rook towards the other side of the chess board and shouts "Check mate!" towards Simon.

"Goddamn it! I totally thought I had you!" Simon yells, feigning a burst of anger. "How is it that we play this game EVERY afternoon and I still have yet to win? I think someone's cheating!"

"Cheating? How dare you insult me like that! I *told* you that I knew what I was doing! I'm just too good for you" he brags, and Simon acts all upset, like he didn't really just let Tony win. That's the thing with them; Simon has been letting Tony win games against him for years, because the poor kid deserves something to look forward to in his life after being constantly let down by Dad. Simon just likes seeing Tony happy.

“You guys really are two peas in a freakin’ pod, aren’t you?” I retort as they begin their next game.

“Hey, you just hate us ‘cause you ain’t us,” Simon calls back, successfully sounding like a middle-aged man trying desperately to sound cool. I smile at them and start back towards my room, so I can get ready for bed.

“Ton, don’t stay up too late tonight. You can’t be late on your first day tomorrow, and I’m not about to fight you when I come in to wake you up in the morning. I’m warning you now, I’m not going to be happy if you’re grumpy,” I shout behind me, and Tony responds with a salute and a smile. He knows better than to piss me off, especially when it comes to something like this. I will not be late for school, even if he doesn’t seem to care.

It’s 6:15 when my alarm goes off. I can feel the excitement raging through my body as I think about all of the great things that are going to happen this year, and all of the fun I’m going to have now that I’m a senior. I roll out of bed and immediately take off towards the kitchen, momentarily forgetting that Dad’s not here to make us breakfast like he usually is. Instead, Simon is busy making his own version of chocolate chip pancakes, which smell pretty good, but just not like Dad’s. I walk in and perch myself on the purple stool, and Simon greets me by putting a cup of dutch hot cocoa on the counter in front of me. It’s my favorite drink in the morning, and he knew that it would make me feel a little better about Dad missing our special morning.

“Why hello there, official high school senior! How does it feel?” Simon asks me, and I can’t help but smile and feel all warm inside.

“It feels pretty freakin’ great, actually. I can’t wait for all of the fun extra activities and privileges that I’ve been working for throughout my entire high school career!” I respond, giddy with excitement, like a six-year-old on Christmas morning. I take a big sip of my cocoa and watch Simon as he whips some egg whites for the pancakes, and I savor the moment, because I know there’ll never be another one like it. “I better go wake Tony up so that he’s actually ready to go before we have to leave. Breakfast smells great!” I add, to make sure he knows I appreciate him.

I climb the steps to the second floor of the house, down the long hallway and come to Tony’s closed door. I pause for a moment to listen, making sure he’s still sound asleep, and then I slowly creak the door open. I look at him, peaceful and innocent, and for a second, I consider not waking him up just yet. However, the longer I wait, the less likely we’ll be at school on time, so I begin to jump on his bed and shake him all around to get him up.

“WAKEY WAKEY, EGGS AND BAKEY!” I scream while I jump, laughing in between chants. “Well, there’s technically no eggs and bacon for breakfast, but the premise is all the same. GET UP, TONY!”

He manages to grab my ankle while I’m in the air and slams me down on the bed, which is his way of telling me to get the hell out of his room. Still laughing, I get up off his bed and stare at him while he begrudgingly sits up.

“I really hate you sometimes, you know that?” he says to me with disdain in his voice. I just smile back at him and tell him breakfast is ready. Ah, it’s good to be the older sister sometimes.

I walk back into the kitchen to see a massive stack of pillowy pancakes on the island, steaming and waiting to be eaten. I tell Simon that Tony's on his way as I grab a plate and stab at a couple of the cakes for myself.

"You really didn't have to do this, you know. I know how much work this must've been," I say to Simon, once I realize just how much effort must've gone into making this gourmet breakfast for two teenagers.

"Well, technically I'm paid to make you whatever your heart desires. So yeah, I actually did. But it's okay, I know how much this means to you and Ton. I just wanted to make you two happy on your first day," Simon replies with a smile on his face. "Besides, my little Italian Nona would beat me to death if she found out I wasn't feeding you kids well. Where I come from, food is a key pillar of life, and we must celebrate it as much as we can. Now, eat up." Despite the fact that he's been working for our family for almost a decade, he never fails to amaze me. We really don't deserve this guy.

It takes Tony approximately seven minutes to make his way to the kitchen, and I can tell that he's still shaking off the early morning drowsiness. Simon pours a second cup of cocoa and hands it to him, and he closes his eyes as he savors his first sip of the warm liquid. He silently grabs a plate and takes four of the massive pancakes from the tray, piles them high with the strawberry compote, a dollop of whipped cream, and wanders back to his room all without saying a word.

"Wow, I truly have the weirdest brother on the planet," I tell Simon, and he just nods in agreement. Nothing is going to make this day worse. Not even a crabby Tony. I smile at Simon, thank him again for the great breakfast, and head up to my room to get ready for school.

“Why the hell are we here a full 45 minutes early? There’s literally no one else even here yet, you doofus!” Tony growls at me as we pull into the school parking lot around 7:15.

“I needed to make sure we got here early enough so that I could get a good parking spot in the senior lot. You KNOW there’s people who fight over the primo spots right by the front door, and I’m trying to claim it early so no one else ever even tries to park here. This will be my spot, and I’m gonna make sure of it,” I respond, and he just rolls his eyes at me as he climbs out of the car. “If you don’t like it, you can take the damn bus!” I call as he walks away from me, and he flips his middle finger up at me with a smile, his signature move to show me he’s just playing around. I step out of my cream-colored Jeep—the car that dad got for me after mom died, his way of distracting me from my own grief—and make my way towards the school, making a beeline to the large bench seat by the bay window in the atrium of the school. That’s where the seniors always get to sit, and I’ve dreamed of being in that spot since I was a first year. It’s finally mine.

I sit there by myself for about a half hour, until my friends finally show up. Natalie and Harper walk in together, walking like they own the place, and make a beeline for me across the atrium with excitement in their eyes. I can tell that they’re just as pumped about being seniors as I am, and within minutes, people are coming up to us asking about whatever fun things we did over the summer. Because I spent most of my summer at various soccer conditioning and technique camps, I don’t have much else to report, not that anyone is really surprised. I live, sleep and breathe soccer. I’ve been

playing since I was five years old—right after Mom died—and it’s been my favorite sport ever since. My coaches keep telling me how I could give Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan a run for their money, even though I know they’re pulling my leg. Nonetheless, I need to be at my best this year, so I can attract college scouts and get a scholarship to a nice school far away from here.

After what feels like five minutes, the bell rings, and we’re all off to our first classes of the day, and that’s how the entire day goes by. Each class flows into the next, and time passes much too quickly for it being my last first day. Mrs. Robertson’s AP Lit class follows calculus with Mr. Monroe, then AP Chemistry before lunch. The entire morning is get-to-know-you games and class syllabi and going over the expectations of each classroom, as if we haven’t done this every single year since we were five. Lunch time quickly comes around, and I make my way to the seniors-only lunch room, where I see Harper in deep conversation with football quarterback Troy Danes at the center table. I walk up to them and sit down quietly, making sure I’m not interrupting them, and I begin to pull out food.

“What kinda sandwich you got there, Landon?” Troy asks me hungrily, cutting off Harper mid-sentence.

“Roast beef with horseradish mayo, on multigrain bread. Looks good, doesn’t it?” I reply, wagging the sandwich under his nose and taking a big bite.

“Got one over there for me? I’m starving and forgot to bring something,” he asks, and I simply roll my eyes as I hand over the other half. What he doesn’t know is that I have homemade garlic butter French fries and a chocolate lava cake also. Simon truly makes the best lunches for us.

“How did you forget lunch on the first day of school? It’s like the one day you’re supposed to have your shit together,” Harper asks Troy, and he just shrugs. She looks over at me, and I just give her a small smile, because I really don’t mind helping a friend out, and we have plenty of food at home anyway. I have a sneaky suspicion that I’m going to be providing Troy lunch for the rest of the school year.

“So, what were y’all talking about so intently when I walked in? Find a cute girl already, Troy?” I ask them in an attempt to change the subject.

“We were just talking about the logistics of the Healey party. Y’know, who’s driving, what the theme is this year, when we need to be there. They always try to switch things up every year, so I just wanna make sure I have all the info right,” Harper responds, and I can sense her excitement. In fact, the whole school is buzzing around with anticipation, because we all plan on being at that epic party.

“So, what *is* the theme this year? Anything’ll be better than the outer space theme of 2018. That was a goddamn hot mess,” I ask, hoping that the outfit we’ve decided on will still be appropriate.

“I think it’s “under the stars” or something. It sounds like a theme for a fucking prom, but it’s fine. I don’t really know how to dress for something like that, so I think I’m just gonna plan to wear something summery and light, so I don’t get really hot,” Harper answers.

“That makes perfect sense to me. I hope my outfit fits the theme enough. I’m not gonna bother changing it,” I say, and she nods, reassuring me that it’ll be totally fine. We finish eating lunch while talking about our first few classes, and I can already tell that this is going to be the best year ever.

We get home around 4:30. I had my first regular soccer practice, and Tony decided to join the academic decathlon team, so we both had to stay after school. When I met up with him at the car, he wouldn't stop talking about how great his first day had been.

"I'm telling you, Avery. My classes this year are going to be awesome. I have Mr. DiPietro for biology and Ms. Hannigan for AP Government. She's so hot, I could listen to her talk all day long. And everyone knows DiPietro is the chilliest dude. He might actually make me *like* science!" Tony exclaims.

"I'm really glad you had a great day. I have some awesome classes too, and I can't wait to see who makes captain for soccer this year. I have a good feeling about it finally being me," I respond, and we spend the whole car ride like this, talking giddily about all of the amazing things we're going to have this year. When we pull into the driveway, we both realize that Dad still isn't home. I guess I should've assumed that this was going to be the case. He missed this morning, after all. Still, I held out hope that he was going to surprise us tonight and apologize for missing our special morning. I can tell that Tony was hoping for the same thing, and we quickly lock eyes before getting out of the car. It's unbelievable how, after all this time, he still manages to disappoint us.

2. MARTY, BEFORE

In the life of a New York Times bestselling author, the work is never done. I awake to the sound of my cell phone ringing and, without even having to look at the caller-ID, I know it's my agent, Dominic. The brightness of the screen cuts through the darkness of morning dawn, and I silently curse the man for insisting on getting me up before daybreak.

"How many times do we have to go over the timeline for your new novel? You do realize that your painfully slow editing skills are costing us both a shit ton of money, right?" Dominic says, his standard way of greeting me ever since we started working together.

"Good morning to you too, Dom," I interject in between his hostile jabs.

"I've been with you for over five years, Marty. We should have a better system than this. You know that I was supposed to send the final edits of your damn book to the publisher last week! This isn't your first book, so you should know the system operates at this point. They're threatening to cut funding because of how fucking slow you've been. D'you hear me? No funding means no livelihood, and you know I won't look good in polyester," Dom said to me. I picture him looking down at his navy blue custom Dolce and Gabbana suit, horrified by the potential threat to his preferred fashion choices.

"Maybe you've forgotten, Dominic, but this is the first time I've ever been *just* a novelist. The last time I did this, I was still teaching part time, so it was easier to write when I only had limited time in my schedule to do it. I have so much time to sit around

that I can't collect my thoughts well enough, and I know that won't make sense to you, but that's how my brain functions. Lucky for you, at this point, I just have some minor revisions to finish up in the last two chapters before I send the pages off to the editor. He should have them by the end of the day today, which is honestly pretty exciting, seeing as they're the last ones that needed revision. As long as I get the OK from the editor this afternoon, the book will officially be done today," I reply.

"Now that's what I like to hear. Perfect timing too, 'cause I've scheduled a meeting with the execs at "Good Morning America" in the hopes of getting you an interview to talk about the new book. You'll talk about release dates and general plotlines, all the usual stuff. I'm hoping we can get you in sometime next week, no later than the 1st of September. That'll set us up perfectly for a fall release," Dom says, breathing heavily from over caffeination and sleep deprivation. "By the way, there's no need to get sassy with me. I'm just trying to make sure we're both gonna have a career after this book is done."

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever you say, big guy. I have a problem with September 1st though. I'm supposed to be home with the kids for the first two weeks of the month to help them get ready for school to start. I promised them that I'd only be in New York for a couple days each week to cater to your endless meetings and publicity events, but I've only made it home every other weekend since I started the damn book. I can't miss Avery's last first day of high school," I declared with a strained tone. I know that arguing with Dominic's plan was futile; he was responsible for making every business decision on my behalf, regardless of how I felt about it. It was in his contract.

“Marty, I know how you feel, but Tony and Avery aren’t little kids anymore. They can handle themselves, and you have that personal home chef there with them so that they don’t go hungry. Besides, they know that gigs like GMA will make you more money and, ergo, give them a better life. You’re doing it for them, trust me,” Dom replies, dismissing me yet again to get what he wants.

“I’ve never missed a first day of school, Dom. I look forward to making them my special strawberry chocolate chip pancakes in the morning, because it’s our yearly tradition. I’m not missing it for anything,” I respond, determined for him to listen to me for once.

“You’re killing me, Marty. How about this: if you do the meeting with GMA on Wednesday, I’ll personally make sure that you’re home with plenty of time to gorge yourself in breakfast heaven. Deal?”

“Fine. I’m holding you to it, though. Seriously. I’m going to be home for their first day.”

“Aye aye, captain. Don’t forget to send me those pages!” Dominic exclaims as he hangs up.

That’s usually how our conversations go; he claims I’m making his life worse in one way or another and I have to plead with him to let me live some semblance of a normal life with my kids. He usually gets what he wants, though, because he’s ultimately right most of the time. He knows what I have to do for my book to be a success, and I just have to go along with it, even if it means being home less than I’d like.

I look over at my bedside table and see 4:37AM shining back at me from my alarm clock. If I want to get my final edits done on time like Dominic wants, I need to get

motivated. I roll out of bed and open the curtains to see the sky just beginning to lighten. The smell of rich Italian espresso wafts down the hallway, and it draws me across my East Village penthouse to the little kitchen where my assistant Jethro is perched by the coffee machine.

“I overheard you on the phone with Dominic and figured that you weren’t going back to sleep,” he says to me as he hands me the small mug. “I hope he’s not pushing you too hard to meet impossible deadlines.”

“He knows what I need to do to sell this damn book. It’s not ideal, but I have to do what he tells me to do, ‘cause it’ll all be worth it in the end,” I reply with a hint of exasperation in my voice. I pay Jethro to keep my suite tidy and help me out with the everyday tasks that I’m too busy to handle on my own. I don’t need him criticizing my livelihood because, in the end, it’s what pays his paycheck every week.

“Just be aware that Dominic doesn’t care about you or your family. All he sees is dollar signs,” he replies with a disapproving look. I can tell that he has even more he wants to say, but he wisely chooses to keep it to himself as he walks away. The bastard’s right, even if I don’t want to admit it, but it doesn’t really matter. Dom may only care about the money, but at least I know that we’ll both be making a shit ton of dough off the book’s success, so as long as he’s happy, I am too.

I sip my espresso as I wander back down the hallway to my room. I have to get dressed before I do anything, because I can never seem to focus with pajamas on. I put on some jeans and a cable knit sweater that Marilyn got me for our second wedding anniversary. I look at myself in the mirror and, for a moment, I picture her arms wrapping around my stomach, the warmth of her hands on my chest and the distinct smell of her

perfume radiating off her skin. I miss her every single day, and I wish she was still here to see how successful I am now. She would be so proud of me. I can't think about her for too long though because, if I do, I'll completely break down, and I won't get any work done. I force the image of her face from my mind, slip on some loafers, and make my way to my office to finish the edits that Dominic is so bent out of shape about.

I sit down at my mahogany writing desk and get to work going through the story that I've been working on for the last year once more. I start reading through the editor's comments for me and it doesn't take me long to get into a groove. I go through and fix all of the spelling and grammar mistakes that I seemed to overlook during the initial writing, and I'm about to start reworking the final resolution of the novel when my phone starts ringing. When I pick it up, I see my daughter Avery's name flash across the screen, and I hesitate to answer it because I'm in the zone. If I break the momentum I currently have going on here, I may never get it back. I'm sure she won't mind if I just call her when I'm done working. I let the call go to my voicemail and continue with my revisions, excited that the end of this book is finally in sight. My phone buzzes again, and it's Avery calling a second time. I've told her so many times not to call me during the work day because I'm usually too busy to talk and I hate being disrupted. What could possibly be so important that she has to bother me while I'm working?

"What do you need, Avery? I'm really busy right now," I say when I answer the phone. I don't even bother to hide the annoyance in my voice because she knows how focused I need to be to write well.

"I just wanted to check in with you to see when you're coming home for our first day of school. You never answered my texts about it, but I want to make sure we have the

stuff to make our pancakes at the house, so you don't have to go to the store or anything," Avery responds with a little bit of hostility in her voice.

"Well, if you keep interrupting me while I work hard to finish this damn book, I won't be able to come home! Did you ever think of that? I've been working my ass off to finish this thing so I can be there for you two, but I can't get it done when I keep having phone calls to deal with. Leave me be while I work through my final edits, and I'll get back to you about when I can make you your damn breakfast," I yell into the phone, even though I know she doesn't really deserve it.

"I'm sorry, I should've known better. I'll let you get back to it," Avery responds, clearly hurt by me scolding her.

"Look, I'll call you back tonight, once I send these pages off to the editor. There's something I have to talk to you about anyway. We'll talk soon," I tell her, and I hang up before she can try to make me feel bad about shrugging her off and for not being home enough the last few months. I know she and Tony have been really missing me, but the sooner I finish this book, the better it'll be for us all.

It takes me three hours to finish my edits and, within two minutes of sending them along to Dom and the editor, my phone starts ringing.

"These chapters are so much better than before, Marty. I'm impressed that you finally got them done," Dom says to me, as if he actually read through them before calling.

"I told you I was going to have them done today! God, you act like I've been the worst writer you've ever worked with. You know I've managed to stick to our timeline

for the most part, so cut me some damn slack. I deserve more credit than that,” I respond, playing into the phony hostile tone he typically uses with me.

“Well, yeah. But it’s still fun to bust your balls a bit now that you’re more or less done. I’m gonna need you to meet me at the publisher’s office, ‘cause Fiona wants us to go over the final details of marketing the novel and the important dates coming up. Can you make it across town in a half hour?” Dom replies, and I let out an audible groan of contempt. I hate going to that office, ‘cause I always end up getting yelled at for things I have no real control over.

“Do I have to? You can’t go over that with her on your own?”

“Martin Landon! Please don’t tell me you’re actually *afraid* of Fiona. She’s harmless, believe me. She just has to make sure that she’s made a sound investment, and you know she requires all of her authors to meet with her before important book launches. She won’t let you get out of this, and neither will I,” Dom teases, and I know I have lost the battle.

“Fine, yeah. I can be there in half an hour,” I resign, and begrudgingly make my way to my room to put on a suit. I can’t visit Fiona without wearing a suit. She’d kick me right out of her office. I throw on my grey Tom Ford suit with a blue tie and a pair of black wingtips before beginning the trek towards Midtown. As I ride the elevator down to the hotel lobby, my phone buzzes in my pocket and, when I check it, I see that Tony has texted me. I don’t have time to answer him because I can’t be late for the meeting with Fiona, so I return my iPhone to my jacket pocket and enter the bustle of the busy sidewalk. I’ll text him back later.

In New York, there are two kinds of people: taxi people and subway people. Everyone I associate with here likes to take taxis everywhere. They prefer being able to take a direct route to where they need to go, and they don't mind spending more to get there. Some of them even think that taking a taxi is a status symbol, a way to flaunt their wealth in a small yet mighty way. Sophisticated people take taxis. It's always annoyed Dom that I never take taxis. I am a subway man, not because it's cheaper, but because there's usually always something interesting going on down there. I make my way towards the 96th Street entrance to the green line and hop on the 6 train towards 28th Street. I choose this train specifically because it stops at every station between my hotel and midtown, and I always like being able to see the different kinds of people who ride the train throughout the city. I usually enjoy striking up conversations with strangers to learn more about their lives and why they live in the greatest city on Earth. In fact, many of the characters in my books have been loosely based on people I met while riding the subway. It's fascinating for me to see an equally hectic yet entirely different world existing underneath the busy streets of the city.

I'm startled out of a daydream when I overhear a woman loudly scolding an adolescent boy for climbing on the metal bars lining the train car.

"How irresponsible! You know how easily you could get hurt? These things aren't just some playground for you hoodlums to play on. People ride the subway to get to their jobs, or visit family, or to do interesting things with their lives. They certainly don't need degenerates fucking around and bothering them, so if you're not gonna ride right, get the hell off," the woman lectures, and the boy just rolls his eyes and walks away before getting off at the next stop. I can tell the woman is proud of herself, like she saved

everyone else on the train from whatever trouble that boy had to offer. Something about the woman's actions just didn't sit well with me.

"Why'd you have to yell at the kid like that? He wasn't hurting anyone by trying to have some fun on his way through the city. He's just a kid," I say to her, and I can immediately tell that I should've kept my mouth shut.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? He was acting like a damn animal and his parents sure as hell weren't here to save him if he got hurt. I shouldn't have to deal with kids wandering around and pestering other people just because they're bored. If he broke his arm, were you going to bring him to the hospital?" she replies, all fired up on adrenaline and ready to fight with me again if I don't choose my next words wisely.

"No, I suppose not. That's a fair argument. Sorry to bother you," I respond, hopeful that she'll just pretend I didn't say anything.

"Yeah, that's right. Fuck right off," she says back. Good enough for me. You never know the kind of people you'll come across on the subway. I decide that it's wise to move away from the hostile woman, so I make my way towards the neighboring car. For it being early afternoon on a Wednesday, the train is dead, and I easily snag a seat near the door. I'm still about twenty minutes away from my stop, so I sit back and relax a bit, listening to the sounds all around me. I can faintly hear the beat of the song that the person next to me is listening to through their headphones, and I think they're listening to some classic Springsteen. The couple down on the other end of the car is chatting quietly, and I can just make out some of their words. From what I can understand, they're trying to find reasons why their parents shouldn't visit them for the holidays. The brunette woman thinks her father would kill her if he found out she was a lesbian, and the other

doesn't want her mother to see her freshly shaven head because it would devastate her. At least, that's what I assume they're saying, based on what I've been able to overhear. I'm a storyteller, so I can't help but be nosy with the people all around me.

I think back to the kid who was bullied off the train by the crazy woman, and I can't help but see my own children reflected in him. I've been so harsh with them recently because I've been so damn stressed with all of my deadlines fast approaching, and they must be feeling my absence much more than ever before. Poor Avery called me earlier because she wanted to put extra effort into helping me out and making my life easier, for God's sake. And yet, I screamed and hung up on her because she interrupted me. How can I so easily recognize when other people are treating random kids like shit, but I can't seem to ever have positive interactions with my own children? I dedicate so much of my time on my work to distract myself from missing Marilyn that I easily lose my temper on anyone who breaks my focus. It's even worse when it's one of the kids, because I can't hear their voices or see their faces without seeing and hearing the elements of Marilyn that I miss the most. I make a mental note to call Avery back and apologize for my terrible behavior, promising myself that I'll actually call her this time.

Dom and Fiona meet me at the front doors of the publishing house and, when I walk up to them, they're already deep in conversation about release dates, commissions and the schedule for my inevitable book signings. It takes them a moment to realize that I'm even standing there with them.

"So, Martin, Dominic here has notified me that you've finished your final edits for *Autumnal Sunsets*. Is this correct?" Fiona asks on our way to the conference room.

“Yes, ma’am. I sent them off to the editor this afternoon to make sure they’re good to go, but I feel really good about it. I think this book’s finally done,” I reply, and I can tell that she’s hearing what she wants to hear.

“I just spoke with Tom, and he says that they’re fantastic. He says you’ve really managed to portray your characters authentically. He was very impressed with your work,” Fiona responds, and starts ruffling through some paperwork she has in front of her. I look over at Dom with a confused look, because I have no idea who Tom is.

“When she says Tom, does she mean TIM? My editor’s name is Tim. I would assume that she would know that, she’s the one who hired him for God’s sake!” I whisper to Dom, and he stifles a laugh under his breath. He simply nods in return, and we both take a second to compose ourselves before continuing on with the meeting. Fiona hands us both a piece of paper with some numbers, dates, and dollar amounts on it, and I can tell that it’s the contract that I signed when I first made the deal to publish with Fiona and her team. It outlines how many copies we’re going to print, where we’re distributing them to, and how much money I’m slated to make from this release. I’ve been so busy getting the damn book done that I forgot I even signed it.

“So, as we’ve already discussed, we plan to have a ten thousand copy first launch, just so we can get a feel for how well your book competes on the market. I anticipate us selling out in a matter of weeks, so I’ll most likely place a second order for another twenty thousand copies after the first week, depending on how well it all goes,” Fiona says, and then looks over at me. “You, Martin, have to complete seven book signings across Manhattan and the other four burrows. If these signings go well, we’ll schedule an entire book tour that’ll take you across to New Jersey, New York state, and up through

New England. We'll start you at the Barnes & Noble on 5th Ave on launch day, and then go from there."

"Sure, Fiona. That all sounds great. I have to go home for a few days at the beginning of September to help my kids get ready for school to start again, but after that, I can be available. When were you thinking of starting the signings?" I ask her, and I can tell from the look on her face that she doesn't like what I just said.

"Martin, I get that you have kids, but we need you to start the day the book is released. I have you scheduled at 5th Avenue on the 1st, and then there's stops every day for the next week at bookstores throughout the burrows. You won't have time to go home and stick to the schedule we have mapped out for you," Fiona replies with a small frown. How did I know that I was going to be screwed out of my time with the kids?

"Are you sure I can't be there for even one night? It would mean the world to both them and me," I plead, but I can already tell that she's made her mind up. That's the thing about Fiona; once you stop standing your ground, she will take advantage of you in any way she possibly can.

"I'm sorry, Martin. Unfortunately for you, you're contractually obligated to maintain the schedule we have planned for you. It's not my problem that you made a promise to your kids that you can't keep. I'm sure they'll understand," Fiona says, driving the final nail into the coffin that holds whatever hope had been left. I can't believe I won't be with them on their first day of school. "Just look at the bright side, Martin," Fiona continues, "they're going to be off to college soon, so you won't have to deal with it much longer anyway." The thought of my kids going to college soon shoots a

pang of guilt through me, and I can't help but think of what life would be like if I never left them.

We continue discussing the plans for the release and, pretty soon, I forget all about having to go home. We talk about everything from money to advertising to photoshoots until all I can think about is how successful this book is predicted to be. There's so much excitement in the air that Dom and I head out to a local bar to celebrate. We order a bottle of champagne, something fancy and suitable for the occasion, followed by a second. Before I know it, it's late and I'm pretty drunk. I manage to get myself home and into bed by 3am, and I'm fast asleep without realizing I forgot to respond to my kids yet again.

3. AVERY

Today's the day we've been waiting all summer for. I open my eyes to the sound of birds chirping outside my bedroom window as the smell of Simon's famous cinnamon rolls wafts down the hallway and tickles my nose. It's just after nine in the morning, which means that I have around ten hours to get ready for the party, and I need to get started as soon as possible so that I'm good to go when Natalie and Harper come over. I crawl out of bed and make my way to the kitchen to snag one of the cinnamon rolls that coaxed me awake, and when I get there, Simon is on the phone. His back is turned to me, but I can tell by the way he's standing that it's my father. I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy that he's been able to get in touch with him when Tony and I never seem to be able to.

"I hear you, Marty. I just thought you should know that they were devastated you weren't here. I did the best I could to make their day special but, honestly, there wasn't much I could do to make up for you being gone. I love those kids like they're my own, but I'm not their father and shouldn't have to pick up your slack. You gotta try harder, Marty," I overhear Simon say into the phone. He pauses for a long moment, then lets out a long sigh. "Yeah, I know you pay me more to be here full time. It's not me I'm concerned about here, though. Those kids miss you, and there's no amount of money in the world you can pay me that'll give me the power to fill that void. It's just not gonna happen because they won't let it."

I stand there for a minute longer before I can't take it anymore. I make some noise to alert Simon that I'm behind him, and he startles before quickly saying goodbye to my dad on the phone. I pretend like I didn't hear anything, so that we don't have to talk about how much I miss my dad. We make eye contact for a moment until I offer him a small smile and we move on, us understanding each other without ever needing to say anything.

"Morning, sunshine. How'd you sleep?" Simon asks me, and I plop myself down on my stool with two of the massive pastries on the plate in front of me.

"Not too bad. I have some really exciting plans for tonight that I'm antsy for, so I was motivated to wake up a little early. Natalie and Harper are gonna be here around five to get ready, but we're all gonna be staying at Nat's tonight, so you don't have to wait up for me," I tell him as I take a big bite of the first roll. I pause for a minute to savor just how good it tastes and wipe a glob of gooey icing off my cheek. "Thanks for the breakfast, by the way. I appreciate all that you do for us, even if I don't tell you often enough," I respond with a grin. Simon smiles back at me, and I can tell that he's happy to hear that I care about him.

"Thanks, kiddo. I'll always be here for you two, no matter what," he responds, touched by my sentiment. I give him another earnest smile as I get up from the counter and, as I walk back to my room, I can't help but think about what life would be like if Simon wasn't here. I don't know what Tony and I would do without him. We don't tell him we love him enough, even though he keeps this household from completely falling into shambles. He's been a godsend my entire life, but especially over the last few years since mom died. He's been a support system for us all in some capacity or another—Dad included—and he deserves far more praise than we ever give him. I remind myself to

pick up a jar of his favorite artesian black currant preserves from the specialty foods store across town to show him that I was thinking about him.

After taking a shower and going through my extensive skincare routine, the day passes by in a blur. I get my small amount of first-week-of-school homework done so that I don't have to worry about it later, and before I know it, it's almost four-thirty in the afternoon. I hear a honk of a car horn outside my window, and when I look out, I see Natalie and Harper carrying everything they need to get ready for tonight through my front door. Seconds later, the two of them slam through the doorway, drop all of their clothes, makeup and hair products on the floor of my room and collapse onto my bed, exhausted from carrying it all down the long hallway.

"I have GOT to invest in some kind of carrying cart for this shit. I can hardly feel my arms!" Natalie exclaims, her way of greeting me.

"Y'know, Nat? Maybe we brought too much stuff. I probably didn't need to bring six pairs of shoes to choose between. And I'm sure you coulda used Avery's hair straightener instead of insisting on bringing your own. We did this to ourselves because we're painfully unorganized," Harper responds, and I look over at the two of them with a smirk. They may be complaining about stupid things, but it's all gonna be worth it when we're the best-looking ones at Matt's tonight.

"Quit yammering, you two. We have some work to do. We gotta leave here by seven, and I have a sneaking suspicion that we're gonna need to use every minute between now and then to make sure we look perfect," I remark as I plug my curling iron in. I walk over to my record collection—one I inherited from my mother—and grab my

favorite album to put on. Natalie groans when she sees which vinyl I've grabbed, because I play it a lot and I'm sure she's sick of it, but I don't care. Queen's *A Night At the Opera* is the best album to exist, and no one can tell me otherwise. It's only after I hear the opening notes of "Death on Two Legs (Dedicated To...)" that I'm finally ready to start prepping for the night. The girls act like they hate it for about two minutes but, before long, we're dancing all around my room as we get ready, singing along to each song like we're putting on a concert for our own imaginary audience. Even they can't resist the power of Freddie Mercury.

I put on the navy, skin-tight skirt with the open-backed blouse like we planned, and it looks just as good as my friends thought it would. I stare at myself in the mirror, shocked that I can actually look this hot with my athletic, lanky body.

"So, how do I look?" I ask them, and I can tell that they're both proud of their handiwork. I twirl around a couple times, making sure they scan the outfit from every angle in case there's an imperfection somewhere that I can't see. It doesn't seem to matter, though, because they both just give me a thumbs up and continue getting themselves ready to go. Natalie puts on a baby pink slip dress with white platform heels, and she looks like a 90s pop star. Harper's more grungy in her burgundy baby doll dress with black Doc Martens combat boots and fishnet stockings. Their looks both match their personalities perfectly, and I get all giddy when I realize that we'll easily be the three hottest girls at that party.

"I just got a text from Matt," Natalie calls out over the music. "He needs us to pick up a couple extra bags of ice on our way, 'cause his idiot brother forgot to get some.

How you forget to buy ICE when hosting a party is truly beyond me, but we'll have to make a pitstop at a gas station somewhere."

"I think there's a station right down the street from Matt's house, so we can swing through there, so it stays cold," Harper replies, and I nod my head in agreement through the mirror of my vanity. I swipe on some lip gloss and mascara, and at the last minute, add a little glitter to my eyelids to make them sparkle. I'm ready before Nat and Harper, so I sneak away to fill my flask from Dad's liquor cabinet. I've done this a thousand times before because there's never anyone around to catch me, and it's not like Dad's ever home to notice that his bottles are significantly lighter. I consider my options and go with the fancy Mexican tequila that Dad has imported straight from a factory in Jalisco. When I make it back to my room, the girls are putting on their jewelry, which is the final touch, and, just like that, we're ready to go.

Twenty minutes later, I pull my Jeep into the parking lot of the seedy gas station down the street from Matt's house.

"I think I'm gonna get some healthy snacks too, 'cause we all know that Matt's only gonna have the shitty junk food that him and his friends live off of," Natalie says, and she takes off into the small convenience store while Harper and I go to grab the ice blocks from the storage bin. We each take two massive bags from the freezer, and we struggle to make it back to the car when we realize they're much heavier than we thought they would be. We throw them into the way back of my car and lean into the open hatchback for a minute to catch our breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see a guy

staring at us with amusement as he's pumping gas into his cherry red BMW. He's attractive, and I'm immediately intrigued by the self-confidence radiating from his eyes.

"Nice car. Didja get it for your Sweet 16 or something?" I call out to him, seeing if he'll play along with my teasing or if he's too much of a wimp to keep up with me.

"Not quite. My dad got it for me when I caught him cheating on my mom. What about you? There's no way you bought that Jeep all on your own. Either your dad's got a guilty conscience too, or you're a spoiled princess," the mysterious boy responds, and I blush, because he's managed to figure me out so quickly.

"Guilty conscience sounds about right. It also helps that my mom's dead. It makes my dad feel even worse about being gone all the time," I respond, realizing too late that I may be sharing too much information with this stranger. Harper gives me a concerned look, and her eyes are telling me to be careful. The boy is about to respond when Natalie saunters out of the store complaining about the lack of healthy options the place offers, and when I look over again, he's getting into his car. I don't know what it is, but there's something about that guy that really interests me.

"How can a gas station not have any trail mix? It's literally a staple road trip food!" I hear Natalie remark as I watch the BMW drive away.

"I don't know, Nat. Maybe they just ran out?" Harper responds, and Natalie makes a disgusted sound as she gets back into the car. Harper then looks over at me with a questioning look. "That guy gave me a weird vibe. You can do so much better than someone like him, I can already tell you that," she says.

"Don't worry. I don't think I'll ever even see that guy again. The attention felt nice, that's all," I reply, a little annoyed that she's so quick to warn me about someone we

don't even know. Maybe she's just a little jealous that he was paying more attention to me than her. Whatever. He's gone, so it doesn't really matter now. We make our way back into the car and turn on a Spotify playlist with popular pop punk hits from the early 2000s, to hype us up for the wild night that we're about to have.

Ten minutes later, we turn down Matt's mile-long driveway, and I can smell the salty sea air as it passes through the windows. I park at the end of a long line of cars on the edge of his lawn, and within seconds, Matt and his brother come charging our way to get the ice bags from my trunk.

"You lovely ladies saved my ass tonight. Thanks for picking this up, I owe you!" Matt's younger brother says to us.

"Go on in and enjoy yourselves, there's a keg and assorted hard liquor in the kitchen," Matt adds, already slurring his words a little bit. It's his last summer party too, and I don't blame him for living it up to the fullest.

We make our way down to the house, and when we walk in, I can't help but gawk at how beautiful the house is. We've been coming to parties here since we were fifteen, and yet I always forget just how massive and expensive everything is. The chocolate colored hardwood floors span across the entire bottom floor, and the grand staircase in the foyer leads up to the small sitting area where some of the older kids usually hang out. We make our way towards the enormous, state of the art kitchen, with its Carrera marble countertops and high-end stainless-steel appliances. The keg is on the floor next to the island, and there are easily thirty different bottles of liquor on the counter next to it. Natalie and Harper make their way towards the booze and start mixing drinks while I pull

out my flask and take a couple shots. We're going to have such a good night. I can feel it already.

Once we have our drinks, we go to find the rest of the crowd. Unsurprisingly, the football players are in the pool, playing a tense game of chicken with the cheerleaders on their shoulders. On the far side of the yard, there's a bonfire, and a group of stoners are passing around a bong and laughing uncontrollably about nothing in particular. Some of my friends from the soccer team spot me as they play a game of cornhole, and I wave to them with a big smile. We find some lounge chairs tucked away from the slash zone and sit down, waiting until the rest of the crowd shows up before going to mingle with the hot guys.

"So, who do you think is gonna show up this year? I bet the guys from that fancy prep school in the valley are going to make an appearance. They wouldn't miss out on an opportunity to hook up with someone," Natalie inquires.

"You're not wrong. I bet we'll also see some of the girls from the all-girls Catholic school, too. The poor things have missed out on every life experience 'cause they're sheltered by their bible-thumping parents. I hope they come so that they can finally live a little," Harper responds.

"I don't really care who comes, to be honest. It's our senior year and I just wanna have a shit ton of fun!" I reply, and we cheers with our drinks and giggle as we chug some down.

By 10:30, the party is in full swing. People from all over town are here, and I recognize most of the faces I see walking through the front door. It takes Natalie all of

five minutes to find some guy to latch onto, and they're sitting on the couch making out with each other while Harper and I dance along to a today's hits playlist. I'm about halfway through my flask at this point, and I'm really starting to feel a buzz as I bop along to the music. Harper taps me on the shoulder and points to a corner of the room behind me. I spin around and it's *him*. It's the guy from the gas station. My heart skips a beat when he makes eye contact with me from across the dance floor, and I feel myself drawn to him like we're magnetized to each other.

"I have to go talk to him. I can't believe he's here!" I tell Harper.

"I'm gonna go with you so I can see if he's scheming up any funny business," Harper replies with some skepticism thick in her voice. I know she's well intentioned, but she really does piss me off sometimes.

"It's going to be totally fine! If not, I can take care of myself. Besides, Matt's been eyeing you up from the minute we got here. You should go find him and get to know each other!" I respond, and I can see the wheels turning in her head as she considers this information.

"Well, we both know I've had a crush on Matt since we started high school," she says, and she pauses for another moment before making up her mind. "Alright, fine, I'm going to go find him. But please just be careful and shoot me an SOS text if mystery dude over there starts giving you a bad vibe," Harper retorts as she squeezes my hand and makes her way back towards the kitchen. I smile at her for a moment longer before turning my attention back to the intriguing boy across the room. I take another swig of tequila from my flask as I cross the crowded dance floor to meet him, and my legs feel lighter than normal, like I'm floating on clouds. He's still in the same secluded corner,

watching me with amusement as the gap between us closes, and when I finally get within earshot of him, he flashes a dazzling smile and reaches for me.

“I was wondering how long it was gonna take for you to notice me over here,” he says, a slight southern drawl in his voice. “How’d you get your friend over there to let you come say hi?”

“Harper’s been in love with Matt Healey since she was fourteen, so when I told her that he was checking her out, she immediately changed course and had to find him. Hopefully she’s not too torn up when she finds out I made it up,” I respond, giggling at my own little bit of deception. I’ve had a lot to drink, so everything is really funny to me.

“You’re awfully smart, pretty girl. So, what’s your name?”

“Avery Landon. I’m a senior at Southern Hill High School,” I reply, slurring my words a little bit from the tequila. “What’s yours?”

“You don’t need to know my name yet. It’s a surprise,” he answers. He’s really playing into the whole mysterious outsider thing, and I really like it.

“Well, stranger, would you like to dance?” I ask him as I pull him off his stool and towards the crowd of dancing teenagers. “Pompeii” by Bastille blasts through the speakers in the living room and, before I know it, the boy has his hands on my waist as we twist and turn to the beat of the song. We’re moving together effortlessly, like we were made to be dance partners, and I can feel every nerve on my body when his skin grazes mine.

When the song ends, he grabs my hand and pulls me towards the kitchen, motioning that he needs a drink. When we get in there, Harper is hanging all over Matt, and for a minute I feel bad for probably setting her up for disappointment when he

inevitably tells her he's not interested. We make eye contact and she winks at me, clearly unconcerned with the boy I'm with and no longer skeptical of his intentions. I give her a thumbs up as I reach for my flask to take another shot, and the boy hands me a plastic cup with a random concoction in it. I take a swig and attempt to hide my gag from him, and he doesn't seem to notice.

“Let's go for a walk down the beach. I'm roasting in here with all these people and I can't hear for shit over the music. It'll be nice to listen to the waves for a little while,” he says to me, and just the thought of doing that with him sends chills down my spine. He takes my hand and leads me through the mess of people, towards the back yard. On the deck, I see Natalie and another guy chatting and laughing together, clearly oblivious to the world around them. We make it to the staircase that connects the house's lawn to the sandy beach down below, and I have to take my shoes off to make sure I stay steady on my feet. I'm really drunk now, and it's hard for me to stand up straight without leaning on the boy for help. I can't stop giggling even though he never even says anything, and we manage to make it maybe a quarter mile from the house before we decide to give up on walking altogether.

“It's so nice out right now. I can't believe how nice out it is,” I say to him, but my words come out all jumbled and fragmented, like my mind only remembered some of the syllables. He just looks at me for a long moment, and I get the sense that he's going to kiss me. “Will you tell me your name now, myssssery boy?” I ask him. He whispers it into my ear and I forget it immediately, like that tidbit of information blew away in the wind before reaching my brain. All of my senses are dulled, like I'm floating two feet underwater. He scooches closer to me and slides one of his hands onto my knee as he

runs the other through my hair. Instinctually, I jerk away, startled by the sudden affection from a guy I barely even know, and I can tell I've hurt his feelings.

"You don't want to kiss me? I thought this was going so well, though!" he says, and he has so much sadness dripping from his voice that it breaks my heart.

"Oh yeah I do! You just surprised me. You were too speedy!" I reply, but he doesn't look convinced. "I didn't MEAN to pull away, I ssswear."

"It's okay, we can just go back to the house if you want," he says as he starts to get up.

"NOOOO, please! I didn't meannnnn to. Come back, I wanna kisssss you!" I yell, and he stares at me for a moment before cracking a big smile and crawling back over to me.

"You're just so cute, I can't resist," he responds, and when he returns his hand to my upper thigh, I don't flinch this time.

He slowly leans in towards me, and it feels like an eternity before our lips finally meet. Our first kiss is slow and calculated, like he wants to make sure that I know what I'm doing. It doesn't take long for us to ease our way into a more passionate kinda kiss, with his hands settling around my waist while my fingers dance through his hair. Our connection is electric, like two beings buzzing with a shared energy between them, and within minutes, he's laying on top of me. I pause to take a breath, and he takes that as a sign to slide his hand up towards my panties, into uncharted territory. It's too much for me, and I immediately fling him off of me so that we don't go any further.

"What the fuck? We were just getting started!" he yells at me.

“I was having fun kissing, but I don’t want to do anything else. We don’t even know each other!” I reply, the chilly wind suddenly cutting through my skimpy clothes.

“You can’t kiss somebody like that without having sex with them. That’s not how this works! I bring you out here, we fool around a little bit, and then we fuck. That’s the deal here,” he responds, and I’m starting to get really sketched out by his sudden burst of intense anger.

“I’m sorry if it makes you mad, but I don’t wanna do that. I said no,” I reply, and that only seems to further ignite the fire burning in his eyes. My head is still really cloudy, but I feel more sober now than I have all night. “I should probably go find my friends, anyway. It’s getting late.”

I try to stand up when he kisses me again, much more forcefully than before. I’m thrown off guard, and that allows him to pin me with my arms above my so he can continue to shove his tongue down my throat. I’m scared now. He’s not letting me go.

“Get the fuck off me, you psycho! I’m leaving right the fuck now,” I scream when he comes up for air. He doesn’t acknowledge my words because he’s focused on taking his belt off, and when he manages to get it free with one hand, he ties my arms together with it as tight as it will go. I can’t move, no matter how hard I try, and it only makes me more terrified about what might be about to happen to me.

“You’re such a fucking tease. I’m gonna get what I came here for, and you’re gonna fucking like it,” he whispers in my ear, and in the next moment, he has my skirt pulled down around my knees. I scream for help as loud as I can, but we’re too far from the house for anyone to hear us. I feel a sharp, stabbing pain, and he’s inside me, pounding hard against my body while I cry and scream for him to stop. I scream as loud

as I possibly can, but it's no use. It only makes him angrier. He puts his hands around my throat to shut me up, and he keeps them there so long I almost pass out. He continues for about ten minutes or so before flipping me over onto my stomach. I'm shaking uncontrollably, my throat is painfully hoarse, and I'm exhausted from trying to save myself from what's happening. There's nothing I can do to stop him, so I stop resisting. He shoves himself into me again, and I just lay there, an empty vessel for his pleasure, the tears continuing to stream from my eyes. He violates my body for another twenty minutes or so until he finally finishes the job, and he falls down next to me for a moment to catch his breath.

“See, now wasn't that fun?” he asks me, and I spit in his face. “Well, I know I had a good time. It's not my fucking fault you wouldn't cooperate.”

I don't say anything else, but I don't think he really even cares at this point. He's gotten what he came here for. He uses my skirt to clean himself up, pulls his pants back up, and takes the belt off my arms so he can put it back on. I continue laying there as he walks away, a fractured shell of the girl I was this morning. I think I hear someone saying my name in the distance, but I don't have the energy to call back. I don't want anyone to see me like this anyway. As I fade in and out of consciousness, I can't help but wish I was dead.

4. MARTY

There's an ever-growing number of words within the English language—around a million at this point, according to linguists—yet there's not a single one to properly label a parent who has lost a child. People who have faced other forms of loss fall under specific classifications; widows are women who have lost their spouses, and orphans are children with two dead parents. The circumstances of the deaths never matter, either. It could've been a car crash, or a violent murder, or cancer. Those left behind still get their distinct titles. Titles are important. Titles help those who are grieving conceptualize their loss in more concrete terms. They can move on with their lives. I can't do that. I have no title.

I'm startled awake by my alarm blaring on the mahogany bedside table, shocked that I actually fell asleep in the first place. I arise from my silk sheets and examine the desolate room that once held such brightness and inspiration. Its stale, stagnant air is now only a painful reminder of my past life. From my position on the left-side of the bed—that was always my side, Marilyn *had* to sleep on the right—I can see my black Valentino custom-fitted suit with a simple black tie hanging around its recently starched collar hooked to my closet door. It's the suit I wore to meet with my publisher for the first time. Marilyn had gotten it for me as a gift, because every fancy writer deserves a fancy suit. Now, it's the suit I wear to celebrate dead people.

“Dad, we have to get going soon,” Tony hollers through my closed door. He bangs his fist against the wood a couple of times, but I don't respond. Wordlessly, I

begrudgingly roll out of bed and pull on the suit. The linen shirt feels stiff and itches the back of my neck, but I honestly just don't care. I knew that this day was coming. I thought I had mentally prepared myself for whatever it had in store. However, as I make my way over to the window to open the curtains, I can't help but burst into tears. Today doesn't feel right. This is not how we're supposed to celebrate Avery's life; the weather man guaranteed sunshine. Instead, the morning is unseasonably cool, and the sky is riddled with dark, ominous clouds threatening to drench unsuspecting passersby. The memorial service is going to be ruined. Apparently even the universe fucking hates me.

I stumble down the stairs, pausing when I get to the bottom. The house feels different. Colder somehow, like someone sucked all of the morning sunlight from its window panes. The slate tile stabs at my bare feet as I make my way to the kitchen where I try—and fail—to eat some breakfast. The coffee smell that usually entices my caffeine-deprived taste buds instead makes me nauseous, and my toast is well beyond golden-brown by the time I remember it. I really wish Simon was still here, 'cause I can't even seem to fucking make toast. Tony sits at the kitchen island just staring at me, headphones blaring some current rap track that I'd never heard before. I don't know what to tell him; I don't even know what the hell to tell myself.

I choke down the dry, charred toast despite my throat constricting against it. Tony continues to watch me from his perch on the bar stool and periodically shifts his attention to the empty space next to him where Avery once sat. That was *her* spot. She had a system of living where everything had a place, and she would always claim various locations in the house that belonged to her and only her. She had many spots. The old, splintering bench seat in the attic was her favorite place to read a book. The right side of

the couch was perfectly worn to the shape of her body, and she would often doze off there while watching old Golden Girls reruns. And, of course, the well-worn leather barstool sitting cold and abandoned on the left side of the island that she painted purple when she was twelve. Not that I ever noticed any of this when she was alive. I'd been so consumed with writing those damn books that I never seemed to notice anything about my kids' lives. I was a complete fuckup of a parent.

“Hey, do you know if Simon's going to be at the memorial? It's been awhile, and I was hoping to see him,” Tony asks me, shaking me out of my own fog.

“I didn't invite him, so I doubt it. He's caused us enough trouble over the past year, I don't need him around anymore,” I reply, and I can tell that he's upset by what I've just said.

“How could you not fucking invite him? He was more of a dad to Avery and me than you ever were! That's so unfair to me AND to him! You're just jealous that we liked him more than you, but whose fucking fault was THAT?” Tony screams, slicing a dagger into my already mangled heart. He's right, but I can never tell him that.

“He helped me out when I needed it, yeah, but he also up and left without so much as a goodbye. This was just a job to him, kid. He didn't care about you the way you think he did,” I reply, and I can see the hurt cross Tony's face.

“You're such a fucking liar! He loved us more than you ever have. He just had to leave for you to notice us. He left FOR us,” Tony answers, scowling at me with such disdain. “I fucking hate you, and I wish you never came back.”

He looks back at me as he walks away, flipping me off with both hands. Get in line, kid. I fucking hate myself too.

I hear the all too familiar sound of my phone vibrating against my hardwood bedside table and I begrudgingly make my way down the hall to answer it. This has been a common occurrence since news got out about Avery, and I've been letting all the calls go to voicemail because it's too much effort to deal with answering the same questions over and over again with each new person. How it happened. How Tony and I are handling the loss. If there was anything they could do. I can't handle it. I'm fully prepared to let this one go like the others, but the name on the caller-ID shocks me, so I answer.

"Hey, Ma. How are you doing?" I ask, a little suspicious of why she's decided to call me after not being present in my life for the last decade.

"I'm doing okay, Marty. I'm sure you've been dealing with sympathy calls since the incident, so I want to tell you right now that I'm not gonna do all that with you. You're a Landon, and I know you can get through anything this world throws at you," Mom says, and I can feel that this is just the beginning of what is bound to be quite the conversation. "It's probably gonna hurt forever, but you'll survive this, just like you survived Marilyn's death all that time ago. I know it feels like the end of the world now, but you can't let it ruin your life," Mom says, and I can feel a knot forming in the back of my throat.

"How am I supposed to move on from this when I see her in every room of the house? I wasn't here for her when she needed me, and now it's too late. This isn't just something I can get over," I reply, and I hear a heavy sigh from the other end of the phone.

“I hear you, Marty, but you also have to think about your future and all that. You were so depressed after Marilyn that no one could ever get through to you. I tried. The kids tried. *You* were the only one able to get yourself out of that funk, in your own time, and I get that that was something you had to do on your own. You used writing to help you work through your grief, and you can use it again now. You can’t let yourself shut down again, not when you’re so close to becoming a household name in the industry. I know I haven’t actively been keeping up with our relationship, but I’ve been celebrating your success from afar. You can’t break that momentum,” Mom replies, and I can feel my anger growing with every word she says. Did she seriously only call me so she could make sure my career—and my money—was safe?

“Why did you even call, Ma? To make sure I can keep writing and making money, so I can help support you through your retirement? My fucking daughter just died—*your* granddaughter, no less—so I think I have bigger things to worry about than writing another damn book,” I respond, unable to hide the fury in my voice.

“I know she did, and I’m not trying to diminish that, honey. I just think you need to try to keep your mind clear and focused on something other than this tragedy, so that you can make sure you don’t fall into the same pattern as before. I’m looking out for you because I don’t think you’re capable of doing it for yourself right now,” she responds.

“Keep my mind clear? Because focusing on writing is the priority right now? I spent the last eight years of my life completely dedicated to my books and my career because that was what I thought Marilyn wanted for me, and all I have to show for it is a dead kid and another who can’t stand to look at me. There’s no amount of money and fame that would make it all worth it. How am I doing?” I bitterly retort.

“What do you mean, what Marilyn wanted for you? What are you talking about, Marty?” my mother inquires. She was never around for me to tell her what really happened all those years ago, so she never found out that Marilyn helped me out of my depression more than anyone else ever could’ve.

“About a year after she died, I was going through Marilyn’s bedside table one night, and I found one of my old leather-bound journals tucked away under a bunch of junk. You know, the ones I would use for jotting down ideas for stories I wanted to write. She never told me that she had it, and when I opened it, she had left little notes all over my writing. She always wanted me to be a writer, and she knew how much I loved it. *That’s* what shook me out of my grief. Seeing her words next to mine, encouraging me to follow my dreams. “*Don’t give up on this!*” she’d written. “*Can’t wait to read this once it’s published!*” I pause for a moment because I get choked up from talking about her. I take a deep breath and continue before Mom can interject any of her two cents. “She managed to penetrate my completely broken heart and ignite a burning flame within me, telling me to chase my dreams before it was too late. I knew then that I had no other choice but to become the successful novelist that she always thought I could be. I *had* to do it for her. It was the only way I could hold onto our connection, even if I was grasping at straws.”

“See, that’s what I’m trying to say, though! You have something to prove to her, and you can’t let Avery’s death stop you from fulfilling that dream. I know you’re in so much pain—we all are—but you can’t let it cloud your judgement and make you alter the trajectory of the career your wife always wanted for you,” Mom answers, as if it’s all that easy.

“That’s the thing though, Ma. If Marilyn were still here, would she really be proud of all my accomplishments, if it meant losing the kids in the process? I think she would argue that the price I had to pay for this success was so not worth it, and the celebration of life today is proof enough that she would be right. I should’ve been there for Avery. If I were, she probably wouldn’t be dead today. I did the writing thing for her, and I feel like I’ve done nothing but let her and the rest of our family down. I’m such a fuckup,” I yell, unable to hold my feelings in any longer. A single tear drips down my cheek as my mother sighs loudly again into the phone.

“Marty, your writing didn’t kill Avery. There was nothing you could do. I understand you’re feeling guilty about the whole thing, and I really do feel your pain, but please just try to stick with it as best you can. I don’t want to see you locked up in that room of yours again, unable to function in society. It was just too sad,” says my mother, and I no longer have any tolerance for her. It takes too much effort to deal with her.

“Look, Ma, I gotta go. Today is Avery’s day, not mine. Will I see you at the celebration of life?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“Sorry kiddo, I won’t be able to make it. I’m at Dean’s beach house in Malibu for the weekend, before our trip to the Italian Riviera next week. I wanted to come, but flights were just too expensive on such short notice. Send me pictures, though!” she replies, and I can’t even stifle my disgust with her. Not that she notices.

“Well, tell daddy #5 I say hi, and tell him to wait ‘til you get back from your trip before breaking things off with you,” I say with sarcasm thick in my voice. “I’m not about to rescue you from Europe again because some rich tool decided he no longer wants you. Have a good life, always a pleasure, and don’t ever fucking call me again.”

It takes me a half hour to muster up the courage to take the purple urn off of the mantle, where it had sat for the past week, to bring it to the celebration of life. When I pick it up, it's so light, almost as if it's completely empty. It's impossible for me to comprehend how a girl so full of life and ambition and beauty can become so weightless and unsubstantial now that she's gone. The metal feels cold against my palms, and I pause for a moment to hold the urn close to my chest, to hold my daughter for the last time.

"Tony, let's go. We don't want to be late," I call towards the kitchen, where Tony's still fiddling with his phone. At first, I think he's ignoring me because he doesn't make any effort to move, but then I see him shift off the stool behind me out of the corner of my eye. I can tell he doesn't really trust me, and he certainly doesn't like to listen to me when I tell him what to do, not that I can blame him. I was so far removed from his life for so long that I'm shocked he even cares about me at all.

We make our way to the car just as it begins to rain, and we rush to get in before getting our suits too wet. Tony looks over at me with annoyance, like it's my fault that we have to do this in the bad weather.

"Why do you insist on parking the car in the driveway when we have a two-car garage attached to the house? We just got wet for absolutely no reason, and now my suit is starting to wrinkle. We haven't even gotten to the service yet!" Tony says, and he slouches in the seat as I start to back down the long pathway to the road.

"There's too much shit in the garage taking up all the room for my car. You're just gonna have to deal with getting damp. We're gonna be outside all afternoon anyway

so you're bound to get pretty damn wet," I reply, and we ride for several minutes in silence. I think we both know why I can't park in the garage, even if we've never talked about it before. It's not because there's boxes of Christmas decorations and other miscellaneous storage bins in the way, because those could easily be moved around to make space. It's because of the Jeep. Avery's Jeep.

I think back to the day I got it for her, the white Jeep she'd always wanted, because I missed her birthday and felt bad. I can't see it without thinking about her. Without my heart tearing from my chest all over again, like it did the morning I got the phone call that she was gone. The Jeep's been in that same spot for weeks because neither one of us can bear to look in its direction, let alone move it from where she'd left it. The car is a constant reminder of her, and avoiding it makes it a little bit easier to cope with the fact that she'll never drive it again. I can't park next to it, and he knows that, even when he complains about the rain to bust my balls. He's punishing me, and he has every right to.

We continue along in silence for twenty minutes until we pull into the parking lot of the cemetery. All around us are other cars of people who loved and cared for Avery, people who I barely know and hardly recognize, all here to celebrate her life and the accomplishments she'd achieved before it happened. I pull into a spot next to a silver Mercedes Benz, and before I can even shift into park, its two front doors swing open to reveal Avery's two best friends Natalie and Harper. They notice me behind the wheel and immediately make a motion to ask me to roll the window down.

“Hi Mr. Landon. I’m so, so sorry about what happened to Avery. We miss her every single day and can’t believe that she’s really gone,” Natalie says with a tear rolling down her cheek.

“I know there’s nothing we can say to make you feel better, but please let us know if there’s anything at all we can do to help you and Tony out. We’re here for you both during this incredibly difficult time,” Harper adds, and she gives my hand a little squeeze before the two of them start making their way with the rest of the crowd towards the memorial service. I turn off the car and look over at Tony in the passenger seat, the look on his face a mixture of confusion and anger.

“What are you thinking about, kid? I know today is going to be hard for both of us, but you gotta try to stay strong. I know today is about your sister, but people are going to be all over us to offer their sympathies. We gotta stay strong,” I tell him with a little pat on his shoulder.

“Yeah, I know Dad. That’s going to be hard, but that’s not the problem. I’m really confused why those girls are even here. From what Avery told me, I didn’t think they were friends anymore. She would ask me to hang out with her instead of them, and she’d complain about how mean they were to her the whole time. I kinda zoned out when she said stuff like that, but I do know they were awful. They shouldn’t be here,” Tony replied, and I can’t help but feel yet another stab of pain in my heart. How did I miss the fact that my baby girl was being bullied? And by girls I thought she was friends with, no less! I’m so angry at myself for missing so much of her life, and mad at those girls for betraying her friendship and treating her so terribly. Tony looks over at me, pats me on the back, and gets out of the car. Once he leaves the car, it hits me. I’m not ready to face

the people who are here to memorialize my dead daughter, the people who are sorry for my loss and offer their condolences. It's all too much. Without thinking, I turn the key in the ignition and throw the car into reverse, peeling out of the parking lot with the purple urn still in the backseat and the tires squealing noisily, announcing my abrupt and unexpected departure. I'm not ready to say goodbye to my daughter just yet.

I don't really know where I'm going. I take a random left turn, and then a right, and before I know it I'm parked in front of the old Dairy Freeze that Marilyn and I used to take the kids to when they were little. I look up at the dilapidated building, shocked to see that it's still in business, and there's a teenage girl leaning on the counter by the take-out window with a bored expression on her face. She seems just as annoyed about the rain as I am. We make eye contact for a second, and my heart just about bursts out of my chest because, for that minuscule period of time, I think it's her. I see Avery looking back at me, her icy blue eyes and long, fluffy lashes fluttering around them. But then she vanishes just as quickly, and the other girl reappears as my mind plays tricks on me. How am I supposed to live my life when every single thing reminds me of her?

I climb out of the car and make my way up to the window. The girl raises her head from the counter and grabs at a notepad, ready to take my order.

"Welcome to the Dairy Freeze. What can I get for you?" she asks me, and I can tell she's excited to finally have something to tend to.

"A banana split with cookies n' cream instead of vanilla ice cream, and peanut butter instead of strawberry sauce. Extra whipped cream too, please," I reply, and I can feel her judging me by my customized order.

“That’ll be \$7.75. Are you sure that’s what you want? Those suckers are pretty big. Pretty hard for just one guy to finish,” she says as she takes my money. I don’t say anything as I stuff the change into her tip jar and go to sit on the same bench we always claimed back in the day. What the girl doesn’t know is that my order has always been the same here. It was our tradition, Marilyn and me. I’d get something so ridiculously big that she could have some without feeling guilty for having her own, and it was a small moment that we could share together while the kids destroyed their own orders. I remember Tony always getting something different each time because he was determined to eat his way through the entire menu. Avery always wanted a small pistachio in a waffle cone because she liked the cone more than the actual ice cream. Every time, Tony would tease her for liking such an old person flavor, but she knew what she liked, and there was nothing he could say to get her to change her mind or try something else. We were the same in that way. We were both creatures of habit, content with living within the confines of what we know to like and refusing to break out of our comfort zone. It was always nice to see that she was like me in some way, even if it wasn’t the most positive trait.

“Sir, your split’s good to go!” I hear the young girl call towards me, and I wander up to the counter to pick it up. She’s about to close the window when I stop her.

“Can you also get me a small pistachio in a waffle cone for my daughter? It’s her favorite,” I ask her as I hand over a five-dollar bill. The girl looks around with a confused look on her face, like she somehow missed seeing a little girl with me before.

“Sure thing, dude. Whatever you want,” she replies with a little bit of skepticism in her tone. I put my bowl on the bench next to where I’m sitting and head over to the car

to grab the urn. It feels a little weird to be doing this, but I don't really care. I set Avery down next to my bowl as I head back to the window to get her cone, and the girl stares at me with sadness as he realizes what I'm doing.

"I'm so sorry sir. Her ice cream is on me today," she says as she hands me back the money I gave her earlier. I throw the bill into her tip jar, thank her with a smile and walk back over to what's left of my little girl. I place the cone next to the urn and start eating my split, and I sit there in silence as the pistachio starts to drip around the edges as it melts. It's been chilly all day, and yet, in that moment, a warm breeze dances across my face. She's there with me. I can feel it. I lean back and savor the first comfortable silence I've had in months, enjoying ice cream with my daughter for the last time before driving back to the memorial and facing the realities of life yet again.

DISQUISITION

DISCUSSION

When I first began considering different avenues for my Honors thesis, I immediately knew that I wanted to write some sort of creative piece instead of tackling a research project because this was an ideal opportunity to explore my skills as a novelist and see what I was truly capable of. All throughout high school, I always gravitated towards the young adult fiction genre because they were stories I could relate to, and they deeply influenced my emotions in ways that I had never felt before. I loved the fact that I could experience something that felt so real and personal, even if I had never gone through any of the events of the stories myself. The idea of writing something that could have such significant control over people's feelings is something that has always intrigued me, and it was this element of fiction narrative that inspired me to explore my own creativity from a young age. Because of my attachment to and exploration of young adult literature depicting intense themes, I've had a general idea for this novel since I was fourteen, and I have always dreamed about writing it someday, even though I had never really told anyone about this aspect of my life until I was in college.

On Christmas day back in 2019, I had a conversation that completely solidified my plans to write this novel for my thesis, despite being only a sophomore at the time. On that day, I remember being asked about school, much like any other college student at a family holiday gathering would, and I told my family how I was starting to think about the thesis element of my Honors journey and whether or not it was something I felt I

could accomplish. I wasn't sure if I was prepared to tackle such a daunting task, especially if I was supposed to complete it in addition to focusing on the student teaching I'm required to complete during my senior year for my secondary education degree. My family reassured me that I could do it because I've always been the kind of person that welcomes challenges and is willing to do whatever it takes to make sure I'm the best student I can be, no matter how hard it might be in the process. Initially, I shrugged them off because I still wasn't convinced that this was my ultimate end goal. I doubted myself and my ideas, thinking that my concept wasn't strong enough for a thesis-level project. I probably would still be thinking this way, too, if it weren't for my wonderful aunt named Patricia.

After the conversation shifted to another cousin's life update, Patricia came and sat next to me so we could continue talking about my potential thesis ideas and where I would want to go with it, should I choose to pursue the project. We spent an hour discussing different options and my thoughts around exploring trauma response as a result of sexual assault because that's an issue I've always been passionate about bringing awareness to. Throughout our entire conversation, she never once diminished my ambition or convinced me that it was too daunting of a task to take on. She was the most encouraging and thoughtful person I've ever met, and she wanted me to know that I was capable of pursuing my dream of writing this novel, no matter what challenges it might bring me. She reassured me that my novel concept was important and meaningful, and that it could make a huge difference in people's lives by bringing attention to these incredibly powerful societal issues. It was this conversation that inspired me to pursue this idea in more concrete terms, and I consistently think back to that night as I finish this

project, thankful that she was able to convince me to write this novel for my thesis, because without her, I never would have believed in myself enough to make this extraordinary dream a reality.

PURPOSE

The overall purpose of this project is to identify a way to successfully depict the complex psychological responses to trauma while developing my skills as a fiction writer by creating a dual perspective novel about a teenage girl who is raped and later commits suicide as well as her father's attempts to cope with her death. There are already so many fictional narratives that focus on adolescent sexual assault and suicide as two separate entities, but having a novel that encompasses both of these elements is more rare. My goal for this thesis is to tie these two elements together because, unfortunately, they commonly correlate with each other in the real world. I wanted to be able to bring awareness to the perpetuation of rape culture in modern society by depicting a story that could easily happen to somebody in our reality. Another goal of this project is bringing awareness to the parental response to adolescent sexual assault and suicide, because this is an element of this kind of story that rarely gets featured in modern literature. I want to be able to present these important psychological concepts to an audience in a way that is easy for them to conceptualize, so that they can be more aware of them in their own lives and understand the struggles that people go through every day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite having an extensive list of works that have influenced the development of my thesis concept, *Some Boys* by Patty Blount is the first novel I read that exposed me to the elements of writing that were critically relevant to my own project. This novel is a dual perspective narrative that follows the stories of Grace and Ian as they both respond to the same critical event. Grace accuses Ian's best friend Zac of rape, and because he is the star of the lacrosse team, no one believes her. Ian's supposed to be on Zac's side, but when he and Grace are forced to work together over spring break and hears her side of the story, he's not so sure whose side he's on anymore. This novel inspired me for two primary reasons: it portrayed many of the problematic elements of contemporary rape culture in an adolescent setting, and it offered the narrative in the dual-perspective style that I had never really experienced before.

When I first read this novel, I felt that it was such an interesting take on the adolescent response to sexual assault because it provides insight into an aspect of rape culture that isn't commonly addressed in YA literature. By including Ian's perspective of the situation, the reader can see a realistic depiction of the social response to sexual assault, and how easily situations can be manipulated to invalidate the victim because of the way this society perpetuates rape culture, which is very similar to how I wanted to depict rape culture in my own project. Also, having an example of a dual perspective novel that worked so well together helped me to explore my own version of that for my novel, which ultimately made my narrative much more interesting and dynamic. Overall, Blount's novel heavily influenced my own, and I don't think my story would have been as powerful had I not read *Some Boys* before writing it.

Another novel that has deeply influenced my decision to craft this thesis was *Saving June* by Hannah Harrington, because it's a young adult novel that also provides some much-needed insight into the parent response to teen suicide. When Harper Scott's older sister June unexpectedly commits suicide, everyone in her family is absolutely devastated. Her parents get divorced, blaming each other for their loss, and Harper is left to patch both her and her mother's broken hearts. Though this story isn't related to sexual assault, it offers a unique insight into the parental response to teen suicide in a way that really influenced my own project. Harper's mother is depicted to be a mere shell of her old self, and there are several instances where Harrington focuses on the realities of losing a child, which is a vital element of my project that most other YA texts about teen suicide commonly overlook. Not only that, but this novel helped me to conceptualize the role of other children in a grieving parent's life and gave me the idea to include Tony as a character so that the audience can see how other children can greatly help a parent overcome the immensity of their grief. Reading this novel made me realize immediately that I wanted to include a parental perspective in my own project, and that I needed a character like Harper to help guide that parent through the complexity of his own feelings.

If I had to pick a single text that has had the most profound impact on this project, it would have to be *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson because of the way it depicts the progression into depression and anxiety in adolescent girls as a result of sexual assault. The story follows Melinda Sordino's life as she begins her high school career as a social outcast because she called the police on a party that all of her classmates were attending over the summer. Throughout the story, the reader begins to understand that she was

raped at the party, and she called the cops to ask for help, but she struggles to come to terms with this fact in her own mind. She can't tell anyone because no one will believe her, and she internalizes her trauma until it completely destroys her. Throughout the narrative, she sinks deeper into her depression, and she completely disengages with her academic responsibilities by hiding out in an abandoned janitor's closet, away from reality. This story had such a profound impact on my understanding of adolescent trauma response because it accurately depicts just how severely trauma impacts the psychological components of adolescents. All of the signs of Melinda's depression are clearly presented in her actions, and this was an element of the story that really made me understand the pain and struggle that she was experiencing. This was something that I knew I wanted to emulate in my novel because I wanted my own story to have that same power and influence over the reader's emotions. In many ways, *Speak* heavily influenced my development of Avery's character because of the accurate and deeply profound way that Melinda responds to her sexual assault.

Though I focused most of my literature exploration on the adolescent perspective, the single most important text that helped me conceptualize Marty's character is Sue Klebold's *A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*. Klebold's memoir recounts her experiences with losing a child, and her struggle to come to terms with the reality that she barely knew who he was as a human being before his death. In 1999, her son Dylan was one of the gunmen who attacked Columbine High School in Colorado, participating in one of the largest school massacres in US history, and he ended up committing suicide that day to escape the consequences of his actions. Klebold's autobiographical recollection of this event and its aftermath dives deeply into the guilt

and responsibility she feels for the tragedies that day, as well as the overwhelming grief that comes from losing a child to suicide. Though her story isn't significant in the actual events that happen, her conceptualization of grief and her guilt that comes from not fully understanding who her child was in real life is something that really helped me to establish who I wanted Marty to be in the context of my own story. Much like Klebold with Dylan, Marty too feels immense guilt for not knowing the realities of his child's life and the mental struggles she was going through. This guilt compounds his grief, and this really helped me to establish Marty's own trauma response and give me the starting point for his overall evolution throughout his story. This text served a much different purpose than the others on this list, but in some ways, I feel it's one of the most important because it helped me to solidify my idea to include Marty as a primary point of view in my narrative.

RESEARCH

When considering the resources I used to inform my understanding of the psychological elements of my novel, I focused on four main concepts for my research: adolescent trauma response and suicide, the social response to rape and suicide, the correlation between depression and suicide, and parental grief. I felt that these four main categories would help me to create a well-rounded understanding of the psychology of adolescents and trauma response that I could apply to Avery's character, as well as the parental response element to implement in Marty's storyline. During my sophomore year of college, I took PSY224, an adolescent psychology course that explored many of the elements that are relevant and vital to the development of my project. The accompanying

textbook for this course, *Adolescence* by Laurence Steinberg, was my first point of reference for understanding not just the mental health and suicidal components of Avery's narrative, but also the implications of Marty's problematic parenting style present throughout the novel. Because of this, I revisited the textbook to ensure that I properly grasp and recognize the indicators that I was looking to use in my novel.

In the book, for example, Steinberg introduces a correlation between depression and suicide, stating that 18% of American teenagers who feel depressive syndromes seriously contemplate committing suicide. This is relevant because it helps to establish why I have Avery choose suicide as her method of escaping her struggles with reality; I depict Avery's mental health strongly declining after her assault, and I wanted to make it clear that she experiences severe depressive symptoms because of her inability to properly conceptualize her trauma. Steinberg also outlines depression symptoms, including sad and/or demoralizing mood, lack of motivation and general disinterest in pleasurable activities, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness, and extreme changes to eating and sleeping habits. Because he makes these statements, I was able to integrate these identifiers into my story so that I can show the audience that Avery has become increasingly depressed as her narrative progresses without needing to explicitly state it at any point. This is an integral element of her character development and something that was vital for me to understand when exploring the role of mental health in this narrative because I wanted to ensure that her development is genuine and authentic according to what could happen in real life.

Not only that but, later on in the text, Steinberg also explains the warning signs of suicidal ideation and behavior, including social isolation, preoccupation with death,

giving away prized possessions and change in appearance. These too are elements of Avery's character that I begin to integrate into her narrative in her later chapters to emphasize her exploration of suicide. Towards the end of her story, she has a conversation with Tony about death and loss because Avery is beginning to think about death in more concrete terms, and she becomes more and more interested in death as a means of relief. Later on, she gives her brother Tony her cherished record collection and Marty gets her vintage collection of classic literature because she knows that they will take good care of the things she values most in the world. She also begins to let her appearance go because she has no interest in taking care of herself anymore. All of these elements of the story are influenced by Steinberg's text, and this has ensured that my depiction of Avery's depression and suicidal ideations are accurate according to reputable psychological research.

One other element of Steinberg's text that I found incredibly relevant to my story was his breakdown of the different parenting styles and how they influence children's development. The parenting style I tried to emulate through Marty in my story is known as indifferent parenting, because of the general lack of responsiveness and demandingness that he establishes with Avery and Tony throughout the majority of their lives. According to Steinberg, "indifferent parents do whatever is necessary to minimize the time and energy they must devote to interacting with their child[ren]" (Steinberg, 107-8). They're categorized as parents who know little about their child's whereabouts or lifestyles, and they rarely express love and compassion towards their child. Now, I've established a world in which Marty becomes an indifferent parent because of the circumstances of his life. He wasn't *always* like this. I wanted to emphasize this style of

parenting to show the disconnect between Marty and his children and, later on in the story, how he completely alters his parenting style for Tony after learning how detrimental his past actions were to his children. I use Steinberg's characteristics of parenting styles to exhibit Marty's growth throughout the story and help the reader to understand how much better Marty treats Tony after coming to terms with his failures as a parent.

Though Steinberg's text was vital to my comprehension of many of the adolescent psychological components relevant to my novel, there were still significant elements of this story that he doesn't provide insight into that I needed to do supplemental research for. For instance, though Steinberg outlined the correlation of adolescent depression and suicide, I needed to establish a connection between sexual assault and depression. I spent a significant amount of time going through various articles discussing how sexual assault influences victims' mental health and how post-traumatic stress can instigate depressive symptoms in sexual assault survivors. I also needed to compile some research regarding the social response to sexual assault and parental grief, because those are the two other primary psychological components to this narrative that I need to ensure that I depicted truthfully and accurately. Through my research, I learned about the realities of rape culture in American culture and the negative social perceptions that people have of those who have been victims of sexual assault. I also learned more about the ways in which the social response to sexual assault influences those individuals and how it commonly leads to self-blame and self-esteem problems in victims because of how common it is in our culture to diminish sexual assault events.

Finally, I spent a great deal of time exploring sources related to parental grief and how grief can manifest itself in people's lives. I established a better understanding of grief symptoms and how it can alter the way people function within society, as well as the immense guilt parents experience when losing a child in a context that they feel is avoidable. Guilt is easily one of the most prevalent side effects of parental grief because of the obligation that parents feel to protect their children from anything and everything that could potentially hurt them. My research was incredibly valuable to my understanding of the critical concepts of my novel, because now I'm certain that I'm focusing my plot on science-based generalities and not perpetuating harmful stereotypes that might not actually be accurate to people's real-world experiences. This way, people can read my story and conceptualize the mental, physical and social implications of sexual assault, as well as the response to suicide from the parent perspective.

METHODOLOGY

In my mind, the natural first step to any significant writing endeavor is to create a structured outline and, because this was a critical element of my overall thesis project, I obviously began there. I wanted to have a roadmap detailing where the narrative travels as time progresses through the story, because it makes it so much easier to write chapters when there's an explicit list of details that go into each one. Not only that, but having an outline allowed me to establish my goals for the project and ensure I had a cohesive understanding of where I wanted each of the narratives to go. I started with the most basic ideas and went from there. For instance, I knew that I wanted a chapter to introduce each of the perspectives at the beginning of the novel, so that the audience could see what

Avery and Marty's lives were like before they're faced with their respective traumas. I also knew I wanted a chapter dedicated to Avery's assault, but I didn't focus too much on the smaller details that were going to go into the chapter until much later in the prewriting process. I kept everything broad so that I could see the basic trajectory of both storylines and how I could interweave them with each other in a natural way.

After having the most fundamental ideas outlined, I then established what areas of the plot that I needed to focus my research on. I quickly realized that I needed more insight into the mental, physical and emotional responses to sexual assault, as well as the societal response to rape culture in America. I really wanted to make sure that I understood Avery's motivations and what was going on in her head to convince her that suicide was the only means of escaping her trauma. I also realized I needed to do more research on parental grief so that I could have a firm grasp on *why* Marty completely shuts down when Avery dies. Having a general understanding of where the story was going to go allowed me to ensure that my depiction of these very intense events and emotions were genuine and consistent with what scientists have determined to be accurate in the context of real-life trauma response.

After completing the bulk of my research, I then began thinking more closely about the smaller details of the plot. Up to this point, I had been only dealing with the abstract generalizations, broad concepts that I knew were relevant without the intricacies to tie them all together and ground them in the same narrative. This was the time to explore the events in more concrete terms by expanding each chapter outline with all of the elements that gave the story meaning. For example, instead of simply writing that chapter 7 was about Avery's return to school after her assault, I detailed every major plot

point of the chapter so that the person reading the outline can picture the events happening in their head without necessarily having to read a completed written chapter. When reading the outline, it's clear that Avery has been struggling to remember the events of that night and, once she sees her attacker again for the first time post-assault, all of those painful memories flood back to her. I established the scene for each chapter that the reader could understand without needing to write each one out in narrative form. Once I finished detailing each chapter, a draft of the first part of this project was done.

The next big stage of this project was drafting the first four chapters of the novel and making sure that they were sophisticated and flowed together smoothly. Throughout the entirety of this project, this is what took the most time for me, because I wanted to make sure that I could properly capture the voices of these complex characters in a way that felt genuine and natural. I started with the Avery chapters because I felt that these were going to be relatively easy to complete; Avery is a character I can relate to, so I felt that I could embody her tone and voice clearly and relatively easily. I also had previously written a short story that followed the same general premise as her assault chapter, so it was easy to use that work as a frame of reference for depicting that violence realistically. I found that writing her chapters came naturally for me because I'm used to writing from a young woman's point of view, and they ended up being strong enough after the first draft that they didn't need much revision. After Chris, my advisor, read through them, he agreed that they were strongly written and that they didn't need much more work. This was incredibly helpful because it gave me more time to work out the kinks in Marty's chapters.

Once Avery's chapters were completed, I shifted all of my focus onto Marty's two chapters. I started out by explicitly noting what I wanted the overall goal of each chapter to be, so that I could clearly visualize the trajectory of each chapter and understand how I wanted them to flow from beginning to end. Since his first chapter is meant to establish who his character is as a professional, critically acclaimed author, I really focused on creating an environment that felt prestigious and affluent. I wanted to establish a clear juxtaposition between the gaudy New York experience that Marty was existing in and the familial suburban life that he was abandoning back home. I focused on getting into Marty's head and thinking how a male, well-established author would. However, I quickly realized that it was going to be more difficult than I thought to get into this frame of mind because I was unfamiliar with writing from a perspective that was so different from my own. I knew then that I needed to explore the male voice in more abstract terms before trying to write the chapters I would submit for this project.

I began taking about ten minutes before each writing session to simply write anything from a male point of view. I would write a paragraph or two each time, exploring everything from fatherhood to blue-collar trades work to sportsmen. I even tried writing from other male characters' perspectives, simply so that I could get a feel for how Marty would interact with them in the scenes I was depicting. Most of the time, these little explorations of character were irrelevant to my storyline, but they helped me to extract my inner male persona enough to establish Marty's character in a more genuine, realistic way. I found that it was easier for me to create his mannerisms and language once I established how I could explore masculinity and the male condition in my own head. During this process of creating a male persona in my mind, I would also

use my own father as a reference by asking him how he would react in certain situations, because he obviously can relate to male characters much easier than I can and can offer me a more concrete understanding of Marty's motivations. This really helped me to conceptualize Marty as a character and make sure that his actions were authentic and that his voice didn't feel superficial and unnatural. Once I was able to adopt Marty's persona, writing came more easily to me, and I finished his chapters confident that his voice felt genuine to the reader.

Once all of the chapters were completed, I spent the rest of my time focused on reworking and clarifying the plot so that the narrative flowed better, and the details were more established in areas that felt a little bit confusing. Taking the time to do this has made me much more confident in my storytelling, and I feel incredibly proud of the final product that I have created.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Now that I am finishing up the final stages of this project and the technical elements of my thesis are complete, I'm able to think critically about everything that I've accomplished and the implications of my project on a broader scale. Immediately after deciding to tackle this idea as a thesis topic, I realized that it was going to be difficult to classify this work in relation to a genre because of the unique features that this story maintains. For instance, so much of this novel follows the constraints of YA fiction, because Avery's storyline is grounded in her adolescence and follows her struggle on a very personal level. However, it's well known that YA fiction as a genre traditionally does not include storytelling from an adult perspective. Because of this, I feel like this

novel fits into a general realistic fiction genre rather than specifically classified as young adult, despite its heavy influence in the YA style of narration and structure.

Now, to some people, this ambiguity could be seen as a detriment to the project because it makes it hard to classify, but I see this as an easy way to broaden the appeal for a wider audience. People who like to read young adult literature will enjoy this story because of Avery's narrative. People who prefer reading books catered to adults will be able to resonate with Marty's perspective. This novel is unique because it functions as both a YA and a general realistic fiction story, which makes it so that anyone who likes to read will find something to relate to while being exposed to an element of fiction writing that they may not choose to engage with on their own.

While writing the first four chapters of this novel, I was faced with another obstacle that made me question how to properly write Marty's story. Because his narrative is out of chronological sequence from the first chapter to the second, I had to figure out a way to introduce many of the background details in a way that the reader could truly experience. Initially, I presented it through internal narration, almost like a flashback, because it was the easiest way to depict why Marty got into writing in the first place and see why he was such a terrible father to his children. However, after Chris read through the two Marty chapters, he gave me the feedback that he thought something was missing. I was telling the reader what happened instead of showing them, and that made it harder for them to engage with the emotions that Marty was feeling during that time. In this section of the chapter, Marty's talking about losing his wife Marilyn and the intensity of his grief, and this is something that the reader should feel deeply so they can understand his motivations to become a writer to make her proud.

Those feelings of grief and depression land much more profoundly when Marty explicitly showcases them in conversation with his mother, which was a significant creative choice I made during the revision process to improve this section of the chapter. Now that it's completed, I can say with confidence that this change was necessary, not just because it allows readers to conceptualize Marty's desires to become something that his wife had always wanted him to be, but also because it establishes his guilt for abandoning his children to hold onto this miniscule connection to Marilyn. This rewrite changes the complexity of Marty's emotions and makes them much more interesting to consider within the context of his life.

Despite all of the challenges that I've faced during this project, the most profound and unexpected hurdle I was forced to navigate was the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has made maintaining my academic obligations much more difficult. When I first decided to take on this project and complete an Honors thesis, I thought I was going to be living on campus with easy access to any resources I could ever need and a productive, distraction-free space to focus on my writing. However, that plan was thrown for a loop when, unexpectedly, I was forced to move out of my on-campus apartment in the middle of March in 2020, uncertain if I would ever be on campus again. Since then, I've been working completely remotely, taking all of my virtual classes from the desk in my childhood bedroom and struggling to engage with academics in a world in which turmoil has been ravishing for the better part of two years. My work ethic sank to an all-time low over the last year and a half, and I've found even the simplest tasks difficult to complete because I can't seem to focus on anything sometimes. I then get frustrated with myself because I know what I'm capable of and being debilitated by a lack of motivation has

never been something I've had to deal with up to this point in my academic career. It was nearly impossible for me to write some days, no matter how much I was supposed to get done for the next week, all because the world around me was ever changing and unpredictable. I never thought that the pandemic would completely alter the way I worked and existed in college, but it truly did change everything for me. Nonetheless, regardless of these struggles, I still managed to complete the project to the best of my ability, and I'm incredibly proud of myself for doing so.

SUMMARY

Now that I've completed my outline and the first four chapters, it's clear to me that I've only really just begun the journey for this novel. Getting to this point was harder than I ever could have imagined, but this has also been the most rewarding and powerful project that I've ever been given the opportunity to explore. I spent many late nights worrying about the minuscule details and making sure that everything was perfect, and I feel that this is as close to perfection as I'm able to achieve at this stage in my life. Once I graduate college, I have every intention of finishing this novel and pursuing publication, because I feel that there truthfully is something special within these pages. The most valuable lesson that this project has taught me is that, despite all of the obstacles that I had to face over the course of the last two years, I am capable of creating truly magical things, and persevering through the stress and anxiety ultimately pays off in the end. I'm so incredibly proud of the progress I have made in this endeavor so far, and I'm excited to see where I'm able to take it in the future.

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Abigail Logan was born in Portland and raised about twenty minutes westwards in the small, residential village of Bar Mills, Maine. She graduated from Bonny Eagle High school in 2018 and is majoring in secondary education with a concentration in English at the University of Maine. Aside from storytelling, Abigail is passionate about music and art, and she's always up for a good challenge in Mario Kart.

Upon graduation, Abby is planning on teaching in a southern Maine middle or high school for a few years to gain valuable classroom experience before pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership. She will continue writing this story until it is ready for publication, so she can finally make her dreams of becoming a published author come true.