

The Chandler Legacies

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My freshman year of boarding school was the hardest year of my life. I was sent to the school by my parents, who wanted the very best education for me. And this was the very best, a place that had educated a president.

It was 1990, and I had only been living in the United States for four years. I had never had an American friend. I arrived for my freshman year, different in so many ways than the other kids. Browner, more effeminate. The freshman-year dorm I lived in, like Ramin's dorm, was a dark basement. The hazing I describe in these passages is a mild version of what happened there. The shame I experienced that year felt like an ocean I could never swim out of. I attended classes, but for most of the year, I wouldn't leave my room. I was sent to the school therapist, but I told the therapist nothing of what I was subjected to. I would beg my parents to let me come home, but I didn't tell them any details of why. To this day, I don't speak about what happened that freshman year other than to my husband and to the family of friends I eventually made in boarding school. The details belong to me, and as I've grown up, I've discovered that fiction is my preferred method of making sense of the world.

For decades, I thought that what I went through that first year of high school was isolated to me. With time, I felt like I had put it all behind me. And if that first year broke me down to pieces, then the next three years of boarding school made me whole again. They were, and will always be, three of the best years of my life. It was in boarding school that I

met the friends who would first accept me and make me feel seen. They remain my best friends to this day, my family and my circle. It was at boarding school that I found adult mentors who first recognized and supported my need to create.

The first person I came out to was a teacher at boarding school. The first friends I came out to were boarding school friends. The person I am today was born on those grounds, and though a part of me still wishes I could have left and never looked back that freshman year, another part of me knows that so much of what is good in my life was born on that same campus in the years that followed.

In April 2017, almost two decades after graduating, I received an email from the school. The email included an attachment to a fifty-page report to the Board of Trustees of my alma mater. Fifty pages that outlined decades of horrific sexual abuse at the school. Twelve former teachers were accused through the years. None were reported to the police. In some cases, the school looked the other way. In others, letters of recommendation were written and the teachers were sent to other schools, no doubt to repeat the behavior elsewhere. I read the fifty pages, feeling sick to my stomach.

That night, I was drawn back to my boarding school family. We texted, emailed, called each other. Some were surprised by the report. Others, myself included, read it with a knowing feeling of dread. Somewhere deep inside me, I knew this was the culture of the school. So many of us did. But we didn't have the words to name it, or question it, or stand up to it. We felt powerless. We were kids back then. We were supposed to be taken care of. I called one of my best friends who lived in that freshman-year basement with

me. We talked about how the report didn't even touch upon the abuse that students inflicted on each other. Because when the teachers and the administration set a code of conduct, students will inevitably follow.

As I read about what happened at the school, the parallels to other powerful institutions were obvious. Like the Catholic Church, this school and many others covered up sexual abuse. And Hollywood, the industry I have worked in for my entire adult life, has been revealed to be yet another version of the same thing. Powerful men protected, victims silenced and paid off, predators hired again and again. The problem is universal. It touches any institution that believes itself to be more powerful than its individuals.

This book is my way of confronting the many complicated emotions I have about four of the most impactful years of my life. I hope that by telling this story, readers will understand that they have more power than they think. But this isn't just a story about darkness. It's also about how friendship, love, and creativity can heal us. And set us free.

The statistics about sexual abuse and hazing are heartbreaking. One in nine girls, and one in fifty-three boys, experience sexual abuse by the age of eighteen at the hands of an adult. Almost half of all students coming to college have already been hazed. Students who are bullied are between 2–9 percent more likely to attempt suicide. These problems are pervasive and are all around us.

If you have experienced or are experiencing abuse of any kind, there is help, both personal and professional. There is therapy, and the support of friends and family and mentors, and so many organizations devoted to being there for you.

Below is a list of organizations that can help:

RAINN is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization.

www.rainn.org

800-656-HOPE

The Trevor Project is devoted to saving young LGBTQ+ lives.

www.thetrevorproject.org

866-488-7386

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

800-273-8255