

That Was Then

by M. K. Tod

PART ONE

Chapter 1

I couldn't recall how I got home. My mind, barely capable of thought, was strung between belief and disbelief, knowledge and denial, carefree and the dark, dead horror of the victim I'd become.

The stairs to my third-floor walk-up looked like a mountain—tall, imposing, impossible. I struggled with each step to put one foot forward and pull myself up, clutching the railing like a lifeline. At the top, trembling and barely able to stand, I fought to hold the key steady enough to open the door.

Finally inside, my knees buckled. I dropped to the floor, curled up like a kicked dog, and sobbed—deep, gulping sobs that reminded me of the day my grandmother, the woman who was like a mother to me, had died. A part of me had died with her. Now another part of me—the innocent, daring, optimistic part of me, the part that saw a future full of possibilities and wonder—was dying too.

I raised two fingers to my mouth. My lips were puffy from unwanted kisses. Every inch of me was bruised inside and out. The tendons of my arms and legs ached. My cheeks were on fire, and my eyes felt swollen with tears. I clenched my fists, gritted my teeth, and stood. Bracing myself against the wall, I stumbled down the hall and into the bathroom.

Do not look in the mirror! an inner voice commanded.

Turn on the shower!

Get undressed!

Pull the curtain back!

Step in!

Each command propelled me forward. I didn't know where they came from, perhaps some tiny flame of sanity still burning within. The water, as hot as I could stand, cascaded over me, rivulets running along my shoulders, between my breasts, down my legs. Each drop washed away the stink of him, the spicy scent of aftershave.

Minutes passed. Steam clouded the air as the water scalded my skin. I lathered soap against a faded blue washcloth and tenderly washed every inch and fold of my body. Then I stood, swaying slightly but otherwise immobile, arms wrapped around my chest as if protecting myself from some unseen force. My mind blurred with indecision.

What next? I wondered, as if there was a protocol for the aftermath of rape. Pajamas? Hot tea? Scroll through Instagram? Another chapter of the book I was reading?

It didn't occur to me to call the police. No one would believe me, a twenty-one-year-old student against the CEO of TekBiotics. A man whose accomplishments were legendary, whose reputation was unsullied by scandal; a man who represented success and leadership within the Boston community; a man who funded major charitable efforts. A man I had arranged to interview for an end-of-term paper.

"Nana," I cried, surely loud enough to resurrect her from the dead. "Come back. I need you!" To the empty room I whimpered my twin sister's name. "Emma. Why aren't you here?"

I shook my head to clear the sounds blocking thought—the ripping of my sleeve, the snap of restraints clipped around my wrists, the whirr of air conditioning, the rustle of sheets, the heaving gasps as he approached orgasm. Tears slipped down my cheeks and

pooled at the corners of my mouth. My world shrank to small breaths and a silence that screamed inside my head.

I didn't remember turning off the water, but when the warm, moist air cooled, I found myself shivering so hard that my teeth chattered. I clutched the shower curtain and stepped out onto the bathroom floor. The towel, rough against my skin, was large enough to wrap my torso and felt like a protective sheath.

In the bedroom I found fresh underwear, sweatpants, an old T-shirt softened by years of laundering, and a hoodie. I took the clothes I'd worn today—bright, confident clothes—and shoved them into the kitchen garbage of discarded wrappers, congealed pasta, carrot scrapings, and the other trash of my life.

I took a few steps from the kitchen to the couch and collapsed, overwhelmed by exhaustion. Logic had escaped me, leaving only confusion and sprawling panic. Fear clogged my throat with every night sound: the swish of tires on rain-dampened streets, the clunk of a radiator, the blare of a siren, the raised voices below my window. The walls seemed to close in on me.

I curled up on the couch. Each breath ragged, uncertain. The lights were on. The front door was locked and bolted. The windows ... Lurching upright, I hurried to my bedroom and locked the window. It didn't matter that the apartment was on the third floor, the window ledge inaccessible to anything other than pigeons.

How could I function after what had happened? Would I ever laugh again? Dance again? Be frivolous again? I clamped a hand over my mouth, ran to the toilet, and threw up. My stomach heaved again and again until finally I pressed my forehead against the porcelain bowl for a few moments to gather a wisp of strength.

Back on the couch, I lay with my head on one of the pillows. My mind clanged with memories. Greiner's broad torso. His chest covered in black, curly hair. His blue and glittering eyes. His hands, strong and large enough to grab both of my wrists. The guttural sounds he made. The smile. I'll never forget the smile.

I must have dozed for a few minutes, for in the instant that separated sleep from waking I had no immediate recollection of the ordeal. Then it hit me like a speeding truck with swirling images just as vivid as real life. With jagged breaths and a racing heart, I pounded my feet against the couch. "No!" I shouted at the memory. "No! This can't be true. Can't be. Can't. *Nooooooooo!*" I wailed, swallowed up by the injustice of it all.

I wanted to charge down the stairs, run outside, and scream until my throat was raw and my lungs exhausted, scream that I had been raped. But it was my fault. I should have known not to go into a hotel room by myself with a man. It didn't matter what he had done. I would be blamed.

I imagined a different outcome. That I'd slashed him with a knife, cutting his pretty face until no one recognized him, severing the thing that had claimed a part of me I would never get back.

Awareness rose within me. I had a choice to make. I could find a way to move on—not to forget, but to move on. Or I could let this bomb that had blown my life apart define me and remain a victim forever. Regardless of the path I chose, I would never be the same.

The last thing Greiner had said as he stood in the doorway adjusting his tie was that he would ruin me and my family if I ever breathed a word.