

## The Graduate

Tali woke from her dream with a startle sitting up in her bed. Her mother's boyfriend was rudely banging on her door threatening if she wasn't ready to go in 15 minutes, she would not be receiving a ride to school. She ignored him and refused to let him ruin her day, graduation day. After clawing her way through the humiliation and ridicule of the school year, she was going to do her best to celebrate her accomplishment. After all, she worked hard for it!

She pulled her phone from the night stand and checked the time. 7:30. No wonder her alarm had not gone off, it wasn't even 8! He probably just wanted her to leave so he could have the house to himself to watch porn movies. She could not understand what Mona saw in him.

She headed for closet quickly, noting that if Sandel said she had fifteen minutes he meant that down to the second. He was looking for a way to upset her especially today, so there would be no time to shower, a scrubbing of baking soda under the arms would have to do. She slipped on a tight black dress that she had been saving for this occasion, and it fit her petite frame perfectly. When her mother bought it, she told her the dress would look "elegant" and wouldn't bunch under her graduation gown. Her mother was right, but she wasn't even here to see how great she looked. Tali hoped she would make it for the ceremony.

Mona didn't come home last night, probably at a friend's house hung over. Since Sandel came into her mother's life, she was back on a downward spiral of drinking and partying and only God knew what else. Tali heard them arguing the night before, so she assumed her mom was trying to escape his wrath, while leaving her to deal with it.

She took a deep breath and tried to reel in her emotions, tied her dreads up into two elegant buns, applied some eyeliner, and sprayed on some perfume. Sandel started yelling and banging on the wall downstairs, so she threw on her cap and gown before she was stuck here with this creep all day. Tali grabbed her backpack and added in a pair of flip flops and her phone to the already heavy bag, glanced back at her room, and closed the door. One day she would not return.

Sandel was waiting in the living room and when Tali reached the bottom of the steps, he looked her up and down with a sneer. She was disgusted by him but said nothing, and they made their way to the car without a word. Tali approached the back door to the car, and he angrily told her he was not a chauffeur and to get in the front, which was surely to make her feel even more uncomfortable.

After the awkwardly silent ride to school, she was ready to leap from the vehicle as soon as he pulled into the parking lot. Tali gathered her belongings when Sandel abruptly reached across her lap to open her door, brushing her thigh in the process. She cringed and whipped her body out of his reach and jumped out of the car, pulling down her gown and dress in the back as she did. She ran into the school as fast as her heels would allow her and joined the crowd of noisy teens in the hallway.

As she walked past the lockers, students met her with indifferent expressions as they did most days. Some smiled, some were looking at her shoes, which were probably the most fashionable they had seen her wear all year, and some just flat out ignored her as they passed by. Tali could have cared less either way, seeing as though she literally had no friends there

other than a girl named Shayla she occasionally sat with at lunch. Shayla was somewhat of an outcast to, as well as a junior in high school with a baby on the way. Tali had been a loner at lunch once again when Shayla went out last week to give birth, a little girl. Maybe she would call her and see how she was doing.

She made her way through the school and out one of the back doors that faced the auditorium and took a seat in one of the gazebos that faced the parking lot that was mostly empty since the ceremony wouldn't start until 11:00. Tali watched the students milling around outside of the cafeteria, amazed how she didn't know many of them. People her age didn't gravitate to her much once they met her mother, and the way they moved around over the years made it difficult to stay connected.

Tali opened the book she had been reading to pass the time. With almost two hours to fill she had come prepared, and she welcomed the distraction from the butterflies swarming in her stomach. She looked up to see the somber twins, a name she gave two girls who were as pale as the characters on the twilight movie, who she had never see speak to anyone other than each other, and never smiled. She only recently learned that their names were Tara and Cara. They stared unblinkingly at her as they walked by, undoubtedly on their way to put on their caps and gowns. If Tali was an outcast, they were cast out! She wondered what the story was on the creepiest chic's at Westwood High.

Not realizing over an hour had passed, Tali closed her book and made her way to the auditorium at 10:15. She wasn't the first student to arrive, and many families had already begun to fill up the seats in the front row facing the stage. Tali made her way around the back

and up the steps to a room where light refreshments were set up for the graduates. Her stomach started growling immediately as she viewed the spread from the door. She took notice of the looks she was receiving, as most of the students had seen her in nothing but t-shirts and joggers all year, if they ever saw her at all. She trudged to the table and chose a bagel and orange juice from the selection and quickly had a seat in a nearby chair. A teacher poked her head in to tell them they had ten minutes, and Tali took a deep breath, trying her best to put on a brave face.

Ms. Olan her English teacher, and one of the only people at the school she didn't completely detest, entered the room and immediately began lining the students up in the order they would be called. Tali's heart started beating wildly in her chest as the music blared through the speakers and filled the room blending with the chatter and excitement of the moment. She allowed herself a smile and refused to let the tears that momentarily filled her eyes spill down her cheeks and ruin her make-up. She squared her shoulders and held her head high as she followed the student procession into the auditorium.

The students sat quietly as Principle Butler finished her dramatically long speech about their futures and dreams. Tali checked her phone and was surprised to see she had a text, and that her phone was going dead! She was sure it was from her mother, but when she clicked the message box she realized it was a calendar reminder, and Tali cut off her phone and slammed it in her bag. Her gaze scanned the crowd silently wishing Mona was there when she locked eyes with her crush, Kasaan.

Kasaan didn't know he was her crush of course, they had never really talked aside from speaking in the halls, and short but flirty conversations in gym class. His eyes asked if she was ok, and she shook her head yes and blushed when he smiled at her. She turned her attention back to the stage where they were finishing the speeches. The students stood and began the walk, their pictures and names on a projected screen as they were congratulated, each presenter shaking their hands. When it was Tali's turn, all her fears were gone as she pranced with grace, and without one negative thought of slipping and breaking her legs. When her name was she heard some cheers, and a few hoots from rowdy guys. Her principle smiled at her, lightly kissing the air near her cheek as she passed Tali her diploma, and they both turned toward the camera man.

While everyone took pictures and celebrated with their families, Tali made her way through the double doors and out to the parking lot, choosing to go around the school instead of walking through. Some of the graduates were outside and Kasaan was among the guys who ditched their parents to hide a have a sip from the party flask, and as she walked by him he called her name asking where she was going. Teary eyed and upset that her Mona didn't show, Tali wasn't in the mood to talk, and she told him if he couldn't give her a ride home, then kindly leave her alone. He laughed her response off and walked back to his cheering teammates. She regretted her attitude, but only for a minute. Fuck everybody was how she felt.

Tali walked slowly in the Texas heat until she approached the hill for Mourning Side. She prayed Sandel had stayed gone for the day but swore when she saw his red hell cat parked in the driveway. Reluctantly, she put her key in the door and could hear shouting as soon as she opened it.

Rounding the corner, she appeared in the doorway without being heard, just in time to see Sandel with his hands around her mother's neck. She reacted without thinking, pulling and scratching him from behind. With one slap he knocked her to the ground, and Tali touched her mouth where he struck her and came back with blood. She saw some of the many discarded beer bottles strewn across the table and grabbed one without hesitation whacking it across the back of Sandel's head.

The bottle didn't break like it did in the movies, and Sandel did not fall or pass out. Too bad for her. He turned around momentarily taking his attention from her mother long enough for Mona to catch her breath and moved towards Tali, eyes wide like a madman. Tali picked up another beer bottle and broke it on the edge of the table. He smirked but stopped in his tracks, cocky but unsure if she would act on the threat she was insinuating. Damn right she would. It was silent in the room aside from their breathing and Mona's crying, and at last Sandel chuckled and conceded. He stormed out of the backdoor, breaking the glass as he slammed it, started the engine to his devil mobile, and sped out of the driveway.

Dropping in to a chair, the broken bottle still in her hand just in case, Tali released the breath she had been holding during the melee. Mona eased herself from the floor to the table and lit a cigarette from the pack that was sitting on the table. Tali waited for her mother to say something, anything, but she remained quiet pausing from smoking only to dump her ashes on the floor. She asked her mother point blank if she was letting him come back into their home, and her response was not surprising to Tali, so she got up without another word and went upstairs to her room.

She closed her door and immediately went to the mirror to check the damage to her face. A cut near her mouth and the side of her lip swollen, a lot less injured than her mother. Sandel had been in her life for less than a year and already he was more important to her than her only child. Mona didn't even ask her how her graduation went. She laid across her bed and closed her eyes.

She woke abruptly to screaming yet again, and realized it was getting dark and she had been asleep for hours. It didn't sound like the fight had gotten physical yet, but the arguing was escalating, and Tali could hear a glass break and her mother swear loudly as she stormed out of the front door. She could hear Sandel's heavy feet stomping up the steps. Tali jumped from her bed and leaned against the dresser trying to block his entrance, but Sandal kicked the door in before Tali could block it. The force he used knocked Tali to the ground and her head hit the floor. All she remembered was his ugly face before she blacked out.

Sunlight crept through the blinds, and birds chirped faintly through the open window in Tali's bedroom. She woke to find she was still on the floor, and her room was in shambles, pieces of glass by the door, she remembered only fragments of the night before. Her head hurt, but at least the swelling on her lip hadn't worsened overnight she thought as she touched her face, she was anxious to get dressed and get out of there. Last night was the last straw for Tali and any thoughts of trying to salvage a relationship with her mother were gone.

Tali slowly lifted herself up from the floor, checking to make sure nothing was broken as she stood and looked down at her dress. Ripped and ruined and there was a black and blue bruise on her thigh, most likely from her fall. Just another nail in the coffin that supported her

decision to leave for good. She dressed quickly in jeans, her lucky pink hoodie, and tennis shoes, packed what she could in her two biggest bags, she didn't have much to begin with, grabbed her backpack and phone and walked out her bedroom door, not looking back this time.

With a knife in her pocket, Tali took the steps downstairs two at a time bucking for a fight, a murder if it came to that, but when she reached the bottom of the steps she was surprised to find Sandel with his head down banging in the table mumbling to himself. He was probably worried he had finally taken it too far, and he should be. She yelled to him that he had better hope she didn't call the police when she got to school. He didn't respond as she ran out the door and slammed it as hard as she could.

Tali ran to the bus stop with the bruise on her thigh throbbing under her skinny jeans, and her arms and back felt like she had been lifting weights. The bus was leaving as she approached so she dropped her bags and jumped up and down thinking for sure the driver saw her in his rearview, but he did not pull over. She could see the twins staring wordlessly at her from the back window with their big shiny eyes. Looked like she would be walking to school after all.

Once Tali arrived she went straight to her locker to put up her bags. She had no classes, but she wanted to be anywhere but home, and at least at school she was safe and would have time to hash out her next steps. After checking her face in the mirror, she closed her locker and turned down the hall towards the cafeteria. Kasaan and a few other players from the football team were taking pictures of each other and making a big scene of it in the hallway. Tali smiled in his direction as she passed but Kasaan didn't return her smile or acknowledge her in any way.

She figured she couldn't blame him for being upset with her for being somewhat rude to him after the ceremony yesterday, but she thought about all she had been through in the past twenty-four hours and sucked back the feelings of remorse that were bubbling in her chest. No one ever felt bad about how they treated her. Never.

She grabbed a breakfast bar and a juice from the cafeteria and waited in line for what seemed like forever for someone to ring her up. When no one appeared from the back, Tali laid the money for her items and the register and hoped someone would see that she paid and not come searching the school to charge her with breakfast theft.

She entered her homeroom, and no one batted an eye except for the Somber twins. Seated in the back of the class as they were every day, they both watched her with a surprised interest as she made her way to one of the seats next to them. Tali assumed the shock on their faces was due to the fresh bruises she was sporting, so she winked at them to lighten the mood. Cara looked away from her immediately, but Tara winked back at her, surprising the frown she was wearing into a semi smile.

The homeroom teacher passed out old assignments and projects for students to take home or discard as they wished, and Tali took out her phone to read realizing that her battery was still not charged. Digging in her backpack and coming up short, Tali glanced over at Tara, who was also reading, and held up her phone. Hoping she got the hint Tali smiled, and Tara retrieved a charger from her bag and passed it to her. Tali mouthed the words thank you and plugged her phone in happy to power up her only lifeline. Tara turned to her sister and

whispered something inaudible to her, and they both turned back and looked at Tali expressionless. Weird chic's.

Tali opened her eyes and realized she had dozed off, a small puddle of drool where her mouth had been pressed against the desk. Students were filing out of the classroom excited that school was finally over, and the twins had left too taking their charger with them. She looked at her phone and the battery remained dead. What the hell! She would have to power up somewhere, and she needed to figure out where the cheapest safest hotel was that she could afford.

She stood and put her book in her bag and noticed a sticky note sitting on the desk where her head had been laying. She picked up the note and realized it was from one of the twins, Tara no doubt. The note said to meet them on the dirt road near the school bus stop at 6. She could not imagine what the twins could possibly want to meet her for seeing as though she had never heard them talk, so she figured it must be important.

She walked to the local diner, happy when no one looked up from their meal as she went straight to the buffet and made her plate. Tali ate without taking a break, drank her soda in one gulp, and left the money to pay the bill on the table. The waitress was rude and never asked her if she needed a refill, so no tip for her. Drained from no sleep she walked towards her mother's house to see if it might be safe to catch a few z's before her rendezvous with the twins. She rounded the corner and saw that neither car was in the driveway, so she ran in the house and straight to her room. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Tali's eyes opened three hours later remembering the night before, and she rushed to look out the window, relieved to see the Sandel had not returned, but Mona had, and her car was parked haphazardly on the front yard. Tali grabbed her things, her phone charger included, and made her way down the hall. The clock on the wall said 5:30 so she woke up just in time. She stopped in front of her mother's bedroom and heard crying and what sounded like soft talking or praying. There was so much she wanted to say to Mona, so she knocked once on the opened door without crossing the threshold.

Her mother was sitting on the bed with her head down. She looked drunk, and Tali told her so. She also told her how awful she felt over the years every time she put a man before her daughter. She told her how much she hated her for never caring about her or protecting her. When she was finished she thought the flood gates would open but they did not. Mona had drained her of any feelings she had left, and she had no tears left to shed. She walked away from her mother's door and left to find out what the twins had to tell her or show her.

Tali started towards the bus stop and she could see the twins with their eyes wide in anticipation waiting timidly for her to approach. She smiled and gave a "what's up" gesture with her hands, but the twins just looked at each other, then back to her. They turned to walk away, and she assumed that meant to follow.

They walked the dirt path in silence, and she wondered if she was following them to their home on the other side of the road. They glanced back at her only once and left her wondering what the hell this was all about. They reached the clearing where the large but

creepy residence of the somber twins stood. It was a beautiful house, just strange much like the girls and their parents who worked from home and never socialized with the neighbors.

She followed the girls through their yard to an old shed that housed a black 1987 Buick, the kind of car a grandpa would drive. Tara approached the driver side and got in followed by her sister on the passenger side. Tali threw up her hands and stated she had never seen either one of them behind the wheel of a car and Tara went in her pocket and produced a driver's license for them both. Tali was shocked mostly because she did not have her license yet and these girls didn't even speak out loud, but she was supposed to trust they could drive?

Unsure of what else to do Tali got in the backseat and buckled her seat belt. At least she could get them to drop her off at a hotel after they were done with whatever this adventure was. Tara pulled out of the driveway and onto the street with a brief glance at Tali in the backseat and onto Highway 90.

They settled into a comfortable silence that didn't last long, and after about 20 minutes, Tara turned off the main street to a rocky road hidden by trees and killed the engine. Tara looked from Tali to her sister, then back to Tali again. The twins opened their doors and they all got out and began walking towards what looked like a barn. The sun was beginning to set, and a crow flew by overhead landing on a nearby light pole. Tali didn't like birds, crows especially. She associated them with death or dying.

The twins stopped in front of the barn and turned to Tali with what looked like fear, or sadness, or maybe both. She had reached her breaking point and finally snapped on the girls and asked them to explain what the hell they brought her here for, or she was gone. A tear

dropped from Cara's left eye, and Tali felt a feeling of dread overcome her. She looked to Tara, who walked to Tali and took her hand. Speaking to her for the very first time, she told Tali that she was already gone, and this spot was her resting place.

Cara's eyes were filled with tears, and Tara stood speechless waiting for Tali's response. She began to laugh so hysterically that she wasn't sure it was her voice. The twins were certifiable nuts, and she was an idiot to have gone anywhere with them. She began screaming at the girls, calling them names, telling them they were crazy, but they did not move or try to console her. She asked them to show her, and they walked her to the back of the abandoned barn where a shallow grave lay open covered only with a plastic tarp.

Tali's breath caught in her throat as she approached the ditch and lifted the edge of the black covering to see a leg, her bruised leg, her ripped dress, and her lifeless body laying twisted to the side in a makeshift coffin dug by her mother's boyfriend.

Sandel killed her on her graduation night. She could not believe it was true, but it made perfect sense. She couldn't remember what happened after she blacked out, and when she came downstairs the next morning, he looked afraid about something.

No one paid Tali any attention at school that day, which was pretty much normal, but that day felt different, not like she was being ignored, but like they hadn't seen her at all. The homeroom teacher didn't give her any of her work back, and Kasaan didn't speak to her either.

When she tried to talk to her mother, she never even lifted her head for Tali to know for sure she heard her. There had to be another explanation. Why was she still walking around? Why could the twins see her? She dropped the tarp hurling questions and accusations at the

twins. Tara put her hand on Tali's arm, the most calming gesture she had felt in a long time, and waited while Tali gathered her emotions, so she could hear her reply.

Speaking just above a whisper Tara told Tali she and Cara were walking the path last night when they heard screaming and saw Tali's mother get in her car and speed away. Shortly after they saw Sandel leave carrying something wrapped in rug to his car. So, they followed him out here to the barn and watched him bury her body.

They were going to tell a teacher or call the police the next day, but when Tali showed up to school they were unsure of what to think, until they realized that no one else could see her but them. Her legs were unsteady, and she sat on the ground next to her grave in awe.

Tara told Tali how sorry she was that this happened to her, but they had a plan. Cara shook her head as her sister talked and smiled through the tears of disbelief that would not stop falling. Tali could only listen still not believing that any of this was possible, and there was nothing that could bring her back.

The girls got back in the car and drove back in the direction they came from. They passed by Tali's house, and checked to make sure Sandel had come back, and his car was in the driveway. Tara parked their car further up the street and opened her cellphone to call 911.

She spoke calmly and clearly to the dispatcher, telling them the address where the crime occurred, and where the body could be located. She was told to wait for the police at her home, but she did not leave from in front of Tali's house until she saw three patrol cars silently making their way up the street.

The girls pulled into the driveway of the somber mansion and sat silently until the other officers arrived. Cara left the car and ran inside to give her parents a heads up about what was about to go down, and they both stood in the doorway as pale as their albino daughters as the homicide detectives approached. They told the girls Sandel, or Mr. Smith was being questioned at the station, and asked if it would be possible for the girls to take them to the grave. Their parents screamed no. The girls shook their heads yes.

Not only did the detectives find the body of 18-year-old Tali Maze, they also found the bodies of several other girls, mostly runaways, buried behind the barn. The girls were missing from other counties, and there was no way they would have found them so quickly had it not been for the observant somber twins.

Tali sat and listened to everything the detectives told the twins with no emotion at all. She was dead, so she guessed she didn't need emotions anymore. The scene around the barn was lit up with strobes and blocked off with crime scene tape. Small white flags on sticks marked the area where the bodies were found. She turned to the twins who looked at her like they wished it was something more they could do to help her. She smiled and blew them a kiss to tell them they did all they could, and she appreciated it. Tali stood and began walking away from where her body was placed, hoping and praying to find a true resting place of her own. She saw a bright light illuminating the sky and the twins saw it too as they watched Tali disappear into the night.

THE END