

*Uncle Tom is dead.*

It was the first words my mother blurted out on that particular morning. I had slept past my alarm and apparently was not awake for most of it. It had come in this morning while Matthew and Jackson were playing about. Mother had picked up the call and when the strange voice spoke, she had thought it was one of those frauds until the sobbing woman called back and this time was more aggressive.

“Listen, woman! Your brother is dead and I am not some damn robo-call,” the voice boomed through the speakers and everybody went quiet to listen.

But I slept through all of it. Truthfully, I never really planned on making it down for breakfast. I was not in the mood for some typical family dinner with all the chatter and chaos over the table.

Tanner and I just had one of those fights we normally had, except this time I was sure it was going to lead to a breakup. He wasn't picking up my calls and I wasn't going back to college any time soon. So, in the meantime, I was stuck here, at home with my family of... What number were we again? ... That's right, *ten*.

Mother narrated it all to me in that same voice she always used when she was cooking or asking you to pass the salt across the table. It was her only voice, although you didn't want to see her furious. Then she was more terrifying.

I listened with rapt attention even though I couldn't care less about Uncle Tom and what killed him. In my family, you didn't want to make it seem like you didn't care, especially when it was bad news and you were trying to save time. I made the mistake of doing it once and the rest of the night was spent listening to all my aunties' advice and questioning if I was a witch or an evil spirit.

So, I sat down quietly, pretending as though I was very much interested in the full details of Uncle Tom's death as Mom went on and on about the past until his death.

Uncle Tom, Mother's brother, had run away from home as a child. She did not hear from him nor did he contact any of them until a few years back when he showed up at our front door. It was the first time I ever saw him. He was a gorilla of a man, tall and big, not from visiting the gym but from genes. His palms were big enough to where he could fold my palms and no one would notice.

I recall his smile faltering when Mother went into a spree cursing him and slamming the door at him. Or the fact that when she finally calmed down, she looked at him as though he was some strange ghost that had wandered into our lives. He might as well have been a ghost because after that day, no one saw or heard from him anymore. Apparently, Uncle Tom had only done us the courtesy of showing up to tell us that he was getting married and we were not invited. I have no idea if that was courtesy or an insult, but Mother saw it as both. She felt furious that she was not invited to her own brother's wedding but on the other hand, she was satisfied because she didn't really consider him her brother anymore.

Now, he was dead and as a final respect to him, they were all going. Not me, though. Someone had to stay behind and watch over the farm just in case anything happened, or at least that was the lie I was prepared to tell them. But I wasn't feeling like going to the burial of a man I didn't know and just maybe be forced to say a thing or two about the man in front of other people whom I also didn't know. There were too many ways it could go wrong, so I made my way back to my room and began to think of how I was going to sell it to my mother that I wasn't interested in going.

Luckily, the night before they left, mother came into my room, and from the way her eyes darted around, I knew she was searching for something, anything to launch a series of talks, but I had arranged my room earlier that day, and laid on my bed trying to reach out to my boyfriend again.

Mom sighed, sitting on the bed, "Paisley," she called out.

"Mama." I sat up, locked my phone, and gave her my full attention.

"We need to talk, honey," she spoke softly. I continued to stare at her. It did not take a keen eye to tell something was bothering her. From the way she sighed to the way her eyes remained fixated on the floor.

"Tomorrow we will be going to my brother's burial." I almost rolled my eyes now. It had been Tom's death non-stop and it was beginning to drive me insane. I had no idea how long I would pretend I was the good girl they wanted to believe I was. Or that I have never gone to parties, never drank alcohol, and no boyfriend.

"Mama, I..."

"If you don't want to come with us, it's okay," she said.

I paused, my jaw dropped open. It was the last thing I expected from her. She had never been the kind to cut anybody some slack. Apparently, Uncle Tom's death was a good thing. "You can stay here while all of us leave, I know you don't know him and honestly, I don't even know him myself."

The rest of the conversation was met with a smile from me until I bade her farewell.

Going to bed that night, I did not try to call Tanner anymore. I was going to spend the weekend partying at least until they came back. They all left early the next day in the old family minivan, leaving the house all to me. I spent the morning dancing about, playing loud music and doing all the things they would not let me do if they were home.

For the first time since I returned home from college, it felt like I had the kind of freedom I always sought. There was no expected curfew or anyone to question my life choices. Tossing my heels to the side, I strode to the refrigerator, pulling out some cereal and the jug of milk. I leaned back, blindly reaching for the television remote.

I spent the next few hours watching my favorite tv show. I planned on watching it throughout the night but I was exhausted from the long day. So, I made my way to the kitchen to brew myself a black coffee.

That was when it all started.

I stood waiting for the old machine to finish brewing when I noticed the noise from the television had gone silent. At this time, I didn't think much about it. Maybe it was a quieter scene or something. I continued with my coffee and made my way back to the living room.

The television was turned off.

"What the hell?" I cursed, groaning as I dropped the mug on the center table and went to check what was wrong with the television. I turned it on, the sound came back and everything went back to normal. *Weird*, I thought as I turned back and made my way back to the couch where I had been sitting all along.

The sound went off again.

I whirled around, feeling irritated. The television was turned off again.

Growing up, I never believed in stories. Hell, the only superstitious thing I ever believed in was that the moon was guiding me when I walked in the dark, but that was years ago when I

was much younger. So, I thought nothing of it beyond a faulty television, except I had never known our television to be faulty. There were a lot of things wrong with this house, but the television was not one of them.

So, I turned back to the television and turned it on. I stood there, staring at it, waiting to see if it would go off. The first second passed, then another five seconds. Just when I was beginning to think it would not go off, everything turned pitch black.

I almost jumped out of my skin, turning frantically around the thick darkness for anything at all, but nothing came to sight. My heart was pounding now. For the first time since it started, I thought it was not ordinary. Something was going on.

I blindly searched for my phone on the couch, turning on the flash with trembling hands. I rushed to the window, peeping out to the distance. There were no neighbors here. We lived in a secluded part of the town, where our quaint farm spread out into the distance. The only way to tell if the power outage had affected only our house was through the street lights sharing the same source with us. I checked out and the light glimmered brightly.

Pondering what was going on, I checked the time on my phone and the notification beeped. Tanner had finally replied. I tapped on it and for a second I forgot my fears, much more engaged with the message.

Two words: *Screw Off*. A groan of frustration escaped. I screwed up, yes, I know that, but it was just once and I was drunk for crying out loud. Yet he made it seem like it was a big deal... Okay, maybe it *was* a big deal kissing his best friend and all, but don't I deserve credit for stopping it there?

Unwilling to deal with him, I sighed and locked the phone. One more view out into the streets had my heart in my mouth, ready to jump out.

*Oh, God!*

There was someone standing out in the street, and he was staring at our house. I stumbled back instinctively, almost tripping over the couch. Blinking back, I looked back outside and he was gone. At that point, I concluded something was wrong. Either my obsession with True Crime had finally caught up with me or there was someone watching my house and they had cut the electricity.

I peered through the darkness still, at least if he really was there, I could see him. Watching attentively, I kept my gaze on the spot where he had been.

But with my attention focused on the street. I did not see him. In a split second, from my peripherals, I noticed something charge towards me. I turned to the figure speeding towards the window.

“Christ!” I jerked from the window, scrambling away as far as I could. Turning to the window, everything looked normal again. I blinked. I could have sworn a man charged toward me, as though he was going to reach out to me through the window. Rising to my feet, I stared at the window with cautious skepticism. I pulled the blinds of the window again, scanning the surroundings. Nothing.

I tried to breathe, but my whole body quivered with fear. I reached for my phone with trembling hands, seeking the comfort of talking to someone, even though they were miles away. I responded to Tanner, *Can we just talk about it, please?* I stared at my screen with bated breath, waiting for his response.

*Typing...*

Waiting for the message to come in was the longest seconds of my life.

*There's nothing to say. You cheated on me with my best friend, what else is there?*

*God!* I swore mentally.

My phone beeped a warning. My battery was low. “This cannot be happening,” I mumbled under my breath, checking my phone. I turned around the darkness, my flashlight creating a target in the sheer darkness that engulfed me.

There was no way I was staying inside this house, with no light and a dead phone. The thought of going out there sent goosebumps all over my body.

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Three steps came from the stairs. “Hello? Who’s there?” I called out, turning my light to the darkness of the stairs. The steps came again, heavy like heavy boots on the wood. My breath hung in my throat, my mind reeling with anxiety. I could not move. I had always bragged about how I would be the first to flee a serial killer situation but I could not move my body. I froze there, waiting for whoever it was to come down and kill me.

The creaking step creaked now, telling me exactly where he was, but my flash was pointing exactly there. Nothing. Nobody. I could feel my cereal and milk returning to my throat

like bile, sealing my air pipe. I needed to breathe. No, scratch that. I needed to get out of here, run and not look back. But I couldn't. I just... I tried to ask who it was again, but it was almost impossible to form a single word with the fear gripping me.

“Whoever you are, it's not funny!” I tried again. The steps paused. Retracting.

It went up again, one step, two steps, three steps. “I already called the police, they are on their way,” I lied. Why I had not called the police, I had no idea. It was the first thing I should have done. I quickly dialed 9-1-1 on my phone, my finger hovering on the send icon.

There was no movement. I had no idea what I was going to tell the operator. There was a creature in my house? Something I could not see or describe? Shaking the thoughts from my head, I managed to convince myself I was over my head about it and there was no one inside. As though reading my thoughts, the thuds came again, the steps racing down the stairs as though charging toward me. My body jerked into motion and I charged for the door hoping that whatever it was would not catch up with me before I made it out.

As I ran, I could feel it chasing behind me, reaching for me from my peripherals, I willed my legs to move faster. With one dexterous move, I pulled the door open, darting out without bothering to shut it behind me.

I ran until my legs felt too heavy to carry me before turning back to the empty house. I could have sworn I heard the steps chase after me into the farm but there was no one behind me. The leaves rustled with the movement of the wind and occasionally mosquitoes sang with other creaking insects, but beyond that, there was nothing else.

I wrapped my hands around myself as the cold breeze brushed against me, the coldness of the night gripping me. I stared at the dark house, wondering if I was seeing things. There was no way I could be imagining things. The house was pitch black, the street light remained visible and yet as I stared at it from the distance, I noticed the porch light flicker on and off again.

Swallowing hard, I watched the light flicker. This had to be some insane joke. It had to be, but still, I knew what I was seeing, either there was someone trying to convince me they were some sort of ghost or... no. There was someone inside my house.

Unlocking my phone, I called for help. The 9-1-1 operative picked up

*“9-1-1 how can I be of help?”*

“Hello, there’s someone in my house,” I said. There was no need to try to sound frantic. I *was* frantic. My neck itched. Standing still was almost impossible.

“Did you see the person go in?” the operator asked. My battery warned me it was about to shut off.

“No, but I...” I turned to the house again, staring at the flickering light, growing more desperate by the moment. “He’s flickering the damn light like he’s some ghost or something!” I shouted.

“Ma’am, we must warn you that a prank call is a crime and you could be jailed for it.”

“You think I’m making this up? There’s...” another warning from my phone. “You know what? Never mind!” I ended the call, cursing under my breath. I stared at the screen at the final percent of my battery, threatening to shut off at any moment. I could not sit outside for the rest of the night, and nor could I go inside alone. I needed someone, and I was quite sure the damn police would not be coming anytime soon.

There was only one person I was certain would respond to at this moment. I quickly unlocked my phone again, sharing gazes between the porch and my phone until I found Tanner’s number. I quickly hit send, praying to whichever god really exists that he was not too furious with me not to pick up.

He did.

“Thank God, Tanner, I...” I was almost in tears now. Whether because I was right to trust he would or because I was scared out of my wits. But Tanner reserved whatever he had started when he picked up and let me continue. “There’s someone in my house, Tanner, I’m scared.”

“Are you okay, Paisley?” Tanner asked with genuine concern in his voice. I could imagine him already jumping to his feet ready to charge here in the middle of the night for me.

“I don’t know, Tanner. I just... I’m outside, I can’t go inside my own house...” Pause. I sucked in a breath, trying to calm my nerves. “I’m scared, Tanner. I’m scared,” I said, my breath caught in my throat.

He was silent for a long time, and I could feel him considering what to do. After what seemed like forever, he finally said, “Alright, just wait there, I’m coming.”

Just as his words reached me, the phone turned off. “Damn!” I cursed, trying to turn on the phone again despite knowing it was not going to come on. I bit my lips, pacing from one end to another, staring at the door, making sure whoever it was inside the house was not about to sneak out and hunt me right here in the open.

Five minutes passed, five hours, I had no idea, only that the cold had slipped through my body now and I was shivering terribly when the car pulled up in front of my house. I raced out just as Tanner stepped out and rushed toward the door. “Tanner!” I called out in a hushed voice. He turned around and his gaze met mine.

“Are you okay?” he said, holding me at arm’s length.

“I’m okay. I’m not hurt. I... there is someone in my house and they are...” I began chewing on my fingers again, an instinctive attitude when I felt anxious.

Tanner stared at me. I could feel him holding himself back from whatever his mind was cooking. I wanted him to. Desperately.

He blew a breath and then turned to face the house. “Is he still inside?” He asked. I nodded. The light on the front porch was on now, not flickering. Just on. Tanner reached inside his car, pulling out a baseball bat.

He held it tightly. I hated being the girl that called the guy to save her but right then, I needed him and I needed to get into the house. It was like killing two birds with one stone. Tanner led me into the house, slowly making our way inside, scrutinizing every shadow and every corner. He reached for the light switches in the dark house and flicked them on. The lights came on.

I held my breath, not knowing exactly what I was expecting but it definitely wasn't this. It wasn't nothing. The house was perfectly empty. The cereal and milk were exactly where I had left them. Turning my gaze to the stairs, I expected to see some man lurking in the corner but nothing still. The house was completely empty

Tanner and I moved from room to room, scanning. For the first time this night, I was praying there was actually someone there. At least he would not be thinking what I knew he was already thinking with the way he stared at me accusatory. I gulped.

“Where is he?” he whispered under his breath.

“I don't know,” I responded with a lift of my shoulders.

Tanner whirled to me now and I knew there was no searching for my mystery invader anymore. “Did you do this just to bring me here?”.

I had braced for this question since I saw the empty living room and kitchen but still, I found myself stumbling to find my words.

“Jesus, Paisley! You are fucking unbelievable!” he spat, pushing past me and making his way out of the house.

*No, he can't be leaving.*

“Tan, please wait!” I called out, chasing after him. He didn't. He pulled open the door to his car and just as I stepped outside, the light flickered on and off again. My breath caught in my chest.

Tanner paused. Slowly, he turned to me. I could not have felt more hopeful than I did then. He noticed it. He noticed the flickering light. He would know I wasn't making anything up and trying to make him stay. I meant everything I said.

But when his eyes met mine, my hopes were thrown from the top of a tall building to the ground, shattering its fragile shell. He wasn't thinking it was strange. No. He was thinking his crazy girlfriend was forging a ghost story to make him spend the night with her.

“You know, you are unbelievable. You think flickering the light would make me think there was some sort of poltergeist in your house and have me trying to protect you? Jesus, Paisley, you've stooped too low for anything!” he shouted as he covered the distance between us, making a demonstration with his hands.

“I didn't do that, Tanner, *I swear!*” I added the last part in hopes that he would trust what I said. It backfired.

“Like you swore when you said you loved me?” he retorted. The veins on his forehead were visible now, like a streak down his forehead spreading to his brows. He was furious.

“That's low, Tan. There's nothing I ever did that indicated I didn't love you!” I declared hotly. I didn't have the right to get angry, but maybe a bit of yelling was what he needed to see things from perspective.

“Yes, kissing my best friend behind my back is a great way to show how much you love me.”

“It was one mistake, Tanner, get over yourself. I have been nothing but a perfect girlfriend to you other than that!” I screamed back. I was losing it, too. Who did he think he was?

He blew out a breath, as though pondering on something. His hand brushed his face and he turned to me. My chest was pounding, whether from the fear that I had just cemented the end of my relationship or that if there *was* a killer in my house, then we had just made ourselves an easy target.

“You see, there shouldn't have to be an exception like that in the first place!” The words were a blow to my guts. It was like the air had been sucked out of my lungs and replaced with a gasping need for him.

“I need you,” was all I could mutter breathlessly.

He shook his head and made his way to his car. I watched as the engine came on and he drove away, leaving me. I needed him. I knew almost immediately it wasn't only about the ghost or killer in my house, I needed him to survive. He was like my tether and I just severed it. The light flickered behind me, cementing my dismay.

All the strength I had to fight had left with Tanner in the passenger seat of his car. I stood there hopeless, waiting for whoever it was to come out and get me. There was no point trying to survive at all. If I was lucky then they would meet my body in the front yard when they returned but if they were not, which they almost always were, I would have been missing.

Slowly, I turned to face the house, steeling my mind. It's funny how one could easily feel like they have lost everything when they lose someone valuable. I strode inside without bothering with the switch, and made my way up the stairs, not minding the creaking of my feet or the weird feeling that something was poking at me through the darkness, like a set of eyes watching me. I couldn't care less.

I made my way up to my room, stepped in, and collapsed on the bed. Nothing mattered anymore and my heart was in turmoil. A monster could literally crawl out of my bed and eat my head off and I would consider it an appropriate pain to quench the dull ache burning a hole through me.

Hot tears streamed down my cheeks. Playing mental tricks on myself did not do the trick this time. I was a mess and yes, it was because of a guy. I fucking loved him. It didn't matter that I cheated on him. *I loved him.*

It was the kind of love that left scars on one's heart when one knows there is nothing they could do. I reached for my phone, wanting to power it on, but the battery was still dead. Of course it was. I let myself drown in my despair, letting it consume me whole. Maybe it would eat me before my killer came for me. There was no terror in my thoughts, just the reality of a messed up day... a messed up life.

Pooling tears continued down my face to my bedsheet and I made no attempt to clean them. I let them drench it. I was still fixated on the thought of Tanner, his words, and the way he looked at me. It was the way he looked at me that broke me even more. It was not the look that said he was mad at me like all the times when we used to fight and I knew things would go back to normal. It was not that. It was the kind of look that said he wondered how he ever fell in love with me in the first place. If eyes were truly the windows to one's soul, then I was damn sure Tanner hated me that very moment and maybe forever.

I had no idea when I drifted to sleep in my tear-soaked sheets. Only when the morning light made its attempt to strike me blind with its heavy rays. The memories of everything that happened the previous night began coming to me again fast, and whatever enthusiasm I woke up with disappeared with the arrival of my old thoughts.

Instinctively, I reached for my phone, connecting it to power. I held the phone, tapping behind it incessantly, waiting for it to power on. It was taking too long. After an excruciatingly long five minutes, the phone came on. No new messages, and definitely no call from Tanner.

*God! What I would give to make it all go away.* I was still pondering about it all when I heard the familiar call for help our minivan made whenever my parents drove it. I jumped out of my bed, trying to steal some morning luck from wherever it comes from and made to welcome my family.

"Hey... baby girl, you missed us?" Mom asked as she hugged me. She looked at me as though I was some young child they had left in the hands of a babysitter, never mind that I was all alone and I was far taller than she was. I forced a smile and began greeting the rest of the family. We made our way inside the house.

"So, what happened while we were gone?" Mom asked.

"Nothing interesting," I responded with a lighthearted tone, climbing the stairs to my room.

The minute she settled on a seat, she began her narration of the events that transpired. Apparently, Uncle Tom had not been too eager to die and hoped to linger, which had caused

some disaster that got the rest of my siblings cackling again even if Uncle Tom had long been buried.

Uncle Tom had created a scene there and for a long time, there was a side ceremony to return his spirit and send him back to where he was supposed to be. For the first time since mother had mentioned all of this, I didn't consider them one of those tales spun to spook children, and even as an argument sprung from it and everybody began taking sides on whether any kind of life existed beyond this plane, I considered the possibility of Uncle Tom being the one here. Mother said they had sent him to where he belonged.

Slowly, I rose from my chair and made my way to my room stiffly. Stepping inside, I shut the door, holding my breath. I had no idea what I was thinking but the next words out of my mouth were, "Uncle Tom, is that you? Blink once if you can hear me," I said.

The light in my room flickered for the final time.