

Big
Brother
Brody

by

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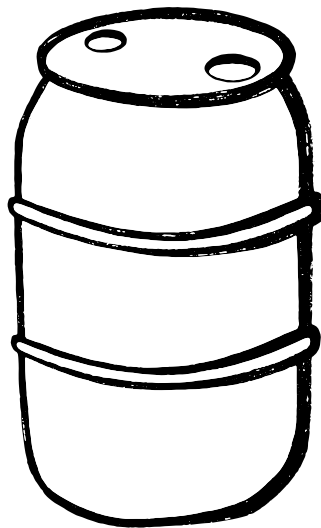
(Full manuscript totals 69,000 words)

For my brother...

As you'll see.

– Part I –

The Boy in the Barrel



– Chapter 1 –

Silence

It is quiet now.

How can I describe silence when it is only the absence of sound? I might first talk about noise – the screams. It's like trying to describe darkness. It would be true to say that it is only a place or time without light. But it can be so much more – lurking in the shadows. In the same way, I might ask, how do I talk to you about death? First, I will have to tell you about life.

I was thinking of beginning this book with more of a crowd-pleaser, something user-friendly, like:

Hi, I'm Alex. Welcome to the End of the World.

But I decided to go with the whole *silence* thing. So deal with it. I will start and end this book with silence, remember that. Two very different kinds of silence. The first one is the kind you won't like. The kind you know is only a matter of time before it ends. Before it is replaced with its opposite, something loud and terrible. But the last one...

Well, you'll just have to wait and see.



The street outside the shopping mall is deserted. Smashed shop fronts. Abandoned cars. Trash blowing through like tumbleweeds on a summer breeze. But you can't help feeling people will come back any moment. The way the car doors hang open. Keys still dangling from the ignition. Shopping bags waiting in open boots. But the blood stain on the road has dried to a brown crust long ago and the body has gone.

Where? you ask.

Don't ask.

I lean inside the car for the groceries. Smells like something has died. *Yep*, the potatoes. Who knew something that looks like a rock could grow arms and legs and make such a stink? I separate the rotting food – vegetables, meat – and salvage what I can. *Cans!* Thank god for canned food. I never thought I'd say it. The apocalypse is horrible for my diet.

Brody is not helping with the scavenging. He is frozen, scanning the street. He's getting one of his *bad feelings*. His chest puffs up and down, getting faster. His eyes sweep the shadows, darting every which way, up and down the boulevard. He looks like a meerkat. A muscly, tattooed meerkat. I'd like to laugh at him – he does look funny – except there's not much laughing these days. And when are his *bad feelings* ever wrong? I hurry with packing the cans into my backpack and join him.

It's quiet, too quiet, silent in fact. There's *that* word again. Silence is a funny thing since it's only supposed to describe when sound is not there. But *something* is here. Silence apparently doesn't exist. But it does. It too can come to life. There are so many different kinds of silence. Like the brooding silence when Dad was disappointed in me but had nothing left to say. Or that noisy silence in the quietest places, when the damage I've done to my eardrums rings and hums in my head. Or at night, the whispering silence, where my own fears and doubts come to worry my soul.

But this very second, in this empty street outside a ruined shopping mall, the silence is

like the world is holding its breath. Not to decide whether it will breathe out again. No, there is no question of that. It will come. Peace and quiet never lasts these days. The noise'll return, that's for sure. The dead will come back to life, the empty boulevard will walk again. No, it's not a matter of *if*, simply a matter of *when*.

The silence is deafening. My pulse pounds so hard it's like a war drum in my ears. I'm afraid I won't be able to hear *them* over my own heartbeat. Just like Brody, I'm getting the *feeling* now too. Like my body knows something before my mind does. My eyes sweep the street. Abandoned cars stand still, broken shop fronts are unchanged, alleys, corners, concrete surfaces, shattered glass. Nothing. I strain to hear what my sixth sense already knows is coming. A sickly electricity creeps over my skin, the hairs on my neck are like needles. Every part of me reaches out into the silence.

And then relief. Because, finally, there *it* is.

For the tiniest of moments, I hear what I've been waiting for. The slightest shuffle, the scrape of a foot dragging along the ground. So brief, that the little, hopeful part of me that's left these days, hopes against everything that I just imagined it. And for the longest moment, it *is* silent again. Playing with us. Tempting us to believe that it will remain just so.

But, of course, it doesn't.

The sound starts again. A scraping foot, scuffing awkwardly. Such a stupidly insignificant sound on its own. But it's not insignificant these days. It's the harbinger of doom, the herald of disaster and death. The beginning of the end.

Those first feet are joined by more. A cascade erupts from the stillness. Then a moan, like the yawn of some tortured soul waking from eternal slumber. Its cries bounce off the glass buildings, echoing down the street. In response, a chorus of wails goes up in every direction. We cannot see them yet, but we know all too well what is coming for us.

– Chapter 2 –

The Barrel

Brody just looks at me. Nothing more. He doesn't need to say a word, I know what that look means. I nod and take the big, blue barrel off my back.

Here we go again.

It's about to get noisy, so I've got to get inside where it's safe. Problem is, I'm getting too tall these days. I just had a growth spurt before all this apocalypse stuff. It makes me a bit clumsy. My fulcrums are all off. And now I can hear *them* coming, getting louder, which makes me panic. I glimpse their shuffling movements in the corners of my eyes and almost trip over the lip of the barrel as I climb in. The whole scene must look hilarious – like a lanky, human hermit crab taking its shell off and squeezing himself inside. It *would* be funny to watch, but as I already told you, there's not much laughing these days. And the moaning dead closing in don't really have a sense of humour.

Once I'm inside the barrel, I lock the lid and flick on the flashlight so I can keep writing. I guess this is a good time to explain some things:

A. is for... The apocalypse. End of the World. You probably think you know all about this one. People turned. Now their undying corpses stalk our world hungry for the living. You get bitten by them, you become one. Everybody dead now. Well, nearly everyone. I'll fill you in later.

B. is for... The barrel. It's a massive, blue, hard-plastic cylinder, which I now carry around on my back. Brody found it in a warehouse one day, rigged it so I can lock it from the inside and popped some air holes so I can breathe. He even installed a tiny plastic window to

look out. And a shutter when I don't want to see (or be seen). It keeps me safe from what's out there.

Now that I have explained *what* the barrel is, I should probably explain the *why*. Why am I sitting inside it in the middle of the street and my big brother Brody is outside? My "big" brother who is now shorter than me after my growth spurt and who would actually fit in here just fine. Why isn't he here instead? Good question. There's an easy answer, but being the apocalypse and all, I don't feel like doing things the easy way. If this was a blog (or whatever form words took when they were cheap, electronic noise and didn't have to be handwritten by flashlight while you hid inside a barrel), it would go a little something like this:

Why Bigger is *Not* Better

(in the Post-Apocalyptic Landscape)

- I'm rubbish at hiding (*This is an issue of **Stealth** – Big always gets spotted first*). Simply put, I forget how tall I am now.
- I have a greater surface area. (*Pure Physics – which equates to more area for biting – I call this **Bite-Surface**.*)
- My arms and legs extend further away from my body. (*Again, a physics issue, but I will call this one **Bite-Radius**. A larger Bite-Radius equates to more chance of being bitten. I tend to lose track of where my arms and legs are and whether a threat is getting too close to me, and thus entering my Bite-Radius.*)
- I'm clumsy, I bump into more things (*This is another **Stealth** issue*).

- Lastly, I represent more of a meal. (*Bigger is not better because it means more meat. I'll call this **Bite-Motivation**. Unfortunately, this goes for the living as well as the dead these days. Not much food left for anyone, anymore. Thus, I say it again, thank god for cans!*)

So there it is. My likelihood of getting bitten is way too high. Therefore, Brody put me in the barrel to keep me safe. He also refuses to teach me how to fight, but I'll get to that in a moment. I think I was giving him too many heart attacks. Falling over things, blowing our stealth, a walking meat lure following him around. This way, when there is ever trouble, I just jump inside the barrel and ride it out. I have water, snacks and my reading light so I can keep writing in this notebook. It's quite cosy. This way Brody doesn't have to worry about me while he does what he does best.

– Chapter 3 –

'B' is for Brody

From my little window in the barrel, I can see Brody. He stands calmly in the middle of the street like he's not in the middle of the apocalypse. Always so calm when bad things are happening. When it is all clear and safe and nothing's going on, he is a grumpy, bossy, little bitch, snapping orders and always on edge. It's as if he is just waiting for the bad things to come back. But as soon as they arrive (and I'm safely locked away in the barrel) he is as calm as calm can be. Just like he is now, as he waits for the undying to arrive.

I feel like I've been watching him my whole life. When I was little, he was the football star of the school. He still looks the part. Full of muscle. But now he has a few more tattoos. A few more scars. Not as young, not as good looking. And there's the limp. In his final year of high school, a football injury put him in hospital and out for the season. I didn't know it then but it also put him out of a promising football career too. He was always the perfect student, liked by everyone, even the teachers. Maybe not so great academically, but with his sports scholarship, he could go to whatever university he wanted. His whole life was set up nicely for him. But after the injury, that all kind of disappeared. And he did too. I didn't see him much after that. Not until the End. Not until now.

The world outside my barrel, every shadow and surface, seems to come to life and crawl towards us. But Brody still doesn't move a muscle. He is a statue. Only his eyes flick around, sizing up the swarm rolling in. The fact that he is not moving means the undying can't tell if he's alive. His stillness confuses them. So they don't get excited yet, or rush towards him. They just creep out of the shadows with their lifeless, grey skin hanging off

their bones, and follow the others. Lurch out of the alleyways, with that shaky, rigor mortis gait. Struggling to their feet from where they had fallen. Ghosts and monsters waking from the rubble. Slack jaws and dead, cloudy eyes coming alive with a demon hunger.

But I've seen it all before. For me, it's as if their howls are only yawns as they shuffle in for breakfast, desperately in need of coffee.

All the while, Brody just waits, seeing how big the wave really is, how many have stirred, called in by the commotion. He lets the first ones come within arm's reach. The undying are still not sure if he is living flesh or not. And just as they figure it out, as the realisation dawns upon their rotting faces, he springs into action.

With a hammer in one hand and a hatchet in the other, Brody whips into a blur between the dead. Every movement he performs with the utmost efficiency. Precision. One hit for one enemy. No more is needed. Five or six undying have been dispatched before the first corpse hits the ground. Brody weaves through them, beating a steady rhythm. Ducking, dodging, swinging again and again. Moving in a slowly expanding circle, spiralling outwards.

Watching the way he dances around the dead reminds me of the way he would slip and twirl through the defenders on the football field. I remember seeing a game of his when I was really young – watching bug-eyed from the sideline. Even then it filled me with dread – that I could never live up to that. Then he went away and I saw him less and less, and it was impossible to tell if the stories people told about him were really true, or just the way they chose to remember him.

When the rest of the swarm finally realises what is happening and begins to rush, Brody takes a step back and lets the undying trip over their own fallen. In their dumb haste they stumble onto hands and knees, presenting their heads perfectly for target practice. Brody zips from one side of his little clearing to the other, as the dead attempt to climb the wall

forming around me in my barrel. Every new undying he dispatches adds another layer, building the wall higher, holding the swarm at bay. Then Brody steps up, climbs the battlement, swinging down on the dead. He certainly looks happiest when he is destroying. Is that a grin of pleasure or exertion on his face as he works up a sweat? For him, I think it is the same thing.

Then Brody's swing misses for the first time and he grapples with one of the dead. He holds the snarling corpse and its snapping teeth at arm's length and takes a second, then a third strike before it finally goes down. I can tell he is getting tired now – his limp is showing. But Brody keeps going, holding on until it seems as though the wave of dead is starting to run out.

On the far side of our clear ground, a fresher undying manages to climb over the wall of fallen. When I say *fresher*, I mean they seem to be more recently deceased. They haven't started to decay. I'm not sure how or why, but it makes these fresh ones different. They can do more than the average undying. Retain a bit of their former self. I'm making a study, you see, keeping a tally. This one has better muscle control – less wobbly on its feet. What I call a *Runner*.

Said runner charges at Brody, who has not seen it. One bite is all it takes. I scream out to him from inside my barrel, banging on the sides. And possibly Brody hears me, or possibly he knew all along, for at the very last second, as the undying lunges at his back, Brody turns, as calm as calm can be, and hits a home run.

The last of the dead falls and just like that, the street is silent again. Brody freezes, goes into statue-mode once more, scanning for any undying still to come, drawn in by the noise. He waits, making sure none of the fallen are coming back to life, again.

This whole scene – the piles of dispatched corpses splattered in a circle around us in this post-apocalyptic street – is just another day at the office for Big Brother Brody and the

boy in the barrel.

You really get the feeling he enjoys this. It is certainly something he is good at. I've seen him do some of the most ridiculous things while I'm hiding in his shadow, and frightening too. *Ridiculously frightening.*

I've seen Brody kill undying with his bare hands. When he has been caught without a weapon, he won't hesitate. Brody'll punch the dead right in the face or twist their necks and pop their heads off. If it is just one undying on its own, he will calmly grab it with his hands, keeping its snapping teeth out of reach. And in those moments – when he is so scarily calm and in total control over what should be a terrifying monster – you can't help but feel sorry for the creature. The thing is helpless.

This one time, I saw Brody actually headbutt the undying. Instead of keeping away from the biting part, he went toward it, so fast that he crushed its skull with his own forehead. Are you starting to get the picture?

In Brody's hands, anything transforms into a weapon. Once he was caught by a group of the dead and things got messy. There was a struggle, they grappled and the group fell. Somehow Brody jumps up with an undying leg in his hands. I don't think he even knew what he was about to do until he suddenly twists the leg off and starts using it to beat its original owner into its second death.

My favourite episode of *Bloodiest Big Brothers*, also known as *BBB: The Destroyer*, was when we came across this cake shop not long after the End of the World. To be more precise, not long after the power grid finally collapsed and we were raiding known locations of food perishing in failing refrigerators. The name of this episode is *The Cake Shop Incident*, or more colourfully, *Let Them Eat Cake*.

We broke into the shop without any troubles and found it surprisingly untouched by looters. The walk-in refrigerator was stocked high and we were both dreaming of cake for

breakfast, lunch and dinner, when out of the storeroom spills the missing staff members. Or what *was* the staff. Undying in pink cake shop uniforms flood into the room. And what does Brody do? He grabs the closest thing, which of course, is a cake. After slamming a creamy sponge into an undying face, Brody is caught in a fit of giggles as he holds his victim back, jaws snapping. Some poor former employee now covered in its own product. I could see why Brody was laughing. Not only was the ravenous monster covered in cream but it looked like it was desperately trying to lick it off its own face. If only we could feed them cake!

Brody-Fucius says,

The only way the world has changed is that people are now on the menu.

Apart from that, it is still the same old crap, we were just better at hiding it before, pretending it wasn't there, pretending we wouldn't kill one another to get ahead. We just had laws back then to stop it. Undying are just as greedy and selfish and hungry as people ever were. But now the living are even worse, says Brody.

The world is now a lot more literal. We literally prey on one another.

All bets are off. It's dog-eat-dog. Or human, or undying.

Brody says,

At least now, life is a lot more honest.

In the street outside my barrel, Brody is finally moving again. At first, his statuesque form takes a couple of deep breaths. Then he sighs and comes toward the barrel where I peer from my little window. I'm certain he's about to give me the signal that I can unlock the hatch and climb from this cramped space. But instead, Brody jumps up onto the barrel, stands

on top of my head. How humiliating! He does this, I know, to get a better view, see further into the distance and spy the undying traipsing in. But I can't help but be reminded of the other reason he keeps me safely locked inside. The same reason he doesn't teach me to fight.

Brody believes I have a purpose.

– Chapter 4 –

Saving the World

Brody believes that when the apocalypse comes to an end, the world will need to rebuild. And when that happens, people will need some help. They will need to remember all the good parts of the world before it was overrun by monsters. Before people became monsters themselves to survive. He believes the most important thing the world will need is good people.

But it's the good that die young,

says Brody.

Especially these days.

Never the bad guys, never the killers. Brody says he doesn't want the new world to be built by the survivors, the ones willing to do what it took to live on. The people like him, he tells me. Because if the survivors build the next world it will be even worse than the one we had before. And according to Brody, that one wasn't so great either.

So that's why he needs at least one good person to survive. That's why I'm in the barrel. He believes he must protect me. I'm one of the *good ones*, apparently. I don't know how he decided that. Maybe it was just a lie he fed me in order to lock me up. His kind way of dealing with the fact that he doesn't trust me to have his back. Now he won't even teach me how to fight. Brody says he doesn't want me dealing with the dead at all. He says it changes you.

Killing.

Even when the undying are already dead. He says I need to be kept away from all the horrors infecting the soul of the human being today. So I'm supposed to stay in my barrel, to stay pure, or something. It sounds like bullshit. But he seems to believe it.

I'm also supposed to write down all the good things I can remember about the world. All the good parts of Us. So people in the future can remember, so they can do better. So *you* can too. Yeah, *YOU*, the one reading this – because you are the future. Believe it or not.

The only problem is I don't know what to write. So far I'm just writing my thoughts and all the things that happen to us. *These things*. These words you are reading right now. I'm not sure it will be of any use to anyone. I once tried to write a “proper” book, like Brody would want. I didn't get far, just the beginning. It goes like this:

Welcome to the End of the World. If you're reading this, congratulations, you're still alive. You made it. You survived the undying army that consumed the planet and then you survived the world afterwards, where the people left alive turned into the real monsters. So, if you are reading this, then you are probably in need of some lessons on how to be a human once more. Please realise it's now up to you. You get to decide the future. Because the End of the World is also a beginning. You can build a new world, better than the last one. Without all the bad parts. But you must remember all the good bits too. That's why I'm writing this book. Consider this your 'Guide to Surviving the End of the World and How to Rebuild'. An encyclopaedia of all the best parts of life. So when faced with all the death, you can remember the things worth living (and dying) for. Even in light of all there is to fear, just turn these pages, and you can still choose to love.

Yeah, I know, I think I just threw up in my own mouth too.

That's the problem, I don't believe what I'm writing at all. I'm finding it hard to remember the good things myself. When I try to remember our world, all I see is the fear.

Fear of what people think. Fear of each other. Fear, even when there was nothing to be afraid of. Fear, even before the undying began to walk. And I remember how we all wanted to be rich, even when it would be impossible for us all to share this dream. We just wanted more. More than we needed. More than the next person. I see people starving while others throw food away. I see how we were killing the planet, even when we had already found renewable energy. Maybe something was broken? Maybe the earth needed a change?

See what I mean? I'm not the best person to be writing this thing – this catalogue of all the good – since Alex (me) is not the most positive person at the moment. But Brody keeps me locked in the barrel to do just that. I just want to learn how to fight so I can protect myself and survive. I don't care about helping people. I'm really having trouble remembering any of the good things about *Us*, anything worth saving. I find it hard to feel good about anything anymore. Just take a look around.

– Chapter 5 –

Survivors

A voice calls out from the street and Brody's feet shift on the barrel above my head. But it wasn't Brody's voice. My heart jumps up my throat, making it even more difficult to hear what's going on outside. Brody steps down, his back fills the view from my window. The voice comes again, more clearly now.

"What's in the barrel?"

Brody puts his hand behind his back so I can see it tighten into a fist. This signal means *stay put, don't move*.

Meeting other people is never a good thing. Believe it or not, even beside the flesh-eating monsters, it's the human survivors that make it so hard to remember anything good about our world.

"Nothing," Brody calls out in such a casual tone I almost believe him.

At least the voice did not ask *who* is in the barrel. This means they weren't watching long enough to see me get inside. But what do they want?

I see the figures emerge from the shopping mall. A group of adults. They don't seem like a family, probably survivors who banded together after the end. Safety in numbers. One of the random apocalypse gangs that roam our hellscape. Luckily they are becoming fewer as they wipe each other out. They all wear new clothes, expensive brand names, recently acquired from the shops inside. It looks ridiculous next to the bloody weapons in their hands and their unwashed hair.

"I said, what's in the barrel?" A woman steps forward. She could have been a doctor

or a school teacher before all this, for all I know. Now she looks like a stone-cold killer.

Brody's body tightens as he stands between me and the gathering group of strangers.

I don't like the look of them. Even if I did – even if they seemed like the nicest people on earth – you can't trust anybody anymore. And even if by some miracle, they were actually some of the good guys, they might be so jumpy and paranoid about you, that they kill you anyway, just to be safe. Because they think you might be the bad ones. Or even if they think you look like good people too, they could think that is all part of your act to trick them. So they get in first, kill you before you can kill them. Or they just do it because they can't take the chance. So the saddest part of the End of the World is, even if you find other survivors, it's best to steer clear of them. They will probably try to kill you, or just as horrible, you might have to kill them.

"Why don't you come inside with us. We have food. You look hungry." The woman seems kind. Motherly. Maybe she was. Once.

"I'm pretty good out here in the street," Brody says with a chuckle.

"Hey friend, what *is* in that barrel there?" A man's voice calls out but I cannot see its owner.

"I guess I shouldn't refuse a free feed. What food you got?" Brody deflects their curiosity about the barrel by agreeing to go inside. He takes a couple of steps toward them.

"Stop right there," yells the man.

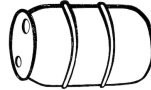
But it's the woman who is in charge. There is a tense moment as the rest of them wait for her decision. Finally, she smiles and nods for Brody to follow them inside.

From my little porthole, I see Brody give me one last signal to stay put. Then he follows the group through the smashed windows at the front of the shopping mall. He steps through a grin of broken glass and disappears into the darkness within.

I don't like this. *I don't like this. I DON'T LIKE THIS!*

What's to like? I'm stuck alone in a barrel in the middle of the apocalypse, with my only lifeline to safety (and humanity for that matter) abandoning me to go into the unknown with a group of probable cannibals.

Nothing. That's the answer. There is nothing to like about this.



I've been in this barrel too long.

Gunshots rip through my wandering thoughts, shredding my mind to blank pages. I almost knock the barrel over trying to find out where the shots came from. But I cannot see a thing from my window.

What does this mean? Brody shot them or they shot Brody?

I consider getting out to take a look, but if it was Brody who fired the shots then he doesn't need my help and would just yell at me for leaving the barrel. And if Brody does need my help, it means he is shot and I cannot help anyway because I cannot fight, damn it! And if the undying see me, then the same problem. I wouldn't be able to fight my way out, I'd be back in the barrel anyway.

BANG-BANG... BANG-BANG!

Another series of shots cascade in quick succession. I can only guess at what this all means. I try not to imagine the worst but the silence drags on. Then it happens. I glimpse the first movement out there in the street. Maybe it was my imagination? But the shots were loud. And noise brings death. Maybe it was one of the quick ones. The *runners*. Some of the freshest corpses can even sprint. However, the street seems empty when I look again.

The shadow doesn't catch my eye at first. But then it starts to move. Far too large to

be one of the undying. The shadow slips off the wall onto a parked car before it disappears from view. A cold sweat drenches me. Clammy, tingling claustrophobia. I want to get OUT but I can't. All I can do is listen to my own breaths as I wonder what is lurking outside.

I stay like this for far too long. The sun is going down. The light out there is changing. Inside the barrel, the air is turning rank. It was a humid summer's day and my body heat is only making it worse. I imagine the smell that must be leaking from my barrel's air holes. How long before it finds those undying noses and their shuffling feet all turn my way? It happened once before when Brody left me alone. I was rolled around in the barrel for over an hour by a pack of undying bullies and nearly threw up all over myself.

Brody is nowhere to be seen. Something is wrong. He wouldn't leave me this long. If he was going to come back, he would have done it by now. I guess it was only a matter of time before something happened to him.

The thought slaps me in the face.

I can't stay in the barrel forever, I'd die of starvation. But one glance out the window and every shadow seems to be crawling with movement. If I open the lid, I'd be swarmed. Alone, I'd die because I don't know how to fight these things. Brody should have taught me to fight. This is so stupid. He should have taught me!

But there are also people out there – *alive people* – killers that I would have to deal with. Could I do that? Even if I knew how to fight the undying, I don't think I could kill a person. But they would know how, wouldn't they? They would kill me without blinking. And some of them are even hungrier than the undying. So even if Brody had taught me to fight, I'm dead either way if he doesn't come back.

I also have another problem if Brody doesn't return. Just as I'm considering popping the lid to take my chances with death, I realise there is something just as important to me as living or dying. Maybe more so. There's this little thing that has been following me for a

while. This secret I have. Something I needed to tell Brody. It probably sounds silly, but if Brody doesn't return, I realise I'll be just as disappointed that I won't be able to tell him, as I am that I will most certainly die. I had wanted to tell my family when they were alive but now he is the only one I have left.

Have you ever had a secret that felt like if you didn't tell someone the world would end? But you know the second you tell people, the ones you love will look at you differently. YOUR world, as you know it, would be gone. Then the indecision, of telling or not, becomes so painful that you just wish the world would end so you never had to deal with it?

Well, I do. I did. And the world really did end. It didn't solve anything.

Now I'm scared I'm going to die without telling anyone. I have to tell someone. You're not exactly family, this is not how I planned it, but maybe I can tell you? Yes, you there, reading this book. I can tell you, while I have the chance. While I sit in this barrel writing. Then at least I've told someone before I'm gone.

Can I tell you?

Would that be alright?

– Chapter 6 –

Telling Someone, Anyone

If I don't say it now, I may never get another chance. Brody is never coming back, the undying will finally crack open the barrel. And all I'll leave on this page is an unreadable last few words and a bloody handprint!



I've got to tell you. You're my last chance. So here goes...

I'm gay.

There, I've said it. Never told anyone before. Guess you're the first. I wonder what you're thinking... Actually, don't tell me.

You're probably wondering why I care so much considering it's the End of the World and all. But this has been part of my life for so long now. It's the only thing I can remember ever really wanting.

I used to dream about coming out every day. Every night I'd lie awake, planning how I would finally tell my family, my friends. Until I did, I felt like I wasn't living. If I didn't tell anyone, it's like the real me never existed. My heart was begging me to come out, but my mind was screaming *NO!* Terrified that the moment I popped the lid and stepped from the barrel, I'd discover the world was full of monsters. So my life was on hold, living-dead like the ones that now stalk the earth. I had needed to come out to finally be alive, but the End of the World got in the way of that.

When I was little, I didn't notice the barrel I was growing up inside. There were hints. When other boys talked about girls, I didn't feel anything the way they seemed to. But there's a lot of things that don't make sense when you're a kid. One thing does, however, and that's games, make-believe. I could play along. The rules came in every movie I watched, every story I was told. *Boy saves girl. Boy defeats bad guy, for girl. Boy saves the world, and gets the girl.* It was easy to sing along, the whole world knew the words. Shouting at me. Even though a voice inside was whispering something different. But that's life, right? Adults tell us to do stuff, we might not like it, but we learn. Still, I couldn't help being jealous of the girls. In their stories, at least they were allowed to like the boys.

At first, it's comforting to have a barrel to hide inside. I was bombarded by the message that there was something wrong with my feelings. All the ways kids (and adults) use the word "gay" – none of them are good. Everything from describing something that's a bit lame to the worst kind of insult. If the label stuck to someone in the playground, it whipped kids into a feeding frenzy, grabbing their pitchforks. Many horrible words are thrown around by boys growing up. Mostly as a joke. And that was the worst part. To seriously call someone gay was considered too harsh – you wouldn't wish that on anyone. When I started to join the dots between my feelings and this label, I convinced myself I had to be straight. Being gay was not an option. I thought, *maybe it is just a choice? I could try. No, I'll go one better, I*

could do it. I'll get married, have kids, get a mortgage, a car, a dog. Grit my teeth, knuckle down. I can do this! No one will ever know. If this is what society keeps yelling at me, maybe I should just go with it?

But then, Joey Sinclair would rip off his shirt in the boys' locker room, and his ripped abs would ripple all over the place, and I had to rip my eyes away before I was caught. I remember hoping that I was only jealous. Who wouldn't want to look like that? *Yeah...* that theory didn't last long. Not against those abs. And *that* feeling. The gravity that weighs in your chest, leans your whole being towards someone, caught in their orbit, hooked by your heart. Joey Sinclair's unbelievable abs outed me to myself once and for all. There's still some part of me that jokes if Joey Sinclair hadn't done so many sit-ups, I'd still be straight. But I was peeking outside the barrel by then, out through my little window and it looked fine. No monsters, just green grass and Joey's abs as far as the eye could see. I wanted to get out, stretch my legs, take a breath of fresh air and go see about a boy. I couldn't ignore the world outside any longer.

Instantly the fear moved in and set up shop. To share my bed at night, stare back at me from the mirror every morning. A deadweight on my shoulders as I walked to school. A night-terror perched heavy on my chest as I tried to sleep. Whenever I was with people, I couldn't stop wondering how they would react, running my mind in crazy circles. *Would the boys in the locker room be disgusted? Afraid of me? What about my parents? Would they be hurt? Would they stop loving me? Disown me? It happens. Mum wants grandkids. Dad's always telling me to find the right girl.* Every time I imagined telling people, I'd nearly have a panic attack. I would see them change as they heard the words. Like the faces of the undying do when they see us in the street, snarling and groaning. The ones I love would look at me differently, turn into monsters like people do these days if they're bitten. The second I spoke up, I would change things forever. The world I had known my whole life would end.

I was lucky to hear some stories about people coming out in books and on TV. It helps a little. Got me back up to try again. But then I'd find myself on that cliff edge, ready to jump, and I'd think, *who the hell convinced me I can fly?* I'd back down, and I felt like shit because a large part of me was also relieved. I wouldn't have to tell Mum there'd be no grandkids. Or tell Dad I was lying every time we talked about girls. I didn't want to hurt them. And I didn't want to hurt either. I didn't want to lose my friends or family, just by being me. If I just said nothing, then nothing would change. The world as I knew it would survive. If I don't open the lid of this barrel, then there is no apocalypse outside. My parents don't turn into monsters. The world doesn't want to eat my flesh. In fact, if I just stay, everything out there is alright.

Until I realise I'm dying on the inside. Like I'm being unborn. Fading away to nothing. Beating my feelings down to twist in my guts. Ashamed of who I am. Ashamed of who I'm not. I can't breathe in here. I want to crack the barrel and face whatever's outside just for a breath of fresh air, even if it's the last breath I take!

I'm torn between two things. My heart whispers one, my terrified mind screams something else. Coming out feels like it will be the End of the World. But I'm dead until I do.

That was back then.

And now, I just want to be real once before I die. Even if it's only on the pages of this book. So thanks for listening. I really mean it. I feel a bit better knowing at least I was true to you, whoever you are. This is a big moment, thanks for sharing it. Raise a glass! (Hopefully you're not drinking from a hollowed-out skull. That would really suck if this notebook is found by a cannibal gang.)

But really, I needed to tell my family. Brody's the only one left. It's like he's now answering for all of them. Looks like I missed that chance too. I was afraid. Don't want to

make things awkward with the only living person you have left, do you? That is, if he is still alive. If he ever comes back...

Brody's been gone a long time. Too long. It's starting to get dark outside. The dead are on the move. And there's something else out there now too. Something I can never quite catch sight of. Something big, fast. A reflection in the broken glass of the shop front. There it is again. A shadow slipping into the gathering night. Or is it my tormented imagination, twisting things, losing itself? A dark flash slips away between the buildings.

Brody must be dead.

Now that I've written the words, I see that it is the truth. He is gone. I close my eyes and beg, to god or anyone that is listening. Even though I know it is hopeless, there is no one left to hear. Except you. Good old You. And this book.

Please bring him back. My big brother. I promise I will do everything he asks. I'll write this stupid book. I'll try to remember all that was good. I promise.

And I will tell him.

Since I've lost everything and everyone else in this life, it's the only thing I have left. This little dream of mine, that now means more than anything. In the dream I tell Brody and he is totally fine with it, tells me I haven't done anything wrong or hurt anyone, says I'm good just the way I am. He's happy. I'm happy. Happily ever after. If I just close my eyes now, maybe I'll dream it one more time. And then, maybe it will be true.