

~ The End Of Ever ~

Part 1

**THE DARK
WITHIN
THE
STORM**

1

Shaun woke in discomfort on his older brother's lumpy couch in a house drowned in darkness. As he stretched out, his right leg cramped. He lurched forward to grab the tightened muscle, overbalanced, and fell off the couch, hitting the hard floor below.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he cursed.

A few long minutes passed before the cramp finally decided to release its grip. Shaun lay quietly on the timber floor in the dark, recounting the events of Saturday night that brought him here. He remembered celebrating Zach's thirtieth birthday. They had feasted on some of the legendary barbeque ribs at the Cold Rock Tavern and then a small group walked back to Zach and Taylor's house afterwards. The rest of the night was currently defined by alcohol induced haze instead of his normal clarity and he appeared to have a headache as a reward. There was a fierce storm blowing outside that must have arrived as he slept, because earlier the moon had been lighting up a clear night sky. He lifted his head and it slammed into the jagged corner of the wrought iron coffee table. He grabbed his forehead and felt the wet blood on the palm of his hand.

"You fucking idiot, Shaun," he scolded himself.

He grabbed the couch with his other hand and boosted himself up, careful to avoid more unnecessary injuries. His eyes struggled to adjust to the limited light as he shuffled carefully across the room, feeling his way with each step. The wind outside sounded angry and Shaun was pleased that he had slept on the couch instead of trying to stagger home in the storm from hell. He safely found the other side of the room and meandered down the dark hallway. He didn't want to wake Zach or Taylor so he left all the lights off until he made it to the

~ The End Of Ever ~

bathroom. He closed the door behind himself and felt around the wall until he found the light switch. He flicked it up and down, but nothing happened.

The darkness remained.

He retrieved his phone from the front pocket of his jeans and moved in closer to the small mirror fastened on the wall. He turned the phone on and the bright screen provided some light. A smear of blood covered a flap of torn flesh the size of a fingernail that was just visible below his scruffy blonde fringe. It was only hanging by a thread of skin so he ripped it off. He turned on the cold water tap to wash the blood away, but nothing came out. He twisted the tap as far as it would go, but it refused to release a single drop. He tried the hot water and that was the same. A frightful gust of wind thumped the side of the house and the small window rattled above the wash basin.

The screen on Shaun's phone went black.

He stood alone in the confined dark space as the storm tormented the walls outside. It let out a ferocious squeal as it wrapped around every corner of the house. Shaun unclipped the cheap lock of the sliding window. He could feel the force of the wind pushing the light aluminium frame inward, but he needed to look out. He slid the small glass panel across and stood motionless, staring out of the tiny dark space with wide eyes. Freezing wind slapped against his pale face as his fingers gripped the edge of the washbasin. His throat dried up.

When Shaun screamed, nothing came out.

2

Taylor was struggling to sleep. The hammering winds outside weren't helping, but they weren't the cause. He normally found himself wide awake and suffering a mild case of insomnia hours after drinking, even though he was

~ Troy Barnes ~

often the last person to crash for the night. Zach, Taylor, Shaun, Amy, and Rayne had all come back to the house after the tavern called last drinks at just after midnight. Taylor had a laugh to himself when he thought back to all the times Zach had searched for the courage to pursue Rayne instead of just saying hello. It was Zach's birthday, so Taylor asked Rayne if she would like to join them for a few drinks. She agreed with a sexy smile and when they all arrived back at the house Zach said goodnight and took her to his bed. It was the best present he could have wished for and the grin on his face proved it.

Shaun didn't have such a good night. He and his girlfriend, Amy, had a heated discussion soon after Zach and Rayne went to bed. Amy left soon after and Shaun decided to sleep on the couch. Taylor took the last of his bottle of bourbon to bed and the night ended swiftly. He wasn't sure what time the storm hit, but when it arrived it was sudden and fierce.

He heard someone close the bathroom door, and then open the window soon after.

Why would someone open the window when the weather is so crazy?

Curiosity got the better of Taylor, so he swung his legs off the bed and let his feet hit the floor. He stood up, wearing grey boxers, and walked to the bedroom door. The house was small so the two bedrooms, the junk room, and the bathroom were all quite close to each other.

The light switch didn't work.

That's just great. The power is out.

He opened the door.

Shaun suddenly ran from the bathroom on the opposite side of the hallway and crashed against the wall as he tried to turn. Taylor jumped back with shock at seeing someone appear out of the dark. Shaun left a body-sized indent in the plaster. As he fell he resembled an upended wind-up toy, his feet still moving in the air. Shaun scrambled, until finally his boots found solid ground again, and

~ The End Of Ever ~

he started scampering down the hall towards Zach's bedroom. Taylor grabbed his arm and gripped it tight. Shaun turned, but it wasn't the party-loving young guy Taylor knew. He had been replaced by a pale replica. Shaun's lifeless face stood out like a ghost in a grave and his mouth gaped open so wide that Taylor feared it would split his face apart. Shaun slipped from Taylor's grip and powered through the door to his brother's room.

3

The warmth of her skin was the first thing Zach felt as he woke. It was dark and he had no concept of time, but he could feel *her*. Rayne was right next to him. They were naked with their legs entwined. She lay on her right side facing away and he was on his back, staring up at the ceiling. A storm outside belted against the house. He had never heard wind like it, and he had never woken up next to a girl like Rayne before now.

She was like a storm last night too.

His mind was fractured into a million different pieces as the intense memories flooded back. He was remembering every second of the previous night all at once and it was impossible not to drown under the pressure of so many feelings. He was excited, frightened, horny, and as insane as it sounded, maybe even in love. Zach wasn't the guy who ever managed to get *the* girl. He was never left wanting, but he didn't possess that rough Taylor-like exterior to stand him apart from others. Zach was good-looking, fit, sported a short buzz hairstyle and he was a genuinely nice guy. That made him exactly the type of guy that would never normally end up with a girl like Rayne. She was a one-in-a-million shot and he was going to owe cupid a big favour if he ever met the little white man in person. Rayne stirred a little. The sheets were half off the

~ *Troy Barnes* ~

bed. Her back was bare. Zach had been awake for quite a while and his eyes had adjusted enough to see what was around him. He tilted his head and stared at Rayne's tattoo that swirled its way from her hair line to her tailbone. The design, a long blade surrounded by vines, swooped down her back as though it were real, its greens and reds coming alive with her every breath. The wind hit the window and it rattled against the frame like it wanted to get in. Rayne jumped in her half-sleep state, startled by the noise. Zach rolled over. His chest covered her tattoo completely, but the tangled sheets separated them below the waist. Zach felt his erection build as soon as their bodies touched again. Her warmth was intoxicating. It was a drug like no other. He wanted the sheets to disappear so she would know how badly he craved her. He needed to be inside her again before the sun had a chance to cast their first night into the past. He put his arm around her, sliding it over soft skin until his hand found her breast. They were small, a perfect size for her petite frame. Her nipples were wide and dark. When he took one between two fingers and squeezed lightly, he felt it react. His mouth subtly caressed her neck as her shoulder-length, unnaturally bright, red hair tickled against his cheeks. Static electricity charged under his lips. He was feeling electricity everywhere as he fell under the spell of lust and desire. A moan left her mouth and her breathing grew heavy. He manoeuvred his leg so the sheets dropped out of their way. With the barrier gone he moved in, leaving nothing between them, and felt his way between her legs from behind. Still half asleep, Rayne moved back into him, inviting more. Her breathing increasing as his mouth bit into her shoulder, his hand covering her whole breast and squeezing. He felt the tip enter her and they started to move together, spooned on the bed. Rayne opened her eyes. Now fully awake, she retreated from his embrace and cut the moment to pieces.

“Please don't,” she said.

~ The End Of Ever ~

Rayne searched for the sheet that had fallen away. Zach was surprised by the reaction.

“You didn’t seem to mind.”

“That’s because I was fucking asleep!”

“Well my plan was to fuck you *awake*.”

Zach was grinning, but she couldn’t see his daft attempt at humour in the dark. The window rattled against the frame again.

“Where the hell did that storm come from?” she said, rubbing her eyes.

“No idea. The weather was meant to be fine all week ...”

“Fuck,” she interrupted.

She was stretching over the side of the bed and tossing things around on the floor.

“Do you know where my clothes are?” she asked.

Before Rayne woke, Zach was imagining the ways this waking up scene could play out. None of the scenarios he considered were anything like this. Rayne was distant. She was asking questions, but held no interest in the answers. It was just chatter to pass the time until she could escape the bed that he had been so happy to wake up in.

“Rayne, what’s going on here?”

She walked around the dark room and found her jeans on the floor, hidden under the sheet that Zach kicked off. She sat her naked body on the bed, put both feet in, and pulled her denims on. She stood up, tugged them up a bit more, and fastened the buttons on the fly.

“Nothing’s going on,” she said, still trying to find the remainder of her clothes. “We had a great night. You did pretty well actually. Better than I thought you would.”

~ Troy Barnes ~

Zach rolled out of bed and grabbed his own jeans off the floor. He remembered Rayne pulling them off him while she knelt before him in anticipation.

“I didn’t know I was being graded on my performance?”

He was glad that the dark prevented her from seeing the look of despair painted across his face, but the disappointment still resonated through his voice. It was only hours earlier that a new stage of his life was beginning, but people say the light of day can change everything. Zach didn’t get to wait that long.

“It was sex. Pretty good sex, but still just sex!”

“That’s all this was?” he asked the silhouette on the other side of the bed.

Something crashed outside in the hallway.

“That wasn’t the wind,” Rayne said.

They stood still, no longer concerned about where their clothes were scattered. Zach listened intently, but the window was now rattling constantly and drowning out everything else. The bedroom door burst open. A body flew face first along the timber floor, slid past the bed, and hit the far wall. Rayne screamed and jumped on the bed, topless.

“What the fuck?” Zach yelled out.

Taylor ran into the room wearing his boxer shorts.

“Zach,” Taylor said quickly. “Something’s wrong with Shaun. I think he’s having a bad trip.”

Zach jumped over the bed, sliding along the floor on his knees. He could see well enough to make out his brother. He was curled up against the wall. His mouth was stuck open and a rasping sound was leaking from his throat.

“Shaun. What’s wrong?” Zach asked him, both hands tight on his brother’s shoulders.

Shaun’s voice kept desperately snatching in oxygen, but nothing was coming back out. He pointed at the window. His hand was shaking uncontrollably.

~ The End Of Ever ~

“I don’t understand.”

He pushed Zach in the chest, causing him to fall backwards, then Shaun gripped the bottom of the curtain with both hands. The window stretched from floor to ceiling and the curtains dropped the full length. They were suspended by a thick timber rod on two large brackets. He jerked down on the curtain and the rod jumped from the brackets. It collapsed to the floor, leaving the window bare for them all to see. It was dark everywhere, but a little more light now seeped into the room. Taylor took a step closer and stared through the glass. Zach lifted himself up and looked out. Shaun stayed where he was, hidden away against the wall.

“What’s happening?” Rayne shouted from where she stood on the bed. “What is this? What the fuck *is* this?”

She collapsed to her knees and dragged the bottom sheet up to her neck.

“Will someone answer me?”

Everyone remained silent.

Seconds morphed into minutes as they stared out into nothing.

Everything was gone. The yard. The fences. The trees. The old garden shed that housed the rusting tools that were hardly used. The neighbours.

There was nothing there.

The entire town had disappeared.

As the storm continued to rage outside, the only thing they could see was darkness.

Rayne felt the warmth of her tears running down her neck. She gripped the sheet around her like a child with a security blanket and started thinking about her mum. Before she left for the tavern they had a fight and she couldn’t even remember what it was about. As her crying stopped, she rocked herself on the bed and asked for one wish.

“I want to go home.”