



The '49 Indian

A Novel By

Craig Moody



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For Gable. Your love inspired this story and your presence anchored and energized me to write it. You have blessed my life in more ways than I could ever express. You are my Gauge.

To Mom, Tiffany, both Memas, and every single teacher, friend or relative who ever encouraged me to write. This is for you.

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And most of all and most importantly, to the Higher Power who blessed me with the calling to channel and deliver this gift of words and storytelling into the world, faithfully guiding me through each step of the process. I am forever grateful to be your humble steward.

His face was shaking, his body trembling. I wrapped my arms around him, choking back a sudden sob as he lifted both hands to cup my face. I opened my eyes to see the reflection of my expression staring back at me in the darkness of his gentle gaze, my brimming tears evident even in the shadowed closeness of our faces. I watched as my reflection fell from the black hole of his eyes and down the pinkness of his cheeks. The sob escaped me as he again pressed his lips to mine, our skin so close that the water of our eyes began to mingle like the confluence of two rivers.

The '49 Indian

I.

Summer, 1983

THE '49 INDIAN

The Florida sun caressed my skin and blinded my eyes as I strolled the Fort Lauderdale sidewalk. The slight summer breeze whistled atop my pores like lips over a bottle top. The muffled sounds of the constant traffic ebbed and flowed against the small bones of my ears, echoing its monotonous drone to the vacant corners of my mind. Cares and worries slipped from my focus like raindrops on a windshield, the brilliant summer day a rhythmic, slow-moving wiper of the brain. The fevered pace of my legs generated a pulsing dance of water upon my skin and a throbbing churn within my veins. A young man of twenty, I strolled along the street-side as confident as a king, yet naive as a toddler. The summer held its promise of adventure, my imagination wild with the possibilities of innocent mayhem and sinful passion. The whispered voice of my soul spoke gently of its intention, singing a song of the future wrapped in warmth within the familiar melody of my heart. The city skyline was not the only magnificent sight dominating the horizon. Beneath the confines of my mind, in the lairs that defied time and logic, a steadfast knowing of truth reverberated through my head like a gunshot fired in a canyon. This would be the summer my manhood would blossom. This would be the season I came to life.

Then, like a beacon rising from a desert mirage, I saw it. The building that had enslaved my curiosity for years. My mother called it a “den of sin”; my father would only scoff and grumble without saying a word, his judgment and assessment of the establishment clear and concise without verbal language. I, however, exploded with wonder. The shadowed sight of bare-chested men or cleverly disguised strangers ignited the limitless wick of my imagination like a stick of dynamite. It took me years to conjure the courage to simply entertain the possibility of walking near the place, much less venture inside. Today was it, though. I had planned this for months. It was time.

Pausing before the door like a weathered soul at the threshold of the afterlife, I stared in a paralysis of fear and disbelief. The years of imagining, the months of planning, my heart pounded so loudly inside my chest that I swore I could comprehend a meaning to its sound. Was it encouraging me to pull the handle? Was it screaming a drumming warning to turn and run? I didn’t know, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t care. There was no turning back now.

Grasping the enormous metal handle in my hand, I paused, swallowed, exhaled, and pulled with all my might. In an instant, the pungent sting of chlorine wrapped itself around my body. The glaring blast of the summer sun prevented my eyes from finding any form of vision beyond a black rectangle. My nose captured the striking smell as

my ears absorbed the bass-heavy throb of disco music.

“Shut the door!” an irritated voice barked from within the darkness. As I quickly released my hand from its grip on the handle, the heavy door creaked and groaned in frustration, slamming its weight with force against my back. Like a poker chip being removed from the game, I slid into the lobby of the bathhouse as if placed there by some unseen force.

“Cash only,” the voice continued, the identity behind it still mysterious in the darkness of the space. My sun-exposed eyes ached in their struggle to focus on the scene before me.

Slowly, the neon glow of the room came into view. Posters of half or fully naked men plastered the walls in a multi-layered wallpaper. The visual intensity of explicit sexuality fired across my brain in an unexpected blaze, its sensual effect trickling down my limbs like lava. Never in my life had I witnessed such a direct and blatant display of human sexuality, be it male or female. The countless images of exposed groins and erect male genitalia overwhelmed my cognizance to a point of near overload.

I jumped as the massive door re-exploded open behind me, the same blast of sunlight engulfing the tiny lobby in a brilliant sheet of white, breaking my hypnotic trance. A figure bumped my side as it passed, the unexpected human touch exhausting my courage and crippling

my excitement. I turned to leave, when the same voice broke my movement.

“I can’t have you blocking my doorway, kid,” it snapped hastily. An awkward realization that I was now being watched by several pairs of eyes slowly began to drip over my flesh like warm July rain water. “You need to pay your entry and move along.”

Like a moth to a flame, my body moved toward the voice in a stumbled shuffle. A window, covered with multicolored bars, stood between me and the source of my commander.

“\$2.50. Cash only.”

Coins began to bounce over the concrete floor as I fumbled in my jeans pockets for the funds. I could hear the voice sigh in frustration as I bent to retrieve the rogue quarters. Clumsily unfolding two one-dollar bills from their sweat-tinged, crumpled state, I placed the cash and coins onto the counter below the rainbow-colored bars. I was barely able to move my hand away, when a shadowed fist pulled the money into the darkness.

“Go ahead. Towel in the bin when you leave.”

A buzzing screech, followed by a gunfire-like pop, signified the release of the door’s lock. Anticipating the further disdain of the voice, I stepped toward the sound and reached into the dimly lit void until my hand secured a door knob. Gripping it, I twisted the metallic sphere until an exhaust of cold air assaulted my face. Taking a

deep breath, I pushed the door as far as it would go, my shoes sliding onto a ceramic field of tiles. I now stood alone in a tiny corridor, the ominous buzz of the overhead florescent light bulbs protesting their labor to the chamber below. Allowing the door to slam shut behind me, I gathered my breath and permitted my feet to discover more of the tiled walkway. My eyes began to water as the acrid stench of chlorine filled my nostrils like a toxic gas. In the distance, the shuffling sounds of water and voices could be heard accenting the air of the space to come. The pulsating throb of the disco music seemed to capture my shoes and further my steps. It was as though each thud of the bass forced my movement into the darkness. I continued to creak across the humid-covered flooring, when a new voice broke my trance.

“Hey, baby, no one wants the mud tracks. You need to ditch the gear.”

Nervously, I held my breath, unsure as to where the voice was coming from.

“Lockers are to your left.”

Without hesitation, I turned my body to the left, sliding my shoes forward until they clicked the metallic wall of the promised lockers. My eyes began to focus as I quickly removed my shoes and jeans, rolling them into a ball and shoving them into one of the slender aluminum squares. I stood in a breathy silence until the same voice again invaded my stillness.

“Are you just gonna stand there in your shirt and briefs, or are you gonna drop trou and grab a towel like the rest of us?”

A short burst of laughter followed the words, the voice a sudden warm and semi-welcome sound.

“Towels are to your right, baby,” the voice directed.

Assuming I was still being watched by the mysterious presence behind the ticket counter and fearing its scolding, I pulled my shirt above my head, quickly placing it with the rest of my garb. My heart raced as my fingers slipped beneath the elastic band of my briefs. Flickered images of my mother and father jumped before my eyes like some life-flashing vision one sees just before death. I felt my pulse skip and lurch as I slid the soft cotton down my thighs and to the floor. I nearly fell over as I pulled the undergarment from around my ankles. Confidently tossing it with the rest of my clothing, I slammed the locker door shut and reached into the faint purple glow for a towel, white, stiff, rough, and ridged. I wrapped the towel around my waist and secured it as tightly as possible in the lower right corner of my abdomen. My pulse now deafened my hearing as I turned to face the stranger who lurked in the darkness behind me.

“Much better,” the voice remarked as I took my first step forward, the slimy suction of my bare

feet against the tile floor so slippery that I feared for my balance.

“I’m Eddie, by the way,” the voice informed me as a hand slid down my lower back.

“Dustin,” I choked, my voice cracking under the unexpected sound of my throat. Stating my name was the first audible sound I had made in hours.

“Glad you are here, Dustin,” the voice continued, the hand now firmly gripped along the topside of my towel. “First time?”

“Yeah,” I stumbled. “How can you tell?”

The voice burst into laughter as a dimly lit face slowly appeared in the faint glow of the fluorescents.

“Oh, it doesn’t take a genius to figure that out, baby. You’ve got the look of a lamb wandering into a lion’s den plastered all over that beautiful young face of yours.”

I smiled, but my slight comfort was instantly broken by the forceful intrusion of the stranger’s tongue against my own. Panicked, I pulled away, instinctively wiping my lips with my forearm.

“Oh, come on now,” the voice laughed in a cough-heavy cackle. “I know you may look innocent, but you sure as hell know what goes on in this place.”

He pulled the back of my towel, quickly leading me beyond the corridor and the lockers. Before I could speak or resist, we were in a tiny

room, a small brown cot and a stool the only furniture I could clearly distinguish.

“Let me show you how it’s done, Dustin.”

With that said, the man snatched the towel from around my flesh, the cold, chlorine-heavy air now the only covering gracing my exposed nakedness.

“Mmm,” the voice groaned before disappearing into the space below my hips.

Before I could utter a word, the man’s mouth fully engulfed the entirety of my manhood. The warm sensation of his tongue caused my member to jump and pulse from the sudden entrapment.

“Eddie,” I whispered, finding his head with my hands. “Please, Eddie. Stop.”

With instant and extreme power, my hands were knocked from in front of me. The bones just below my lower forearms raced their message of pain to my brain. I opened my mouth to again protest, when I felt the force of his enclosed fist repeatedly meeting the tender skin around my left eye.

“Shut the fuck up, little faggot!”

The voice was now in my face, the twisted and gnarled expression just inches from my nose.

“This is what you came here for!”

The man stuck his bare foot between my own, pulling it back and knocking me to the floor. Gripping a fistful of my hair, he pulled my head upward, my throat too stretched for me to vocalize. My breath deflated from my lungs as he launched

his knee into the center of my spine. My hands slid from their crawl-like position and toward the wall. I could feel the rattled clack of my teeth as my upper and lower jaw impacted the ceramic plane of the floor. The pain was immediately forgotten as the press of the man's hips lowered my buttocks to the ground. I cried out in agony as he forcefully entered my body, the invasion of his appendage an excruciating burning. His fist slammed my mouth before I could cry out again.

My head pounded against the solid wall as Eddie thrust his pelvis into mine. The taste of his fisted fingers pressed tightly against my teeth was that of cigarettes and pool water. The flashed images of my mother and father again appeared across the film screen behind my eyes, on an endless, tormenting loop. What I wouldn't give to simply fall into the scenes that flickered over the darkness behind my lids. The love, the safety, the security of their comforting presence, all a stark contrast to the nightmarish reality I now found myself in. Tears streamed down my skin and onto Eddie's hands. I could taste their salt-heavy presence as they soaked his fists.

"Fuck!" he screamed, lifting my face from the floor with a handful of my hair. "Fuck!"

He continued his chant, his body convulsing under the strained cry of each outburst.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Eddie released my hair, my head falling with

a solid thud to the cold, moist floor. I wasn't sure if I was breathing. I didn't know if my eyes were open or closed. All I knew was that it was over.

A cold and nearly lifeless body on the floor, I did not move as I felt the man lift himself from behind me. The feel of his wet skin unsticking itself from mine was the only sensation I could mentally compute and physically recognize.

I felt his presence looming above me, his breathing hard and shallow. Clearing his throat, I heard him summon mucus from his upper chest, lifting it from the hollows and across the open cavern of his mouth like a cannon, the sound of his spit a weighted bullet as it splattered across my lower back.

“Fuckin’ faggot.”

His insult fell to the floor as heated and hateful as his saliva. I lay in silence as I felt him swoop his towel from the ground and wrap it around his waist. He paused, cleared his throat again, hurled the wet contents onto my backside, and then exited the room.

I didn't move for what felt like hours. My breath continued on its own, my heart sounding its pulsing drum in my ears like a tribal war cry. The constant ache of my lower body was the only evidence I held for my continued physical existence. Despite the circumstantial chaos, my mind was still, my ego silent. The quiet voice of my soul assured me of my well-being, though I could still sense its weeping.

Slowly, I began to move, lifting my body from the floor as if it were fractured glass. I felt myself rise into the darkened space which had floated above me like a poisonous gas, inundating my lungs and stinging my face. I didn't care where the towel was. I simply moved my hands along the slime-like texture of the walls until I found the small door. Pushing it open, I gasped as the cooler and slightly familiar air of the hallway entered my body. Stumbling, I slid my feet along the dimly lit corridor until I reached the locker area. Fumbling through the haze that surrounded my eyes, I somehow located my clothing within the first locker that I tried.

Tossing the garments onto my body without thought or care, I shoved my feet into my shoes and limped to the exit. It was then that I felt the warm, thick sensation running down the back of my legs. Pausing, I slid my hand into the rear of my jeans and toward my inner thighs. Returning the hand to my face, my heart skipped and stuttered as the unmistakable crimson stain of blood found recognition within my brain.

Pressing the bloodstained hand onto the door, I erupted into the lobby as if escaping a life-sentence prison term. The still unseen voice of the ticket booth shouted something in anger as I clumsily stormed through the entryway. The blinding light of the street stunned my senses as I fell onto the sidewalk. The heavy metal door of the bathhouse slammed behind me like the echoing

roar of a medieval dungeon. Then, the world went black.

I awoke to the sound of hospital machinery whirring and beeping around my head. Slowly opening my eyes, I toured the room with blurry vision, taking in the scene before me. A faded peach color adorned the medical-equipment-heavy walls. A large television set murmured in the corner. A balloon and flowers accented the table at the foot of the bed. My mother sat beside me.

“Mom,” I whispered, my voice dry and cracked.

My vision cleared as I watched the face of my mother absorb the site of me, a nervous wariness dominating her expression.

“Dustin,” she whispered, her voice breathless and worried. “My baby boy.”

Our hands locked. Instantly, a warm feeling of protection blanketed over me.

“Oh, Mom.”

Squeezing her hand tighter, I didn’t attempt to stop the flood of tears that began to stream down my face. The vivid memory of what had occurred danced through my mind like a demon on the shores of the lake of fire. The smell of the chlorine, the stark coldness of the tile floor, the smell of Eddie’s breath, even the feel of his skin next to mine, it all surrounded me as if finding its way

from the recent past and into the present. I began to sink deeper into the memory, when my mother's voice broke the nightmarish trance.

"The police told me that they found you on the sidewalk," her voice quivered, the obvious stress of the ordeal still heavy on her heart. "What happened, dear?"

She didn't say it, but I knew the question that was to come next. More than likely, the police had also mentioned just where on the sidewalk they had found me and the establishment it was in front of. I prepared myself for the inevitable interrogation.

"They said they found you outside of a building, Dustin," she continued, an obvious strain hovering over her words as she attempted to control her emotions. "Do you know what sort of building it was?"

I could only glare at her, half in physical pain and half in disbelief that my own mother wasted not one second at satiating her need for control. Even the police had yet to question me.

"A bathhouse, Dustin," she replied flatly, obviously uninterested in any reply. "A gay bathhouse. What were you doing in front of that place?"

I watched as her motherly gaze of concern melted into a stare of fear and rage.

"Answer me, Dustin."

I didn't know what to say. She didn't have proof that I was in the bathhouse, yet she was

positive that I was. Every fiber of my being could feel her angered certainty. It felt as though she were only seconds from pouncing from the chair and onto the bed, physically exhausting her obvious discontent onto my body. I swallowed and held my breath as the words began to form just beneath my quivering lips. Before I could speak, the door to the room burst open, revealing the chatter of the hallway beyond and the presence of my father. In his hand was another balloon, this one far larger and more colorful than the first.

“Hey, son!” he exclaimed, his face beaming with relief as he closed the door behind him and quickly made his way to my bedside. “I am so glad to see you awake, my boy.”

A rush of relief and sorrow melted over me as I felt my father wrap his arms around my shoulders. He pressed his head onto my face, the smell of his hair and skin a lifetime familiarity. Beneath the chatter of the hospital machinery, I could hear him softly sobbing.

“Hey, Dad,” I choked, my voice drier and more sore than before. “I’m okay.”

I caught a glimpse of my mother through the intertwinement of my father’s arms, her expression frozen and terrified. I could tell it was taking every bit of inner strength she could muster not to burst out with her continued line of questioning.

“Your mother and I have been worried sick, son. You have been in here for hours.”

It was then that I noticed the lack of sunlight beyond the hospital window. It was obvious that a vast chunk of time had passed since my last conscious memory.

“I brought you some food,” my father announced, quickly moving to the corner of the room.

I kept my eyes glued to his back, the burning sizzle of my mother’s glare searing into my skin like a laser. I managed a nervous, dry gulp, which taunted the piercing thirst of my throat. I kept my gaze centered on my father, absolutely terrified to even casually glance at my mother.

“Here we go,” my father boasted cheerfully, displaying a massive hoagie on the tray before me. “I just picked it up from Sub Center, so it’s good and fresh.”

I stared at the sandwich as if glimpsing a humane form of sustenance for the first time after being stranded on a deserted island for years. I didn’t know if I should simply admire its existence or scarf it down like a stray dog discovering a chicken bone with a bit of cold, cooked flesh still attached.

“We should tell the detective that he is awake,” my mother stated flatly, her stare still fixed on me yet her words directed at my father.

I watched as my hands collected the hoagie and lifted it from the wax paper it rested on. Saliva began to pool beneath my tongue as the oversized sandwich neared my starving mouth.

“We should let him eat and get some more rest before we do that, Teresa,” my father replied, busily tying the latest balloon to the foot of the bed.

“No, Nathan,” she shot back immediately. “They asked us to contact them the moment he came to. The boy is a victim of an attack, and I am not just going to sit here idly while—”

“Okay, okay,” my father whispered, interrupting my mother’s plea with his arms. I watched in silence as my parents embraced, the sheer terror of their energy as palpable as the hoagie to my now satiated taste buds.

My mother stood from her chair, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater as she made her way to the door. She didn’t hesitate or look back as she frantically exited the room. The blast of cold air from the hallway shot through me like a cannonball as she closed the door firmly behind her.

“You have to forgive your mom, son,” my dad stated, breaking the sudden silence. “She is just scared out of her mind.”

He leaned closer, the unmistakable scent of his cologne aftershave wafting under my nostrils like a welcome spring breeze over a wintered field.

“You are still her baby boy, you know.”

I closed my eyes as my father gently pressed his open hand over my cheek. The touch of his skin seemed to cool and extinguish the sputtered flames of trauma and stress that still burned inside

me. A tear escaped one of my sealed eyelids, slowly inching its way down my upper cheek and onto my father's weathered hand. The moment seemed to suspend time as I focused on the sensations the simple touch conjured within me.

The cannon-like blast of the hallway air again flooded the space around me as my mother reentered the room, this time, a burly man in a brown corduroy suit trailing her fevered pace.

"This is Detective Sherman," she breathlessly declared, her words shaken yet firm. "He is here to ask you some questions."

I looked at my father, who still stood beside me, his expression worried and uncertain by the sudden appearance of the detective. I returned my slow gaze to the stranger, taking in his stern appearance the same way a kitten curiously paws at a lizard.

The man stood tall, his dark brown hair slicked back, a bushy mustache accenting his upper lip. His eyes matched the color of his hair, his glare as glazed and hard as the matted brown helmet atop his scalp. A bit of some form of pastry clung lifelessly to the lower right corner of his impressively thick mustache, its volume and bulk reaching at least a half an inch from his skin. He was both attractive and odd, his appearance both enticing and nerve-wracking.

"It is good to see you awake, Mr. Thomas," the detective stated, his expression motionless and

controlled. “I know your parents have been very worried.”

He nodded toward each of my parents as he spoke, pausing for what appeared to be a calculated attempt at genuine concern and sympathy, and then returned his expression to its unmoving resting place.

“I have some questions that I am going to need to ask you, Mr. Thomas,” his voice now stronger and more direct than before. “Some of these questions may make you uncomfortable, so I will understand if you would like to ask your parents to leave the room while we talk.”

Unsure how to respond, I could only stare at the detective. My pulse began to quicken as my imagination contemplated the possible questions he was about to ask. With my breath now shallow and stuttered, I swallowed hard and looked at my parents. My father nodded slightly before approaching my mother. He placed his hands softly on her shoulders and pulled her toward him. I could see my mother hesitate. Her need to be involved and inevitably control the situation was overwhelming her. Still, she followed my father’s lead and exited the room.

“Now,” Detective Sherman began, clearing his throat and pulling a small notepad from his jacket pocket.

I was amused at how comically accurate his appearance, demeanor, speech, and actions were to that of the stereotypical police detectives I saw

on television. The only elements missing were a cigarette and an obnoxious theme song.

“I need you to recount for me every detail of what occurred at the bathhouse, son,” he continued, flipping the pages of his small, worn notebook to what I assumed was a blank page.

I watched as he struggled to find his pen, it too tucked deep within the labyrinth of his inner coat.

“I need for you to be explicitly accurate, Dustin. Every single detail is vital if we are going to locate your perpetrator.”

My heart was deafening now. It felt as though the blood-pounding organ had somehow relocated itself into the confines of my skull, pushing my brain down into the hollows of my inner core, replacing my thoughts with its pulsating beat.

“Let’s go, Dustin,” Detective Sherman commanded impatiently. “I can’t be here all night.”

“Okay,” I started, my words falling into the room as broken and heavy as the Titanic descending into the abyss.

The detective didn’t react or pause as he carefully listened and scribbled onto his pad. It was as if he already knew the entire story before I told it. Nothing seemed to faze him, not even the violently explicit details of the assault.

“Mr. Thomas,” Detective Sherman sighed after I concluded my statement, flipping his notebook shut and replacing it with the pen into his

jacket. “Do your parents know that you are a homosexual?”

The question paralyzed my heart. The feeling of the beating organ’s presence in my head sank back down into my hollow chest cavity. I was holding my breath, frightened and unsure as to how to reengage my lungs.

“Son,” he continued, my hesitation the obvious answer to his question, “I am only asking you this because I am trying to figure out a way to inform them of the details without causing some sort of upset or friction between you.”

He paused a moment, taking in what I assumed was my horrified expression before closing his eyes.

“Dustin, your personal business is not the focus of this investigation. You were attacked and sexually assaulted, and that is the crime that has been committed. Not your sexual orientation.”

I felt my lungs fill and then collapse under the sudden arrival of the detective’s reassurance. A warm, comforting wave crashed over my body as I realized the conversation I dreaded and feared most in my entire life was not about to take place as I lay helpless in a hospital bed.

“I am going to bring your parents back in,” he announced, moving to the door. “I will call them in a few days. When I do, I am telling them that the investigation will require more interviewing. I plan to speak with some of the

bathroom employees and other patrons. I will not disclose anything further.”

He stared at me cautiously before turning the doorknob.

“What you decide to tell them is up to you.”

With that said, he pulled the door completely open, nearly spilling my mother into the room.

“Mrs. Thomas,” Detective Sherman nodded, his expressionless stare unbroken.

I watched in silence as the detective exited the room while my father and mother rushed back inside like two eager cattle returning to the barn to feed.

“Well?” my mother asked, resuming her position next to the bed. “What did he say?”

I could only stare back at her, uncertain as to how to form any words.

“Dustin?” she continued, her look of concern fading into impatience and frustration.

“Dear,” my father said softly, approaching her from behind. “The boy has been through so much. Let’s just leave him be for now. The police will do their job.”

My mother snapped her head at him as though he had just blasphemed the name of Christ.

“How dare you tell me to relax!” she shot. “This is my child we are speaking of. My child who was found outside of a...a...”

Her words faded into an insecure void, her angered expression falling with it.

“He said they were going to interview some of the witnesses nearby,” I stated with confidence. “There were some. Witnesses. On the street. They saw me get attacked.”

My parents simply stared at me, a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions obvious through the windows of their loving eyes.

“There,” my father replied, gripping my mother’s tense shoulders with both of his hands. “The police are going to take care of this, darling. I promise you.”

My mother could only stare, her eyes spiraling in a mix of colors fueled by confusion, suspicion, and rage. She knew there was more to the story, and I knew she would not rest until she got it from me.

“Fine,” she stated flatly. “Fine.”

She took her place in the seat next to my bed and began fumbling through her purse. My father patted my knee, smiling at me as though I had just managed an unlikely win at some Boy Scout sport competition.

Slowly, either from the medication dripping into my veins or absolute mental and emotional exhaustion, I slipped beyond the darkness behind my eyes and into a deeply peaceful sleep.

It had been exactly one month since the attack. There was no word from the police. No

calls, no visits. Only silence. I didn't mind, as I would rather not relive the details of that day, but my mother was slowly teetering on the edge of her already frayed emotional ledge. Nearly every dinner conversation reverted to the subject, usually ending with my mother berating my father for not being more proactive by harassing the police or Detective Sherman on a daily basis. I never contributed to the conversation. I would only lock my gaze onto my delicate dinnerplate and wait for the discussion to meet its usual end.

Other than that, my life was slowly returning to its paralyzed state of normality. Without falter, the common summer days slipped in and out of my existence like grains of sand blowing on the beachside. Aside from the trauma of my bathhouse visit, absolutely nothing of importance or worth any sort of memory-capture transpired. My life had become an endless cycle of flipping through comic books, skimming my mother's massive collection of tacky romance novels, and hours of staring at pointless daytime television. Besides the occasional telephone call from my cousin Ruby in Tennessee, I had limited contact or communication with anyone outside of my parent's house. Slowly each day, I could feel my boredom seep beyond the fading limits of my spirit and into the inner depths of my soul. A part of me was secretly fantasizing about how much better it would have been to have never woken up in that hospital bed after the attack.

“Mom!” I yelled into the distance of the house beyond the foyer. “I’m gonna go ride my bike.”

Silence.

I turned to the front door and began to make my exit when I heard my mother’s post-nap vocals echo down the stairway.

“Don’t go past the cul-de-sac,” she croaked, her voice soggy yet parched from slumber. “And be home when the streetlights come on.”

I slammed the door behind me, irritated and annoyed that her response to my bike riding at age twenty was no different than it had been when I was only eight.

As I moved in the direction of the garage, the full view of the street opened beyond the manicured hedges of our lawn. Neighbors peppered the scenery as I strolled toward the side of the house where my bike was stored. It was clear that the soft, warm Florida evening breeze had lured the residents from their caverns of air-conditioned shelter, where they hibernated from the extreme midday heat. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, allowing the warm, humidity-thick wind to swirl and align my lungs. Exhaling, I opened my eyes, my vision clearing but my heart ceasing to beat.

I stood in complete silence as my body began to adjust to the sight it was viewing. Raven-haired, glistening skin, a myriad of colorful tattoos adorning the arms, a gorgeous human male glided

past the hedges, the sound of a gas-powered lawnmower leading the way. My heart found its pace, jumping from what felt like complete stillness to a racing, deafening pound. My breathing shallowed as the summer wind I had only recently captured now expelled and fled back into the air around me. I could only stare, my gaze transfixed and bewildered.

I watched as he reappeared and then disappeared behind the limited view of the hedges. He moved methodically, focused and dedicated to his laborious chore, oblivious to my trance-like presence.

Catching myself, I moved to my bicycle, pulling it from its place behind my father's meticulously-lined gardening tools, and hopped onto the seat. Peddling frantically for the street, I kept my eyes trained on the sidewalk before me, excited yet terrified to gain a closer look at the mysterious lawn man.

Rounding the corner of the hedges, I watched in unexpected horror as my bike's front tire slammed into a person's pant leg.

"Sorry!" I shouted, absorbing my shock and looking up toward my victim's face. "I didn't mean to—"

It was him, the mysterious lawn man, shirtless and glowing like a 1940s film star.

"Hey, man, it's okay," a voice boomed, its depth and power vibrating the airwaves around me.

I watched as my reflection slipped and fell into the darkness of his pupils. It was then and there that I lost myself.

“I’m Gauge,” the voice continued, a hand reaching up from the distance below his waist. “This is my aunt’s new place. We just moved in last week.”

I could only stare, my voice completely frozen and locked beneath the now tense flesh of my throat. Instinctively, I too reached out my hand, my blood racing in my veins as my skin connected with his.

“I’m Dustin.”

“Nice to meet ya, Dustin,” he replied, a crooked smile tugging at the right side of his mouth. His eyes sparkled as he reached behind his back, retrieving an old white rag, lifting it to his sweat-covered forehead. His soft face, a mix of Elvis Presley and a young Marlon Brando, I watched in a dreamlike haze as he ran the cloth over his skin. Never in my entire life had the presence of another human being ignited and hypnotized each of my senses, heightening their awareness. I could feel the heat from his bare flesh and smell the tinge of musk and sweat that draped over him like a sun-beaten cloak. As if seeing for the very first time, I allowed my eyes to tour every inch of his being. His faded blue jeans fit tight around his legs, the curvature of his natural muscle tone accentuated by the perfect grip of the denim. Enamored, or simply overtaken by pure

lustfulness, I felt each and every one of my muscles, limbs, ligaments, and bones gravitate toward him. It was as though some unseen force was pulling me from the inside out and into his inner core.

“So, you live around here, Dustin?” he asked, replacing the rag to its holding place in his right-rear jean pocket. Blood raced to the surface of my cheeks as my eyes followed his hand’s movement to his backside. My heart skipped and fumbled as it struggled to find its pace. I cleared my throat under the weight of my sudden nervousness and forced my overstimulated attention back to his eyes. Immediately, I tumbled headfirst into his reflective gaze, the darkness that offset the white an endless tunnel I willingly and fearlessly journeyed into.

END OF PREVIEW