

WEAPONIZED by Zac Thompson – Exclusive Excerpt

Distraught, Trip drove down Rosebank Road on the way home. There was a pit in his stomach like it had been empty for days. It hurt like a hole left inside him. He frowned as the sun glinted on the hood of his car. He slowed the vehicle down and stuck his head out the window. Tracing the veins in the pavement with his eyes, feeling the wind on his face. Then he saw it.

A person in the middle of the road. Twisted, breathing shallow breaths, and laying under a sheet. An eye gleamed at Trip from beneath the sheet's darkness. Trip slammed on the brakes as the corrupted gure rose to its feet.

Chad Donovan walked clutching his arm. He was nude and catatonic. As he approached Trip's car, the sheet barely clung to his exposed flesh. Trip could see his familiar acne-ridden skin and pockmarks. For some reason, it offered him a modicum of comfort.

Chad's bare feet dragged down the empty street. His face twisted, eyes blackened, the vertebrae in his back seemed unable to hold weight. *What the hell is going on with his body? What the fuck is he doing the middle of the road?* Trip wondered. The teen staggered toward the car with peculiar weakness. Moving in half steps as a smile played over his lips. Chad wasn't acting like his usual alpha-male self. As Chad dropped the blanket to reveal his full body, Trip saw tiny holes all along his chest and legs. It was as if his flesh had sucked small chunks of his skin inward. He was withering away, and it didn't get better on his appendages.

His right arm looked like a bleeding sleeve. His fingers were frayed like old rope ends, and his palm split with an open red wound leaking squalid white liquid that congealed on the hot pavement with a sizzle. As if sensing Trip's gaze, Chad lifted his mangled elephant trunk of a hand.

His arm was slicked with gore as he presented it to Trip. Chad stood five feet from the hood of Trip's car as his hand glistened in the sun. As he held it up, a hole opened in the flayed stump. He smiled at Trip and pulled his hand to his temple. With a subtle pop, Chad's head jerked backward—the oozing liquid began to drip from his head, down his face and neck, like white strands of hair. The liquid bubbled as his body dropped. His corpse uttered onto the pavement without sound.

Trip watched the white liquid eat through Chad's head like acid. The reveal of his pristine white skull immediately soured as it dissolved into irregular clusters of holes. Eventually caving into a black abyss. Chad's face stared back at Trip like a void. This was the hollow.

Trip had gotten out of his car and was standing over Chad's body; the decaying husk had the distinct scent of sweaty balls. It was clear Chad had just finished having sex. Trip winced thinking of his own transgressions. His fingers twitched in pain, piercing the gloom of the scene.

A gust of wind blew from behind the suburban houses left unoccupied by the workday and tickled Trip's nostrils with an odor of cinnamon. He immediately recognized it as Ree's perfume. Trip looked to his parent's house. There she was, holding herself up on the vinyl siding. Trip left his car idling in the street and ran toward her.

Ree stepped out into their shared driveway to meet Trip. It was the first time Trip had been close to her since the night he saw her pink breasts in Chad's hands. Jesus, he thought. Chad's fucking hands.

Ree looked rough, her mascara left a black trail down her face that ended on her neck. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her chest flushed red as she looked Trip up and down. "You've got a lot of fucking nerve showing up here now."

Trip saw that Ree clutched her father's bone pistol. "What are you doing with that?" he asked, gesturing to the gun in her hands.

"We don't understand any of this, Trip."

“Sex?”

“Yes, sex. And fuck you for watching me and Chad.” Ree crossed the driveway and shoved Trip to the ground. She spit on the pavement. **“You’re a fucking pig.”**

The skin on Trip’s palms scraped the pavement. The stinging pain was impossible to avoid. He looked at his hands, raw and ripened with blood. The pain disappeared as Ree loomed over him. He caught her eyes, and it was as if they were looking at each other for the first time. Well, the first time in weeks. Ree seemed open again, more open than ever. She looked radiant as she stared down. **“Why the fuck were you watching us have sex the other night?”**

Trip felt his stomach drop. **“I never saw it before . . . ”**

“Well, here’s a tip. People don’t like being watched while they’re fucking.”

Trip lowered his head. **“So, you have the hollow now?”**

“The hollow is bullshit, Trip. It’s just to keep us in line.”

“Then how do you explain Chad out there?”

“I don’t fucking know!” she screamed. **“But I’m not changing! I’m fine!”**

“I know that!” Trip screamed. His eyes went wide as he remembered the gun in Ree’s hands. **“Why the gun?”**

“I’m not going to let them take me,” Ree said.

“You’re not going to get recycled?”

“Fuck that. I’ll shoot myself before I get put on the hook.”

“Is that what Chad did?”

“Chad left my room while I was in the bathroom. I came out here same time you did.”

“So what then? You wait to get the hollow?”

“Do you think we die from having sex, Trip?” Ree asked. She bent down and made herself level with him as she pointed out at Chad’s body. **“That isn’t the hollow and . . . ”**

“And what?” Trip asked.

“He was changing. Into something.”

“We should go look at his body,” Trip said.

“I already called the Lich. Anonymously. They’ll be here soon. We can’t risk it.”

Trip felt sick and touched his temples. Spit hit his lip like a wet kiss. If Chad died from the infection, how the hell was he still alive? He was losing everything he knew about the world. Reality and illusion blurred.