

Mick and the Beef

by Greg Stolze

Tuesday evenings were usually quiet at Dr. Honda's emergency room. Kids with broken arms, traffic incidents, now and again a stunt performer earning their hazard pay at one of the Hollywood studios. That, on top of the kidney stones, heart attacks, domestic accidents, minor cuts and burns, or episodes of acute hypochondria. One might encounter drug-seeking behavior, freakouts or overdoses, but those were more of a weekend thing. So when the rock star came in with an abdominal laceration, Dr. Honda saw him right away.

The patient was tall and lanky with a lot of disconnected tattoos on his arms and chest—not full sleeves of the type Dr. Honda was getting used to seeing, but different images in different styles, done by different artists. He noticed that the man had a skeleton on his forearm, waving a top hat and cigar, and saying (via speech balloon) “You’re gonna die, dude!” He spared a moment to hope this was inaccurate as far as this Tuesday was concerned, then looked at the mass of duct-tape, blood, and knife-hilt layered on top of the fellow’s blue jeans and black THRASHER t-shirt.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I got staaaabbed!” the patient wailed.

“Short blade to the abdomen,” said the woman who’d come in with him. She had a yellow sleeveless blouse with embroidered flowers, a blonde pixie cut, and an expression of steely focus. It went well with the blood covered nitrile gloves that hadn’t quite kept all the gore off her forearms. “I applied direct pressure with a cloth and left the weapon in place as a tamponade.”

“Then duct-taped it?”

“Yessir.”

“Drove him here yourself instead of calling an ambulance?”

She looked stricken. “He didn’t want to wait,” she said.

Dr. Honda didn’t answer, but checked the vitals as the nurses read them off. He made notes, then leaned down to the patient.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Hospital... in L.A.!” the man said through his wince.

“Good. I would like to perform surgery to close your laceration.”

“Fuck yeah dude, go for it!” He gave a thumbs-up gesture.

“Excellent. We’re going to get you something for the pain.”

"You're a good one, doc!"

As they wheeled him away, already cutting off his distressed bluejeans, Dr. Honda took a pause to address the blonde woman before going to scrub in.

"Ms...?"

"Gasiorowski," she said. "Tammy Gasiorowski."

"Ms. Gazerowski," he tried. "Please do not worry. Your friend's vitals are strong. It's a good sign that he is awake and knows where he is. He did not lose too much blood?"

"No," she said, but didn't sound completely certain.

"I have closed many abdominal lacerations," he said.

There was an awkward pause.

"Well, that's great then," she said at last.

"I think these policemen wish a word with you," the doctor said, nodding behind her.

With a sigh, Tammy turned and started stripping off her gloves.



Four days earlier, Mick Peltier had picked Tammy up from LAX in the shoddiest pickup she'd ever seen in motion. Its bed was thick with rust, the wells were rotted through in the back, and the tailgate was held in place with cotter pins through bolted-on mountings. She winced as he threw her sea bag into the back, though it had been through worse. She carefully placed her rolling carry-on beside it, noting with a frown the chaotic jumble of odds and ends already present.

"Welcome to L.A.!" Mick said, with a chaste hug. Tammy could not have explained how a scent mixture containing tobacco, marijuana, sweat and gasoline could be pleasant, but Mick managed it. He'd mentioned once in passing that he had a "personal fragrance" supplied by a fan/friend from Parma, Italy. (This friend had also been cited as the source for the exquisite prosciutto Mick had served at his last birthday party.) Certainly there was some kind of herbaceous, sandalwood and/or bergamot note in there, tying everything weirdly together...

They broke apart. "How was your flight?" he asked.

"It was fine. Why is there a fire extinguisher in the truck bed?"

"Oh, better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. I think David threw it in there after some fireworks went a little pear-shaped," he said vaguely, moving to open her door for her. She got it first and entered, noting the ashtray (deployed but with only a few butts), the trash on the floor (mostly wrappers from Carl's Jr.) and the tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rearview.

"Is this your brother's truck, then?" she asked.

“Yeah. He’s getting car service all the time. Gotta love the leg room, yeah?”

Tammy, being a full head shorter, didn’t need much space, but she nodded.

“Thanks for flying me down,” she said. “I honestly don’t understand why you did.”

“Editing the podcast! Gotta get next month’s in the can, don’t we? Besides, I had just, like, a shit-ton of flyer miles. Your ticket was essentially free.”

Tammy gave a tiny head shake. Mick, despite looking exactly like the dirtbag you didn’t want your daughter to date, occupied a rarefied plane of privilege and ease. Doors against which Tammy struggled would open before he even touched them, and it wasn’t even that he was *rich*, or *famous* anymore. But he’d been a rock star once, and somehow his confidence that the world would thoughtfully arrange itself around his needs kept being confirmed.

“You’re sure I shouldn’t get a hotel? I don’t want to impose on your friend.”

Mick laughed. “She’s not even in the country. I think they’re in France,” he said, casually, as if he barely paid attention to the antics of the multi-platinum band that had kicked him out after their second album and was now touring to promote their eleventh. “Don’t worry about it, Tina would love you.”

“Still…”

“Look, we’re not even in the main house, OK? It’s *fine*.”

Mick was borrowing guitarist Tina Mossino’s home studio—a small and simple setup by rock band standards, but lavish for a podcast about the paranormal. Or a podcast about anything, really. There were two small and tidy bedrooms, one of which Mick had already occupied and disorganized.

“Just toss your shit in the corner, we should get going.” Instead of checking his phone like a normal person, Mick was consulting a gold pocketwatch. “I always forget how bad traffic is here. Probably traumatic amnesia.”

“Tell me again what this show is?” Tammy asked as she returned to the truck. This time, Mick didn’t try to hold her door.

“It’s called *American Beefcake*,” Mick replied with a grin.

“And your brother David is a contestant?”

“Yeah. David’s all right. When you meet him, don’t get scared.” He honked once as he navigated the onramp.

“Why would I get scared?”

“Ehn, you’re right, you probably wouldn’t. You met a few meatheads here and there in the Marine Corps, right?”

“Here and there,” she admitted, looking out the window at the smog and endless freeway as they slowed and stopped into bumper-on-bumper gridlock.

“The one you *should* worry about is Lydia, but she’s gonna love you.”

“Then why should I worry?”

Mick grinned but didn't answer her. His phone rang, and he answered that instead.

"Hey sis," he said, answering. Then, "Yeah, we're almost at the studio. What? Wait, *where*? Well shit. How soon? OK, no, yeah, all right, en route. No, it's fine. It's *fine*."

With that he leaned on the horn, pulled into the breakdown lane and started illegally rocketing towards the next exit.

"Lydia likes things to be just so, especially where family is concerned," he said.

"What are you doing?" Tammy demanded.

"It's fine, it's L.A., everyone drives like a maniac."

"At the moment, the only person doing this is you."

Her comment was punctuated by a Coke can (or possibly Tecate) bouncing off the side of the truck, accompanied by dopplering angry curses. Mick reflexively flipped a bird in return before scraping the side of the rearview getting past a semi, onto an exit ramp.

"Whoops, hope David doesn't mind," he said.

"What the hell, Mick?"

"Just a little change of plans, route, et cetera. Instead of the studio, we're 'sposta go to some high school football field. They're probably going to measure how far the man-chonks can throw the ol' pigskin."

"You still haven't explained what this show is JESUS CHRIST!" she yelled as he swung a hard right into a gas station parking lot and wove around the cars to avoid a red light.

"It's *American Beefcake*," he said. "It's one of those fake-ass reality shows. This one's about weight lifting and barbecue."

"Huh?"

"They cook the beef but also, they kinda are the beef? Get it? It's high concept."

"I don't think that's what high concept means MICK THAT'S A ONE WAY STREET!"

"Ooh, thanks, good note," he said, aborting the illegal turn at the last moment. "Sheesh, for a Devil Dog you sure are uptight about traffic safety."

"I was not, like, a convoy escort, I did comms and data processing!"

"That explains it."

"No, you driving like a *psychopath* explains it!"

"Relax, we're here." Both of their bodies thrashed briefly forward as he slammed on the brakes in a no-parking zone.

"It'll be fine," he said, hopping out. "School ain't even in session."

"I said nothing," Tammy sniffed.

"That's them," a woman told a security worker, pointing as they approached. This, Tammy guessed, was Mick's sister. There was a definite family resemblance—height, lankiness, long black hair that looked good messy. She

even shared Mick's taste for abundant, dangling silver jewelry, but didn't have any visible tattoos, or his easy laid-back whiteboy sense that everything would always work out. She scowled their direction through formidable blue eyes.

"You must be Lydia!" Tammy said, holding out her hand for a shake.

"Lovely to meet you. I'm really sorry about what Mick did."

"Hey!" Mick said. Then, as security patted him down, he muttered "Buy me a drink first." The guard did not smile.

"Please empty your bag," the man next told Tammy, who compliantly opened her fanny pack.

"My stuff better be there when I get back!" Lydia warned as she took Mick by the arm and pulled him towards the grass.

"So what did you mean?" Tammy asked, skipping to keep up with the tall, long-legged Peltiers. "When you said you were sorry about Mick?"

"Oh, whenever I meet a woman who's with him, I assume he's done *something*. Was I wrong?"

"Tammy and me are absolutely just colleagues!" Mick said indignantly.

"Your driving was a bit shit though."

"That's my little brother," Lydia said, and then they were standing at the railing as a production assistant shouted at them and waved them to the area reserved for friends, family, hangers-on, and other people who shouldn't be in the shot.

"You're lucky they haven't started yet," Lydia said.

"Started what?" Mick asked, and she shrugged. A different officious PA shushed them as the shot was called and the cameras started rolling. Settling into her seat, Tammy finally saw the beefcakes.

Six men stood on the field, heights ranging from slightly taller than Tammy up to 6'3". A variety of complexions were present, from ebony through golden up to freckled and ruddy. One contestant appeared to be completely hairless except for eyebrows and eyelashes. Another had thick honey waves running halfway down his back, and the biggest had wiry black hair emerging, apparently, from every square inch of his body. But despite their differences in look, attitude, ethnotype and degree of hirsutism, they were, without exception, *hugely* muscled. The most normal of them was merely stout—the red-faced barrel of freckles, with a creased face and grey shot through his rusty locks. The bald man looked like an anatomical diagram drawn entirely in charcoal, while the blonde had the scribbly veins typical of the most serious bodybuilders.

"Which one is yours?" Tammy whispered, but it became clear when the largest, furriest one broke from the pack and loped over with that distinctive Peltier gait. He gave a small jump, enough that his catcher's-mitt hands could grab the top rail, and lifted himself up and over with apelike agility. He had a huge grin with crooked teeth.

"Little brother!" he shouted in a low, slightly raspy voice before sweeping Mick Peltier off his feet with the hug of one vast arm.

“Put me down, y’fuckin’ sasquatch!” Mick said, laughing, punching his brother in the back hard enough to make hollow thudding sounds. David Peltier gave no sign of noticing. He just said “Family reunion!” and picked up Lydia with his free arm.

Tammy blinked. She’d seen big strong guys: she’d been in the Corps. But even by her standards, David Peltier lifting a full grown person in each arm with no apparent effort or thought, the way Tammy might pick up two grocery bags... it was something.

“Put me down you stinky douchebag!” Lydia sounded much more put out than Mick, and David quickly complied. “Hug me like a human being, not an orangutan,” she said, winding her arms around him and resting her head against the middle of his chest. His massive fingers rose to gently caress his sister’s hair.

“David, this is my friend Tammy,” Mick said.

“Tammy Gasiorowski,” she said.

David disentangled himself from Lydia, took a small pause to compose himself, then reached out for a formal handshake. “Pleased to meet’cha, ma’am.”

Tammy’s hand was the width of his three smallest fingers. She gave a strong grip, because she’d been told you had to, and it was like grasping a leather log. He, on the other hand, was present but exerted no undue strength.

“Any friend of Mick’s is a friend of mine,” David said, before the production assistant arrived to shoo him back to the grass, where the other contestants were taking off their shirts and, in the case of the blonde man, his trousers as well. Underneath, he had short-shorts in vertical rainbow stripes, leaving little to the imagination. He struck a pose, and the muscles of his arms, which bulged at rest, seemed to inflate like balloons. The aging redhead, on the other hand, looked like a fatstrong Midwesterner getting used to the idea of becoming a grandpa. His face and arms were the crimson that very fair people turn after recurrent sunburns. His chest and shoulders were pale—a classic farmer tan—except for a galaxy of freckles and a sparse triangle of red hair.

“Where did they get these people?” Tammy wondered.

Lydia shrugged. “Ran some ads, I figure. Word of mouth. Maybe looked up arrest records for steroid abuse.”

“So, what does David... do?” she asked, then blinked hard as David Peltier stripped off his flannel. It was clear that if he ever did decide to shave his beard, he would have to make a conscious decision about where to stop, as the hair proceeded down his neck and shoulders, as even as a carpet.

“He’s done some teardown,” Lydia said.

“Civil construction mostly,” Mick said. “He had trouble getting work after... uh, recently,” he corrected himself, in the face of Lydia’s glare.

Their conversation trailed off as production people instructed the contestants to scrape handfuls of paste from canisters and apply it to their bare arms and torsos.

"Is that sunscreen?" Lydia asked.

"I don't know what it is, but no," Mick said. "Lord, I hope David didn't accidentally get himself cast in a porno. Someone could get injured."

Lydia, without looking, gave Mick a slap on the bicep. He did not react, any more than David had when Mick punched his back.

"That dude in the rainbow is greasing up like a pro," Mick observed. "That Black guy too. They gotta be competition bodybuilders."

"How do you know so much about it?" Lydia asked, with a sideways glance.

"Only stands to reason," he replied.

Giant fans were brought in. The blonde's long hair waved gracefully. David's beard shifted grudgingly. Then an announcer said something they couldn't hear, and cameras prowled around as the six men arranged themselves on the grass and lay on their backs.

There was a moment of stillness, except for the grass rippling in the artificial breeze and the cameras moving around. Then, almost directly below Tammy's feet, she heard a door open and a chorus of high-pitched yips.

"Oh my goodness, *puppies!*" Lydia cried, jumping out of her seat to look down.

And indeed, a bumbling wave of baying baby dogs emerged, charging through the grass. Some moved in intentional beelines before their speed exceeded their coordination and they tumbled adorably over. Others meandered, tongues waving, distracted by this, by that, by each other, before nearing the prone hunks.

It was adorable.

Then, at the gesture of some director or cinematographer, the fans shifted and the dogs caught the scent. David explained later that they had, in fact, rubbed their bodies with bacon grease. As soon as its odor hit underdeveloped but keen pooch noses, their tiny howls increased in volume and urgency and they charged the muscled men.

The hairless Black bodybuilder was extremely ticklish. No sooner had a tiny beagle nosed his rippling lats than he twitched, quivered, and covered his face. Curling into a ball offered no protection. They were all over him.

David was laughing too, but more, it seemed, at the absurdity. He scooped up handfuls of dogs and piled them on his chest, huge hands indiscriminately scratching ears to paroxysms of canine delight.

The redhead sat up and tried to gather them into the lap of his splayed big legs, an organizational feat impossible in the face of their chaos. The blonde in hotpants clapped his hands to the sides of an 'O' mouth theatrically, like the *Home Alone* poster, then squirmed and fluttered his hands as he sought to lure

the dogs close. Only the shortest contestant, one whose muscles were more rounded and general, seemed unimpressed. He even gave a headshake before trying, in a desultory manner, to call a few of them to heel.

"I ask you, what the *hell* does this have to do with masculinity?" a peevish low-alto voice from Tammy's right asked.

Tammy hadn't noticed the other people penned up with her and the Peltiers in the hangers-on zone, until this disdainful comment cut through the noise of grips, fans, camera operators and puppies. The speaker was up at the front, polo shirt buttoned to the neck, hair floppy on top and shaven on the sides, an inverted triangle torso perched atop skinny legs in chinos—the body of a man who lifts, but skips leg day. He looked like a computer programmer who read pickup artist blogs, except for the incongruous detail of a full sleeve tattoo on his left arm—something with fire, an elephant, and the American flag.

"What does anything have to do with masculinity?" Mick asked in reply. He was looking at the man—looking keenly, with *interest*, which surprised Tammy, as precious few people seemed able to catch the youngest Peltier's attention without some effort. She herself hated it when Mick really got interested in something she was saying and she could *feel* the dopamine light up her brain, an embarrassing pleasure she couldn't help taking in earning his full focus. This guy had gotten it with one sentence? Tammy instinctively disliked him.

The stranger turned, revealing a profile with a jutting chin and angular nose under Oakley sunglasses. "Masculinity is fundamental to the continuance of Western civilization," he told Mick.

Mick barked out a snort of laughter, and the man reddened a little. In that instant, Tammy forgave Mick for his hazardous driving and aggravating tendency to succeed at everything, because she knew his unthinking chortle had wounded the other man's feelings more than anything she, Tammy, could possibly have said or even done.

"It's not funny!"

"It's kinda funny. C'mon. Which one you with?" Mick asked, gesturing at the field, patently unaware that he'd insulted the other man.

"I'm not 'with' any of them, I'm here as a journalist."

"Oh cool! What channel or, I guess, magazine?"

"I have a blog. You've probably heard of it."

Mick nodded, but said, "I doubt it, but it's nice you think I'm a reader. Honestly couldn't name more than two blogs after 'Rock of Mossino' and 'Bitchfork Blues.' Oh, and that one weird old guy who does 'Ghost Jizz,' I read that some times."

"You don't know about 'King of the Cave'?" the man said disdainfully.

"Nope! So what'cha blog about? Reality TV or something?"

"I blog about modern *culture*."

"Oh yeah? You ever do music?" Mick asked with an affable grin.

"No. Politics, identity, civil philosophy and cognitive science are the primary foci."

"Cool. Which of those covers meaty-boys getting doglicked?"

He blinked. "Civil philosophy, obviously."

"Mick, stop tormenting the stranger," Lydia said, rising to wearily approach.

"I ain't tormenting anybody! Am I *tormenting* you, er... hey we should do names, I'm Mick Peltier."

"Bren Guilfoile."

They shook hands and Mick laughed again. "Oh, that's a grip. You use one of those spring exercisers for hands?"

"A firm handshake is the hallmark of masculinity."

"Huh, I thought something else was. Anyhow, meet Lydia Peltier, and that's Tammy. Hey Tammy, c'mon down!"

She winced as Bren's eyes slid dismissively over Lydia, only to fix on her the way a greedy child stares at the biggest box under the Christmas tree.

"Don't crush my hand," Lydia warned, reaching out for a shake.

"I would never," Bren said, kissing her knuckles instead. Lydia was visibly nonplussed. "I believe every woman should be cherished, respected and valued," he continued, completely turning his back on Lydia and reaching out for Tammy's hand. "Feminine beauty is the ultimate adornment of any culture," he said.

"Yeah, I don't do casual hand kisses but you can have a forearm bump," Tammy said. Bren's chuckle was a grotesque burlesque of suave amusement.

"I'll win you over," he said with a wink. "So you're here to support David Peltier? I approve."

"Oh, whew, thank God for that," Lydia said sarcastically. "If we—"

"I'm a little concerned that he lost the jug challenge to Troy Nguyen so decisively," Bren interrupted. "But at least he came in second, and his burgers were decent."

"Jug challenge?" Tammy asked.

"They had to hold gallon jugs of water at arm's length," Lydia said, "Arms out, like—"

"The crucifix pose," Bren said. "It's surprisingly challenging when you try it, because it's isometric instead of isotonic, and the leverage on your shoulders is very poor."

"Sure," Mick said solemnly, nodding, "David always was weak with his isotronic leverage."

"Well I mean, Nguyen's a weight lifter—as opposed to a bodybuilder like Jacobs or, ugh, 'Corey Steele'," Guilfoile said, with audible sarcasm quotes. "Continuing the hold eleven seconds after Peltier had to put the left one down, that was definitely a power move."

"Which one beat my brother then?" Mick said.

"Troy Nguyen." Bren Guilfoile pointed. "The short Korean man."

“So with the burgers, did Dave put a pat of butter on top?” Mick asked, and when Lydia nodded, he said, “Yeah, that was mom’s move.”

“Your father didn’t do the grilling?” Guilfoile sounded surprised.

“Not all the time and honestly, when he did them burgers were *dryyy*,” Mick said.

“Which one’s Corey Steele?” Tammy asked.

“The one in the *rainbow panties*,” the blogger replied, turning to glare out onto the field, where the judges had announced a winner—David!—and where the contestants were now doing formal reactions. Corey Steele was holding a puppy to his face and visibly cooing. “I’ll admit his muscular development is impressive, but he’s clearly a sop to the gay demographic.”

“I believe they’re called hotpants,” Mick said.

“Excuse me?”

“Panties are different, those are hotpants.”

“Mick’s an expert,” Lydia said, with a smirk.

“You let your wife speak to you that way?” Bren said, provoking unforced guffaws from both Peltiers and an incredulous stare from Tammy.

“Oh God, he thinks we’re married!” Mick said. “Naw dawg, we’re siblings! Jesus!”

“Can’t you see it?” Tammy asked.

“Oh. Um. Yeah, OK, now that you mention... I guess...” Bren was bright red now.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mick said.

“You don’t think I could do better than this has-been rubadub?” Lydia said, throwing her brother a very pointy elbow.

“It was an honest mistake!” Bren cried. He turned to Tammy and tried to compose himself, visibly choking his energy level down to assay a casual, “Just to avoid errors, are you... seeing anybody?”

“My man, you are barking up an *extremely* wrong tree,” Mick said, prompting his sister to glare at him and say his name as if it was an insult.

“I’d be open to something if the right gal came along,” Tammy said evenly.

“Oh.”

“Dude, you look like your parents just canceled your birthday,” Mick chortled, then shifted as his phone vibrated in his pocket. “What have we got... Ooh, we should jet. Is David done here?”

“I think so, but he’s still got to wash out his chest hair. Why? You got a hot date?” Lydia asked rhetorically. Then, shoulders slightly dropping, she said, “You *don’t* have a date, do you?”

“No, no, but there’s a good show tonight, mid-week and small venue, should kick a measurable amount of ass,” he said.

“Mick...”

“It’s Luke Away, you like him right? But I’m really stoked for the opening act, Lipstick Rage, they are *tight*.”

“Who?” Lydia asked, and Tammy shook her head. Mick’s sister had fallen into the trap, exactly as Tammy had.

“If you don’t know who Lipstick Rage are a year from now, ask me again and I’ll tell you,” Mick said smugly.

“Wasn’t that David Lee Roth’s line about the Beastie Boys?” Bren asked. There was a moment of terrible stillness.

Mick Peltier slowly turned, expressionless, and looked at the blogger. Bren Guilfoile, similarly, stood motionless, face empty, before taking his hands from his pockets and adjusting his footing, as if preparing for the other man to charge.

Then Mick cracked a huge smile and waved a finger. “Nothing gets past you, Brennan!”

“It’s just Bren.”

“It says ‘Bren’ on your birth certificate?”

“No, it says ‘Brendan’ but I go by Bren.”

“OK, cool, if someone tells me what their name is, I call them that name. You should swing by the show Bren. Put it on your blog. It’s at Sailor Sal’s, you know it?”

“I don’t, and I have to write tonight.”

“Ugh, *grind culture*,” Mick said, shaking his head ruefully. “Toil then the grave, right? Maybe next time. ‘Cause you know, *Tammy* might be there,” he said, turning his back to depart.

“For a second it looked like you were going to go throw some off-brand MCMAP on that guy,” Tammy said, as Lydia waited in a short line by the security table.

“Some what?”

“MCMAP? Semper Fu?” At his blank look, she said “Marine Corps Martial Arts Program.”

“Oh! Naw, he just called me on my derivative bullshit, the hit was legit. What did you think of ol’ Bren there?”

Tammy considered. “This morning, I did not think anything could make me more of a lesbian than Gillian Anderson’s career, but between your brother shirtless and Bren Guilfoile’s whole *thing*, I am definitely ten degrees more distant from heterosexuality.” Glancing over at the table, she was slightly surprised to see Lydia Peltier holding a snub-nosed revolver, checking the cylinder, then clicking on the safety and stowing it in her purse.

“Yeah, he seems pretty tight-wound,” Mick chuckled. “Like one of those guys online. There’s a word for it... you know, before they become mass shooters.”

“Incel?” Tammy guessed.

“Totally.”

“You kinda glommed on to him though,” she said as they waited for Lydia.

"I sensed a significance. Kinda worried that the cosmos might be paying attention to him. You know I'm an intuitive type. Like, psychically sensitive," he said, giving the slightest hair toss.

"Oh *this* again," Lydia said, arriving.

"Hey, shut up it's *true*," Mick said, and—of all the back and forth Tammy had seen from the Peltiers—this statement seemed the most genuinely aggrieved.

"Lydia, you mean you've never encountered anything weird or paranormal? 'Cause, you know, our whole podcast thing is kinda... that," Tammy said.

"It just strikes me as ridiculous that the guy who was in Dream Void when he was still practically a *child*, who invested in real estate with the royalties he got from his truck ad music and doesn't have to work at age thirty, needs to also be a special psychic *too*."

"It's not something I picked, sis. It picked me. It's a..."

"If you say 'it's a blessing as much as a curse,' I won't like it," Lydia warned.

"Nobody's asking you to like it," Mick said, climbing into the truck.

"Yeah, well, nobody's asking you to bail on David and go see another rock show."

"I don't think I'm bailing, I have actually gotten him—and you, if you care—on the list, *he* might come out and have a fun time because apparently only the Peltier sons are capable of that!"

"Oh eat a *dick*, I was hoping we'd make it at least 24 hours before a fight but the lowball bet always wins with you, doesn't it?"

"Starting to understand why Ben thought you were my nagging wife!" Mick said, viciously cranking the truck to life.

"And I've *always* understood why you never got married!" Lydia slammed her door too as she got into her subcompact with the 'COEXIST' bumper sticker.

Mick's lips were tight as he yanked the truck into reverse and, with a rattle of the junk behind them, spun out of the driveway.

"She has no room to talk shit about my romantic history," Mick said bitterly. "If she wants a game of 'Can You Bottom This, Relationship Edition,' she better be ready to win hands down."

"That... escalated really quickly," Tammy observed, and Mick released a huge sigh.

"It always does. But it blows over fast too. Most of the time. She's overprotective, y'know? But this doesn't feel like one of those 'six month silent treatment' fights, like when she ratted me out to mom for doing blow on tour."

"She gave you the silent treatment after that?"

"Oh, I said some pretty gnarly shit after mom threatened me with *dad*." Mick said.

Then, suddenly, they were in highway gridlock again. Mick fiddled with the stereo but got only the rawest static.

"You don't talk much about your family," Tammy said at last.

"Uh, I guess I don't? And I mean, it's not *bad*. We love each other. Lydia really would do anything to, like, protect me. David too. Mom and dad are still together after all the years and, you know, everything."

"What everything?" Tammy cautiously asked.

"Ooh, you really want to hear the Steve and Donna story? Well, it does look like we're gonna be here a while." He cracked his neck and said, "Dad was kinda rough around the edges, I guess? Worked oil fields after high school. I remember him saying 'Son, oil derricks do three things—make oilmen richer, keep cars running, and tear chunks off their workers.' After he met mom, or maybe after having David, he shifted to safer work."

"What's your mom do?"

"She's an accountant."

"Oh yeah?"

"Hah, yeah, we had her running the books for Dream Void for a while, until we broke wide and the label pulled the money stuff in house. She still checked it to make sure we weren't getting rooked over."

"Nice."

"Between that and Miller's lawyer dad, yeah, we were shielded from a lot of the usual new-band monkeyshines."

"'Monkeyshines'?"

He turned his head, pulled his sunglasses down his nose so he could somberly peer over their tops and said, "Monkey. Shines," as gravely as a doctor giving a cancer diagnosis.

"OK, so these two crazy kids fall in love, have David, have Lydia, have you," Tammy prompted.

"Yeah, not rich but doing all right. Dad never met a piece of machinery he couldn't use or fix, me and David were little bastards sometimes—he's only three years older than me, you know."

"How does that math even work?"

"Maybe mom just wanted to get it over with? She was raised Catholic but like, I don't think she was *that* Catholic, if you get my drift. The thing though, was the Brown family."

The traffic lightened and Mick proceeded in a leisurely fashion, not his previous manic slam. He continued.

"Jim Brown, the dad of five timid kids and a silent wife, was kind of bullying the whole *town*. It was... I mean, he was this really intense guy. *Never* laughed. *Never* smiled. Probably one of those what'chacallem dudes. Sociopath. Psychopath, something like that. Born with static in the attic, you know?"

"How do you bully a whole *town*?" Tammy asked.

"By caring a *lot*. Any time someone gave him any pushback, or even did some minor thing he didn't like, it was *on*. You knew he was pissed, and he was glaring at you, following you around—didn't care who saw it, would walk up to

you in the supermarket and say the most disgusting stuff, right up to the edge of the line but never bad enough that the cops would bust him. And if other people had done what he did? Oh, *then* the cops would have words and maybe put them in jail overnight but this guy, this hard case, he wasn't worth it. They could never prove he put the DA's daughter in the hospital, or that he was involved with that cop whose brake cable snapped, but he was just *bad* and you could tell. He never killed anyone, but I think he was responsible for about three nervous breakdowns."

"No one did anything?"

"Who wants to bell that cat? He was 100% clear that what he mostly did with his *life* was make things miserable for people on his list, and you did not want to make that list, so it was easier to avoid, defer, let things slide."

Tammy cut her eyes over at Mick, thought about everything she knew about him. "Your dad," she guessed, "Was not a 'let things slide' kind of man, was he?"

"See, Jim Brown died in the diner—you know, the place where he stubbed out his cigar in the food of, like, his son's teacher who gave the boy a bad grade, the restaurant where he reduced a couple waitresses to tears by yelling in front of everybody. So he died there and there were about... I wanna say ten people who were present, including my dad. Plus the cook and dish dude in back. Mostly townies except for one, like, hippie guy passing through who told the waitress he hated chain restaurants, right?" Mick plucked at his stubbly chin, then said, "You mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead," Tammy sighed.

"You see? You let that slide 'cause it wasn't worth it to fight over, and I'm charming and *like* you," he said, with that wicked grin.

"What happened in the diner?"

"Well, according to the out-of-town traveler, Jim and my dad got into some kind of verbal argument, then one of them slapped the other, then they threw hands and my dad spun him around, grabbed the back of his head, and slammed him into the counter. Like cracking an egg, bam."

"Holy shit."

"Then, according to this guy, dad checked his pulse, looked around, and said, 'Well, I'm not surprised that clumsy bastard tripped over his shoelace and beat his own fool head in.' Like, made eye contact with everyone else in the restaurant. Untied Jim Brown's shoe... and then the staff, like, went table to table and talked to people."

"Saying what?"

"I dunno. But they called the EMTs and the cops and when they showed up, the tourist had one story and every other person present said some variation on 'I wasn't looking that way, I heard a bump' or 'he tripped and fell' or 'I'm not really sure what happened.'"

"This really went down?" Tammy demanded.

"I mean, the police report is 'death by misadventure' or whatever you call it. Jim Brown's dead, most of the witnesses said he slipped and fell, there's only one outlier and like... nobody liked Jim Brown. I heard the stranger, the hippie guy, I heard the sheriff gave him the choice of leaving town or being charged with making a false statement."

"Holy shit," Tammy repeated.

"So maybe it was an accident, and this traveler was delusional or a troublemaker. Or maybe my dad got away with murder in broad daylight because his target was a stone-cold bastard."



Four days later, the police officer at the hospital closed up his notebook and said, "I think that should do it, Miss Gazerowski. Hope your friend there pulls through all right."

"He's surprisingly tough," she said, biting her lip.

"And you have no idea where the attacker went?"

"No, when he ran off I just wanted to keep Mick safe, you know? I think I wanted to get out of there 'cause I was scared he'd come back with a gun or something. Or try to ram us with a car."

"Yeah, well, that may have been some good thinking." The cop frowned, then said, "Wait, wasn't Mick Peltier in Dream Void?"

"He played drums on their first two albums," Tammy said, wearily.

"I gave a speeding ticket to Ozzy Osbourne once," his partner said.

"You didn't let him off with a warning?"

"Eh. 'Crazy Train' is a classic but the law's the law."

"Mm. I did perimeter stuff when that one model's house got burgled, what was her name... Lena something? Laurena?"

"She must be real famous," the partner said with a little sneer.

"She was very polite, went around and offered us all ice tea. With lavender."

"With lavender, wow."

With that, the police departed and Tammy was finally able to sit down in the ER lobby and, to her own surprise, fall asleep. When she felt someone take the chair beside her, she awoke immediately, lifting her hands defensively.

"Whoa! Whoa, easy. It's just me," Lydia Peltier said.

"Yeah, I'm... sorry, it's, um... did they tell you anything?"

"He's out of surgery and recovering. We should be able to go in soon."

Then the lights above Tammy were eclipsed by the massive, hairy, worried form of David Peltier. "Y'all right?" he said.

"I'm fine."

"I always knew somebody would stab Mick one day," David said, flopping into a chair and making it groan.

"I'm sorry, that's not funny," Tammy said.

"Nah, I guess not... So what *happened*?" David asked, and Tammy started to explain it again.



The morning after the puppies and the Lipstick Rage/Luke Away show, Lydia was waiting for them at the studio to show them the *American Beefcake* soundstage.

"They're doing the meats now," she said. "Every show has three challenges, they call them 'Meats,' 'Feats' and 'Treats.' So they have to cook something, and then do some muscle thing, and then there's a weird third thing like the puppies."

"This sounds like great TV," Mick said.

"Today is brisket, and that older guy is probably going to nail it. He's a pit master from Mississippi, he's won two of four food challenges. Troy Nguyen took one off him on the short ribs challenge for doing them Korean style, and Corey Steele got the other with veggie burgers that one judge didn't recognize as being vegetables. David came in second with burgers and second in chicken drumsticks. The feats of strength are anyone's guess." Then her eyes narrowed. "Oh, here comes this sumbitch."

Tammy instinctively sensed she was talking about Bren, and his "Good morning, Tammy, Linda," confirmed it.

"Lydia," Lydia corrected.

"Right! Sorry, so sorry."

"No you're not," she said, pivoting on her heel and walking away from him.

Bren blinked, as did Tammy. She had time to say "Uh," before Lydia came back, took her by the arm and said, "We're going," and towed her away.

"Now just a minute!" Bren said.

"Nope, not even one minute, piss off fascist." Lydia didn't even look back.

"Oh, very mature. Tammy and I were talking," Bren said, starting to stride after them. "You know, there was a time in this country when people could discuss their political differences without childish name-calling."

"No there wasn't, you revisionist ball-bag."

"Is there a problem here?" The security guard had appeared as if from nowhere and, while smaller than the contestants, was still a big guy.

"No problem at all," Bren said patronizingly, only to be told "I wasn't asking you."

"Yes, this man will not leave my friend alone," Lydia said.

"Ma'am, that true?"

Tammy took a deep breath, looked at Bren, shrugged and said, "Yeah, kinda."

“Oh here it is!” Bren cried. “Here’s the real face of lesbian feminism, everybody! Needing a *man* to solve her problem for her.”

That got Lydia to turn and give the blogger a glare that staggered him. “If you could *listen* to a woman, you’d have figured out the problem was you before anyone else had to get involved. Keep away from us. You suck. Nobody wants your input.”

“Fine!” He yanked his sleeve away from the guard and the pair of them walked off.

“It’s kind of a relief to have that over,” Tammy admitted.

“Yeah, well, I read some of that dude’s blog last night and it’s skin-crawly stuff. Not coming right out and saying rape is OK or that the mass shooters are right, but definitely taking an above-it-all ‘let’s hear both sides’ approach to all that MRA, PUA, alt-right incel shitwag crap.”

“Great,” Tammy sighed.

“There’s...” Lydia scowled and twisted her head to the side. “I hate this kind of internet crap, but there’s, like... like he’s a shriveled little man casting some kind of giant shadow, you know? He did a thing about some poor transgender TikTok star and now that guy’s in hiding. Bren didn’t say where he lived, or that people should set his lawn on fire, but he make sure to sprinkle all the clues about how to find him while calling him an ‘insult to the hegemony of the masculine position.’ He claims some schoolteacher is writing pro-Roe stuff under a pseudonym, she gets fired and someone shoots the windshield out of her car. And I don’t think he’s *doing* it? But it’s like... he doesn’t have to do it.”

“Well, that’s some scary shit.”

“Maybe I’m just being paranoid. I... I have a hard time telling safe guys from dangerous ones some times. He could just be a harmless piss-ant blowhard. But you can see why I don’t want his beady little poison eyes on my family. Where the hell is Mick?” Lydia said, rounding a corner to find her little brother standing by the craft services table, eating Funyuns from a small bag and being admired by a mousy woman in slacks, severe glasses and a sleeveless turtleneck.

“My brother actually had the *Future Ghosts* poster on his bedroom door,” she was saying. Her hair was short but she was instinctively trying to pull a lock of it behind her ear.

“The one where it was like the radiation symbol?”

“Yeah, with you just drumming your heart out in one part, and the bass player with only his glasses lit up, Tina Mossino in the dog collar and opera gloves...”

“She *hated* that shoot. Hated it like cancer, absolutely refused to work with the guy again, but everyone secretly agreed that was as sexy as she ever looked.”

“Then Cole Deckard in the middle.”

"Of course, the center of everything!" Mick said, with a laugh that, if you didn't know him, made it seem like he had no bad or even complicated feelings about the man who'd kicked him out of Dream Void. "I think that was a candid from a concert... 's like, 'ladies, get a man who loves you the way cameras love Cole Deckard.'"

She laughed, almost giddily. "I stared at that poster so many times," she said, biting her lower lip a little.

"Well, it was probably the best thing about *Future Ghosts*." He turned and said, "Tammy, Lydia, meet Rowena! This show's her baby!"

"Oh, I don't know I'd go that far," Rowena said, blushing. "I also didn't know one of our contestants had a famous brother! Would you be OK working that into the program? Maybe, I don't know, an interview or a surprise visit or something?"

"I'm all right with it if David is, though I don't want to detract from the, like, beef," Mick said.

"Oh, you look like you've got a little meat on those bones," Rowena said, her hand darting out to give his bicep a squeeze.

"So where *is* David?" Lydia asked. "If he's cooking, we ought to be, you know, *supporting him*? The thing we came to L.A. to do?"

"Relax, I saw the time sheet, he's in makeup now. Probably getting his beard gelled."

"They oil it," Rowena said, and Mick smirked.

"Of course they do."

"You know, under those heavy brows he has *amazing eyes*," Rowena said. "The long eyelashes of a fashion model and this kind of puppy-warm brown. You've got the same, actually," she said.

"It's called genetics," Lydia said.

Rowena turned to her and leaned in. "Oh wow," she breathed. "You lucked out with the blue, didn't you? If you... may I?"

"...sure?" Lydia abortively raised, then lowered her hands as Rowena reached in and started fussing with her hair.

"Yeah, you get this out of your face, get less dangle on the ears to distract, put just a little bit of shadow on there, maybe get threaded... you'd have an amazing camera face," Rowena said. "Sorry, I came up through lenses and lighting, so I just see people that way."

"It's fine," Lydia said, clearly unsure how to deal with the compliment.

"Speaking of which, I should go talk to Dennis. What I do for eyes, he does for fire and meat." She turned to Mick. "We should continue this conversation though, have you got anything going on after shooting? If David makes it into the final three, we might be able to get some on-camera interviews with family."

"Sure, gimme the digits," he said.

They briefly got to give David a pep talk—barbed jokes from Lydia and Mick— before being herded to folding chairs by a bank of monitors. The sound quality was lousy.

“You’re not going to bang that Rowena, are you?” Lydia demanded.

“Well gee sis, it’s not solely my decision, a lot depends on her. Consent, you’ve heard of it? Also, kinda tryin’a figure out how that’s any of your concern and coming up with a null set.”

“She was clearly into you, or at least, into whatever teen Dream Void fantasies you represent.”

“Ouch.”

“Anyhow, if you spin her head, *she could take it out on David.*”

“In the hypothetical where I ‘spin her head,’ I think the odds are good it would make her treat David *better*. But c’mon. It ain’t like she’s one of the judges.”

“You’re not that naïve,” Lydia said.

Mick squinted at the monitor. “Oh hey, is that Valessa? Damn, small world!”

“You know Valessa Larue? What am I saying, of course you do,” Lydia said, disgusted.

“Who?” Tammy asked.

“One of the judges, she’s a sweetheart,” Mick said while, at the exact same time, Lydia said “She’s a model, washed up from the same era as Mick.”

“Hey,” he said. “You need to chill, sis, or you’re going to hurt somebody’s feelings.”

“Did you date her?”

“Couple times but, since you’re apparently my new dick manager, there was no *full penetration*,” he said, glaring back. “We had some laughs in some wine bars, got photographed, but never *dogged it out.*”

“Oh, why not? Did you suspect she was secretly into Cole?”

“Give it a rest,” Mick said, slouching.

“You *did*,” Lydia said, putting a hand to her mouth.

“Lydia? Could you maybe tell Mick what you were telling me?” Tammy asked.

Lydia gave her a look, and a tiny head-shake where Mick couldn’t see. “He’s just onto a ton of horseshit culture war red meat,” she said. “Every damn thing is weakening the American spirit except, of course, guns, Bitcoin, and billionaires. Real ‘shine infrared light on your testicles and buy these branded herbal supplements’ junk.”

“Anti-vax?” Mick asked.

“Anti-vax,” Lydia confirmed. “Lesbians are just women who were traumatized in childhood by too much feminism or early exposure to drag shows and who haven’t been healed by submitting to the right Christian man.”

“Where did this guy come from?” Tammy asked.

“He says Stanford, though he could be lying,” Lydia said.

"You should tell him you were a Marine," Mick said. "He'd lose it."

"Don't be an instigator," Lydia said. "But, probably. Finding out his crush was in *actual war* while he was talking a high-horse stand about America's strong military fist but, also, never in a million years considering service for *himself*? Yeah, that would put his brain in some ugly knots. Oh, he does do arnis. Is that how it's pronounced? 'Our NIECE'?"

"Don't ask me, I don't know what you're talking about," Mick said.

"It's like 'ARE niss'," Tammy said.

"Cool, arnis. What is it?" Mick said.

"Philippine martial art," Tammy replied.

"Is this just a guy whose dad never hugged him and he never learned to love himself?" Mick asked.

Lydia shrugged.

"OK, so what did he say about *American Beefcake*?"

"Well, he likes David," Lydia said. "And he can't say too much because he signed paper to not give spoilers... I guess they're doing all the episodes and then releasing them week by week on some streaming platform I never heard of? But yeah, he can't give away who makes it or doesn't, he's just permitted to talk about the couple episodes he's there for and the earlier ones getting cut up right now, they wanna build buzz..."

"And he digs our brother," Mick prompted.

"Yeah. David's such a traditionally man-style *man*," Lydia said. "Big, muscular, direct, hairy. God, if he finds out about..." she trailed off, looking over at Tammy.

"Hey," Mick said, deploying his puppy-warm eyes against his sister. "I trust Tammy with everything. You can tell her."

Lydia sighed. "OK, so..." she scooted her chair closer so she could lower her voice. "David was in prison."

"Oh," Tammy said.

"It's like this," Mick said, "Lydia dated this guy named Raymond. Ray."

"It was more than dating," Lydia clarified. "It was serious. Not like Mick's hookups, you know."

"Hey."

"But you know what I mean."

"...yeah," he answered. "But it's not my fault I do casual so well. It's not like I don't *want*... you know, deep."

Lydia scooped over to him and put an arm on his shoulders. "You were just let loose in the candy store too soon."

"That feels demeaning."

"Sorry brother. Didn't mean it like that and, hell, it's not like striving for soulmate status worked out great for me." She sighed. "Ray was really into me. For really real. I'd dated some fails before that, you know? Macho men who

couldn't handle pushback. Trifling lightweights who couldn't get anything finished. Basic buffoons... the usual man trash. Ray seemed different."

"All right," Tammy said.

"He had a good job. Computer thing. I still am not 100% sure what he did. He didn't like Mick, which was... a point in his favor or a real problem, depending on my mood."

"Thanks, sis."

"Hush. He wanted to get engaged, I was on the bubble and then I found a microphone in my house."

"I'm sorry...?" Tammy said.

"A bug. A listening device, in my bedroom heating vent. Spy store shit. I put it back in place and said some stuff near it, pretended I was on the phone and said, 'I dunno, if only my boyfriend would do X and Y I might be sure' and sure enough, that weekend, he did both X and Y."

"Oh no."

"But yes. So then I take my computer in and there are keytrackers installed, he's reading my emails and texts and fuck all that, I broke up with him."

"I mean..." Tammy just stared. Lydia sighed.

"He did not take that well, but in a... mushy, groveling, gross kinda way? The weakest, most self-flagellating stuff you can imagine, so many apologies, escalating in how weird and unsettling they were. But I was handling it. I set *boundaries*. Got a restraining order, for all the good it did—if you want Black folks badgered out of a wealthy neighborhood, call the cops. Otherwise it's a lot of 'Well can you *prove* he's going to kidnap you, skin you, and wear your flesh as a suit? Did he say he was going to do that?'"

"Wait," Tammy said, frowning hard, "He said he was going to wear you as a *suit*?"

"No, that's... I made that up, it's an exaggeration. It's like, if you said that to the cops they'd shrug. It's... forget it, it was a failed rhetorical what'chacallit."

"Gambit?" Mick suggested.

"Right, thanks, a failed rhetorical gambit," Lydia said. "This went on for a while and it was kind of a stalemate, right? Any time I saw him watching me I'd call the cops and he'd be gone by the time they got there. I told him I'd go to his office and get him fired, it was *unpleasant*, but stable. You know?"

"Thankfully I don't." Tammy said, "Jesus, are you hets OK?"

"Don't ask me," Mick said, raising his hands. "I'm a bisexual."

"Oh lord," Lydia said, rolling her eyes. "Does one time really qualify, when his girlfriend was also right there?"

"Don't you bi-erasure me!"

"How does David fit in?" Tammy asked.

"Well, one day David saw him around my apartment complex. Skulking, I guess you'd call it. David rolled up on Ray, had some words, and then, erm, threw him down a flight of stairs."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah."

"When David throws you," Mick said, "You stay throwed. Broke the guy's arm, shoulder, two ribs, herniated something or other. Hell of a toss."

"I had it handled," Lydia insisted. "So Ray calls the cops and David gets arrested, convicted, and does five years for aggravated battery."

"No!"

There was a gloomy pause.

"To hear David tell it," Mick said at last, "He didn't do particularly hard time. And yeah, any time is hard, the prison system is deranged, but it wasn't like he showed up for gladiator school. Like, he... he was careful to not make any enemies and, hell, you've seen him. He didn't walk into the penitentiary looking like anybody's *victim*. He kept his nose clean, went to church, let people think he was dumb as hell but probably too much trouble to fuck with. He jokes about how new guys always took a swing at him their first day to prove they were crazy but, eh... I don't think that really happened. He lifted weights and worked in the kitchen, got out and had a hard time finding work."

"And Ray left you alone?" Tammy asked Lydia.

"Well yeah. A lot of stuff came out at trial, he had to admit he'd violated the restraining order, so he wound up moving all the way across the country. Though, lemme tell you, there's a reason I don't do any social media."

"And hate the internet," Tammy said. "Wow. God, it's just like your dad."

"You told her about dad?" Lydia said, spinning on Mick.

"Yeah, but c'mon, she's cool. You see she's cool, don't you?"

"And anyway it's nothing like that," Lydia said, turning back to Tammy.

"Dad, hell, it was like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, you ever see that one? Everybody was grateful and I think he just went with it. Unlike Mick, I don't idolize our father as some kind of vigilante badass. You wanna know what I think? I think, what *almost everyone there* said happened, that's what happened. I think Jim Brown fell and hit his mean old head, and some peyote tourist reported what he thought he saw outta the corner of his eye. Did dad and that old asshole argue? Well, it wouldn't be out of character for either one. But I do not think my father assassinated Jim Brown and then cold-bloodedly orchestrated a near-perfect coverup off the top of his head." She folded her arms.

"I can imagine Bren getting very excited about the idea of your brother protecting you," Tammy said at last.

"Oh yeah," Mick said. "Now you mention, dang, he'd have to call that Viagra line for if your erection lasts more than four hours. Hm... you know, do you think Bren might actually just need to suck some D and chill out?"

"What?" Lydia said, exasperated.

"Mick," Tammy said, "Not everybody who hates gays is secretly gay. That's not, it doesn't work that way. Lots of people hate gays because they're haters,

or because it's how they were raised, or because it's convenient. I would say the self-hating closet case is the exception, not the rule."

"He just has an energy," Mick said, shrugging.

"Oh here we go with the dime-store fortune telling again," Lydia said.

"You mock, but I didn't like Ray from the start."

"You said you liked him just fine!"

"Because that's what you say, sis! Jesus, how many of the women I dated have you said 'Oh, she seems lovely' while you were mentally flushing her down the toilet?"

Lydia looked away.

"And you thought I was too self-satisfied and insensitive to know you were lying," he said, with the most self-satisfied smirk imaginable.

"So is David seeing anybody?" Tammy asked.

"Why, you wanna fix him up with Bren?" Mick said.

"He's single," Lydia said. "And oh shit, they're saying his brisket is dry. Shit, shit, *shit!*"

They all craned towards the monitors.



"This is a struggle for the essential definition of manhood," Bren said, and Tammy stopped. She'd been headed towards Mick and David after a contest that involved flipping over tractor tires, which David had inched out over Corey Steele. She was around the corner of a hallway and, rather than head all the way back, or deal with more Bren, she chose to eavesdrop and hope Mick would annoy the blogger into retreat.

"*This is?*" Mick asked. "Not congressional douchebags tryin' a define the transgendered into suicide, the fight is here? You're trippin'."

"Fine, it's a battle, this war is ongoing and it has many fronts. Certainly *rock and roll* hasn't done the institute of masculinity any favors."

"Man, make up your mind. Either masculinity is the pole star everything rotates around, majestic and immutable, or it's so fragile that ten thousand years of it can be wiped away by Eliot Page, *Drag Race*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire*." From his tone, Tammy could tell he was teetering between the trollish joys of arguing, and getting bored and exasperated.

"The battleground of ideas is the subtlest and most complicated, so I can see why *you* find it inscrutable," Bren sniffed. "But the primal manhood of showing power, taming fire, and hunting meat are core to civilization."

"Pretty sure women eat meat and burn stuff, and that caveman shit isn't playing too well in the age of microwaves and cell phones—except to dudes who, I suspect, never actually hunt deer, never actually lift weights and, as an aside, have never actually aroused a woman."

"I get plenty of tail!" Bren squeaked.

"Dude," Mick said pityingly. "I saw you tryin' a run game on Valessa and you need to check reality *hard*."

"She was flirting back!"

"You're livin' in a fool's paradise. Didja get her phone number?"

"Yes!"

"Her number or her agent's number?" There was a brief silence and even without seeing him, even with her dislike of Bren growing minute by minute, Tammy winced a little in sympathetic humiliation. "Yeah," Mick said quietly. "Why do you even care? She's not very political, and what politics she has, you wouldn't like. Do you dance? She's gonna want to go out dancing. And she probably expects a *lot* of oral which, just hypothesizing here, is not your bag."

"The woman should be..."

"There you go again, talking about 'the woman' like there's just one, like there ain't any room in your mind for lesbians or old women or ladies outside your definition of beauty. You want an adornment. You think you deserve a gorgeous babe, but you don't even know what to do with her body. And buddy? The individual mind is a million times more complicated."

"How dare you talk to me about being shallow and, and ignorant of what women need!" Just from the sound, Tammy guessed his face was bright red.

"I mean, I have a sister. I've been around a lot of women. I worked with one who was a musical genius and now I'm working with one who's a Marine Corps vet. I listen when they talk because I'm interested. Any of those would be a good start, just pick one. And Bren, don't blame me because hotties find me more appealing than you. That's just the way it is."

"Go fuck yourself, you, you *liberal glamor fag!*"

"You know," Mick drawled, "I heard there was a time in this country when people could disagree about politics without name calling and violence. Though, thinking back on, like, *history*... not sure what decade that ever coulda been."

"Oh read a book!" Bren shouted, and stormed off past Mick so angrily that he walked right by Tammy without a word. She'd been right. His face was lobster-red. Turning the corner, she saw Mick absolutely radiant with the shit-eating grin of a successful tease.

"That guy needs an enema," Mick snickered.

"If you're not careful, he's going to tell all his cave-dwelling blog readers to murder you."

"I'm a rock star baby, people have always wanted to kill me." Mick wiped his nose a little with the back of his hand, a slight boxerly gesture. "Besides, it's working."

"If your job was making fresh anger, yes, great work."

"No, I mean... I told you the cosmos was maybe paying attention to him?"

Tammy shuddered. "Yeah."

“Well, the more I get him bound up in being pissed at me for busting hot truth on him, the weaker his connection gets. Making this personal keeps him from tuning in to a million man march of discontented dicks. I didn’t ask for this job,” he said, raising his hands and eyes to heaven, “But it has fallen on me to blunt the tip of the babyman spear.”



Bren started avoiding them. Of course he did. But Rowena was happy to take his place in Mick’s attentions and, judging from the sounds that came from Tina Mossino’s recording studio guest bedroom, Mick was happy with that as well. Tammy just gritted her teeth, shopping online for noise-cancelling headphones and shutting the page before purchase.

Everything came to a head after they saw Rowena and Bren exchanging words, Bren reddening until he bore a remarkable resemblance to Brett Kavanaugh at the apex of a rape denial, Rowena gesturing for security guards.

“Well,” she said, when Mick asked her about it, “The terms of the NDA he signed were really pretty broad. We were hoping to get some exciting pushback and a manageable degree of controversy out of him, but last night’s post—wow. The stuff he said about Valessa was not... the product of a healthy mind.” Rowena shook her bowl cut. “Under the strict letter of the law, we can sue him for saying anything at all about the show. We were hoping we wouldn’t have to, but...”

“Wait, you told him he could write about the show after making him sign paper that he wouldn’t?” Mick said.

“It was insurance!” Rowena said, giving him a playful swat on the chest. “Unfortunately, we needed it. And we tried to meet him halfway—we had one of the staff PR guys whip up something more like what we wanted, ran it through one of those ChatGPT things to make it sound like Bren, but he didn’t like that either so... he’s out.”

“I don’t like the guy, but that seems shitty,” Mick murmured.

“C’mon sweetie, you’re not that naïve,” Rowena said.

That was also the day David got eliminated. He overcooked swordfish, tied with Corey Steele for second in salmon ladder reps, and was absolutely dismal at the dance-off. As soon as his siblings heard that was the ‘treat’ challenge, they started to prepare themselves for disappointment.

“I’m fine with it,” David sighed afterwards, removing the classic formal tuxedo that clashed completely with his demeanor and appearance. “I think Steele’s got what they want, though—f’real—that Mississippi guy’s food is *amazing*. It’s like eating a barbecued angel’s wing.”

“You’re handling it well,” Lydia said.

“I didn’t like being on camera,” David admitted, ducking his head bashfully. “It’s OK for Mick but I felt... silly, awkward.”

“Still, I’m proud of you,” Mick said, clapping David on his immense expanse of back.

“The pay’s pretty good and the work wasn’t too hard, so I ain’t hardly crying. And I stick around for the rest of the shooting on their dime, since they don’t want spoilers to get out to... like, the four people who would care?” David shook his head. “It was fun to do, don’t think I’ll do it again.”

The sun was setting and Lydia was in line at the security station as Mick and Tammy went to get into David’s busted-out truck.

“It’s booked out for you,” Mick said, referring to a trendy sushi place, “But their manager is a Voidhead from way back, I’ll get Tina to text him...”

“You did this, Mick Peltier.”

Bren was leaning against his own immaculate, extended-cab pickup truck, glaring.

“‘Sup Bren,” Mick said, slowing down.

“You got me kicked off set! You or your little dyke friend there!”

“You need—need—to throttle back,” Mick said, getting closer and narrowing his eyes.

“Or maybe I ought to throttle you inst—”

Bren did not finish his statement because things got hectic. He’d stepped forward, chest out, and started poking Mick in the center of his chest with his fingers. Mick had gently put his right hand over Bren’s, almost like they were doing an epic handshake, but it was mostly to stop Bren from blocking his loose left roundhouse straight into Bren’s ear.

Mick was not a trained boxer or a karate fighter, but for years his job had been “accurately strike things at a rapid rate, for an hour or so,” so his hands were *fast*. Bren blinked and his head bobbed on his thick neck as the deafening initial strike was followed by a clip on the jaw, ribs on the right, ribs on the left, straight to the gut, then temple again, all so fast you could barely see Mick’s hands move.

Tammy was already running around the end of the truck, grabbing inside to get a prybar, or screwdriver, or 2x4, *something* to even up the odds if she had to fight a man who outweighed her by forty pounds of gym-muscle and misogyny. The first thing her hands found was that fire extinguisher.

Bren, realizing he was in a fistfight after getting his nose broken and his lip fattened, shoved Mick into the side of David’s truck, producing a clang and a patter of rust. Mick bent over the edge—probably fishing for an axe handle—and then screamed when Bren lunged forward and wrapped him in a hug from behind.

Neither Mick nor Tammy had even seen Bren draw the knife.

Mick’s shriek was high, shrill, and ear-shatteringly loud. Tammy knew, on a primal level, that this was worse than a strong man’s bear-hug. She’d seen Mick roughhouse with his brother and could sense that this was different.

“MICK!” Lydia howled. She’d just emerged from the stairwell, and was staring.

Tammy swung the fire extinguisher around her head and hit Bren in the back of his neck as hard as she could. He dropped, groaning.

“THAT MOTHERFUCKER STABBED ME!” Mick sounded panicky, and also personally offended.

“*Do not pull that knife out!*” Tammy shouted, in the authoritative tones of someone who has had combat medicine forcefully impressed upon her mind. She knew there was a first aid kit in the truck. Tammy was the kind who always noted it when she saw a white box with a red cross, and in a twinkling she had the door open and was scrabbling under the seat for it. “*Put direct pressure on it! Sit down! Don’t pass out!*”

Bren had turtled up on his side in a full fetal position, making pitiful sounds as Lydia swept down on him, navy blue skirt swirling, silver pendants clattering.

Tammy kept her hands steady with sheer force of will as she gloved up, got out the gauze and started cramming it in Mick’s red hole. He howled. “*Don’t go weak on me!*” she barked “*Hold that!*”

She’d seen the duct tape roll in the truck bed—of course—and she scrambled over the edge before realizing Lydia had her gun out. Tammy said, “*Don’t!*” but it was too late.

Bren had gotten his hands on the floor and was slowly pressing himself up to all fours. Mick’s sister pressed the gun against Bren’s perineum as the blogger groaned and muttered. It somehow made Tammy think of the stick on a popsicle. Then there was the pop, the flash, the puff of smoke, quieter than she expected. Thinking back on it, she rationalized that it was a small caliber gun, a .32 or maybe even a .22, pressed up against a body, muffled the way an assassin might shoot through a pillow. Only this pillow was the bottom half of Bren’s torso.

Lydia fired three times in all and Bren stopped moving and muttering. Tammy just focused on the tape. Mick was crumpled on the concrete, probably unaware of anything going on, in pain, in shock, staring fixedly at the knife sticking out of his inguinal crease.

Tammy taped the gauze, then wound more strips around him like a mummy. She heard sounds behind her and deliberately avoided figuring them out, but by the time she was helping Mick into the passenger side and patting him down for the keys, she saw Lydia unfolding a paint-stained tarp from the truck bed.

“Get him to a hospital.” Lydia’s voice was like black ice. “I’ll take care of this.”



"Your brother is very fortunate," Dr. Honda told David and Lydia. "Of course, he would have been more fortunate still to avoid stabbing altogether but... it was not too deep, it missed tendons, organs and major blood vessels." He turned to Tammy with a little frown crease between his eyebrows. "You said you struck the assailant while he was hugging Mr. Peltier from behind?"

"I think so, yeah."

He nodded. "That probably saved his life. One second later, the attacker could have completed a transverse cut, from one iliac crest to the other," he explained, drawing a shallow smile-curve across the front of his lab coat, from one hip bone to the other. "That would have disemboweled him."

"So you think this was attempted murder," David said.

"I'm not a lawyer," Dr. Honda said. "Now, if you don't have any other questions? Great." He left for the rest of his shift.

"If I find that sumbitch..." David muttered.

"David, don't violate your parole," Lydia said. "Besides, I bet we never hear from him again."

"What're you basing that on?"

"Mick's not the only one in the family who has an intuition now and again," she said.

While David went to angrily get Nutty Buddies from the vending machine, Tammy nudged Lydia and said, "Well?"

"Well what?"

Tammy raised an eyebrow.

"It's sorted out for now," Lydia muttered. "He's in his truck, and his truck's out of the way. I'm going to borrow a friend's fishing boat tonight... I got a really big duffel bag and some cinder blocks... I think the plan's solid."

"I can help," Tammy said.

Lydia blinked.

"...am I alive?" came a thin voice from the bed.

"Mick! You're awake!" Lydia's tense and worried posture evaporated with a speed that actually made Tammy a little uneasy.

"How much do you remember?" Tammy asked.

"Urgh... David got elim'nated... uh... we went t' the truck... that asshole started shit..." He frowned.

"Yeah, well, you're OK now. Tammy saved your foolish life," Lydia said.

"See, I tol'ja she was cool."

That was when Rowena stuck her head in through the doorway. "Ohmigod Mick, you got *stabbed*? And the police are looking for *Bren*?"

"Oh yeah, that's what happened. It's pretty foggy though. That fuggin' guy."

Rowena zipped over to his bed, depositing a 'Get Well Soon' teddy bear from the downstairs gift shop next to his water jug. "I just can't believe it! I mean,

there were rumors, he seemed a little..." She tilted her head left, then right. "But, but *knifeplay*? Nobody ever said *he* was violent!"

Tammy couldn't help but notice the producer's emphasis on 'he.'

"It's cool, I'll be fine. Don't worry your pretty lil' head," Mick said.

Tammy and Lydia exchanged an eyeroll.

"It's so awful. Though, gosh, this could sure create some publicity!"

Mick blinked, very slowly.

"Rowena," he said, gently but firmly, "I say this with affection and respect. You need to get out of Los Angeles and stay away for, like, two years at least."

"What?"

"C'mon."

"I tried to make you feel better!" she said, standing and staring, face palsied with unhappiness.

"Hearing that me getting jabbed could be good for your show does not do that."

She burst into tears and ran off.

"Sheesh," Mick said, gesturing for a drink. "Some people gotta make everything about them, am I right?"

"So annoying," his sister agreed, getting his water for him.

THE END