

I'm hanging out in the Applebee's parking lot like a bored teenager with absolutely nothing better to do. Really, everyone else probably thinks I look like a homeless burnout, but something about the unorthodox teachings of Giovanni "GiGi" Aries—and Holly Adams, I guess—currently has me thinking the best of myself, so, you know, I'm feeling more comparable to a teenager who *chooses* to do nothing rather than a middle-aged woman who has nothing left.

I'm about ten minutes into part one of Gio's audio guidance, titled: Nirvana: On the Go. It's not enough that he's metaphorically in my ear, but now he's there literally, his words of self-affirmation worming their way from my earbuds and straight into my ears. Were both sides not being blocked, it'd probably go in one ear and right out the other as his ramblings often do, but here I was, waiting in a parking lot with no car, moments away from a double date from hell.

Honestly, even with nothing to distract me, I find my mind drifting as Gio continues to blabber—I mean, this is supposed to be a recording of self-affirmation, but he has yet to share a single affirmation, instead opting open with an extended lesson on chakras, neural pathways, and the science behind spirituality. I thought that spirituality was *above* science. Were I listening to a single word this man was saying on this recording, I could probably explain how science and spirituality go hand-in-hand, but I'm instead thinking of how good I'm feeling.

Yeah, I was used as a human shield when Holly inserted herself into the business between that maniac Sarah Wolf and Lexy's farm people, which led to me having to witness that bald psycho shove her black tongue down Sammy's mouth, which *then* led to me having internal bleeding after Wolf rearranged my insides with a baseball bat.

And yeah, Holly left me behind to potentially die at the hands of Wolf and her partner-in-mutilation Kimberly Williams, all to save two idiots who we were supposed to be enemies of.

And okay, yes, I was only a night removed from Sarah Wolf once again making me look like a complete joke after also beating the shit out of my husband, who has been in a complete freefall—both spiritually and mechanically—ever since losing to Selena Frost.

All of these things are equal parts truthful and shitty.

But what outweighs all of that is the fact that I'm coming off of what Holly and Gio called an "impressive disqualification victory" against The One in her singles debut.

I played spoiler! I actually did it! Not only did I play spoiler, but I won! I won a match! It doesn't even matter that I wasn't conscious to have my arm raised in victory, nor does it matter that I have literally zero memory of said victory—what matters is that I actually won!

Where's the Beef? Here's the beef! Right here!

I'm not going to act like I like the stupid name. I actually hate it.

Loathe the damn thing, in fact. I'm pretty sure we're not even lawfully allowed to use the phrase. I think it's copyrighted by some burger joint. If I had to guess, I'd say Holly will have me legally change my name to Where's the Beef? in order to get around any potential issues with the law, but you know what? Maybe I'd do it. Maybe Holly was right. Maybe this Where's the Beef? moniker is what's going to get me to where I should be in SCW. It already got me a win, didn't it?

God. I can't believe I'm actually buying into this whole Brand nonsense. Is this what happens when you join a cult? You struggle under their thumb until you somehow stumble onto some success and then they

get to take all the credit, making you feel like it wasn't your determination that got you there, but their watchful eye?

It's just a name, right? I'm the woman *behind* the name. I beat The One. That was my accomplishment—not Holly's, Gio's, or Cid's. Mine.

"And now, you will repeat after me," Gio's unnerving voice softly demands, snapping me out of my daydreaming.

I glance at my phone to see part one of the exercise is only ten minutes long. I'm at nine. I'm about to get one minute of self-affirmation on a ten minute self-affirmation tape. I swear to God, I paid money for this.

"I am unsuccessful," Gio says.

There's an empty space for me to repeat it, but I'm just confused. "What the hell?"

"I am insecure," he goes on.

"What kind of self-affirmation is—"

"I am weak."

"Luh"

"My life has no meaning."

I gasp. Who even gasps in real life? I can't remember the last time I actually gasped, even when I was being mauled with a baseball bat by a serial killer, but Gio's recording has really got me here. This man has literally taken my breath away in the worst way.

"I do not belong in this world," Gio continues.

"Oh, my God, this is horrible!"

A small family passing me with mixed looks of fear and disgust reminds me that I'm in a public parking lot, just talking to myself. I watch them continue on towards the Applebee's, their Friday night family gathering starting out with the worry that there's a mumbling crackhead not ten feet away from the dining establishment.

Excellent, Clammy. Just *great*. Definitely giving *homeless burnout* vibes rather than *carefree teenager*.

Gio carries on, "I've failed at every goal I've set for myself, leading to where I am now, living a life in a graveyard littered with lost hopes and dreams, in desperate need of guidance from a higher power."

"Okay, well, that one's too long to repeat," I say aloud despite just scolding myself for that act not even five seconds ago. Lord, maybe Gio's right—I can't even achieve short-burst goals.

"This concludes part one of Nirvana: On the Go," Gio says.

My jaw drops. Again, who actually does these things in real life? The nut has turned me into a cartoon character. It's absurd. *He's* absurd.

"Continue to part two, where you will find positive self-affirmations to counteract the negative truths you had to admit to yourself in this exercise. If you have yet to acquire part two of *Nirvana: On the Go*, please contact your spiritual advisor to make the necessary payments to continue your journey to nirvana. Namaste and goodnight."

The recording ends. Seriously.

I should've known the second I saw "part one" that I was going to get swindled. What's worse is that Sammy and I are so broke from all of this

that I couldn't even afford part two. I just thought I'd get the first part done and it'd give me some extra confidence heading into this double date, but I basically just paid money to verbally remind myself that I'm a massive failure...and I don't have enough extra to pay for the privilege of making me think otherwise.

Unless it comes in the form of the fiesta lime chicken, it appears that I'm not going to find nirvana tonight.

I pocket my earbuds and check my phone. Not long until this double date starts. I'm now wondering if I look overly eager showing up this early. Will Sammy see me as desperate? As much as I may feel that way, I'm doing everything I can to not show it.

Thing is, Sammy—no, Samuel, damn it—is kind of spiraling lately, but he's still somehow managing to pick up chicks. He told me that he was going to get "shitfaced" with that busty bitch from Cid's wedding that ended in a racial slur and literal fire and flames. Her name's BLT, which is short for something that I don't give a damn about. Now, he's decided that it'd be best we all got together to discuss our open marriage.

I spent most of Breakdown looking up unflattering names of sandwiches. This is my way of breaking BLT down. Not only will I act like I can't even care enough to remember her name, but I'll continually refer to her as the most disgusting sandwich possible.

Oh, sorry, what was that, Jucy Lucy? I couldn't quite understand you through that unique dialect.

Pork Roll, that bandana goes so well with that cute flannel!

Just leave the menu, mister waiter. Cheesesteak often goes for seconds!

It was so nice to meet you, Roast Beef. I'm so glad Samuel decided to give a big girl a chance.

No way will she come out of this whole thing looking stronger than me. No way.

To make sure of that, I've also put in the effort to hire someone as my date. Which, you know, maybe sounds bad, but it's not what it sounds like.

See, my dating app adventures haven't gone quite the way I expected. I seem to solely attract geeks and losers. That might be because I have spent my entire adult life with one, but that's an entirely different discussion. My ill-fated romantic life is *not* going to mess things up tonight. I'm taking matters into my own hands.

This is why I've hired a male escort as my date for this Friday evening.

Günther. Judging by his name, I assume this hunk is German.

His name is dreamy enough, but his picture was heaven portrayed through pixels. Radiant blande hair hanging just below his ears, a pointed nose that could double as a saddle, his sharp jawline that rivaled even Samuel's surgically enhanced chin, and penetrating bright blue eyes.

Is this what the Nazis meant by "master race?" Because...wow!

Quick note: do not bring up Nazis to your German escort, Clammy.

Anyway, this is how I win this complicated game that is my open marriage. I beat The One. Now I'm going to beat Samuel. I'm more than just a successful name; I'm a successful woman.

As I wait for Günther to show up, I scroll through his details on the escort website. I'm seriously excited. He's going to make BLT look like chopped liver.

What's crazy is that he was really cheap, too! I mean, he had to be. I can't even afford part two of *Nirvana: On the Go*, so obviously I was looking for a good deal here. Thankfully, a quick Google search showed that the website had some coupon codes, so not only did I get an affordable, hot, muscly, blonde, German escort, but he was ten percent off!

"Howdy, ma'am," an annoying voice with a Southern twang calls out.

Please don't be talking to me, I silently pray before looking up to see a gangly looking hillbilly with dirty blonde hair barely covering up his freckled and pockmarked face. He can't be any older than 16. His denim overalls are at least hiding the curious stains on the white t-shirt underneath, but that's about all the credit I can give him as far as fashion goes. I'm pretty sure I'm about to be a victim of sexual assault.

"Oh, sorry," I laugh nervously while pulling my phone up to my ear, "I'm just on the phone with my boyfriend."

Having successfully defended myself from being violated in an Applebee's parking lot, I start to walk away, but he calls out again, "Ma'am, are you Miss Clamidiya?"

I stop. I haven't been approached by a fan in a long time. Even though this kid is disgusting, I can't help but feel exhilarated. Is this what being a winner feels like?

I lower my phone down and turn towards him. "Um...yes, that's me," I say with a friendly smile.

"Oh, ya can say bye to your boyfriend if ya want, miss," he says, gesturing towards the phone.

Ah, right, my anti-rape defense. "I'll call you back, hon," I say into the phone before pocketing it and walking closer to the fan. "So nice to meet you! Do you want an autograph, or..."

"No, miss, I'm your date for the evening," he says.

I suddenly feel like I'm in a dream. My peripheral vision dims. The ground becomes a dark fog. The night sky is blinded by beaming streetlights. Nothing is real. I want to fly away. With my luck, it'd turn into a nightmare and I'd get halfway up to heaven before plummeting down towards a faceful of pavement.

"The name's Gunther," the kid—my fucking *date*, apparently—continues, holding out his greasy hand towards me. "Real pleasure to meet ya!"

I look down at his hand. I can't bring myself to touch it. "Wait," I mumble, bringing my eyes up. Jesus, I can barely look at him. "You're Günther?"

"Nah, miss, y'all sayin' it real funny-like," Gunther says, following it up with a loud guffaw as if to show how funny I am despite me being

absolutely dead serious. *Guffaw*—who says *that* in real life either? What in the hell is happening to me tonight? Gasping, dropping jaws, and guffawing. I'm living in a fucking animated sitcom. "It's *Gunther*, miss!"

"No, no, no," I plead—to who, I don't know. God left me long ago and all I'm left with now is Gunther. "Please, tell me you're joking."

"Why would I be jokin'?"

"You're a teenager!"

"Hey now, I turned 18 a month back! I'm a legal ah-dult!"

I clasp my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming. My soul has departed this planet, but my feet somehow manage to carry me over to the Applebee's window. I lean against the glass and try to sort the unrelenting wave of thoughts rushing through my head. I believe I'm having a mental breakdown, actually.

"This can't be real," I mumble through my fingers. "Please, no."

"Tell ya what, I'm 'bout as happy as a pig in clover that ya chose this place," Gunther says, strutting up next to me. "Love me some Applebee's.

Y'all got me hankerin' for some baby back ribs!"

I don't know what a pig in clover is. Then again, I don't even know what my *life* is anymore, so why would I know anything about pigs or clovers? I can't even judge this kid for being stupid. If we're speaking in pigs, clovers, metaphors, and similes, then let's just say that's a pot and kettle situation. If it wasn't then I wouldn't be here right now. Jesus Christ, Clammy, the site had a coupon code section. *Coupon code*!

Before I can even process this any further, a giant truck roars into the parking lot, skidding into an empty spot with the worst parking job I've ever seen. The headlights go off and I see Samuel and BLT in the front. My life is ruined.

No. No, it's not. This can be salvaged. I'll find a way, just like I found a way to beat The One. I *have* to.

Samuel stumbles out of the passenger's side, almost falling to the ground on his way out. I think he's drunk again. It's sad, but it's also *great*. I can use this.

I grab Gunther by his overall straps—hey, work with what you've got—and pull him close.

"God damn," he exclaims, looking me up and down with a buck-toothed grin, "that dress is so short I can 'bout see your religion, but still, I didn't expect ya to be *this* quick!"

"Shut up and listen to me," I whisper. His smile disappears, leaving only his ears. "I'm not going to let my husband win, okay? You're going to be on your best behavior and look like the best one night stand I'll ever have, even if you're not."

Gunther looks at me like he's an idiot. More than usual, I mean. "Huh? Husband?"

"Didn't they tell you this was a double date thing?" I ask. His idiotic expression doesn't change. "I told them on the form that I needed someone to make my husband jealous on a polyamorous double date."

"Aw, shit, a foursome," Gunther squeals with excitement. I roll my eyes.

"Well, nah, miss, they didn't really say nothin' 'bout that. Or, heck, maybe
they did. Truthfully, I'm so poor that I can't afford to even pay attention half
the time!"

An ADHD and a skint joke rolled into one? I'm not sure if I'm impressed or repulsed. He's quick, at least. Like, *dumb* quick, but still...quick, I guess.

I look over to see Samuel stumbling towards us, BLT in tow. "Can you sound different?" I quickly ask Gunther.

"Whatchu mean?"

"Can you do a German accent?"

Again, a guffaw. "Why the hell would I do that?!"

Before I can explain any further, the happy couple is here.

l'd bring up my hand to wave, but it's trembling from my breakdown. "Samuel, hi—"

"Gunther?!" BLT interrupts.

Gunther looks surprised to see BLT. I already know he doesn't know me from SCW, so no doubt that's not where he knows *her* from. A boulder is expanding in my chest. Something is wrong. *Everything* is wrong.

"Cousin Brandi?!" Gunther says through his signature guffaw.

I feel faint. I end up against the Applebee's window again. I reach back and press my palms against the glass. Is it strong enough to kill me if I jump through head first? Glancing back, I see the family from earlier eating at the table just on the other side of the glass. Not wanting to ruin

their evening more than I already have, I decide not to attempt suicide via Applebee's window.

"Boy, whatchu doin' here?!" BLT asks her apparent cousin, who's pulling away from a hearty Southern family hug. "I ain't seen you in a dog's age!"

"I'm here with my date," Gunther says, gesturing towards me. "Ya see, she paid me to—"

I leap forward and rip Gunther away from BLT. The only thing I can think to do to shut him up is kiss him on the lips—no tongue, of course. He's trying, though. I can feel his lips actively humping mine, which are as still as a dead fish.

After what feels like a lifetime, I pull away. The kid basically falls forward while trying to go for more, but I push him off. I turn to Samuel and BLT and try my best to smile with Gunther's geasy spit lining my lips.

"Boy, ain't you 17?" BLT asks.

"Actually, my birthday was—"

"He is 18 and perfectly legal," I say confidently. "He's my date. Günther."

"Why y'all say it like that?" both Gunther and BLT say at the exact same time.

"Good evening, Samuel," I say with a nod.

"Where's the Beef?" Samuel slurs. "There she is!"

I nod and turn to BLT. "And you must be—"

"Brandi Lynn Tucker," she interrupts, offering a handshake. "Real pleasure to meet ya, Clam!"

She introduced herself with her full name. All of that *planning* to demean her with the wrong sandwich names is proven to be a gigantic waste of time in this single instant. Between this and my date being an 18-year-old hick, I'm starting tonight fighting from behind.

But then again, I started my match against The One in the same way. I'm a fighter. A real comeback artist. I can do this.

"Uh, yeah, you, too," I say. "But I'm actually Where's the Beef?"
"You what?"

"You can just call me Beef, I guess," I tell her. I can't help but cringe. I don't know how this happened, but I've somehow ended up in the position of having the most embarrassing name at a dinner party involving someone named after a fucking sandwich. "Or, y'know, Clammy works—"

"Well, it's nice to meet ya!"

I shake her hand. It is somehow both wet *and* sticky. Her grip is so strong that my legs literally buckle under the strength. I bring forth my other hand and awkwardly shake with both hands while trying my best not to cry.

Finally, she grants me mercy and releases the handshake. My fingers are stuck together. I cannot open my hand. It's completely shattered and this double date will make sure that it goes untreated for the night. If I have a match next week, I'm screwed.

"All right, Pork," BLT says with an open-mouthed smile, basically sticking my own dagger into my heart, "Samuel and I already pre-gamed,

but feel free to try and play catch up, baby girl!" She turns to Gunther. "If you're drinkin', don't get us caught, boy."

I raised a brow. "Pre-gamed?"

"Yup, we got hammered on some cheap shit just before comin'."

I look over at BLT's truck. This explains the parking job. "Um, didn't you drive here?" I ask.

"Hey, I said it was cheap shit," she replies, finishing with a burp. I choke on my own vomit, but manage to swallow it down. "Now we get to the *good* stuff. What are we doin' sitting around with our thumbs up our asses, huh?! Let's get grubbin'!"

BLT grabs Samuel by the arm and drags his drunk ass to the front door of the restaurant. Gunther, meanwhile, extends his hand out towards me.

Against my better judgment, I take his hand. It reminds me of his cousin's—both wet and sticky, like bad sourdough. Fortunately, he has a considerably weaker grip than her. Cradling my fractured fingers, Gunther leads me towards the Applebee's.

Under my breath, I mumble self-affirmations. The real kind, not Gio's. I think I'm going to need them tonight.