

(The following pages contain the first chapter of *The Brute*, a novel by Mike Klaassen. This sample chapter is in **manuscript format**, not the printed font and format of the published.

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## *THE BRUTE*

A Novel by

Mike Klaassen

### CHAPTER 1

A crack of thunder jolted Fortney Curtis from his sleep. Lightning flashed outside his tent, and the ground seemed to buck beneath him. The storm generated an eerie symphony of light and sound that made him think of ancient Greek gods battling in the sky.

Fort had been through Kansas thunderstorms on campouts before, and they usually passed by quickly. Still, the intensity of this one made him shiver and burrow more deeply into his sleeping bag. He pulled the top over his head, leaving a small opening just big

enough so he could see and breathe. A light, refreshing smell caught his attention. He recognized it as ozone, the smell of rain. Or was it actually the smell of lightning?

His father and Mr. Crawford, the Scoutmaster, were probably calmly observing the light show from their own tent, but Fort was sure the six younger Boy Scouts, including his eleven-year-old twin brothers, must be terrified.

The thought of the younger Scouts made his forehead throb. He had promised he would control his temper, but that morning, at the Newton Ranch headquarters, he had lost his cool and slugged one of his little brothers. Fort remembered the flash of anger and disappointment in his father's eyes.

To make matters worse, he had socked his little brother in front of Tana Newton, the ranch owner's niece. His face flushed in spite of the cool night air, and he wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. He pictured Tana on her horse at the ranch house—white cowboy hat over her long brown hair, brown eyes sparkling, and a teasing smile on her friendly face.

Just thinking about her made his insides ache. Their fingers had touched momentarily, and electricity had coursed through him.

He couldn't wait to see her again, to get to know her, to touch her, to .

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Then it hit him. He had probably ruined any chance with her. Most of the girls at school avoided him—even considered him dangerous. His size and muscular build, together with his violent temper, had earned him a nickname: The Brute.

He squirmed. He wasn't a bad person, but sometimes even little things set him off on a rampage. He tried hard to control himself, but sometimes the unexpected would set him off. The thought of really hurting someone filled him with dread, and he assumed that somehow, somewhere, he would be punished. He wished he could fall back to sleep so he wouldn't think about his temper any more.

Rain plopped on the tent, the sound gradually increasing to a numbing roar. The roof bent downward, and for a moment Fort feared his shelter would collapse around him. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the rain quit. Maybe the storm had passed. Good. Still, they would have to cook breakfast and break camp in the mud tomorrow.

Just last week he had told his mom and dad that he was thinking about dropping out of the Boy Scouts. "I'm the only guy left

in the troop who's my age, the meetings bore me, and I'm tired of going on campouts every month," he had complained.

"But, Son," his dad had pleaded, "Mr. Crawford and I are starting a new troop, and we're counting on your help. Besides, you're so close to becoming an Eagle Scout. Can't you stick with it a little longer?"

Fort had agreed—reluctantly. Now he was camping with six new Scouts along a remote, wooded creek on the Newton ranch in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Just as Fort's former troop had done, these new Scouts had pitched their tents out of sight of the adults, far enough away to have a sense of being on their own, but close enough to seek help if they needed it.

Fort hadn't relished the thought of hot, eleven-year-old bodies crowding him all night, so he had set up a tent for himself. Feeling his feet touching the back of it while his head pressed against the nylon canvas door, he figured he took up the same space as two of the smaller boys. His oversized body was handy on the football field, but a real nuisance in a small tent.

For a few seconds he listened to the patter of water dripping from the trees to the wet ground outside. The lulling sound was

interrupted by a sharp thump that sounded like a rock hitting a tree.

He wondered if his brothers were teasing him again—as they had for most of the afternoon. Fort was still disgusted with them for horsing around while he tried to show them how to set up camp and cook dinner. Then they had dawdled over washing the dishes, not finishing until just before dark.

He smiled in the darkness at the thought of paying them back. Maybe he would sneak up behind their tents and growl, to scare them so badly they wouldn't be able to sleep for the rest of the night. It would serve the little pests right. Then he frowned at the thought of crawling around in the mud. No. He would stay in his nice warm sleeping bag and howl like a coyote. He cupped his hands around his mouth and took a deep breath.

Before he could make a sound, he heard another object slap through the branches above, then splash into a puddle. Hail, he realized, as a roaring barrage of ice balls pelted the tent, its roof whipping from side to side. He covered his head, fearing the tent would be ripped to shreds. After a few harrowing moments, the wind lessened, and the hail petered out.

He unzipped the sleeping bag, switched on his flashlight, and

zipped the tent door open. Hailstones the size of golf balls carpeted the wet ground. He grabbed some of the ice and pulled it back into the tent.

Fort studied the cold, wet hailstones in his hand. One was broken in half. He could see ice rings, some white, some almost clear, and then he wondered why the concentric layers were different colors. His hand was getting numb from the cold, so he tossed the hailstones back out into the mud, zipped the tent door shut, slipped into his sleeping bag, and stared at the sagging tent ceiling.

He wondered what his buddies from the wrestling and football teams were doing tonight. Probably out on dates. The thought of asking a girl out for a date gave him a nervous ache in his stomach.

Now that he was sixteen, he could drive his parents' automobiles. He wished he could buy his own car, but his mom and dad had discouraged him from getting a job during the school year. Two more years of high school, he figured, and he could leave home and do whatever he wanted. Some of his friends had already picked out careers, or thought they had. Fort had no idea what he wanted to do when he finished school. He stared into the darkness of his tent, wishing he could fall asleep again.

A faint noise caught his attention, and he strained to hear. After a moment he realized that one of the younger boys was crying. Little wimp. He pulled the edge of the sleeping bag over his head so he wouldn't hear the sobbing, but the sound kept nagging at his mind. Then he remembered his own first campout. He had been so spooked that he had climbed into his dad's tent for the night.

Fort rolled onto his back and tugged the edge of the sleeping bag off his head. He could still hear the crying, and now he recognized the voice. No surprise.

"Billy?" he asked, in a voice he hoped was loud enough to carry to the next tent.

The crying stopped but there was no answer.

"Billy, are you okay?"

"I'm scared," said a young voice.

"Just roll over and close your eyes," said Fort. "You'll fall asleep. Before you know it, it'll be morning."

The sobbing continued as Fort lay on his back staring into the darkness. He could picture his twin brothers in the tent with Billy. They were probably sound asleep with their bags over their heads, oblivious to Billy's crying.

“Billy. Listen to me.” The crying grew faint. “Do you want to come over here?”

A moment of silence passed before Fort heard a weak reply. “Okay.”

“Well, then, come on over,” said Fort. He listened for the sound of the boy gathering his stuff and unzipping the tent. Nothing.

“Billy? Are you coming over or not?”

Fort could hear more sobbing.

“Billy, what are you scared of? Just grab your sleeping bag and walk on over!”

“Can you come get me?”

Fort felt like yelling, but figured that wouldn't help the situation. He considered just leaving Billy where he was, but the little boy might cry all night. Then neither one of them would get any sleep.

Muttering under his breath, Fort crawled out of the sleeping bag, found his flashlight, and unzipped the tent. The air was heavy with moisture. A gust of wind howled through the trees, making him shiver. He was wearing only his white cotton briefs and wondered if he should have put on his pants. Cold mud squished up between his toes. As he splashed toward Billy's tent, something stabbed into the

tender arch of his bare foot. He cursed and limped toward the tents ahead of him, trying to avoid sticks and rocks.

He could see two tents and knew each contained three boys. Approaching the nearest one he whispered, "Billy?"

The boy answered, and Fort could hear rustling sounds from within. He unzipped the tent and peeked inside. As he had suspected, his brothers were burrowed deep in their bags. Billy squinted and blinked at the flashlight. Seeing the boy reminded Fort of his mother's reaction to Billy.

"That little Billy Stockton is so cute with those blue eyes and blond hair. I just want to pick him up and hug him every time I see him," she had said.

Fort would not admit it, but he envied the younger boy. With Fort's rough features, he knew nobody ever referred to him as cute, or even handsome. People who liked him tended to call him rugged-looking. Others just called him scary—although never to his face. As the slender boy coughed and wiped his eyes, Fort had to admit it would be hard not to like Billy.

They squished their way through the mud again, carrying Billy's sleeping bag. Fort helped Billy get settled and wiped the mud off his

own feet before slipping back into his own bag. He could see an expression of relief on Billy's face.

"Thanks, Fort." Billy snuggled into the bag and closed his eyes.

Fort rolled so his back was to Billy, then pulled the top of the bag up around his cheeks and settled in for what he hoped would be an uninterrupted few hours of sleep, but he felt Billy rustle behind him. The boy leaned over Fort's shoulder.

"Fort, I don't feel good."

Fort blinked a couple of times before answering. "Just lie down and go to sleep. You'll be fine in the morning."

At first, Fort didn't recognize the sound, a combination of gagging and gushing fluid. He instantly recognized the sour smell—vomit. He sat up, completely awake, and switched on his flashlight just in time to see Billy spewing greenish-brown liquid over their sleeping bags. Fort could identify chunks of partially digested beef, potatoes, and carrots as they flowed onto the tent floor.

Billy spat a couple of times, then wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. "Sorry," he said, and then started to sob.

Fort cringed. He felt like throwing Billy out into the mud. Instead, he grabbed a towel. "It's okay, Billy."

That does it, he thought as he began cleaning the sleeping bags, I'm not going on any more campouts. He noticed the gray-and-brown camouflage pattern of his pants at the edge of the tent and checked them for vomit, then did the same for his red baseball cap. After he had wiped away most of the puke, he tossed the towel outside.

The inside of the tent reeked, and Fort considered taking his sleeping bag to his dad's vehicle and spending the night there. Then he heard a low-pitched, rhythmic sound and realized that Billy was snoring. He suddenly felt very tired, laid back down, and was almost asleep when another noise caught his attention.

It started in the distance and intensified: a vibration like a bass guitar turned up really loud. The vibration amplified to a roar, like a jet flying low overhead, or a fast-moving train. Suddenly, he knew what he was hearing. His mind screamed at him to run and take cover somewhere, anywhere, but fear held him like a straightjacket. His insides seemed to melt. He couldn't move or scream.

The roar grew deeper and louder until it rumbled through the earth under him and resonated through his bones. Over the deep roar he could hear a high-pitched howling wind that tore at his ears

until his teeth ached. In his mind he could see a giant, rotating funnel bearing down on him in the darkness.

The tent snapped from side to side, then collapsed. The shrieking wind pummeled Fort through the thin nylon canvas. As the flattened tent flipped over, it hurled him up and then dropped him to the ground, pounding the wind out of him. He heard Billy scream. Before Fort could reach for him, the tent began to roll, and they tumbled helplessly inside it.

Fort's stomach ached as the tent fabric plastered against his face, suffocating him. Gasping and clawing at the canvas, he could feel himself being propelled upward with incredible speed. He tried to scream, but no sound came. He tried to reach out to find Billy, but his arms wouldn't move. He plunged downward, then up, rolling and spinning over and over again.

Then everything slowed. He could still hear the powerful, rushing roar, but it seemed farther away. The tent fabric loosened its clinging hold on his face and body, and he could breathe again. The canvas fluttered and flapped. He stretched his arms and legs, feeling weightless, like an astronaut floating freely in a space capsule. For a split second, time and motion stopped—a carefree sensation, so

different from the horror of moments earlier.

In an instant, the sensation of weightlessness evaporated. He was falling. His stomach seemed to hang in his mouth with that horrible roller-coaster sensation. He screamed, arms thrashing, grasping for something to stop the fall. He felt Billy, still wrapped in his bag, and clutched the boy to his chest. In a flash, he imagined both of them on the ground, dead, a bloody pile of broken bones and guts splattered around the inside of the tent. It would be a sad, gory end to their young lives.

Then something solid whacked Fort's back with the force of a baseball bat. He tumbled head over heels as he was hit repeatedly. The tent bounced up, then sideways, then down again. Something dense and hard pounded his side. Again he fell and was stabbed by dozens of sticks jabbing at him through the tent. He tumbled sideways onto more poking sticks. He rolled and fell again, with a crushing thud. Solid ground.