DEADPAN

THREE-ACT SYNOPSIS



ACT I

Della Stinson arrives at a ranch outside Austin to close the roast she has written. The event belongs to macho entrepreneur Wade Mikkelson and streaming CEO Lowell Bradds. Veteran television comic Cary Eaddy and emcee Ned McCraw depend on Della's pages. Her friend Arnie Kelleher plans to watch her finally perform them. Sponsor wristbands display the performers' pulses; Della's stays at sixty, even as the jokes turn on her.

Lowell removes Della's chair from the dais, divides her material among the men and gives Cary the closing spot. In place of a set, Ned offers a sequined corset and numbered round cards. Della refuses. She asks for her writing credit, offers to split the close, and rejects extra money in exchange for disappearing. Lowell insists the broadcast will credit the performers. Cary rehearses her jokes as stories that came to him in the car.

Della gives an unsold joke to Tobin Ruffner, an eager young comic. He earns a real laugh from the crew. Ned then pressures Tobin to ridicule Della's rejection of the corset, dangling a recurring booking. Della pulls Tobin away. Arnie offers to drive her home; she stays to do her set. Onsite director Inez Malinchak protects workers and tries to correct the credit, but Lowell's instructions prevail. Online commentator Audra Gerhart offers Della exposure in exchange for a conveniently edited account. Della declines.

Ned follows Della's humiliation with a camera, treating her objections as comic material. In the catering kitchen, she warns that she will hit him with a cast-iron skillet. He laughs and keeps filming. Della strikes first. Ned fights back with a tray, opening her forearm, and nearly escapes. He returns for his phone. Della retrieves the skillet and beats him to death.

Arnie finds the body. Della tells him Ned came at her. He bandages her arm and helps conceal Ned beneath a catering trolley, even as a caterer offers to take her to the hospital. Arnie tries to wheel the body outside. Della turns the trolley toward the stage. She still intends to reach Lowell and reclaim the close. Arnie helps her through the doorway. They park Ned behind a sponsor board as the audience arrives.

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ACT II

Cary keeps the roast moving around Ned's empty chair. The public stream runs prerecorded packages until the advertised 9:05 live close; the barn hears the ongoing show. Lowell plays an earlier clip of Della threatening Ned, covering his absence with a laugh. Arnie struggles to keep the corpse concealed. Della turns suspicious noises and glimpses of the trolley into jokes that make the room help dismiss the evidence.

Wade invites Della into his barbell endurance stunt. She takes a microphone and attacks his self-made mythology, challenging him to name the workers whose labor supports it. Arnie publicly credits her writing and tries to draw her away. Inez follows the blood from the kitchen to Ned's body, calls emergency services and orders an evacuation. Lowell cuts off her warning. Guests begin leaving, but others stay for the show and its prizes.

Wade seizes Della's wounded arm and pursues her through the backstage rooms. Escaping him damages her knee; a fall into broken glass slices her palm. Back beside the dais, he uses the barbell to block her exit, then slips and falls onto the bench. Della turns the falling bar across his throat. She knocks a spotter away and defeats Arnie's attempt to lift it. Wade dies while spectators who cannot see him cheer the pulse contest. Trumpets and confetti announce Della as the low-pulse champion.

Arnie refuses to move another body and starts helping people escape. Lowell offers refunds to departing guests and premium subscriptions to those who stay. He prepares Cary to close from the production trailer. When Tobin asks about his promised booking, Lowell tells him there was never a booking to cancel. Della reaches Arnie's car, but he will not drive her away. He offers her a seat while they wait for police. She hears Cary still rehearsing her stolen credit and gets out. Arnie gives the car to an injured worker and the caterer.

Tobin takes wardrobe shears and demands an introduction from a sound assistant. He wounds the worker, then holds him hostage. Della draws Tobin's attention to the joke she gave him; Arnie pulls the assistant free. With a clear route away, Della instead steps back toward Tobin and demands the shears. He thrusts. She turns the points under his ribs and kills him, then finishes her roast of Cary over her open microphone.

Arnie tells Della she chose to go back. He will tell the police everything. Cary helps carry the injured assistant outside, then refuses Lowell's demand to perform the close. Della tries to recover Tobin's blood-soaked joke card. It tears in her damaged hand. She leaves it behind.

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ACT III

Audra tells the remaining guests that the deaths are real. More leave. With Cary refusing to perform and deputies arriving, Lowell offers Della the 9:05 close under her own name. She demands an introduction. He agrees, hoping to keep the broadcast and sell what happens next. Della follows him toward the stage carrying the shears. Inez warns the remote production team that Lowell is bringing an armed woman into the show.

Lowell puts on the sponsor robe he wanted Della to wear over her blood. The robe and dais table conceal her weapon from the wide camera. The remote producer sees applause, hears Lowell threaten the sponsor account, and authorizes the live handoff despite Inez's warning. Deputies enter from both sides, helping guests out. When one orders Della to drop the shears, she holds Lowell between herself and his gun.

The tally light comes on. Lowell announces that Della wrote the roast. She performs, attacking the stolen credit, the corset and the company's treatment of women. The jokes work. At home, viewers mistake the blood for part of an earlier funeral sketch. In the barn, some guests laugh while others crawl toward the exits. Arnie laughs at her improved punchline, then hears Lowell plead for room to breathe and moves the injured sound assistant away from the speakers.

Della's injured hand loses its grip and her knee folds. Lowell drives his chair into Ned's trolley and pulls away the cloth, deliberately exposing the corpse to the camera. The remote producer cuts the public feed. Della tries to continue, then sees the interruption card. The house microphones remain live.

Lowell attacks with the microphone stand, disarming her and leaving her unable to stand. A deputy shifts the trolley to reach him, but its wheel jams and Ned's legs spill across the step. Lowell offers to sell Della's three broadcast minutes with the bodies cropped out. Then he trips over Ned's leg and falls beneath the table. Unable to grip the stand, she pushes its shaft with her forearm. Its heavy base falls from the tabletop onto Lowell's head. The impact sounds through the house speakers. The deputy pins and arrests her.

Inez accounts for every crew member. Arnie helps the wounded and admits his part in hiding Ned. Cary identifies Della's pages as hers. Audra supplies raw footage to investigators, then sells her account behind a paywall.

Three weeks later, Grandstand markets the murders with Della's name and a clean crop of her set. A viewer shares it despite knowing what the frame excludes. The sound assistant asks for the clip to be turned down at a clinic. In the jail infirmary, Della hears the same promo and asks for it louder. Her hands struggle to lift a cup. Her pulse remains sixty.