

EIGHTEENTH WEEK

Monday, December 01, 2003, 12:45 PM
Sacramento, CA

I slowly carried my bags and headed for the car. This was one trip I was not looking forward to. My stomach had been bothering me all day, and I had barely been able to control lunch. I took some flu medicine after lunch to make sure I could get through the day. *This is just no fun.*

As I crawled into the back seat, a hand reached out and touched my shoulder. I looked over to see Rene Dupree smiling back at me, attempting to cheer me up. "Ah, Mademoiselle, it is an honor to be with you today," he said as he kissed my hand.

"Stuff it, Lindsay," I said, not even sure where those words came from. "I'm sick and I'm tired. I woke up at 5 AM and vomited. This is not my day. It may not be my week. I'm just... sorry."

"No, no," I heard. "Do not apologize. If you are sick, you are sick. I understand. But please -- know this. You still have important work to do. If you do not, well, we cannot have that, oui?"

"What's with the French, really?"

"Sorry. I'm getting in character. Is this better?"

"A little... ugh. This is not fun. I thought you stopped being sick when you died."

I heard a chuckle. "Well, we cannot win them all. At least Ivory has been a big help, right?"

"Yeah... she has. I just wish I knew what was wrong."

"Well, what could it be?"

"It's been going on a long time to be the flu... and Torrie said something about eating... I don't know which it is, but it's kinda serious. I've... er, she's... been sick for so long."

"Hmmm... could it be mono?"

"I dunno -- I don't think nausea's part of mono. There's gotta be another explanation."

As we thought, Shawn opened the driver's seat and got into the car. He looked behind him, as always. "Well, two girls this time," he said with a chuckle. "Who's who?"

"Really, Shawn, just because I'm a girl on the inside doesn't mean Rene Dupree is!"

"So you're Lindsay, then. Okay, we're off. Oh, and if anyone ever needs to pull over for some reason, just tell me. I'll be glad to do it."

03:11 PM

There was a knock on the Diva locker room door. Upon hearing it, Nora seemed to cringe. I went over to her. "What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh... no... just a reflex."

"Nora, relax. He's gone. Besides, there's six of us who will defend you from

anyone who comes in here."

The knock came again. "I'd better go get that," I said. I opened the door. The familiar black hair and million-dollar smile peered out from the hallway. "Oh, Eric. Hi. I suppose you have the marching orders for today?"

"Yeah -- and a lot of you aren't on it. They're putting an emphasis on the tag division again. I suppose you all don't mind the time off, though, right?" He added an uneasy chuckle as he said this.

"I know I don't... man, I've been miserable recently. I'm really sorry."

"Relax, Amy -- I'm no expert, but I know that everyone has problems every now and again. You gonna be able to go out for Heat?"

"I'll... I'll try."

"Okay, good. We got you and Trish going against Gail and Ivory. Hopefully things will work out here. Get dressed."

05:34 PM

Trish began the match in the ring as I looked on. I was barely paying attention to the match -- more of my effort was being driven towards staying upright in the corner. As Ivory and Trish traded blows in the ring, I looked across at Gail, who was yelling to the crowd. Ivory had to shake the ropes as she climbed in the neutral corner next to me to get my attention.

Oh, no, I'm gonna miss the spot! Hurry! I ran over to the ropes and placed my hand on her back as she leapt. She fell out of control as Trish stepped aside. I ran back to my corner, sweating from seven seconds of exertion. *Why am I so sick?* Trish melodramatically crawled over to the corner as I extended my hand. Gail and I were tagged in at the same time.

I charged Gail and jumped on her to knock her over. I began to slap away at her face, then lifted her up and dropkicked her. Ivory was getting to her feet, so I went over and punched her back off -- at least, theoretically it was a punch. *Wow, I didn't know I was so bad at it.* Getting back to Gail, who by this time was getting up, I tossed her into the ropes and hit a back body drop.

Trish was off the apron to cut off Ivory as I went up top. Gail rolled to her feet and looked around in confusion. I timed it just right, so that as she made her way back to looking at me, I grabbed her with my legs into a headscissors. We both made our way to our feet as I was running on pure adrenaline. I kicked her in the gut -- *ah, that's more like it* -- and yelled to the crowd, nailing the Twist of Fate. From there, I vaulted up top and delivered the Moonsault.

As I hit Gail in the stomach, I felt a crushing pain in my gut. I rolled halfway across the ring, unable to do anything but hold my stomach in pain. I felt like someone had stabbed me. The referee saw what was going on and quickly called for the bell. All three women dashed to me as I lay nearly motionless, only coughing and crying.

"Amy," I heard, "Amy, can you breathe?"

I nodded. Another voice, a male voice, broke in with, "Stay right here, Lita. Help's on the way."

I slowly tried to get to my feet, but a pair of hands pushed down on my shoulders. "No, don't," a voice said. "Just lie there. We'll get you help."

After a minute or so, I just closed my eyes to shield the lights of the arena. I felt a series of hands checking my heart rate, blood pressure, and various other signs. Someone put a neck brace on me -- "She broke it a couple years ago," I heard what sounded like Trish explain -- and I was rolled onto a stretcher and taken out of the arena. As I reached the back, I heard Vince's voice tell people, "She's probably just really sick. That's all."

"Yeah -- I've just had a bit of the flu. You all are over-reacting... I just need a bucket..." My voice sounded very unconvincing. I didn't even believe my own words. Whatever just hurt me, it wasn't the flu. I knew that.

As they removed the straps and neck brace from me, I sat up on the stretcher and walked to the back. Ivory had my arm, steadying my gait. "Amy, you just rest tonight, honey. You've had enough for one day. I have something to do tonight, but Trish will be here to make sure you're all right. Get some rest. I'm taking you to a doctor tomorrow."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Dec. 01 / 2003.

- Live from Sacramento, CA.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jerry Lawler**.

- A lot of people are asking me what to make of **William Regal** now that he's been arrested, and my answer should be obvious: f*ck him. The man showed such concern for his career being over and was BEGGING for work when he was made a road agent, and he uses his position to do this? I'm generally not a death penalty kind of guy, but the fact is that some people DESERVE it, and he's one of them. Maybe prison will make him realize what he did. I'm sure there are enough Bubbas in Texan prisons that he'll be a prized possession for the remainder of his life.

- Enough of that, there's a TV show.

- RNN with **Randy Orton**, as he seems rather shaken with the whole thing. He brings out **Christian**, who is his usual arrogant little self. Christian challenges **Booker T** to a match at Armageddon, as we get footage of Christian pounding on Booker during last week's six-man on the OrTron 2250. **Goldust** interrupts (wearing an "I <heart> Nora" armband - now that's classy) and tells Christian he has to get through him to get to Booker. Christian says that sounds like a good idea, so let's do it RIGHT NOW!

- Impromptu Hardcore Match: **Christian** v. **Goldust**. I assume this is hardcore, because the set very quickly gets used as weaponry here. Christian takes Goldust into the OrTron and suplexes him for two. Goldust hits the sliding punch and a low blow, then shatters a pair of stools over Christian's head. Christian takes Orton's microphone and clocks Goldust with it as this match gets stiffer by the minute. Christian applies a straitjacket choke to Goldust, who responds by wiggling out of his glove and YANKING Christian's

hair to break. This is getting UFC-level brutal. In a good way. Curtain Call is blocked, Unprettier is blocked, then Goldust shoves Christian into the set and climbs the top rope. Oh no. Sure enough, Goldust is up top, but the FAT GUY OUTTA CONTROL splash misses and DESTROYS the set completely. Christian pins Goldust in the wreckage at 4:45. Brutally short, but realistic. **1/4 **Booker T** runs in and accepts the match by way of a Book End.

- WEEKEND UPDATE WITH 3 LIVE KRU~! **Konnan** opens with the breaking news story that **Michael Jackson** has been cleared of all charges by his surprise girlfriend **Paris Hilton**. **Road Dogg** does sports wearing a **Keyshawn Johnson** jersey, but Konnan "de-activates" the sports report halfway through. Ouch. **Ron Killings** reports at the weather center that a giant blue arrow is headed to Philadelphia. I think they stole that one from ESPN, but more power to them. **Stacy Keibler** is showing the stock report when the Dow surprisingly points upward while she's talking about it. Real subtle, guys. Not. Killings announces that a severe storm of pain is headed to France in a "breaking news" segment. Killings: "Do they have the balls to fight back?" Dogg: "Someone should give me some damn balls." I assume this is funny for those who follow the NFL. Anyway, cute filler segment.

- Losers Bracket: **Dudley Boyz v. Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack**. **Bubba** wants to make this a table match as I immediately realize what the finish will be. Four-man brawl to start, then the Dudleyz clear out with the usual. Tables are fetched, but **Theodore Long** smacks **D-Von** with the cane to end that segment. Blackout by Mack, which does no good in a table match, but Bubba saves. Nowinski uses the FACIAL APPLIANCE OF DEATH to take over, and the table enters. Nowinski goes up top, and sure enough, Bubba catches him and powerslams him through the table to win at 4:14. Okay, that's the makeup call. *

- Earlier Today footage shows **Lita** hitting a moonsault on **Gail Kim** in a "pre-show match", but suffering a mysterious stomach injury as everyone crowds around her. Gee, great, ANOTHER bogus pregnancy angle. Hasn't the fact that the last 25 attempts at this all failed to get over sunk in with anyone in the back? I guess women are just baby machines to wrestling fans, aren't they? And why would someone get "hurt" anywhere off of landing on their hands and knees from maybe 5 feet up? Let's move on before I get further disgusted.

- **Michael Shane** is backstage, and he brags about winning in last week's main event, as if that means something. This ain't the NWA, kid. He challenges his uncle to a match at Armageddon, which ought to be fun.

- Losers Bracket: **Hurricane and Mighty Molly v. La Resistance**. All four dance to start -- okay, with a woman and two Frenchmen in there, it just fit -- and Hurricane dives out with a pescado. Molly suplexes **Grenier**, and Hurricane gets a shining wizard for two. **Dupree** cheapshots Hurricane to make him hero-in-peril. Prancing elbow gets two. German suplex gets two. Double DDT by the French gets two. Then, something really surreal happens, as **Lawler** starts making his usual sexist comments with reference to

Molly, and **JR** absolutely goes BERSERK, chastising him in 15 different ways and declaring the LAST thing Molly needs is to be sexualized right now. The two announcers start absolutely shooting on each other as I can just imagine **Gerwitz** seeing his career dematerializing before his very eyes. Back in the ring, Grenier dropkicks Hurricane and hits the chinlock. Dupree in, and a dragon screw leads to a figure-four try, but Hurricane blocks. Both men up top, and a Dupree superplex is blocked by a Hurricane SUPER NECKBREAKER (!!) as the announcers aren't calling ANY of this. Hot tag Molly, who gets an AMAZING sympathetic pop of a lifetime upon entering. I nearly lose it as the crowd chants "Fry Darren Fry" in unison as Molly really LAYS IN THE PAIN to Grenier. Dupree gets slammed off the top, and Molly hits the Molly Go Round on both of them... and the ref, too. Oops. JR calls Lawler a "sick sonofabitch who should be locked up with Michael Jackson", and Lawler defends himself by saying "at least I'm not going senile out there." Oh dear. Dupree goes for the French flag, but Molly steals it and SNAPS the pole over Grenier's head. She goes up top, but **Ivory** makes her return and gives Molly an RKO off the top rope, rolling Grenier on top for the pin at 7:25. JR: "I suppose you think Ivory's a milf, huh?" Lawler: "What's gotten into you?" JR: "It's called chivalry; you should try it for more than 5 seconds." It looked like a good match, but with the crowd, the announcers, and everything else, trying to rate it would be impossible. Ivory declares that Nora "may be hurt, but you're still the champ, and that's all I want." Finally, a return to wrestling on a wrestling show? With the women? And Lawler's comments aren't being appreciated? What parallel universe am I in? And why put this on right after showing a fake pregnancy bit with **Lita**, anyway? Talk about your mixed messages.

- Wait a minute -- did **Jim Ross** just use the acronym "MILF" in the right context?

- **Chris Benoit** v. **Michael Shane**. Well, they're trying, aren't they? Benoit chops away at Shane, but Shane dumps him and follows with a tope. Benoit flies into the steps, and back in, Shane gets two. Shane works the neck of Benoit with a snapmare, then dropkicks the back of it. A series of dropkicks gets two for Shane. Shane hits a rana, then chokes at Benoit. Benoit fires back with another chop, then clotheslines Shane down. Snap suplex and rolling Germans get two for Benoit. Benoit goes for a superplex, but Shane slugs him down and dives off with a crossbody for two. Shane warms up the band -- sacrilege -- but Benoit ducks the superkick and clips Shane into a Sharpshooter. Shane makes the ropes, so Benoit drags him to the center of the ring. Shane kicks away, then goes for a Crossface on Benoit, but Benoit blocks. Shane clotheslines Benoit down, then goes up top. Picture Perfect Elbow misses, Crossface gets locked in, goodnight at 7:44. As long as Shane allows himself to be carried, everything will be fine. *** **Shawn Michaels** emerges and superkicks a temper-tantrum-throwing Shane, then accepts the match. This one will be interesting for all the wrong reasons.

- Winners Bracket Final: **New Blood** v. **Evolution**. Winner gets their ticket punched to Armageddon and enjoys a one-fall advantage. **Orton** and **Conway** start, and Conway slugs away at Orton and lands a neckbreaker. **Batista** slams Conway down, but Orton can't take advantage. **Maven** enters, and the DROPKICK OF DOOM connects for two. To the top, but Orton rolls away from the moonsault. Play of the Day gets two as Maven

is YOUR face-in-peril. Batista in, and he throws Maven around for his petty amusement. Orton returns and suplexes Maven for two. Batista and Orton hit the Hart Attack for two. Orton goes up top but gets caught in a Greco-Roman throw, hot tag Conway. Everyone takes their lumps, and the New Blood hit the stack belly-to-belly on Orton for two. Batista hits the MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER on Maven for two. Conway with the IRON CLAW~! on Orton, but Batista chop blocks to break. Maven and Conway get a high/low dropkick combo on Orton, but Batista hits the SIT-OUT POWERBOMB OF DEATH to get the pin and the spot in the title match at 8:01. **1/2 Well, at least they're giving Evolution something to do now that **HHH** is away from the main event picture.

- Main Event Interview: **Eric Bischoff** is in the ring with a table, some paper, and the WHEEL OF DEATH! We view the segments on the wheel:

- I Quit Match
- Cage Match
- Hell in a Cell
- Taped Fist Match
- Strap Match
- Table Match
- Scaffold Match
- Coal Miner's Glove Match (oh, TAG!)
- Inferno Match
- Rooftop Rumble
- Spinner's Choice
- Bankrupt (ha ha)

Benoit and **Kane** come out and sign the contract, and one guess what happens next. Yup, Kane goes ballistic and destroys Benoit, choke slamming him through the table. And that's that.

The Bottom Line:

Full steam ahead, matey, and never mind the suck. The matches are getting to be well-paced, either short or good, but never both. The tournament (which is updated [right friggin HERE](#)) has done its part to shake things up, but the big test will be next week -- which of the teams gets the big push?

And will **Jerry Lawler** be commenting from the insane asylum?

10:44 PM

"You okay, Amy?"

"Yeah -- I think so. I just got the wind knocked out of me, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Tina, I'm sure." *Why does Ivory act like I'm a child? Can't she trust me?*

"I think there's more to it than you realize."

"Like what?"

"Oh, forget it. I'll explain to you tomorrow. In the meantime, if anything happens, tell me right away. I have a little expertise in this."

"In what?? Tina, what's wrong with me?"

"I think I know... but I'll wait until the doctor says so."

I slipped into my shirt and climbed into bed. *I wish she wouldn't be so elusive. Besides, what can she have expertise in, the flu? I don't get it at all.*

Tuesday, December 02, 2003, 02:15 PM
Sacramento, CA

We were off to see Doctor Theresa Montessori, who said she would give me a blood test to determine if I was pregnant. I spent most of the ride in Ivory's truck curled over, my head close to a bucket from the hotel. I felt every single bump.

"Amy, it's okay. Everything's probably died down by now. It's only when you rev up your activity that the problems come. That's why you're always sick after a match or in the morning."

"How would you know?"

"Amy... what other symptoms have you had? Wait, let me guess... you feel bloated. Certain areas feel like they're swollen. Your dreams have become surreal, almost nightmarish on a regular basis. Your stomach feels very hard, almost like someone has inserted a metal plate there. Am I on target?"

I had to think. I hadn't been around long enough to know for sure, but Amy had. "Yeah... that's amazing. How'd you know all that?"

"I didn't. Well, I don't. But I was certain of the problem after our match last night. You see, it didn't click until after you rolled off on the moonsault. I wondered how something like that -- something you've done a thousand times -- could suddenly cause pain. But when I added it together with everything else, I knew."

"Knew what?"

"Amy... when was the last time you had sex?"

"Hey! That's none of your damn business! I'm no tramp out there, okay? I'm a good girl, and I... I..."

Oh, shit.

Ivory smiled. "You what?"

"It... it was just once. That's all. We were coming back from the funeral. He was so upset. I just wanted to comfort him... I didn't mean for it to happen. We were just so out of control. Oh, no..."

I leaned back, trying to hold the tears in. *It all makes sense now. When I saw her at the slumber party and a few weeks afterwards, her stomach was more solid. Why didn't I see it before? It wasn't a mistake -- it was another person! It's obvious.*

The truck pulled over to the side of the road we were on. Ivory reached over and hugged me. "It's okay, sweetie. It's okay. Don't be upset -- this is a big thing. You should be happy."

"Why? Because the next 20 years of my life I'm going to have to leave everything I do and stay at home to take care of someone I never intended to have in the first place? Tina, this would be so different if we were married... we're not even engaged. We're just... just dating. And besides, I don't know if he'd want to do it if it isn't..."

I cut myself off before finishing. I knew the last word I was about to say, but I hoped she didn't. My lip quivered as I tried to fall asleep, hoping I would wake up from this and be back in North Carolina, back as the Hurricane, and back before Lindsay and I ever put them in harm's way.

"Amy? If it isn't what? If the marriage isn't big? Isn't in a church? I don't understand."

I shook my head and let the tears fly. I couldn't hold back anymore. "You... wouldn't... understand," I said between sobs. "I... I can't..."

"Amy, come on. Just tell me about it. What's wrong, girl?"

I tried to see her through the tears in my eyes. "You won't tell anyone? Please?"

"Sure. I'll keep it a secret."

"That one time... it wasn't Matt. It was Gregory."

"Hurricane? Really? Why?"

"Well... it was Monday morning after we came back. We tried to save money by doubling up on the hotel... big mistake, I know. He was all drained after giving the eulogy... and I just wanted to tell him how much better he made me feel. I don't know who started it next, but... I didn't stop him. And the next thing I... I..."

I froze. I couldn't continue, not because I was sad, but because I was scared. Amy's memory was replaying that morning together, and every time her mind recalled Gregory, I recalled Darren. I wasn't even Nora anymore, but being a woman and thinking about sex was enough to trigger flashbacks. My breath became shallow.

"Amy... Amy!"

"Huh?"

"What happened? You just cut off."

"I... I can't continue. This isn't right. I'm sorry. I'm just so... I told him it was just once, but... I never thought..."

"You never do. Heck, that's the risk my husband and I take all the time. I mean, we can afford to care for more children, but I'm 42. My body's not in its prime for this sort of thing. I don't know if I have one more comeback in me. I'm lucky; I could stay at home and live off of the money I saved and my husband's income if I had to. I just don't want to, you know?"

Ah, but who am I kidding? This is my last run at the top. Whether or not I win the

Women's Title, they wanna phase me out. I'm not surprised. I've done my time, not just here, but all over. Most athletes, you know, they call it a career at my age. Maybe I should. I guess that next big injury, the next big break... whatever it is... my time is up soon. At least I know I have a place here, or with Corny down in Ohio. I just don't know if I wanna go there yet."

"I know... I couldn't wait to return. I was out for 16 long, painful months. And now... now, just when I was ready, I... oh God..."

"No, no, you have time. Look, we'll just get the blood test done, and we'll be on our way back. I'll take you to San Jose, and you can talk to Matt. It'll be good for you."

"I hope so... I just don't know what he'll do."

03:24 PM

I was alone in the office. There was a bandage on my arm -- a child's bandage. I thought about that as I waited for the inevitable. I realized that I myself would have only a few days of putting up with this -- Amy would have 20 years.

She's 28. She wants to spend the rest of her life with Matt. She's at the age where it's almost time for her to settle down, anyway. But one mistake -- one false move -- and now she's forced to make that decision. Day after day, attending to children, being a mommy machine. It's such a stretch from being 2Xtreme, isn't it?

The door opened. I looked up hopefully as Dr. Montessori walked in. She placed the test results on the table and examined them. She then turned around and looked at me, keeping a straight face. "Miss Dumas, I'm sure this comes as no surprise to you by now."

"I'm pregnant, aren't I?"

"Yes you are. About nine weeks, according to this. I don't know how you went this long without noticing, but it's important you make arrangements to make regular prenatal visits soon. Your child will need to be taken care of. Now, here..." she said, handing me a series of pamphlets and such, "is some information you'll need to know to take care of yourself and your child over the next seven months. From the information you gave me, I would place the due date -- for right now -- at June 29. That, however, is a very rough estimation. Anyway, you have plenty of time to get ready."

"Ummm... thanks, doc. I guess."

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, I... I'm not married."

"If that bothers you, there are dozens of national single-parent support groups. That information is in the material I gave you as well. Miss Dumas, I wish you the best of luck. And congratulations."

Congratulations, indeed. I took the information and headed out to the waiting room. Ivory was there, but her smile was gone. She seemed subdued compared to earlier. She stared ahead, not even looking for me to come out. I had to touch her shoulder to get her attention.

"Oh... hey there. You ready to go?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong. I was just thinking... just kinda... I dunno."

"Tina? What's on your finger? Did you cut yourself?"

"Oh, this? Well, I thought that as long as I was here, I'd give blood. So they did a skin prick to see if my mineral content was normal and stuff. Well... they sent me back here."

"Why? You look healthy to me."

"It's not that... Amy... you don't understand."

"Obviously not. Tell me."

"Well... damn... I shoulda known this could happen. I was so excited just to go home after Survivor Series..."

My face changed from confusion to shock. I could tell what she was going to say before she said it. "You too, eh?"

She looked into my eyes and realized I knew. "Well, yeah. I guess we'd better get to SmackDown!. Gotta tell Vince the news."

05:58 PM

San Jose, CA

We walked into the San Jose Arena by the locker rooms. Paul saw us and stopped us. "What's goin' on, girls? Coming to see Matt?"

"Yeah, Paul, I am. I gotta talk to him."

"Suit yourself, Lita. How about you, Ivory?"

"I just came along for the ride."

"Proceed, then."

We walked the corridors, stopping just outside the SmackDown! men's locker room. I found myself unable to take the next step. Ivory paused and looked back at me.

"What's wrong? You nervous?"

"Yeah... it's just that... well, you have a couple months before it's a real concern. You got lucky. I... oh, this is crazy. I should just tell him. But... but I don't know how he'll react."

"Just take a deep breath and ask to speak with him. I'll be here the whole time."

"Thanks..." I knocked on the door. John Cena slowly opened it, then seemed to relax. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just you."

"Thanks, John."

"No, no, no -- I mean, that girl's going nuts right now. Anyway, I guess you wanna see Matt?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Sure. Yo, V1 -- your honey's here!" *Harumph*. Matt peeked his head around the corner and saw me standing at the door. He raced to me and gave me a huge hug and kiss.

"Should I leave you two alone, Matt?"

"Close the door, John." The door shut behind him, leaving the three of us out in the hallway.

"Amy... I was so worried. You scared me."

"I was scared. But everything's okay. I went to the doctor, and she said that there

was an easy explanation for everything... but, uhhhh, I don't know if I should tell you."

"What? What do you mean? Amy, you know that whatever goes on in your life, I'm gonna be there. I don't care what it is... just let me know."

"Well... no, you'll be mad."

"Why would I be mad? What could you tell me that would upset me?" I didn't respond. I was working up how to say this. "Come on, Amy... what's wrong?"

"Matt... after the show, let's go back to Vegas and get married."

"Wh... what? But I thought you wanted to have a big ceremony, and wanted your family to be there. I was waiting to propose until we had the time. Besides, now isn't a good time for that -- we're on different shows. Why would you wanna get married now?"

I said nothing. I merely turned my head away, searching for the right way to explain to him that I was trying to get him to legitimize a kid that wasn't his. I felt ashamed for having asked, since I was dragging him into my mess. I was hoping for divine inspiration to strike him. He put his arm around me as I looked down at the floor.

"Amy... tell me, please," he said in a calm voice that seemed to want to understand. "Whatever it is... just tell me."

"I... I'm sorry. You remember what happened... after the funeral?"

"Is this about Greg? I told you, I forgave you for that. I mean, yeah, it still hurts, but you don't have to overreact just because you slept with someone else one..." he stopped. His eyes grew wide. He looked back at me, then at my stomach. I covered it with my arms, hoping I could block some X-ray vision he didn't have.

"Oh... ohhhhhhhh... wow. Damn. I... I... damn." He swallowed hard. "I guess... well... wow. Are they sure?"

"Yeah... they are. It's due in late June."

"Oh dear. Damn. I..." He kept shaking his head. I turned away, hoping to feel his arms around my neck or on my shoulders. Instead, I felt nothing. It was the coldest nothing I'd ever felt. "Amy... no. I can't. I'm not ready. I'm sorry."

"Matt, wait..." I turned around to face him, but instead of confusion or concern, I saw something else -- anger.

"Amy, I can't do this. You know, it's been hurting me for ages that you talk about how you didn't wanna do more than a little with me because I was special. You wanted it to feel like the first time all over again. Well, I didn't mention anything because I was thinkin' about Jeff, and about how I wanted to go on with my life, and how much help you were when it came to getting me through that week. Well, it looks like you had other ideas. Go talk to him -- see if he's willing. But I am not taking responsibility for what isn't mine! Dammit, Amy, I can't believe you would do this. Why?"

I was in tears. I was too upset to answer. I was bawling now, as Ivory stood off to the side, not interfering but not comfortable. "M... Matt... but I..."

"Can it, Amy. You're just going to go on and on about how unlucky you were. Well, I don't think so. It takes effort. It takes day after day to get it just right. There are guys in the back who say they had to go at it for months! How long have you two been screwing behind my back?"

"Matt, I swear, it was just one time!"

"You lying bitch! Don't play me for an idiot. I know what I sound like out there, but I'm smart enough to see through this. You and your city boyfriend probably thought you could time it just right. Well, fuck you and fuck Greg. I hope you're happy together."

You could've at least stopped after I lost my brother instead of jumping him as soon as you got back!"

"No, it's not like that..."

By this time, the locker room door opened. I saw Billy Kidman standing at the door, eyes wide open.

"The hell it isn't, Amy! You know how many of those guys said I shoulda dumped you back when you first told me? But I didn't. You know why? Because I believed you. I believed it was just once. You used me, Amy. Well, I ain't getting used any more! You're free of me now! Go and enjoy Greg if he's man enough to have you now!"

He stormed back to the locker room, only to see Kidman watching him. Kidman merely shook his head and stared at Matt. "You think you're a man now, I suppose," he finally said.

"I got used. I'm not getting used again. Now lemme in." He shoved Kidman aside and walked through the door, slamming it behind him. I fell to my knees, then sat down next to the wall. I could do nothing but cry for the next ten minutes. I was feeling the exact opposite of when I was Stacy.

The door finally opened. Kidman came out. He sat down next to me and embraced me. "Amy... I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. And even if what he says is true -- and I don't know -- but even if it is, that's no reason for him to treat you like that right now. I'd never do that."

"Th... thank you," I sobbed. "Thanks."

"Lemme go get Torrie... I'm so bad as this consolation thing."

"No, no... you're doing fine."

"Lemme get her anyway." Kidman got up and walked around the corner. His steps seemed to echo in the hallway. Ivory went to comfort me, but I pushed her away.

"Amy, I'm sorry..."

"Save it, please. It means nothing from you. It'll mean nothing from Torrie. You haven't been here."

"But Amy, don't you remember?"

"You've got a family, don't you? What have I got? Nothing. I'm alone. This is something Dad always warned me would happen. I just never thought it would be like this."

"Amy, that's not fair. Look, it..."

Before she could continue, the locker room door burst open again. Matt reappeared, this time seemingly agitated. I saw a pair of heavily tattooed arms shove him out into the hall. A voice yelled at him, "You better do the right thing, boy."

Matt stood out in the hall, then flung the door open again. He yelled, "Yeah? And what'll you do about it, old man," as the door closed.

"C'mon, Amy... let's go." Ivory pulled me up and helped me around the corner. As we entered the main hall, Kidman and Torrie returned. Torrie merely ran up to me and hugged me. We remained in each other's arms for a full minute, just crying over what had just happened. Even though the tears shed on my behalf wouldn't change the situation, they meant more to me than any action that could have been taken.

"Amy... I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"It's okay, Torrie. It wouldn't matter. You have him," I said, pointing at Kidman. "If this happens to you, he'll be there. I'm gonna have to do this alone."

Wednesday, December 03, 2003, 05:44 PM
Cameron, NC

I went home. I told Eric and Shawn I didn't want to work the house shows that weekend. Eric understood why, having heard from another source about the blow-up. Shawn, however, asked that I stay with the crew, although he was in no position to say why. I told him I'd think about it, and that I'd try to make it back by the weekend, but I needed to do something first.

I walked into the house that once belonged to Matt and Jeff. Now, it was just Matt's -- and, up until yesterday, mine. I didn't want her to stay there anymore. It was clear Matt didn't want anything to do with a pregnant Amy -- that he had too many issues in his own mind. I didn't know where to go, but I couldn't stay here.

I was thankful that Matt had to continue on with the publicity tour. Oprah Winfrey had called and asked him to appear on a show about family members affected by drug addicts. He wouldn't be able to return until next week, by which time I'd be long gone. *But where?*

I slowly went through the dresser and loaded all the stuff that I could identify as mine into my suitcase. I had nowhere to stay, but I knew that I had a few days' head start on Matt. Maybe the weekend would provide Amy with an answer. In the meantime, I had to try to stay out of everyone's way.

As I removed shirts from their drawer, I saw something tucked in the back, inside an envelope. I pulled it out. The envelope had nothing written on it, but it had been opened and closed several times. I looked inside, but couldn't see anything at first. I turned it upside down, and a single item fell out, face up.

It was a novelty photo from some place in Atlantic City. Matt and Amy were stood behind a wooden picture, with only their heads sticking out to fill in holes in the painting. Where Matt stood was a man in a sharp black tuxedo. Where Amy stood was a woman in a beautiful white gown, holding flowers in her left hand. The two figures were holding hands as Matt and Amy smiled from just over the top. I turned it over to the back, where I saw a single word:

"Someday."

I cried for the rest of the night.

Thursday, December 04, 2003, 07:45 PM

The phone rang. I debated whether to pick it up. It could be Matt -- or it could be someone looking for Matt. I had no idea if anyone knew I was in or not. *What if Matt was coming home early? What if he saw me here, planning to leave? What would he do?* I waited for the answering machine to pick up.

"Amy, it's Shawn -- I, uh, I hope you're still here because I really need to talk to you. Something big just went down this morning..."

"Shawn?" I instantly grabbed the phone and picked it up.

"Oh, hey... you ok, Andy?"

"I think so... I'm just gathering my stuff and getting out. What's wrong?"

"Well, uh... I can't say Matt's changed his mind, but... just some good news about Vince. You know, the guy we're trying to get to be better and all?"

"Yeah, yeah... what is it?"

"He, uh... he took a stand I never thought I'd see him take. You remember how JR and Lawler were at each other's throats back on RAW?"

"Yeah -- it was about Molly, wasn't it?"

"More to the point, Lawler was being his usual perverted self, and Jim thought it was in bad taste. Well, Lawler got called in by Vince today... and... man."

"What? What is it?"

"I never thought I'd say this, but... I think the demon may have done good."

"How?"

"Well, Vince told Lawler that out of respect for Molly, he should lay off the whole puppy thing, and Lawler basically said he didn't think it was necessary. Then things got out of hand."

"How?"

"Well, both men accusing the other of being out of touch, not knowing what the business is about, disrespecting a legend... anyway, the point is, Lawler refused to change his act, and... well, Vince fired him."

"What??"

"Yeah... he just told Lawler not to show up. I mean, we were all wondering what was going on. It didn't make much sense. Here was a guy who had done everything Vince asked him to, and now, when it mattered most, he refused."

"Why do you think that was?"

"I... I wish I could say. I think it has to do with who he is. He's a proud man. He's been wary of Tazz and Cole for a long time, and he... he thinks he's the best in the business. I'm not even sure he's the best in the WWE, myself, but I'm not inside his head. The point is, he refused, and Vince doesn't take no for an answer."

"Well... wait... wouldn't the demon let Lawler do it?"

"I don't know. I looked for the demon... he's in there, but he's... he's laying back. He seemed to be smiling the whole time though. Like he was leading Vince down the wrong path."

"How?"

"Well... I think it's part of what he said. Jerry was... he was talking about what old friends they were, and... Vince wanted nothing of it. There was a lot of foul language being exchanged. Maybe we cut off one sin and put in another."

"You mean... wrath?"

"In a way. But, well... there's really only one sin, and that's Pride. See, I don't buy this seven deadly sins stuff... everything traces to Pride. Lawler? He was too proud to think common decency applied to him, so he leered at women. Regal? Same thing, only he went even further. Vince? Well, he was too proud to be rejected and take the high road, so look what he's done. Lawler... and Kendrick before him..."

I cut him off. "That still stings, doesn't it, Shawn?"

"Well, a little, yeah. I mean, the guy was my student. I love all of them like

nephews -- like Michael. And you know, Brian just didn't deserve that kind of treatment. I guess that's why my real nephew was promoted -- to appease me. But it's not the same."

"I know..." I looked at the clock. "Shawn... call me tomorrow. I'm going to watch SmackDown! and go to bed. I've had a long week."

"All right, buddy. I'll talk to you then. Stay strong. If you need out, come back and tell me."

"Thanks."

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Dec. 04 / 2003, Taped Dec. 02.

- From San Jose, CA.

- Your hosts are **Michael Cole** and **Tazz**.

- Opening match, no time limit, WWE Tag Team Titles: **Team Japan v. World's Greatest Tag Team**. The announcers basically promise a classic as **Ultimo** and **Haas** start. Ultimo gets some basic arm stuff to force Haas to back off, but on a second lockup, Haas wrestles Ultimo down and bridges for two. Back up, and Ultimo reverses a wheelbarrow suplex into a rollup for two. They lock up again, and Ultimo rans Haas over, nearly losing his mask in the process. He rolls out to fix it, and **Shelton** whips him into the STEEL steps to cover for time. Back in, Haas tries for the Haas of Pain, but Ultimo rolls with it, and the two get into a pinfall reversal sequence. Big ovation for that. Another lockup, and this time Ultimo backs off Haas in the corner. He brings back the handstand headscissors, and Haas now bails. **Tajiri** dropkicks him to get his attention, and Haas knocks tosses Tajiri against the railing and climbs back in... straight into an Ultimo standing moonsault for two. Haas clotheslines him down and hits an armbar. Ultimo makes the ropes, so Haas drags him back in and gets a Nagata Lock (called a "figure-four armbar" by **Cole** -- he's trying), but Tajiri stomps on Haas to break. Shelton in, and the arm gets Banzai dropped a few times. Herb Kunze armbar follows, but Ultimo makes the ropes again. Shelton misses a blind charge, Ultimo gets a drop toe-hold and elbowdrop -- with the wrong elbow, which he sells more than Shelton. Haas cuts off the tag, and Ultimo eats an Angle Slam. Haas gets a DDT and goes back to the arm. Shelton grabs his legs, but Tajiri kicks him away... and can't get back in time to get the tag. This is brilliant. Shelton in, and the two do the leapfrog choke for two. Armbreaker and shoulderbreaker gets two. Haas with an arm wrench and lariat for two. Double arm DDT gets two. Full nelson, but Ultimo walks the ropes to break, only to land on the arm. Shelton just stomps the shoulder and does a double armbar, placing his boot in Ultimo's back to make it hurt that much more. Cole and **Tazz** are selling the psychology like NUTS here. Haas back in, and he gets a judo throw for two. Shelton returns and 450s the arm, but only gets two. Tazz is RIGHT ON THE BALL by pointing out that the move only hit the arm and thus didn't do full damage. Shelton goes for the superkick, but Ultimo ducks and scores a tornado DDT. He can't reach Tajiri, but Haas and Shelton miscommunicate on a double-team that ends with Shelton spearing Haas. FINALLY Tajiri gets the hot tag and blitzes both men with karate moves. Tarantula to Shelton, but

Haas breaks it as we go to commercial. We come back with Shelton suplexing Tajiri for two. Haas in, and the two do a stack German (Shelton suplexing Haas who has Tajiri) for two. To the outside they go, as Tajiri gets tossed onto the railing by Haas before Shelton clotheslines him over. Tajiri returns, but Shelton suplexes and bridges for two. Haas gets the Haas of Pain, but Ultimo breaks. WGTT use the distraction to do their finishing combo on Tajiri... for two. Tajiri ducks a clothesline and connects with the back elbow, hot tag #2 to Ultimo. Ultimo chops away, then connects with a clothesline, but Haas no-sells and Ultimo grabs his arm. CONTINUITY~! Shelton airballs a crossbody, and Tajiri takes him outside. Haas follows, so Ultimo does the ASAI onto the pile. Back in, Shelton goes for an STO, but Ultimo slides underneath and gets an inverted DDT for two. Tajiri Buzzsaws Shelton for two. Haas grabs Tajiri into a powerbomb for two. Shelton and Haas go for the Doomsday Device on Tajiri, but Ultimo clips Haas and Tajiri falls on top for two. Shelton, still on the top rope, gets a missile dropkick for two. Dragon's arm hits the post via Haas, but Shelton's back superplex is blocked when Tajiri flips over BOTH MEN with a sunset flip on Shelton for two. Shelton is up, and Ultimo flips off the top with the Asai DDT for two, but Haas saves. This is just nuts. Finally, Ultimo whips Tajiri into Haas, who stumbles out into the Buzzsaw for three at 31:55 as Ultimo holds Shelton off. The wrong team won the match, but this was the usual level of awesome you'd expect. **** **Shannon Moore** smashes a chair on Ultimo's arm for good measure, but **Paul Heyman** runs interference and Tajiri mists him.

- Backstage, the **APA** are doing what they always do -- namely, drink beer -- when **Test** and his new gal **Dawn Marie** show up. Dawn basically challenges the APA to face her new team, and when **Simmons** rightly points out there's only one of them... **Hardcore Holly** returns, smashing a pitcher over Simmons' head. Probably better, since Holly's a wasted babyface.

- **Hardcore Holly** and **Test** v. **A.P.A.**. Big brawl to start, of course, and it never really stops. That's fine, because that's what everyone's good at. **Bradshaw** plays face-in-peril as **Dawn Marie**'s boys pummel him into goo. Test misses the big boot, Bradshaw hits the lariat, hot tag **Simmons**. Whoop-ass is produced, but the crowd isn't into it. Dawn Marie climbs the apron and gets whacked by Bradshaw, who turns around into the big boot. Simmons eats the Falcon Arrow to finish at 6:26. Energetic mess here. **1/2

- **John Cena** does his usual rap here, though somewhat uninspired. He calls **Rhyno** a woman, going so far as to say "Rhyna" to get a cheap rhyme. Um, yeah.

- WWE Title: **Kurt Angle** v. **Matt Hardy**. Matt Fact: Matt is twice the man **Hurricane** is. Huh?? Anyway, Matt challenges **Undertaker** for next week, so let's see what happens here. Angle blitzes Matt, but **Shannon Moore** provides the cheapshot. Hardy works Angle's neck with a snapmare, but Angle reverses an early Twist of Fate try into the Northern Lights suplex. Angle heads out, where Hardy bulldogs him on the steps. Back in, legdrop gets two. He hits a mocking pose of Hurricane. Okay, what is this? Even Shannon seems confused. Hardy goes up top a second time, but Angle gets the Pop-Up Superplex. Hardy flips out of the Angle Slam and delivers the Eye of the Hurricane for two. Are they building a cross-promotional feud I don't know about? Hardy misses the

shining wizard (oh dear...) and Angle grabs the Ankle Lock. Matt easily makes the ropes -- too easily, if you get my drift. Matt enzuigiris Angle, then hits the Twist of Fate with feet on the ropes for two. Angle seems to snap and delivers FIVE German suplexes in a row, then slaps on the crossface chickenwing, dragon sleeper variation. Okay, OUCH. Hardy taps out at 7:12. Taker comes out and accepts the challenge for next week, but when he does, Shannon tries to attack from behind and Mattitude double-team him. I'm not sure what's going on with Matt and Hurricane, but it really screwed the match up. **1/4 Angle runs into **Eddie Guerrero** and declares Eddie will never win his title.

- **Billy Kidman, Rey Misterio, and Rob Van Dam v. Brock Lesnar, Billy Gunn, and Jamie Noble**. Pier Six to start, as everyone pairs off as you'd expect and the faces hit stereo topes on the heels. Back in, RVD opens up on Gunn with kicks and Rolling Thunder. Cheapshot from Lesnar, who comes in and pounds on RVD with angry stuff. Noble gets a crossbody for two. Gunn back in with the One and Only for two (only). Lesnar gets a German, which RVD sells like there's no tomorrow. Gunn and Noble go for a double Dumbasser, but RVD ducks both and hits a double enzuigiri. Hot (?) tag to Rey, who goes all-out on all three heels. Kidman jumps in and gets a swinging neckbreaker on Noble, and Rey gets the West Coast Pop on Gunn for two. **Torrie** jumps on the apron and snaps Gunn's neck on the top rope, and Kidman rolls him up for the three at 7:24. The opening two minutes made the match -- once they tried the formula, it dragged. This should have been the cruisers doing a spotfest on the heavies, with the occasional power move to hold it together. C'est la vie. *** Gunn challenges Kidman to next week, telling him to put the title on the line. Good, this feud is getting insipid.

- **John Cena v. Rhyno**. Cena and Rhyno punch away at each other, then take it outside, where Cena goes into the announce table. Spinebuster by Rhyno on the floor, and back in it gets two. Rhyno delivers a SICK DDT on Cena for two. Cena sold like a champ. Cena goes low, but Rhyno replies in turn. Rhyno gets the chain and distracts the referee with it, and while the ref disposes of it, Rhyno clips Cena and posts him. Rhyno dives off the top for two. Rhyno? Okay then. Lariat by Rhyno gets two. Crowd is rabidly booing Rhyno. Cena fights back, hitting a belly-to-belly, but Rhyno reverses the second one and hiptosses Cena over the top rope. Back in, Rhyno gets two. Cena hits the Protoplex out of nowhere for two. Throwback gets two. F-U gets two. Rhyno with the GORE GORE GORE for... two? He tries again, but misses and eats post, and the super fallaway slam finishes for Cena at 6:03. Cena is still over. **1/2

- Next week!

- * Hollywood Hulk Hogan v. Eddie Guerrero
- * Billy Kidman v. Billy Gunn
- * Undertaker v. Matt Hardy
- * Ultimo Dragon, Tajiri, and Paul Heyman v. Charlie Haas, Shelton Benjamin, and Shannon Moore

Certainly a PPV-worthy card so far, but it'll all depend on everyone's mood. If Taker doesn't feel like playing ball, it'll ruin that match. Ditto Hogan. And speaking of...

- Main event: **Los Guerreros v. Hollywood Hulk Hogan and Undertaker**. Hogan and Taker again ride out on twin bikes, which I hear they're doing at the house shows nowadays. Faces clear house to start, and the Guerreros regroup. Hogan gets the ten punches on Chavo in the corner and the BACKRAKES OF DEATH, but Eddie delivers the cheapshot. Chavo gets a back suplex to make Hogan goblin-in-peril. Interesting. Eddie goes to work on Hogan's leg with a bunch of stomps and holds. Slingshot senton hits the leg. Chavo delivers a kneebuster (like a gutbuster, but not). Eddie in, and the two do a double legdrop on Hogan's leg. Hogan hops around, looking more foolish than I've ever seen him before (yay), so Eddie chop blocks him. Chavo with a figure-four, with Eddie's help of course, but the ref sees it and gets the break. Slam by Chavo for two. Eddie tries for a missile dropkick, but Hogan moves, hot tag Taker. Soupbones for everyone! Hogan tries an axe lariat on Chavo, but Chavo grabs him into a "brainbuster" that's really a suplex. Points for effort, though. It gets two, and Hogan hulks up. Eddie blocks the big boot to Chavo by clipping Hogan from behind, but Chavo runs straight into the chokeslam for the pin at 8:22. Smart idea keeping Eddie and Hogan strong in theory, but I think we all knew from the opening bell who was jobbing here. *1/2 **Kurt Angle** applauds both men as the credits roll.

The Bottom Line:

Talk about counter-programming at its finest -- they're trying Eddie up top to see if he's credible against the main eventers, and so far the ratings don't show much change. I doubt he'll go over next week, but certainly he'll get a chance to do all his offense and basically wrestle himself. Let's see if it's elevation time, though.

Until next week, BUY THE BOOK!

Friday, December 05, 2003, 11:47 AM
Cameron, NC

"Amy?"

"Yeah? Who is this?" At first I felt I should know the voice, even though it wasn't one I had spoken to in a long time.

"This is Ric Flair."

"Ric??? THE Ric Flair?"

"That's right, honey. Hey, ol' Mark was just tellin' me about the stuff with you an' Matt, and I wanna let you know that I've talked things over with Beth and the boys down here. If you wanna live with us for the time being, we'd be glad to take care of ya till you get your own place."

"Really? Well, that's... that's wonderful. I'll get packed, and I'll make the trip tonight."

"Great. Lemme give you some directions."

I grabbed a pad and pen and hastily wrote everything down. *Just when you're at your lowest, God tosses you a lifeline. I should have known things would work out.*

Friday, December 05, 2003, 11:48 PM
Outside Charlotte, NC

I pulled off to the side of the road. The rain was getting worse, and though Amy knew the way, I had never been comfortable driving in the rain. I just sat there and hoped for the best as the traffic whizzed by. I wanted to turn on the radio, but was afraid of what I'd hear.

Right now I was in no mood for any music anyway. I was beginning the long trip to the rest of my life. My suitcases were in the back of an old wagon I had the keys to. I could've found another way, since I wasn't sure whose car it was, but if Matt wanted it back, he could have it. Today, it was just another car.

The rain began form patterns on the windshield. The wipers were on constantly but still couldn't keep a clear picture. I knew Ric or his son Reid would be waiting up for me at the Flair house. I also knew that the longer I was out, the more they'd worry.

For their sake, it was in my best interest to keep going. I couldn't, though. The rain mirrored the tears in my heart, tears I would've never had as Andy and tears I never would have considered as a guy in general. Tonight, though, was different. It wasn't just that I was Amy, female. It was that I was pregnant, and I was homeless. All the money in the world couldn't help me yet. The only thing keeping me from disaster was Ric Flair.

I turned and looked at the stuff in the back. All of Amy's clothing and personal belongings were in there. Every trace of her ever having been in the house was gone, except for one thing. I couldn't bear to bring the picture of us -- the "Someday" picture -- along with my stuff, so I left it out on the kitchen table, where he'd be sure to see it when he got in. I wanted him to know that I still believed in someday.

Out on the road, the cars continued. Some skidded in the rain, nearly losing control. I could see police officers advising people to get off the road if travel wasn't necessary. A few thousand feet ahead, a full rest stop stood. I could've gone in there, but tonight wasn't about being Lita. It was about being Amy, about being Andy, and about fixing a broken life.

I felt a twinge inside my stomach. I looked in the glove compartment and saw a candy bar I knew was kept there for emergencies. I took a bite and attempted to get rid of the pain. I had skipped dinner, so of course my stomach hurt. But the pain reminded me of the child inside me at the time.

My mind spun as the rain began to lighten. Here I was, a male mindset, inside a female body. To make matters worse, I was both possessing and possessed -- I was inside someone, and someone was inside me. All the warning signs had been there, and certainly if it was obvious to Ivory, it had to be obvious to others. Yet I failed to see it until I was told of it.

I remembered looking on the Internet after RAW to read the report of the show. All around, people were talking, whining, complaining, and generally mad at what happened. It wasn't because it was a match stopped, but rather that they thought I wasn't

really pregnant. I had kept the news to myself, even now.

I knew from when I was a fan that women getting pregnant -- as a story -- was generally an excuse for bad dialogue and worse plot twists. I knew there probably hadn't been a successful pregnancy angle in the history of sports entertainment. I also knew that, even if Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler had mentioned that I was going on maternity leave, it would be slammed by wrestling fans all over.

I pulled back onto the highway, with the words of people such as Scott Keith, Chris Hyatte, and many others ringing in my head -- their credo as a wrestling fan:

"If it makes it to television, you know it's fake." Just like Montreal, Over the Edge, and Bash at the Beach were all fake, right? Why was I ever a cynical fan?

12:25 AM
Charlotte, NC

I pulled up to the Flair family estate, amazed at how luxurious it had been. As I closed the door, I looked around. No one was up and about -- no one knew where I was. *Thank God -- I don't need people to think.*

I opened the back seat and slowly got my suitcases out. Each one weighed more than I remembered from packing -- probably due to my fatigue. It had been a long drive from Matt's house to here, but the directions were just fine. My emotional state, on the other hand, could have used a severe rewrite.

I slowly walked the few steps up to the door. I looked back at the wagon, sitting in the driveway, just behind a Lexus that I assumed belonged to Ric. I thought of all the fine suits and flowing robes Ric made fashionable, then looked at my own outfit -- a ratty T-shirt and green cargo pants. I wasn't exactly flat broke, barefoot, and pregnant -- I had shoes -- but this was definitely more than I felt I deserved.

I was half-tempted to just turn around, return to Cameron, and beg for mercy. But now wasn't the time. I saw anger in Matt -- no, more than that, I had seen stubbornness. It was the kind of stubborn behavior that can only go away with time, if it does at all. Everything he did became a personal vendetta. Even on-screen he had gone too far. I didn't have to find home, but there was no way it was wise to stay there.

Slowly, within the drizzle surrounding the Carolinas, I knocked on the door. I waited. At first, there was no answer. Then I heard footsteps. I looked around, trying to determine their origin. *Is someone after me? Could there be a prowler here? I didn't know I was so vulnerable! I need to get inside!* I pounded on the door, more out of panic than concern I hadn't been heard. It took a few seconds for it to register that the footsteps I had heard were from inside the house.

The door opened. A familiar face answered. He flashed a million dollar smile at me and extended his arms. His face, though scarred through years of hard work, cuts, and bruises, was friendlier than I had ever imagined. It all made me feel like I was re-entering Heaven -- although this man was no god among men.

"Amy, my girl," he said, looking at me with his beautiful eyes and flashing all his crooked teeth, "welcome. We're always here for you."

Saturday, December 06, 2003, 10:45 AM
Charlotte, NC

Ric and Beth -- his wife -- provided the finest comforts for me and seemed not to judge me. Just the fact that they hadn't yet discussed why I was here made me feel more accepted than if they had said it didn't bother them. They seemed to see me, not as a former co-worker young enough to be Ric's daughter, but as Ric's daughter.

As Beth and Reid went out to buy groceries, I looked at Ric. He was decked out in a T-shirt, shorts, and sandals -- hardly the look of the smoothest character ever to grace the ring. He looked almost human, an old man who had his glory. I knew he was in pain every step of the way as he crossed the living room to sit in his favorite chair.

"You know, Amy, the big game is today," he said. "Army and Navy. Best example of college football there is. No scholarships, no recruiting, no money, no NFL scouts, no bowl, nothin'. Just a bunch of guys doin' what they love who are gonna leave the game with respect for each other. You can't touch that anywhere, Amy. Anywhere."

"Yeah, so I've been told. College sports is... well, I'm glad I never got into it." As he sat in the recliner, I began to wonder about this quiet legend. He wasn't the Nature Boy right now -- that much was certain. He was another 54-year-old man, hoping that the angels would keep him intact for one last match or two before he rode off into the sunset. And yet, here was a man who had room in his heart to help a scared young woman who had no one else to turn to. We weren't friends, but he treated me like one. My curiosity overflowed.

"Ric," I finally said, "why are you so nice to me?"

"What do you mean, little lady?"

"Well... this is too much. It really is. You don't even know me that well. I'm just someone you know from work. Why would you inconvenience your family to put up with me?"

"Amy, you're not an inconvenience, girl. You're a little lady who needs to know that someone out there accepts her. Hell, we got the room, and we got the money... we'll do everything short of raising your child for you, kid. You need a place to be right now. You're falling."

"I shouldn't be." *What brought that statement on?*

"No, no... you've lost at love. You should be falling. It's natural. Honey, you think I picked Beth because I had my choice of a million women in the world? Oh, no. There have been others that ol' Naitch has loved and not been loved by in return. Dozens. Beth was there for me, and she didn't care that I was working some nothing sideshow with a broken back, risking being in a wheelchair every night. She loved me, and I love her. And that's all that mattered."

"No... if that was all that mattered, I wouldn't be here. I'd be on the road, making plans to marry Matt. Or I'd... we'd be picking out items for a nursery back home. Why did he have to dump me when I needed him the most?"

"Amy... I dunno if you'll accept this, but it'll make sense later, you got it?"

I nodded. I also listened. While outwardly I was crying hard, I knew words of wisdom from an old hand were coming from a mile away. I knew Amy had to hear this,

and had to take it to heart before she forgot it in her own self-pity.

"Amy... Matt did the right thing. Look, why do you think he didn't wanna sleep with you? He respected you, yeah, but more than that, I think he knew he wasn't ready to be a father. You saw how he was -- you want that man to raise your child?"

"But... but... what he did to me... it was so... hurtful."

"You think that's hurtful? Lemme tell you somethin', cuz I've seen it a thousand times from people I talk to on the road. Parenthood is not a job. It's an act of love. I don't know if you realize what you were asking him to do. You wanted him to pour all his love, all his heart, and all his well-being into someone he didn't want, didn't need, and didn't really do anything to bring about. You were going to take your pain and shove it in his face."

"He couldn't swallow his damn pride? How do I feel? How do you think I feel? I'm gonna spend the next six, seven months turning into a roast turkey. I'm going to lose everything that made me attractive as a wrestler and as a person. The least he can do if he really loves me is help me get through the next 20 years I've been sentenced to. Why can't he do that?"

"Amy, please... calm down, girl."

I tasted a tear falling off my cheek. I walked over to the living room and lay down on the floor, crying and hoping to just fall asleep. *Maybe if I fall asleep, I'll wake up back in San Jose, and this will all be a bad feeling Amy had. I must be in a dream.* "Ric..."

"Amy... look. I bragged about kissin' the girls and makin' them cry. I bragged about Space Mountain. I bragged about bein' a 60-minute man. But that was an act. I'd never do that -- not to Beth, not to the other women. You know why? Cuz then I'd be putting them where you are now."

"But you... you could've paid for them... you have the money."

"Children deserve parents, not checkbooks. Besides, I've heard things said that can't be heard by the wrong ears. I want you to imagine this. Suppose he had married you, and suppose he did want to raise your kid. You think he's gonna forget why he's a dad? You think he'll keep it secret?"

"I trust him."

"You trust him to keep it from other people. But he'll remind you. Imagine being in an argument with him after the kid's in bed. Imagine he reminds you that he married you to save your kid's name. He says you cheated on him and forced him to do this, and that that kid is nothing more than a burden to him."

"But... he can't believe that."

"I know, sweetheart. We never say what we believe when we're mad. It's all exaggeration and emotion out of control. But you know who doesn't know that? The kid. Now I want you to imagine he hears this. He's gotta live with the fact that he knows -- he may not say, but he knows -- he's a bastard, and his parents gave up the single life for him. He's gotta go through life wondering who his daddy really is, but knowing it ain't the man Mom says she's in love with.

Now think of Matt being told for the first time by that kid that he ain't his real daddy. Matt gets frustrated. He can't reach this child he dedicated his life to raising, even though he wasn't ready. He feels no emotional attachment to him like you will because it's not his child. So he doesn't interact with him. He doesn't treat him with the love that kid deserves. And you're begging for Matt to show respect.

Now his anger's shifted -- it's no longer on the kid who represents his lost freedom, but it's on you, the person who stole it. He goes from loving you to hating you, despising your existence and his marriage. He doesn't want to walk away, but he can't stand it, and he makes it clear every day and every night. Then one day it all boils over, and he can't take the pressure and the anger and the pain any more. And that kid -- that symbol of how you conned him -- is right there asking one question too many, and..."

"Stop! Please, for the love of God, stop!!" I was trembling as I rolled to face him. I felt more fear than hurt, anger, or confusion. His story, his picture was so vivid, I could see the belt in Matt's hand as he talked. I didn't want to hear any more, even though what he described could not and would not happen. I rolled back onto my stomach and buried my face on the carpet. I kept it there until I felt a hand -- an old hand, but a loving, nurturing hand -- upon my shoulder.

"Amy... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, girl. But you gotta know -- this happens. I've seen it happen to people all around my world. They wanna live the high life, they get a girl pregnant, they marry her out of obligation, and the whole thing falls apart. Amy... it was now or later. He's not ready, but he knows it. And you know what -- that makes him a real man."

"Where does that leave me?"

"Amy... you think it's over? You think you're somehow going to be undesirable now? You're still the same wonderful, free-spirited wild child I knew from RAW, and that I helped learn to walk again when you were in rehab. That doesn't change just because you have another generation. There are men who will accept the both of you. There have to be."

"And what if there isn't? You want me to make them choose? Or... maybe I..." *No, Andy, don't even think about it. You know that's a child in there -- you've seen the soul within the womb!* "...maybe I'd be better off without all this pain. Maybe it'll be better..."

Ric looked at me without judgment. "Amy... I can't answer that for you. You have to decide what to do with your life. I can only guide you and tell you of my life. I can't take over your body and direct your thoughts. I don't have that power. You do. You have to decide if that's what you want. Is it?" I didn't answer. "Is it?"

I slowly shook my head. "No, Ric... no. I'm not a quitter. I have never backed down before. Now's not the time to begin."

"All right, then. C'mon -- lemme help you up." He extended a hand to me. I took it and pulled myself up to my feet with his help. He hugged me with a fatherly embrace. "Don't try to think about it. You're here to be you. Now, sit down, girl -- I'm sure Beth and Reid will be back soon, and David's here for December doin' some injury angle. Let's all watch the game."

He turned on the television and flipped to CBS. I saw the jets fly over and the stadium filled with thousands of men in uniform -- every one of whom had been called to serve, and every one of whom answered the call without hesitation. They may have been in blue and gray instead of red and white, but I knew that watching this game was supposed to remind me of why I was here.

Sunday, December 07, 2003, 03:38 PM
Charlotte, NC

"Shawn? Is that you?"

"Yeah. How are you? You alone now?"

"I am... I'm on my cel and in my room. Well, it's really not my room, but it'll do. I'm staying with the Flairs. They called me on Friday and offered me a spot to live. I'm starting over."

"Yeah, speaking of... you know you'll be someone else tomorrow, right?"

"I do. And I'm ready to be someone else. I don't know if I could handle another day being a vagabond."

"Hey, I understand. These things are hard to deal with. Just remember: every cloud has a silver lining."

"Yeah... like Jeff's."

"Back up for a second. Does that still bother you?"

"Well... I know, and Amy knows, and... well, Matt doesn't. And now he wouldn't believe me anyway. Or Greg... maybe it's better he doesn't."

"Doesn't know what?"

"Um... You know what? I've said too much. I really have."

"No, no, wait... Andy, were you sworn to secrecy?"

"Yeah."

"...okay... then I'll drop it. Sorry, I've been having a rough time too. I've been working with Michael here on our match... I don't know if the guy's up to it."

"Up to it? In what way?"

"Well, he's going on a Pay-Per-View in front of an audience ten times what he's used to. I can't see how he'll survive more than a few minutes without stage fright. He's been okay in short matches, but... he already knows that about half a million people are watching. It's gonna be too much for him... I'm scared."

"How? Shawn, I was there with him. I was in the ring with him just last week. He was fine."

"No, no -- Lindsay was fine."

"Oh, yeah... that's right... she was Michael... but... what about Benoit? Didn't he get a good match out of him?"

"Andy, be honest -- have you ever seen Benoit NOT get a good match out of someone?"

"Well..."

"Exactly."

"Okay, fine... damn... so much is going on, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you're telling me. Lindsay misses you, by the way. I mean, she's been trying to work on her own problems right now, but she really wishes you could be around to help."

"Maybe I will be tomorrow. Don't see how I couldn't be."

"I know... I know..."

"Shawn? What's really bothering you?"

"You think something else is on my mind, huh? Well... yeah."

"What is it?"

"Um... it's about Lawler."

"Shawn, he got fired. He got proud, and he's gone. What's bad about that? Vince showed respect for the women, didn't he?"

"No, no... I know the right thing was done... kinda... but you see... Jerry helped save me. He and Sean... Waltman, I mean... they were the ones who dragged me to church and out of the lying and deceiving I had been doing. I owe my soul to them. And now he's... well, it's just sad how far he's fallen."

"Yeah... I guess I understand. But you got others. Talk to Lindsay about it. Maybe she can help you through this. You know she and I are both here for you."

"I know... but it's just hard. They haven't even said who'll replace him. I guess JR wants to fly solo next week. Maybe they're holding it off for Armageddon. I don't know. It's all going so quickly. Time is running out."

"In more ways than one."

"What?"

"Shawn... I've had dreams of demons attacking me. And the one always says the same thing. Cave ides Martem. You know what that means?"

"I never took Latin."

"Okay... it's Beware the Ides of March. It's the thing Caesar was told before he was killed. Shawn, you know when the Ides of March are?"

"Sure. They're on March 15th."

"Right! Maybe the demon's taunting me. I think he's planning to kill Vince that day."

"Well, that puts a time limit on things, but that doesn't mean we can't get him saved before then."

"Shawn, it won't be on his mind on the 15th or any day beforehand. Don't you know what falls around that time?"

"March... oh no..."

"Yeah."

"...Dammit! That's good... that's gonna be hard to top. I don't know how we'll get his attention away from his pet project."

"Exactly. We're in deep trouble, Shawn. Deep trouble. Do you... do you know what to do?"

"All we can. We got three months to save him. We got three months to put a full-court press on. But don't you worry about that. Heyman and I will go at it. Sting's coming in soon. We'll work on it. We have to."

"Get as much help as you can. Tell them as much as you can get away with... man, I hate this double life."

"We all do. But we've been called to live it. I could've said no, but I said yes to God... now's not a time to go back on my word, is it?"

"No... not at all."

"Look, I'll do what I can. You get back here tomorrow, and we'll see how much we can do. Soon, this will all be over, and Vince's fate will be decided. I hope God accepts failure."

"He wants our best effort, I'm sure. That's what I got to give."

"Yeah... me too. Let's go with it. I'll get right on it. Thanks."

05:14 PM

The door to my room slowly opened. I looked in the direction of the door as David Flair walked in. He seemed flustered -- more so than usual. His cheeks were a bright red, almost blushing. Yet his presence seemed unassuming, almost as though he were honored to be near me.

"Amy? Can we talk?"

"Sure. Sit down."

We both sat on the bed. He avoided eye contact, but still showed an interest. He seemed like he had inherited the gift of being trustworthy from his father.

"Amy... I'm sorry this happened."

"David, you didn't do anything. I did this. I just wish I had been more careful. You never think once is enough, do you?"

He chuckled. "All the same, I... I wish there was something I could do. You're a wonderful person, Amy. You're someone who's done a lot to make wrestling better. I wish I could've had half the success you did."

"But David... wrestling's not everything. Can't you just strike out your own path?"

"It's not that. I want to do this. I want to be in wrestling. It's what's been in my family and in my blood since I was born. It's my destiny -- I really think that."

"So do it."

"But... no one wants me. No one thinks I'm worth it. I'll never be able to be a respected wrestler. There's just too much pressure on me. Everyone sees my name and they... they have no patience."

"I don't understand."

"Amy... what's my name?"

"David."

"David FLAIR. F - l - a - i - r. You know what kind of responsibility that carries? Did you see me when I wrestled? I have almost no clue what I'm doing out there. I still don't. I'm... I'm not going to be accepted because I'm a joke. I'm a disgrace."

"David, what are you talking about? Just because you're not the greatest wrestler of all time, you think you're the worst?"

"I might as well be. You remember when they had me be a wrestler in WCW? You remember that they gave me the US Title? They did everything to make me look... well, no. They made the whole thing a joke. I was a joke. I didn't earn it. I didn't pay any dues. I didn't do anything. And that's the problem."

"But that's WCW. No one takes that seriously."

"No... it's national attention. I'm 23, Amy, and I'm expected to be good at what I do. I'm not supposed to be struggling in the minors. I'm supposed to be a superstar by now."

"Says who?"

"Says 'them!'"

"David... you're putting the pressure on yourself. It doesn't matter if you're not your dad. It doesn't matter if you can't reach the top of the game. What matters is that you be what you can be. Maybe you're not cut out to be a wrestler, but you're definitely cut

out to be a great person. You know this."

"No... no, it's not that. I have to be good. If I'm not excellent, I'm pathetic. People accused me of making a mockery of the Flair name. I was 19 and I was a disgrace to wrestling. I felt like I couldn't look anyone in the eye any more. This hurt. It hurt a lot. I just want to be something. I wish someone could see past my name and look at me."

"David, I can. I've been laughed at most of my life too. Look at me -- I look like a drug addict when I'm out there. But that's just how I am... and I'm proud of it. You gotta be proud of what you do, too! It's the right thing. So what if you're not your father. Be yourself. Make your children want to be like you."

David's head dropped as he shook it. "I'm not capable. Too many people know about me. I'm always going to be Ric Flair's heir. The one who should have followed in his footsteps, but couldn't handle it. I'm not crazy -- I'm not pathetic -- I'm just... I don't know. I didn't want to be a star right away. I wanted to be me and nothing else. But as long as I'm in a ring, doing what I love, I'm gonna be a Flair. It's just not right."

"Then... do you really want to do this? You have to decide if it's worth the criticisms and sacrifice. No one else can keep you from doing what you want. Be a man, David. Be your own man. Besides, you already are a star in my life."

His eyes quickly turned to me. "What? How?"

"You and your whole family. You helped me when I was at my lowest. You don't think that counts for something?"

"Well... after it's all done, you're still going to be on your own and without a father. There isn't much I can do about that." He paused. An idea seemed to be forming in his head. Before he even said anything, I knew what he was thinking. "Actually, Amy... there is something I can do..."

"David, wait. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yeah -- why not?"

"David... do you love me?"

"Amy, you're awesome. You're beautiful. You're one of the hottest girls I've met. Every man in the world would want to be able to be with you -- of course I love you."

"No, no... you don't understand. You are infatuated with me. You want me. But do you need me?"

He stared in confusion. "What... Amy, I'm helping you here. I'm giving you the support you're going to need!"

"No. I don't need any guy. I need someone who loves me. David, you're a really sweet guy, but... it wouldn't work. It can't work. Ask your father -- being a parent isn't something you volunteer for. It's something you commit yourself to. I've committed to it... you don't have to."

"I... I don't understand. Do you want to be a single mom?"

"No... but I want to be in love with my husband. David... I just don't know enough to know if you're my type yet. I'm sorry... but... that doesn't mean I can't find out. How about we hit the town for dinner tonight, David? Just see what it's like?"

"You... you mean it?"

"Sure. What can go wrong?"

11:51 PM

We walked together to my room. David stopped for a second. "Thank you, Amy. That was a great time. Thank you for having confidence in me."

"David... you need to have confidence in yourself. You need to see you're worth it. Do you understand? I can only do so much!"

"Yeah... but still... thank you."

"Thank you too."

There was a pause. Something about the evening and the time we had seemed to click within me. *If I were myself, right around this time I'd try for a kiss goodnight or more. Why don't I feel the need right now?* David saw me and moved closer. I turned it into a hug before he could be awkwardly moving his lips toward me.

We held the hug for a long time. He looked into my eyes. I closed them and waited for him to decide. It didn't take long.

As we kissed, he began to move his hands behind me. I felt them move under my shirt and abruptly stopped. "David, wait... no. I'm not doing that."

"Wh-- what's wrong? Don't you like me?"

"Yes... and if you did, you'd respect me when I say stop. I'm sorry, but... well..." I touched my stomach as I looked at him with a look that pleaded for him to understand.

"Oh... okay. I guess..."

"David, understand me. It's not you. It's that I... I lost control before, and it's why I'm ten weeks pregnant and stuck in a guest room. I'm not doing it again. Just please -- trust me. I'll give you a second date... you don't need to win me over."

"Okay... sure."

"Thanks." I kissed him quickly on the lips and opened the door behind me. "Good night." As the door closed, I turned on the light. I felt something inside me -- not the child, or nausea, but a feeling of accomplishment. I had made David feel better about himself -- and maybe, just maybe, Amy too.

Monday, December 8, 2003, 09:15 AM
Anaheim, CA

The alarm clock went off. I slammed it down and looked around. I wasn't back in Charlotte -- I had returned to my new life. *But what new life?*

I heard a voice from the other bed in the room. "You ready to go, buddy?"

"Yeah, I am," I replied. "Today's a big day." *How big? I'd better see first.*

I jumped out of bed and headed to the bathroom. I closed the door behind me and turned on the water in the shower. As my eyes cleared, I looked into the mirror. I'm not sure I was ready for what I saw.

No more red hair, no more tattoos, and no more pregnancy. In fact, no more female traits at all. Instead, it was bald head, darker skin, and understated features -- well, except for the eyebrows.

Lindsay had done this before. Now, it was my turn to be Maven.

NINETEENTH WEEK

Monday, December 08, 2003, 11:44 AM
Anaheim, CA

I grabbed my things and headed downstairs to where I knew Shawn would be waiting for me. As I entered the car, I saw Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack heading over to where Jazz was waiting. Rodney and Jazz shared a kiss before getting on the van. *Lucky them. I don't care how someone looks; if they've got someone to love, then to that person they're a perfect 10.*

As I stood in front of the car, Nowinski returned. He placed his stuff by the side of the car and waited with me. An uneasy silence followed.

"So, Chris," I said, trying to get the formality out of the way, "you're riding with us today?"

"Us?" He eyed me suspiciously.

"Yeah. HBK offered me a ride. Did he offer you one too?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't know why he wants to converse with us, though. I suppose he'll have us putting his nephew over at house shows. Such is life."

"C'mon, man... Shane ain't that much better than we are, is he?"

"Not important. It's all about who you can associate yourself with, isn't it?"

"I suppose." I paused, then smirked. "Did you ever think it would be like this?"

"Like what?"

"Well, I mean, here we are. We went through months of training together, and we came up through the ranks together... and now... two years later, we're in the tag division. Did you think we'd be regulars on TV this soon?"

"Personally, I thought I'd be higher up than this. I mean, the match with Booker at SummerSlam... I thought that was something bigger. Now I'm just another wrestler in the midcard. You are too -- don't delude yourself. You saw how much attention we got at Survivor Series."

"Next to the Dudleys? That's just the way it is. They're the stars. Just watch -- when we face them tonight... well, IF we face them tonight... they'll get all the accolades. We'll be forced to play the bad guys."

"Of course you will. But you and Robert... I don't know. It's going to be unusual, since by your nature you don't have the moves to handle being the heels."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I think I have more than you realize."

"Oh, really?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Have you and Al been training again?"

"Haven't you?"

"To some extent. But the problem is, I have other things to worry about."

"Such as?"

"Well, I don't want to say too much, but... right now I feel that I have to pay attention to the people around me. Especially now that Amy's rejoining us... you know, she had such a rough week last week."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I can't say. It came to me in a dream, let's say. Her spirit contacted mine."

"Chris, are you pulling my leg?"

Before he could answer, Shawn arrived and unlocked the car doors from the top

of the stairway. "Okay, guys," he said without hesitation. "Let's get going. We got work to do."

We both climbed in as Shawn looked at us through the glasses and smiled. We turned to each other and laughed.

"Did you know?"

"Kind of... you?"

"I had a good feeling."

02:23 PM

"Rob, Rob!"

"What is it, Mave?" Rob Conway was paying more attention to his PlayStation game than he was to me at the time. I knew Mave was an excitable person, so I figured that Rob was just waiting for me to get it out of my system. Little did he know that I actually had a purpose in talking to him.

"We gotta work on what we're going to say tonight."

He instantly paused the game and turned to face me. "Say? Tonight? Us?" His eyes grew wide. "You're kidding... wh-what about?"

"The tournament. We're going to face the Dudley Boyz later tonight to see who takes on Evolution for the titles."

"Right... do we win?"

"Rob, we'll get to that later. Right now, we have to work on what to say... let's see, what kind of interview can we do?"

"Well, how about just a straight up one? I mean, we're just a couple of regular babyfaces taking on another couple of babyfaces. It's not like we have to bring any spite or anything like we did with La Resistance or with Nowinski and Mack."

"Yeah, that's true... but... look, we're scheduled to talk right after the match is over. Are we even going to know the result?"

"It depends. Is it just us?"

"I don't know... man, we'd better talk to Eric. This night is going to be rough."

"You said it. And that's just on us. Imagine how the viewers feel with JR going solo."

"Oh, I almost forgot... does anyone know who the new guy's going to be?"

"Not at all. Vince is gonna tell us right before Armageddon."

"Not until then? How typical of the guy to leave it till the last minute."

"I know... Cornette would've had it filled the next day, know what I mean, Mave?"

"Exactly."

06:38 PM

Rob and I took deep breaths as we watched the Dudley Boys and La Resistance

on the monitor. JR seemed slightly confused as to how to handle being on his own, and it was clear he was already missing the interplay he had with Lawler on most matches. Of course, his explanation for Lawler being fired -- which basically boiled down to "insensitive comments" -- struck me as being forced. *Then again, I guess the real reason wouldn't make much sense.*

A camera flashed on next to us as I saw our images on the split screen. I leaned over and whispered something to Rob, who nodded. He then pointed at the screen as we both winced. D-Von had just hit a DDT on Dupree, who did a full headstand before giving a glassy-eyed sell. The match went back to full-screen.

"You thought about what you'll say?" I asked Rob.

"Yeah... but I'll play off of you... how's that?"

"I suppose."

"Maven?"

"Yeah, Rob?"

"I'm really nervous."

"So am I. This is our big moment. Let's not blow it."

"Right."

The match came to a finish as La Resistance hit the Crepe on D-Von. Road Dogg entered the ring as the ref was escorting Dupree out. Grenier was grabbed from behind into the Dogg Pound pumphandle powerslam. D-Von rolled on top as Dogg left, and the referee counted the three. 3 Live Kru had returned the favor to La Resistance -- both teams were now indirectly responsible for eliminating each other.

I'm guessing they'll face each other at Armageddon.

"Ten seconds, guys."

"You ready for this, Rob?"

"Yeah... let's do it."

"Three -- two -- one --"

We were shown looking at the monitor as we waited for the several second delay to put our faces on it. Once it did, I began.

"You know, Rob... it's funny. Last month we were teaming with the Dudley Boyz, and now we're teaming against them. Something tells me all that friendship's out the window."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But the Dudleys -- they may be tag team legends, but they're old news. Don't forget, Mave, we're the New Blood! We're the wave of the future! And the future begins tonight, doesn't it?"

"Oh yeah -- I hope Evolution's taking notes, because they'll need them after we get done with the Dudleys."

"Let's get ready."

"All the way, Rob."

We walked off as the camera continued filming where we were before going to commercial.

07:31 PM

Our music played as we entered via the curtain to a decent reaction. I could tell that we weren't the biggest names on the roster yet, but with the push we got to the finals of the tag team title tournament's winner's bracket, there was a chance we could amount to something. Perhaps this was yet another push for Maven, and Conway would be along for the ride.

All thoughts of being able to get a good reaction went right out the window, however, as the fireworks returned to the stage for a second time. Bubba Ray and D-Von's heat made ours seem like OVW all over again. I looked to Rob and shook my head. "Guess we're the heels."

"I guess," he deadpanned.

The Dudleys headed to the ring and stared us down. We all looked back and forth at each other. Bubba Ray mouthed some words of discouragement at us. "Those titles are coming with us," I countered. Eventually we all shook hands and went to our corners to talk strategy.

"So," I said to Rob, "you wanna start?"

"Might as well," he replied. "If we're the faces, you make the better hot tag." I high-fived him and stepped onto the apron. It was only after about a minute that I realized he had just told me he thought he was the superior wrestler.

Rob Conway and Bubba Ray Dudley started with a lockup as I shouted words of encouragement from the corner. Conway helped Bubba through a chain wrestling sequence for the first 30 seconds before Bubba stood up and reared back to punch him, stopping short. They locked up again, but this time Bubba pushed Conway to a neutral corner and unloaded on him with punches. He added an avalanche on a cross-corner whip, but the second time he tried it I was ready. I pulled Rob out of the corner, which sent Bubba Ray crashing into the turnbuckles.

Conway tagged me in, and I stomped down Bubba Ray. I whipped him into the ropes and followed with a flying forearm, trying to improvise my way out of a difficult situation. I picked Bubba up and hit a standing dropkick. He didn't fall down, but from my position, I switched into a drop toe hold, landing him on the second rope. I ran the ropes and vaulted over the top, snapping Bubba's neck on the second rope on the way down.

I shook the shock out of my leg on the floor, then turned around to return to the ring. Unfortunately, D-Von was waiting for me. He slammed my head into the apron, then threw me into the steps. I lay there as D-Von picked me up and returned me to the ring, where Bubba was waiting. Bubba stomped me a few times, then brought in D-Von. Apparently, the decision had been made.

D-Von went to the top rope as Bubba slammed me down. Bubba yelled to D-Von, who returned the favor. I simply watched from between my legs as D-Von came flying off the top rope. *Please don't hit it for real please please please...*

Whew. He didn't, but I sure acted like he did. With that, I rolled out of the ring and regained my senses as Bubba and D-Von prepared the crowd for some tables. Fortunately, D-Von came out to where I was. I clubbed him in the back with my forearm, then tossed him into the railing. I scaled the apron and looked down at him, then dove. I hit him with an elbow to the face as I landed on my feet. Satisfied, I returned D-Von to the ring and tagged Conway back in.

I placed D-Von on the turnbuckle and ducked down. Conway climbed up top as I

got him on my shoulders. I counted to three, then leaned backward. All three of us crashed to the mat, with D-Von having been tossed halfway across the ring. I rolled out as Rob covered for two before Bubba Ray broke it up.

I darted back in and began to pound on Bubba as all four of us went at it. In the chaos, the Dudleys whipped us to each other. I held my arm out as he went by and we do-si-doed in the middle of the ring before I sent Rob into Bubba. He hit a monkey flip on Bubba from the corner, then climbed the top rope. I tripped D-Von as he went by, then waited for one of them to get up. Rob dove off as I aimed at the knee, and we connected with the Hi-Lo Dropkick on Bubba. Conway covered, but somehow only got two before Bubba got his shoulder up.

D-Von tried to attack from behind, but we got into a slugfest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Bubba had tossed Conway over the top rope. The ref came over to us and gave the go home signal. I kicked D-Von and tried to whip him into the ropes, but he reversed. As I returned, Bubba Ray got into position. *Elevator up, elevator down.* D-Von covered, and it was Evolution vs. the Dudleys at Armageddon.

The Dudley Boyz celebrated as I lay prone on the mat for a full 20 seconds. Conway returned to the ring to pick me up, by which time the Dudleys were headed out of the ring. We stopped them before they left. Their music stopped. The moment was tense in the arena. However, we simply shook their hands and left through the crowd.

Rob and I had been in the biggest match of our career. We lost, sure, but we lost fighting. I'm sure the crowd had more respect for us. They might have even applauded us had they not been too busy seeing Orton and Batista beat up the Dudleyz back in the ring. No matter -- the writers knew we could cut it.

09:44 PM

"So, Shawn, is that the full card?"

"Yeah, it is... doesn't have results or anything on it, but it's basically who's who. Oh, they say you two can have a match at Heat before Armageddon if you talk to Bischoff tomorrow. Maybe you and your tag partners, you know, guys?"

"Wow. Think of it, Lindsay... we can be opponents!"

"All the same... I think I'd rather not."

"Why? Isn't this what you want?"

"I couldn't do it. I just... I don't feel right. And I don't think you would either."

"I gave you a Stunner a few weeks ago, didn't I?"

"That's different. That was a quick thing. A whole match? I thought about this while you were in the Carolinas. Andy, a whole match would be difficult for me to get through emotionally. I... I don't even want to pretend to hurt you, you know? I'm sorry if that makes me unprofessional, but the fact is... you're too special to me."

"Thanks... well, I guess that's that. We'll be watching back at the hotel."

"Not quite," Shawn said. "You two will be in the locker room with the rest of the boys. Meanwhile, Gerwitz says he wants New Blood on the show somehow, so... I suggest you think about that."

"Sure, Shawn," I said as I scanned over the card. "Hey, Shawn... how'd this mixed

tag match get here? The rest makes perfect sense, but that?"

"Oh, that's right, you were planning your match. Well, Ivory's the new Women's Champion. They got it off of Molly and onto her. Molly's going to be doing the Chyna thing now. Anyway, she lost the title because Big Show chokeslammed her. Hurricane, of course, saved his tag team partner, and there you go. Simple stuff, really."

"Yeah, that's true. But... I don't know. It's like the whole thing seems rushed."

"No more rushed than anything else that night."

"I guess... hey, Shawn, are you gonna put your nephew over?"

"If they want me to... but I don't think the guy's ready yet. I hear they have other plans for him."

"Like what?"

"I'd better not give it away. You'll see at Armageddon -- that's all I can tell you."

Thursday, December 11, 2003, 07:35 PM
Orlando, FL

"Holy crap... Mave, get over here!"

"What is it, Rob?" I bolted from my bed where I had been reclining to view SmackDown! and headed to the computer. Rob was staring at a news announcement from WWEMattitude.com, where Matt Hardy posted a series of thoughts. Rob pointed me to the top of the page and let me read it.

"I can't believe it," he said as I sat down.

Greetings, MFers!

Today I want to discuss something very serious: betrayal. As you know, the Book of Mattitude preaches of loyalty. Part of this loyalty is to those who you know and love the most. Well, this week, Matt Hardy (Version 1) suffered a serious loss of loyalty from the person he expected it to belong to the most.

Two people I knew for a long time have stabbed me in the back. They did this without hesitation and at a time when I was most in need. While I was originally willing to set aside problems and continue with a normal life, extenuating circumstances have made this impossible. I do not wish to divulge more, although it would serve them right to be viewed as the vermin they are.

Those of you who viewed SmackDown! last week know of at least one person whom I speak of. The other should be obvious. Neither of these people are a part of the ways of Mattitude any more. I have washed my hands of them completely.

I know some people think I have overreacted, but I feel I am in the right in my actions. They committed the act of treason when they broke my loyalty, my trust, and most

importantly, my innermost emotion. For this, they should be seen as worthless. I am glad I am on SmackDown! right now, so that I do not have to see them every day.

The lesson, MFers, is thus: be careful who you trust and who you befriend. You never know when the people you are closest to will do something inexplicably despicable. Be on guard, and trust only yourself. It is the best way to avoid being hurt.

Thank you for listening,

Matt Hardy V-1

"Holy crap... Rob, you remember last week's show?"

"Yeah... he was doing all those poses and... so one of them's Hurricane. But who's the other one?"

"I'm not sure." *Or, more to the point, I can't tell.* "Wait... what do you suppose he meant by innermost emotion?"

"Sounds like he was trying to avoid saying something, doesn't it?"

"Yeah... like love, maybe?"

"Maybe... wait, you're not saying that Lita and Hurricane... whoa, that would be weird. I wonder how that would've come about?"

Don't break character, Andy. "How what would've?"

"Think about it, Mave. What's the biggest betrayal a person's girlfriend can make?"

"To cheat on him?"

"Yeah! And we already know Hurricane is in Matt's doghouse, so..."

"Wow. You think they had an affair?"

"Would it shock you? Look at how the women around here act! Look at Trish -- she's basically coming on to anyone on RAW with a p..."

"Yeah, yeah, Rob... but... after what Darren did... you think maybe we should assume otherwise?"

"I guess... I just don't know. Maybe Matt was being paranoid."

"Maybe... still, it'll be interesting to see tonight's show. He's facing the Undertaker."

"Uh oh... that's not good."

"So you've heard of his rep too, huh?"

"Heard of it? Everyone knows about it. It's one of the stories in OVW. You go to SmackDown!, you gotta impress the Taker. He's the judge of whether you have it. It's why Nick's contract wasn't renewed -- he didn't have it."

"You're kidding, right? I saw some great matches with him."

"Maybe... but he got too much too soon. He'll be fine on the indies. He's demanding top dollar anyway."

"Yeah -- I saw Wildside couldn't afford to bring him back."

"Exactly. Anyway, enough talk. Let's go watch SmackDown!."

"I'm with you, Rob."

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Dec. 11 / 03, taped Dec. 09.

- From San Diego, CA

- Your hosts are **MC Doofus** and the **Tazzman**.

- Opening match, Tornado tag rules: **Paul London and Los Maximos** v. **Rey Misterio, Zach Gowen, and Rob Van Dam**. Let the party begin! Huge brawl to start, and the heels clear out. RVD and Rey chuck Zach onto the heels, then each follow on their own. Back in as Rey and RVD give London a Hart Attack for two. **Jose** lands a crossbody on RVD, but Rey breaks it up. Zach hits a missile dropkick on London, but **Joel** is right there to get a somersault senton on Zach. RVD starts kicking Jose into oblivion, but London gets a German suplex on RVD for two. Zach gets tossed by his leg into the turnbuckle, where Los Maximos hit Poetry in Motion. Rey gives London the 6-1-9, but the West Coast Hop is thwarted by Joel spearing Rey in mid-air. RVD gets Rolling Thunder instead for two. Zach hops onto RVD's back for his own Poetry in Motion onto Jose. London and Joel do a double superkick, and the heels clear the ring, then hit stereo triple topes. Have I mentioned how fast-paced this is? Rey climbs to the top but London slams him off, so Zach drops London throat-first on the top rope. London staggers into a crucifix from Rey for two. The Jose monkey flips RVD into a powerbomb from Joel for two. Zach throws himself at London for two. RVD hits a spinning kick on Jose, then a stepover enzuigiri on Joel. He tries the same on London, but London ducks and sweeps out RVD, followed up with a standing moonsault for two. Zach gets a leg lariat on Jose, which sends him into an armdrag takedown from Rey. Corkscrew moonsault from Zach onto London gets two. RVD follows with the split-legged variety for two. **Cole** and **Tazz** are absolutely out of their league here. Joel gets a rana off the top rope on Zach for two. RVD goes for a springboard bodyblock, but London ducks it. However, in ducking, he sets himself up for a Fame-asser off the top from Rey. Then, just to complete the insanity, RVD hits the Five Star on London for two as Jose saves. Ye gods. Zach with the Sharpshooter on London, but Jose and Joel deliver a front-and-back dropkick to knock him down. Yeah, none of that wrestling stuff in THIS match. London rolls to the outside, so Rey gets a somersault tope con hilo to knock both of them out. Gowen is sent packing by the Maximos, who then debut the Spanish Fly on RVD (called "What the hell" by Tazz -- yeesh). Gowen saves at two. London finishes RVD with the London Bridge at 14:22. The Maximos and Gowen are total spot machines and nothing much else, but the three wrestlers played along and produced a nice hot opener. *** Cole correctly calls the Spanish Fly on the replay in between gasps of breath.

- Backstage, **Undertaker** does some shadow boxing, then gets nailed by both members of **Mattitude**. **Hardy** tells **Shannon** to do right in the next match. Speaking of Matt, he posted a rambling diatribe on WWEMattitude.com basically accusing **Lita** and **Hurricane** of betraying his trust somehow. Combine this with the fake pregnancy thing Lita's doing, and I wonder why the WWE would try to work the internet over something

99% of their fans aren't aware of. And don't tell me it might be true -- it was on TV, and Vince McMahon wouldn't put something on TV unless it were part of the show. Duh.

- **Team Japan and Paul Heyman v. World's Greatest Tag Team and Shannon Moore.** **Ultimo** and **Shelton** start, to the shock of no one. Ultimo goes nuts with kicks, and **Tajiri** adds a handspring elbow for two. **Haas** in, and Ultimo gets a headstand headscissors for two. **Heyman** tags in and immediately gets pummeled by WGTT. Wait, HE'S face in peril? Shelton gets the leapfrog choke, but refuses to cover. **Moore** in, and a headscissors gets two, broken up by Tajiri with a stiff kick to the head. Both men up, and Moore and Haas get a double DDT. Benjamin tries for the 450 but misses. Ultimo tosses Shelton from the ring, then dives onto all three heels to buy time for Heyman to make the hot tag to Tajiri. Tarantula for Haas, GREEN MIST OF DOOM for Shelton, and Buzzsaw Kick for Moore. Ultimo runs in and a huge brawl breaks out, and in the chaos, Moore grabs Heyman and gives him the Twist of Fate for the pin at 7:44. The formula was a little screwy, but it helps transition the heat from WGTT to **Mattitude**, so there ya go. **1/4 Moore acts like he's won at the Olympics, which is rather funny.

- **Undertaker v. Matt Hardy.** Matt Fact: Matt doesn't hang out with prostitutes. Second Matt Fact: Matt is toast in this match. Okay, I added that one. Taker punches away to start, as Matt bounces like a maniac. Lariat by Taker follows, and Matt bails, so Taker tosses him into the steps. Back in, Taker gets a big boot and chokeslam. Matt slides out of the Last Ride, but Taker just clubs him down. OLD SCHOOL ROPEWALK OF DOOM follows. Matt tries to fight out, but Taker no-sells and continues pounding him. Taker gets a choke lift and tosses Matt from the ring to the railing. This is a mugging. Back in, Taker gets a second chokeslam and the Last Ride to finish at 4:41. What the hell? *3/4 No, seriously, what happened THERE? Is Matt seriously a threat to anyone's spot in the main event? Why the hell have Undertaker squash ANOTHER rising star? And don't tell me about Cena: he got over DESPITE the Undertaker, not because of him. Something around here stinks, and it smells of creative control and locker room politics. I can't believe this garbage. Let's just move on before I throw my laptop at the TV screen.

- US Title match: **Billy Gunn v. Billy Kidman.** Gunn attacks to start as **Nidia** and **Torrie** yell at each other in lieu of doing something important. Kidman comes back with elbows and a rana, but Gunn dodges a dropkick. Military press slam gets two. One and Only gets two. Gunn stomps away (great moveset, Monty) and hits a slam for two. Jackhammer gets two, and we HIT THE CHINLOCK. Kidman elbows out and takes over with a series of armdrags, causing Gunn to leave. Kidman goes for a tope suicida, but Gunn blows catching him and Kidman SPLATS on the padding below. Brilliant. Back in, Gunn gets two. Gunn tries for a second One and Only, but Kidman beals him over and dropkicks the back of his head for two. Gunn up, and a hiptoss and tilt-a-whirl slam get two. Gunn goes back to the chinlock, but Kidman slips out and starts dropkicking into a DDT for two. Kid Krusher is shoved off, and Gunn gets a powerslam for two. Gunn then makes the cardinal mistake of any Kidman opponent: he goes for a powerbomb. Kidman gets two. Nidia climbs onto the apron as Gunn gets the belt, but Kidman superkicks the belt into his face. Nidia dives in -- and lands on Gunn as Kidman dodges. Shooting Star Press finishes it off for Kidman at 8:03. Way too much Billy Gunn, but thankfully no title

change. **1/4 Kidman and Torrie kiss to celebrate.

- And now, from the Home Office in Wahoo, Nebraska, it's YOUR Armageddon report!

* Wheel of Death, World Title: **Kane v. Chris Benoit**

* Intercontinental Title: **Booker T v. Christian**

* World Tag Team Title Tournament Final(s): **Evolution v. Dudley Boyz**

* **Goldust v. Triple H**

* **Michael Shane v. Shawn Michaels**

* **Hurricane and Molly Holly v. Big Show and Ivory**

* **3 Live Kru v. La Resistance**

- Definitely going to be an interesting show as far as the direction of RAW is concerned. I can't see which match will get the time, though: maybe Michaels/Shane, but even that is a rookie against a legend. The main event will depend almost entirely on which match the wheel lands on, of course.

- **Kurt Angle and John Cena v. Brock Lesnar and Rhyno.** You notice that the announcers have been pointing out the You Suck chants more and more? Just thinking out loud again. Cena and Lesnar start, and Cena gets a quick German suplex and fallaway slam. Rhyno delivers a clothesline to take Cena down, so Angle tackles him and all four are at it. Lesnar delivers a lariat to Cena to make him face-in-peril, though. Rhyno with a powerslam for two. Gorilla press (delivered ten times better than **Billy Gunn** did) gets two. Brock in, and he hits the bearhug and spinebuster for two. Overhead suplex gets two. Let the parade of neck injuries continue, eh? Cena ducks a clothesline and delivers a DDT out of desperation, hot tag Angle. Angle goes ballistic with overhead suplexes on both men, then gets a tornado DDT on Brock for two. Rhyno hits the GORE GORE GORE on Angle, but Cena clocks Brock with the chain to counter as the ref escorts Rhyno out. Angle slowly gets up and rolls over for two. F5 is slipped out of, and Angle gets a clip and Angle Lock for the tapout at 7:54. Felt rushed, you know? **1/2 Cena seems to be losing his motivation here, perhaps because he's in a tough situation. Clearly, the hot feud is **Angle/Eddie**, and Rhyno, although a good opponent, would just clutter things. A move to RAW, though helpful, would probably make things more difficult with Spike TV's censors than it's worth. Let's hope they find something for him to do.

- An awesome video package for the main event tonight points out the big difference between the two: 12 to 0, the number of World title reigns. **Cole** calls it **Guerrero's** biggest match of his career, and it's hard to argue with that.

- Main event: **Eddie Guerrero v. Hulk Hogan.** Both men get HUGE pops on entering, and the crowd is practically divided. **Kurt Angle** joins our heroes on commentary, as Hogan wins the LOCKUP OF DOOM and poses. Eddie pops out with dropkicks and a DDT, then he poses for the crowd. The marks are clearly in Hogan's corner, but Eddie's got his fans and they're doing everything to drown out Hogan's. Angle says he'd rather face Hogan because Eddie "is a flash in the pan who's made it due to his heritage and not his talent." Is **Vince** telling him to say that? Eddie gains the edge by going low on a

lockup, but Hogan won't go down from punches. Eddie gets sent into the corner, and the ten punches and bite follow. Eddie bails to the outside, so Hogan follows and clubs him down. Eddie sends Hogan into the steps, then jaws with Angle. Back in, Eddie gets the slingshot senton for two. Eddie dropkicks Hogan's knee, then grabs him in a sleeperhold. Hogan backs him into the turnbuckle as the crowd is chanting both "Hogan" and "Eddie", making it sound like "Hoagie". I'm hungry for an Eddie win, myself. Hogan gets the backrakes, but Eddie reverses a whip into the ropes and scores an abdominal stretch. Hogan hiptosses Eddie out and follows with elbowedrops for two. Hogan goes to the headlock, but Eddie gets a back suplex for two. Eddie goes up top and dives off with a headscissors (it was supposed to be a rana, but Hogan rolled with it instead). Eddie baseball slides Hogan's gut, sending him outside, where Eddie dives off with a plancha. Hogan's got his selling boots, I'll give him that. Back in, Eddie gets a Flair pin for two. Eddie's fans are just RABID here in trying to get more noise. Hogan punches Eddie down and hits a chinlock as we take a break. We come back with Eddie elbowing out and going low as the announcers find a way to tell us that, yes, the chinlock basically lasted that long. Okay then. Eddie gets a drop toehold and a kneebar, but Hogan makes the ropes. Eddie drags Hogan back and kicks at his leg a few times before legdropping the leg. Hogan can barely stand as Eddie delivers a Shining Wizard for two. Figure-four is blocked once, but not twice. Hogan manages to reverse it as they dive to the ropes. The number of ways they're disguising Hogan's immobility is staggering here. Eddie goes up top, looking for the frog splash, but Hogan limps over and slams him off as the fanbase is getting into a chant war. Angle acknowledges the crowd will probably support his opponent because "they're jealous of a winner". Huh. Hogan tries for a slam, but the knee gives out and Eddie falls on top for two. I was wondering when they'd do that spot. Eddie finally hits the frog splash... for two, of course. Hulk up, but Hogan's leg gives out during the big boot. Eddie tries for a figure-four, but gets kicked off and wipes out the ref. Angle runs in and gives Hogan the Angle Slam, but Eddie delivers a brainbuster to him to get him to leave. Angle drops the belt on the way out, though. Eddie gets the belt and waits for Hogan to get up, but Hogan sees it and boots the belt into Eddie's face, barely able to stand. Legdrop misses, and Eddie goes for a cradle as the referee crawls over for... two. I thought that would be it. Eddie punches the ref out, and Angle returns to give Eddie the rolling Germans. Could they be doing a three-way? Hogan sees Angle and tosses him out, then limps over to Eddie and powerbombs him as a second ref joins us and clears out the belt. Eddie goes low again, then gets two rolling vertical suplexes (very slowly), but Hogan blocks the third one and delivers a chokeslam and legdrop for the pin at 21:44. Match was 10 minutes of action stretched to 22, including the run-ins, but I think they just wanted to see how the crowd went. Eddie's no miracle worker, though, and even though Hogan played ball, the two didn't click. Well, let's see if Angle can do better at the Rumble. 3/4*

The Bottom Line:

Certainly not a BAD show by any means, but not the blowaway show you'd expect opposite a PPV. The opener was totally spotty and will likely mean nothing in the long run, and pairing people with their opposites (Hogan with Eddie, Gunn with Kidman) won't do anyone any good any time soon. Putting off Eddie's title shot when the crowd is

DEMANDING it makes me wonder if McMahon really doesn't have faith here.

Oh well, I know I do.

Friday, December 12, 2003, 09:33 AM
AmyDumas.net

Hello.

You've seen Matt Hardy's diatribe about trust and betrayal, and you probably are wondering what it's about. I suppose some of you believe that I have done something to hurt him, or that our relationship is on the rocks. I wish to discuss this as well as other comments that have been made.

The truth is that, yes, Matt and I are no more. The reason why is one I'm going to have to ask all of you to evaluate on your own. You may side with him or with me, but at this time, I want you to believe in our eventual reconciliation, no matter who you think is at fault.

Back in late September, after returning from Jeff's funeral, Gregory Helms (Hurricane) and I were sharing a hotel room for cost purposes. I had no intention of doing anything while we were together, but I gave him a goodnight kiss to let him know we were in this together as friends. I wish it had ended there, and I had every intention of it ending there.

The next morning, Hurricane was finally having it set in that Jeff was dead. I wanted to comfort him, and I had every intention of letting him know he could count on me for support as I counted on him. Things were said, and things were done that I deeply regret. I apologized profusely to Matt, as did he. I thought all was forgiven.

Last week, though, I learned that what I thought was a one-time mistake had long-lasting and permanent consequences. I found out I was nine weeks pregnant, and because I had never given myself to Matt, there was little doubt who the father was. I went to confront Matt and let him know about this, and when I did, he exploded in anger. He accused me of betraying him and trying to get him to bail me out. It got so bad that Mark (Undertaker) had to try to force Matt to apologize for his outburst, which he never did.

As soon as I could, I went back to Cameron and packed my belongings. I am now living in a guest room with the Flair family in Charlotte until such time as I can find housing of my own. Ric and his family have been so nice to me, particularly David, who has expressed willingness to do whatever is necessary to make my pregnancy easier. I just wish I could say the same for others.

I do not blame or hate Gregory -- he is as confused as I am about what to do. I know that abortion is something I cannot consider, but I also feel scared of facing single

motherhood. I wonder if my career is over now. I need time and prayers to get me through this next very difficult portion of my life.

Please, help me -- advice, prayers, anything would be appreciated. I'm facing this by myself, but it's another challenge I'm willing to take on. I knew this time would come eventually when I would be a mother -- it's just faster than I imagined. I'll need all the luck and help I can get.

Amy

Saturday, December 13, 2003, 12:15 PM
Orlando, FL

I slowly headed over to the ring area, where the PPV participants were practicing for tomorrow night's big event. I saw some construction workers putting together the Wheel of Death, which huge letters to indicate which spaces would be for what match. True to form, they even had a giant black "BANKRUPT" written in one of the 12 slots. *Well, if you advertise it, might as well have it, but I wonder what they plan on having done if it lands there?*

I walked around and listened in randomly to conversations. Goldust and Terri were planning their future on one set of stairs. Kevin Nash and Konnan were playing Parcheesi in between shouting semi-random instructions at the ring. Chris Benoit was preparing his leg, which had been injured on RAW in storyline terms, so that he could get used to the limited mobility. Meanwhile, Shawn and Shane were in the ring, practicing spots from their match and getting Shawn's five months of ring rust out of his system.

I heard a sigh and jerked my head over to the left. Hurricane was seated, in costume, holding his mask in his hands and staring at it. Something seemed to be on his mind, but I didn't know if it would be wise to approach him about it. However, my curiosity had been piqued, so I sat down and pretended to watch the ring.

As Hurricane sat there, Nora approached. She sat down next to Hurricane and tried to get his attention. I tuned out Shawn in the ring and paid attention to their conversation.

"Hey... you gonna be okay for tomorrow, Greg?"

"Sure... sure I am. We'll, uh, tear the house down."

"You're not very convincing."

"Oh, sorry, want me to try again?"

"No, no... Greg, what's wrong?"

"Nora, I... I'd rather not talk about it."

"C'mon, you can talk to me... Greg, you can't tell me anything worse than what I've been through."

"You sure you won't freak out? I mean, I'm shocked you're even looking at me."

"This is about Amy, isn't it?"

"You know?"

"She told everyone."

"Oh no... oh God, I'm ruined."

"Why?"

"Wh-- what do you mean why? Because I can't look her in the eye again? Because everyone knows I broke up a relationship? Because I did this right after she buried one of her friends? Hey, I'm sorry about your loss -- here, would a screw help?"

"Greg, come on. You don't understand."

"No, YOU don't -- I've ruined three lives by what I did. I ruined Matt's, I ruined Amy's, and I ruined her kid's life. No, make that four. Mine ain't too hot either."

"Hey, listen to me. You have the time to make things better. It's not over yet. She's been with us on the road all week and you haven't talked to her so far as I know. Why not?"

"Because I... I..."

"Are you scared?"

"Yeah."

"Of what?"

"Nora, if Darren wanted to apologize to you, don't you think he'd be scared?"

"Not Darren, no..."

"Well... how would you react?"

"I wouldn't let him get anywhere near me."

"Exactly."

"...I don't under... oh. Greg, you didn't hurt her. Did you? I mean, she let you... um, she... what's the word?"

"Consented?"

"Yeah, that's it. Did she consent?"

"I... well, she seemed to. I mean, she wasn't exactly resisting or anything... so I guess so."

"That's fine. I mean, I don't agree with what happened, but it wasn't the worst thing..."

"Nora, please, you're not helping me."

"I know... I... look, you two are such good friends. You had to be just to get into this mess, right? She's not going to want nothing to do with you. That should be obvious. Just talk to her. Just clear things with her."

"It's not that easy."

"I'm not expecting it not to be awkward, Greg, but you have to try. You have to. Not just for your sake, but for hers. The two of you got along so well. We were all there for you when Jeff died. I know I don't want you to... not over this."

"What would you know? You don't know what went on. You don't have any idea what it was like. You're too proud of the fact that you'd never let a... oh, God, I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from."

"No, let it out. I know I was protective, but... it doesn't matter now. I lost it and I can't get it back. It's not worth dwelling on."

"Nora, wait... what I mean is... you've never had a positive experience. You don't know what it feels like. You can't understand how... why are you smiling?"

"I think I see why you're so nervous."

"Why?"

"You're upset that you liked it."

"What do you... of course I... but that's..."

"Hold on, now. You and she did this, and it was a lot of fun at the time, but now you're all guilty about it because Matt's going crazy. Did it bother you before this? Did this feeling that you'd done something wrong bother you at first?"

"Yeah! Of course. But then he... well, you know, Matt said it was okay. I haven't done anything since. It's always been awkward. I couldn't comfort her or let myself near her, because I'd just remember what that night was like. It's driving me crazy. And now... now I have to be near her. I can't abandon her. But it's not right, it's not fair."

"Greg, what's worse -- the mistake you've made, or the mistake you're making?"

"Making? But I--"

"You're abandoning her by not talking to her. Give her a try. Just... go on. In a couple months she'll be off the road, and then after that she probably won't want anything to do with you. You gotta try. You have to accept responsibility. I did."

"You did? For what?"

"For being quiet. For letting Darren hurt me. I was at fault too."

"Nora, you were a victim!"

"No... well, a little. I mean... I thought I was totally at fault, but... this guy I know now... he's been so nice to me, and he's helped me along so much in returning to a normal life... but he's also been telling me that I made mistakes, that I could've fought him... I didn't do enough. I want to get in his good graces again."

"Why? He doesn't sound like the kind of guy who's good for you. Nora, you're better than he describes. Didn't he hurt you? Didn't he do this to you without your permission?"

"I... yeah, but I led him on..."

"The hell you did! Stop thinking you're a victim! Nora, girl, you gotta get to a support group for this sort of thing. Don't you get it? You're not the one at fault here. If you were the bad person you think you are, would there have been as many people cheering when Darren got carted off as there were?"

"Vince... Vince hated me for it."

"Look, forget about Vince. He's insane. We all know that. We stay here because the pay's good and we live for the recognition. But that's not important. His opinion doesn't matter. My opinion doesn't matter. What matters is what you think of yourself. You have to face your problem. You have to realize it's okay. You have to move on... from... this....."

"Greg?"

"I... just realized. There's something I have to do, isn't there?"

"Tell you what, Greg... you go talk to Amy, and I'll go talk to the doctor around here. I need to visit him again anyway."

"You haven't been? Why not?"

"Because... well, I went once, but I felt I was being forced to go. Like Gail dragged me to it. She just wanted what was best for me. I'm sure the doctor will too."

"Yeah, I hope so. And look -- it's just my opinion, but you gotta stay away from that guy who's telling you it's your fault. He's got his own issues, and he doesn't need to be putting them on you."

"But... I don't know... he really has helped me a whole lot. I want to be..."

"Nora, listen. This guy... what's his name?"

"Phil."

"Okay... Phil sounds like a nice guy, but... I don't think he understands what you really need. He's got some hangup. Rape isn't deserved. You didn't bring it on. He took advantage of you, and that's all there is to it. If Phil is trying to tell you otherwise, he has the problem."

"Maybe... maybe he does. But he seems to have his life in order. And... I feel so comfortable talking to him, even though he tells me what I do wrong. It's like there's something there that says, I believe in you, and I can make you a better person."

"Nora, trust me -- you don't need to be a better person. You're better than most of the people here. You went through a hell of a lot. You're still smiling. I don't see any grudges or any... anything in your mind. I mean, I'll be honest -- you just talked me into wanting to straighten my life out. That's a big thing."

"Thanks, but... I still got a long way to go. Maybe the doctor will help me."

"Sure... you go to him. I got something to do."

"Okay."

They went their separate ways as Shawn and Shane were going over the intricacies of the finish. *Wow... they made each other better. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder if they were Angels in disguise. I guess God rubs off on people.*

07:44 PM

As Rob and I returned from dinner, we saw the Divas headed out for a late-night swim. Rob elbowed me and pointed to the swimming pool, and the two of us crept over to get a closer look. *Hey, any time you can sneak a peek at women in bikinis is a good time for a guy, right?*

As we viewed the ladies swimming around and splashing each other, we heard a voice behind us. "You know, where I come from, the ladies -- they would not be wearing those bikinis." We turned around to see La Resistance behind us. "Bonjour, gentilhommes," Rene said with a grin. "You enjoying yourselves?"

Rob seemed embarrassed. "Well, uh, you know... I guess we were. I mean, there's nothing wrong with it, right?"

"Well, personally, it isn't my style, but I guess to each his own, n'est-ce pas?" Sylvan grinner and winked. "Ah, well. I guess we should not keep you from your guard post. Wouldn't want any of our femmes fatale to be abducted from under your watchful eye, non?"

"Sylvan, it's not that big a deal. We just noticed they were over here and thought we'd see what was going on. I mean, usually the girls are... well, they're not this big bunch, right?"

Before our conversation could get any more awkward, we heard a voice from the pool. "Hey, boys... come on in! The water's fine!"

We all turned our heads back to the pool. Trish was leaning against the near end. She winked at us and motioned with her head for us to come on in. She then backflipped in the water so that her chest elevated over the side -- and clearly, intentionally, into our view.

We all looked at each other. "Okay, so how long you think it'll take to get our suits and get in."

"M. Conway, the longer we talk, the longer it takes..."

And like that, we all raced to the lobby and elevators, determined to be the first ones to join the party.

Saturday, December 13, 2003, 08:00 PM
Orlando, FL

"Incoming!"

I got a running start and threw myself into the pool where the Divas were waiting. The water was about 4 feet deep where I was, so I didn't dive. As some of the girls squealed and tried to get out of the splash zone -- *Um, it's only water* -- Rene threw himself off the edge with a crossbody onto me. I noticed him and caught him just in time, the water providing a safety padding that allowed me to fall back more easily. At this point, the inevitable happened, as Sylvan dove in onto us, then as we got up, Rob launched himself off the edge and onto our pile of humanity. The girls cheered louder and louder with each one, including a few misplaced "ECW" chants.

I stood up and swam over to where they were congregated. Stacy and Nora were lying on rafts in the middle of the deep end of the pool. They weren't tanning -- not at 8:00 in an indoor pool -- but they were clearly missing the point of being in a pool. I looked at Trish, then back at the rafts. I then put my finger to my mouth and made quick shoving motions. She smiled and made the zipped lip motion.

I ducked under the water and swam towards the rafts. Stacy's was on the left, and Nora's on the right. I thought carefully about which one to get first. *While Nora's such a sweet girl and should be spared, she's also the one more likely to take it in stride. Decisions...* Fortunately, Stacy's hand lazily drifted down into the water to steer. *Bingo!* I swam toward the hand as it paddled slowly. I crept under the raft, still holding my breath against all odds. In one swift motion, I grabbed the hand and pulled down.

I swam quickly to the surface and poked my head out from underneath the now-abandoned raft. Nora was staring at me, her face halfway between surprise and shock. Soon, Stacy bobbed up to the surface, spitting a mouthful of water in my face. "You jerk! Why didn't you--!"

"Hey, relax. It was harmless, wasn't it?"

"Harmless, nothing! My hair's a mess! I spent hours on it!" She began running her hands through her hair to get it back in place, then seemed to notice something. She stared at her hands. "My ring. My ring! It's gone!"

"Wh-what?"

"My engagement ring! The one Andrew gave me! It's missing! I had it on my hand! It's... it's gone."

Trish swam over and took Stacy's hand. "Stacy, y--"

"I'm telling you it's not there! I had it on my hand, and now it's not there! You lost it!" She turned to me, seemingly in a rage. "You lost my ring! Go get it!"

"But... but I..."

"NOW!"

I took a deep breath and dove under the surface. I swam all the way down to the bottom of the pool and began to look. Nothing stood out as a diamond gleam or a golden tinge. I went back up to the surface, changed breath, and dove again. *That was strange. I thought I heard laughter.*

As I dove again, I saw Trish looking as well. Or at least, she seemed to be looking. She grabbed my hand and pointed for me to follow her. We swam out to the shallower end where we could stand up. I caught my breath as I broke through the water. "What... what is it?"

The laughter was more pronounced, but from the opposite side of the pool, where we had just come from. I turned over in that direction to see Stacy back on her raft, laughing at me. I turned back to Trish, who shrugged. "She was never wearing her ring," she said. "I guess you have to be more observant before you go waste your breath."

Grrrrrrrr...

She laughed. "Oh, come on, it's not that bad, is it? You got to practice your diving."

"I'd have rather practiced dunking."

"Well, there is someone else."

"Nah... the element of surprise is gone."

"Don't count on it," she said. As I watched, Nora lay back on her raft, seemingly at rest. Suddenly, there was a bit of a rustle around her. Stacy sat up and darted her head around, seemingly looking for a return attack. She soon lay back down, but Nora sat up in a hurry, clinging to the sides of her raft. Soon she was capsized, as La Resistance made a surprise appearance from underneath. They saluted each other, then sank back down to swim back over.

Trish and I laughed and swam over to join the party, only to stop short when Nora popped back up. Sylvan swam to the surface soon after, confused and looking around. Rene followed, barely able to contain his laughter. Nora got back onto her raft and placed something in her lap. I was going to get a closer look when Sylvan's angry French shouting made it perfectly clear. She may have been dunked, but she got a souvenir in the process.

"Que l'enfer?" I said, turning to Trish. She looked at me, trying to translate my broken French. "What the hell?" That got her to comprehend.

"Ah, she's just having fun... she'll give them back. Besides, she probably doesn't want to see Sylvan's package any more than you do."

I shuddered. "Yeah, no kidding."

11:34 PM

Everyone else had left. I was getting ready to follow Rob when I felt someone grab my arm. Trish winked and shook her head. "No, no... could you stay a little? Please?"

I shrugged. Rob looked over his shoulder and grinned a wide grin. He headed off to the showers as I returned to the pool area. "So..." I said to Trish, trying to make small

talk, "something wrong? You wanna talk?"

"Talk, nothing," she smiled. "I saw the way you were looking at me out there. I know what you'd like."

"Huh? What... are... you..."

She placed her finger on my lips and took my hand. She led me along the edge of the pool, winking back at me as she did so. I was mesmerized by her, uncertain where I was going. She stopped and turned around, smiling at me. She kissed me, seemingly trying to get a reaction out of me. *Stay calm, stay in control. You've been here before.*

As she pulled away from me, I began to regain my senses. "Trish, you're... you're beautiful, but... what do you want?"

"Relax, kid. This is a gift. Don't you see -- since I arrived here, I've been seen by a lot of people as THE desirable woman. Well -- if I'm considered the top dog, I might as well have fun with it, you know? Like I said, you were looking at us in the pool, and... well, I think I know why."

"Because I'm a guy, and it's what guys do."

She laughed. "You're so conservative. You gotta lighten up a little. There's nothing wrong with having fun on a Saturday night." I looked over her shoulder to see the hot tub behind her. She saw me look behind her. "Ooh, interested?"

"Well, I... uh..."

"Relax, okay? I've seen guys bring random women back to their hotel rooms all the time. I don't go for that, but... hey, we're on the road together all the time..."

"Trish, this isn't right. I shouldn't. I mean, I..." I couldn't even finish the sentence. I was running out of ideas and at a crossroads as to what to do. I remembered how much trouble I got John in from just humoring someone. I didn't know what Lindsay would think, but I remembered what Brian and Terri did while we were under their control. So many issues clouded my head.

"Maven, honey... oh, I get it. You think I'm asking to sleep with you."

"Well... yeah... I mean, aren't you?"

She laughed. "Is that what they've been telling you? I know what people think of me, but it's not true. It's a joke. I just... well, let's say you guys aren't the only ones who get curious."

"Pardon me?"

"I see ten thousand guys out there every week, and they all think the same fantasy when I walk out from behind the curtain. Well, you should consider yourself lucky. You'll get to experience what most people only dream about."

My mind nearly froze. "Are you saying you..."

She silenced me again. "Well... there is a price you have to pay."

"P-p-price?"

"Exactly. I want things to be equal between us. You understand? Now, since it appears I'm more covered than you are, let me show you I'm serious."

She turned around and moved her hands behind her back. She reached the string on her swim top and pulled it so that it untied. I waited in anticipation, but also in confusion. This had gone far beyond what I was used to -- it was no longer about just having fun. I had to know if I could trust myself. I had to stall for time. "Wait!"

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"It's just... after Nora... I..."

"Don't you trust me?"

"You? Yeah. It's me I'm worried about."

"Don't worry," she said, turning around with her top still covering herself. She kissed me a second time. "I can fend for myself. I'm a big girl." She then placed her hands over her chest, ready to pull her top off. "Now -- can you trust me?"

I thought for a few seconds. I tried to remember if I'd ever been in this situation before and been able to control myself. Not since I died -- but before? *Well, there was once...* I leaned forward and kissed her again, longer than before. I slowly moved my hand up her side as she guided it to her top.

12:21 AM

After close to an hour of sitting together in the hot tub and making out, I found myself wanting to discuss something specific with her -- something about what made her behavior seem all the more difficult to comprehend. "Trish... given all the stuff with how women are exploited on TV and how Nora was treated... and now with Amy the way she is... aren't you worried about any of that happening to you?"

She giggled. "It's not that hard to protect yourself. You gotta realize, I know how to be safe. If you were to try to jump me, I could easily fight you off. Heck, there's security cameras all over the place -- you'd have to be insane to try anything."

"Yeah, but... I mean... how do you keep anyone from hurting you?"

"It's easier than you think. You have to know the person first. You think I do this for just anyone? Maven, I trust you -- that's why I'm here. All anyone has to do is learn about the person, keep a level head, and bingo -- fun little moments of intimacy. Actually, that reminds me..."

"Of what?"

"The most fun I had -- I never knew I'd enjoy it this much -- was actually with Andrew. Test, I mean. You see, it was the day he got engaged, and..."

As she went on to describe all the things she did that night, I sat there and played along, pretending I didn't already know about it and wasn't already there.

Sunday, October 14, 2003, 06:45 PM

Orlando, FL

The Tough Enough theme music began. There wasn't much time left on Heat, and Jim Ross was still alone at the announcers' position. Rob and I headed out for the Heat match, slapping the hands of fans along the way. We entered the ring and stretched a little before awaiting our opponents.

We didn't have to wait long. The sirens blared as Steven Richards led his charges, Sean Morley and Mark Henry, out to face us. Rob seemed upset about the noise and wanted it turned off as soon as possible. *That can be arranged.* I waited until Steven had his back turned, giving his charges last-minute instructions, then springboarded onto the

top rope. I dove off and took out all three RTC members at once. Rob followed outside as the bell rang, and the fight was on.

I rolled Morley into the ring and climbed to the top rope. My missile dropkick missed as Sean stepped aside. Sean picked me up and gave me a back suplex, then raised his hand as the crowd booted. Mark Henry tagged in and tossed me into the corner. He followed with an avalanche, then picked me up and tossed me like a javelin across the ring. I pulled myself up and saw him coming out of the corner of my eye. I sidestepped and tried to reach Rob for the tag, but Mark stopped me and threw me into the RTC corner.

Sean tagged back in and started whipping me back and forth in the ropes, driving his knee into my gut as he did so. As I staggered out after the third one, he hit a Russian legsweep on me and covered for two. I was soon placed on the top turnbuckle as Morley followed. He lifted me overhead, but in midair I shifted my weight slightly. I landed on top of him and covered for two before Morley kicked out with authority. Henry charged in as Morley tossed me to him. Henry threw me with a belly-to-belly suplex, then went for the big splash. I rolled away, but Morley was still in the ring. I chop blocked him on the way to the corner and tagged in Rob.

Rob started to kick and punch away at both members of the opposition, slamming Morley and dropkicking Henry. Henry rolled to the outside as Morley tried to fight back. I re-entered the ring and cut him off. Rob and I set Morley on the top turnbuckle. Rob climbed up, and I slid underneath him, then leaned back. We executed the stack belly-to-belly to perfection, and Rob covered for a close two.

Henry returned and gave Rob a spinebuster, covering for two before I saved. Morley charged in, but his clothesline hit Henry, knocking him out of the ring. I climbed to the top as Rob gave Morley a DDT. I was ready to deliver a moonsault as Steven Richards climbed up and knocked me off the top rope. Fortunately, I landed on my feet. However, after arguing with Richards, I turned around into a powerbomb from Morley. Three seconds later, we lost again.

As the sirens played and the RTC celebrated as only they could, Rob returned to the ring to check if I was okay. After a few minutes, the referee told us we were in commercial. I slowly got to my feet and, with Rob's help, went to the back. Our night was over, but the WWE's was just beginning.

- The SmarK Rant for Armageddon.

- Live from Orlando, FL.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross...** and **Diamond Dallas Page**, making his WWE return. I guess the motivational speaker circuit wasn't working as well as he had hoped.

- Earlier tonight, the **Right to Censor** won over the **New Blood**, as apparently Vince's bad idea is better than Turner's bad idea. I gave it *3/4, for you completists out there.

- The **WHEEL! OF! DEATH!** is present on the stage. **SPIN THE WHEEL, MAKE THE**

DEAL, SPIN THE WHEEL, MAKE THE... oh, sorry, wrong show.

- Opening Match: **3 Live Kru** v. **La Resistance**. **Konnan** joins us on commentary, making for perhaps the greatest possible trainwreck this side of **Dusty Rhodes**. **Grenier** and **Killings** start, and Ron gets a suplex and rana for two. Grenier gets backdropped out of a DDT, and **Road Dogg** comes in with the funky punches and kneedrop for two. **Dupree** scores with a back suplex and works the leg. SPINNING TOEHOLD OF DEATH, but Dogg makes the ropes and Konnan makes a **Terry Funk** joke. He and **DDP** are exchanging WCW inside jokes about a mile a minute. Grenier kicks the leg a few times and scores a MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER for two. Dupree with the Dancing Kneedrop for two. Dogg avoids a dropkick, but his leg gives out en route to Killings. La Res with La Crepe for two. Grenier misses a blind charge, hot tag Killings. Dropkicks for everyone! Kru Kutter gets two. **Stacy** climbs onto the apron and Grenier ignores her, leading to Konnan questioning why he would. Ain't **Vince McMahon** just the classiest? Dupree plants one on Stacy, and Dogg comes from behind with the Dogg Pound... for two. Grenier clips Dogg, and Dupree gets a figure-four for the tap-out at 8:45. Everyone did what they were good at, and the result was a fun opening match. **1/2 Konnan cleans house to finish, then everyone dances.

- **Eric Bischoff** flips a coin backstage and announces **Kane** will get the honors of spinning.

- **Shawn Michaels** v. **Michael Shane**. Now?? Okay then. Both men come out to the same music. Shane nails Shawn right off the bat and gets a monkey flip in. Shawn catches Shane's rana and tosses him into the corner, then pounds on him. It's so strange seeing Shawn Michaels as the BIGGER of the two men in a match. Shane goes low and chokes Shawn down. Shawn bails, so Shane follows and tosses Shawn into the STEEL steps. Back in, Shane gets two. Dropkick gets two. Shane gets a headscissors, then punts Shawn right in the back for two. Shane gets a weird bow-and-arrow type submission hold, but Shawn powers out. Never thought I'd describe Shawn being able to power out of anything. Shane stomps the back a few more times, then mule kicks Shawn for two. Shane tunes up the band, but Shawn ducks and legsweeps Shane. Shawn's flying forearm misses as Shane ducks it, so Shawn bails and Shane hits a tope. They're teetering DANGEROUSLY close to a double turn here. Shane sends Shawn into the post. Back in, Shane climbs up, but the Picture Perfect Elbow misses. Sweet Chin Music also misses, and Shane gets a German suplex for two. Shane tries a fisherman's suplex, but Shawn flips out of it, then scores a back elbow and kips up. Shane trips Shawn with a drop toehold, then HE kips up. Shane grabs a headlock, and they work a few near falls off of it, into a pinfall reversal sequence. The announcers are doing a spectacular job of putting over how well these two know each other. Both men up, and Shane goes low on Shawn, then hits a DDT for two. Springboard whatever misses, though. Both men get superkicks for the Double KO. Shawn up first, but a second superkick misses, and Shane rakes the eyes. He gets a crossbody, but Shawn rolls through it for the pin at 15:11. Shane beats up Shawn after the match, including the Picture Perfect Elbow (called that by **DDP**) and a mock celebration. I don't think it would've been believable for Shane to win the match, but Shawn made him look good and won by basically knowing his opponent better. ***

- World Tag Team Tournament Final(s): Evolution v. Dudley Boyz. To clarify, if the Dudz win the match, they'll do it again after a 30-second rest period. **Batista** and **D-Von** start, and D-Von gets a flapjack and headbutt. **Bubba** enters and hits a series of elbows, culminating in a roaring elbow for two. Double flapjack gets two. Batista bails, so D-Von follows and tosses him back in as Bubba drops a leg for two. Senton misses -- duh -- and **Orton** comes in. Play of the Day gets two. Flatliner gets two. Batista with a press slam for two. Orton spears Bubba for two. Batista gets the MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER for two. Orton kicks the leg a few times and gets a Russian legsweep for two. Figure-four leads to a few twos before Bubba makes the ropes. Batista with the GIANT SWING (five rotations) for two. Now he's thoroughly dizzy, so Orton comes in with a frog splash for two. Bubba catches Orton in a spinebuster on a blind charge, hot tag D-Von. All four men go ballistic, and the Dudelyz get WAZZUP on Orton. Batista breaks up the table dance with a bearhug slam, so Bubba deliver a Bubba Bomb for two. Dudleyz get 3-D, but Orton dives off the top rope and RKO's D-Von onto the pile to break. That leaves Orton and Bubba, and Bubba's leg goes out on a slam attempt. Orton hits a twisting springboard legdrop and a second RKO for the pin and the titles outright at 12:44. Some people may complain that the "double elimination" stip was rendered pointless, but screw that -- Evolution went over as monster heels here, blowing through the tournament with room to spare. That's how you make good heels for the faces to beat. **3/4

- Backstage, **Shawn Michaels** tries to make peace with **Michael Shane**, who refuses to listen. These kids today...

- Intercontinental Title: **Booker T** v. **Christian**. Huge brawl to start as Christian dives onto Booker from the get-go. They battle all around ringside as the ref begs with them to return to the ring. Back inside, Booker spinkicks Christian for two. Christian gets a shouldertackle and a dropkick, and Booker bails. Christian follows and sends Booker into the announce table. Booker fires back with shots of his own, then both men fly over the guardrail into the crowd. Booker tosses Christian back over the guardrail... as the ref counts them out at 3:44? What the hell? Oh, wait, here's **Eric Bischoff** to restart the match and declare it a Street Fight. That's better. So back in the crowd we go. Booker grabs a chair from a "fan" at ringside and pastes Christian with it a few times. Back at ringside, and Christian sends Booker into the steps, then pounds him with it. The Spanish announcer's table is prepped, but Booker cuts off any shenanigans over there and returns it to the ring (what a concept). Booker punches away and hits a huge chop and tiptoe kneedrop for two. Christian ducks a clothesline and gets a swinging neckbreaker for two. Christian goes up top but gets slammed off, and Booker follows with the axe kick -- but that misses, and Christian gets an X Factor for two. **DDP** with the Funny Obscure Line of the Night: "Let's hope my boy doesn't throw a tantrum in there." Booker slams Christian down and delivers a hook kick for two. Spinebuster gets two. Powerslam gets two. Booker up top for the Houston Hangover, but Bischoff (still at ringside) distracts him, so Booker climbs down and gives Bischoff a few shots. In the ring, Bischoff gets the axe kick as Christian rolls out, allowing Booker a Spinaroonie. Christian delivers a knee to the head after it's done. Ha! Christian uses the microphone on Booker a few times, and Booker blades. I don't think he's ever bladed before, but it's a decent one, about .25 Muta.

Not bad for a rookie. Christian is slammed down and hit with the microphone a few times. Booker spinebusters Bischoff and puts HIM in position for the Houston Hangover... but Christian shoves Booker off through the pre-prepped Spanish announcers' table. Christian drags Booker back in as Bischoff rolls out. The referee is bumped, and Booker gets a tiger suplex for what would be three, but there's no ref. Bischoff breaks it up. Booker goes after him, but Christian knocks him out with a chair, then slaps on something vaguely resembling a Sharpshooter so Bischoff can RING THE BELL, RING THE FUCKING BELL at 15:52 total. Probably the best match these two have had, and certainly a good enough trip to Vampire Land. Now can we PLEASE find something else for them to do? **1/2

- **Bischoff** calls the main event participants out before he leaves for the night, and **Kane** spins the wheel... which lands on an Inferno Match. Kane cuts a promo on **Benoit** about how he LIVES for fire, as the following exchange takes place at the announcers' table:

JR: "How is Benoit going to win this match? Kane is an expert at this!"

DDP: "Really? Has he ever won an Inferno match?"

JR (perturbed): "He's been in them, which is more than Benoit can say."

- **Page** is officially a step up from **Jerry Lawler**.

- By the way, if the night ended here, it would be a short PPV, but a thumbs up. If the night continued with this trend, it would be a thumbs leaning up. However, instead...

- **Hurricane** and **Mighty Molly Holly** v. **Big Show** and **Ivory**. There are two possible results here, neither of which I like. Molly has a new outfit, which is sort of her superhero look, minus the monogram and cape. The announcers note it's more flattering on her and wonder why she'd wear it. Hurricane and Show start, and that goes poorly for the guy who isn't a hoss. Show tosses him around as **JR** and **DDP** make references to **Lita** and I still don't care. Show gets booted when he puts his head down, then Hurricane gets a shining wizard for two. Neckbreaker gets two. Molly and Ivory go at it, and they do some wrestling to indicate that, yes, women can wrestle too. Ivory whips Molly out of the corner and hits a handspring elbow. Ivory works the arm, but Molly twists her way out of it and suplexes Ivory. Now Molly works the arm some. Ivory walks the ropes to get an armdrag. A seated dropkick follows as Molly plays **Chyna**-wannabe-in-peril. Show comes in and press slams her for two. Single-arm suplex gets two. Ivory in, and she drop toeholds Molly and gets a camel clutch. Molly makes the ropes. Molly gets tossed out, and Show tosses her back in from the floor over the top. Ivory covers for two. Carpetmuncher gets two. Ivory goes for a Northern Lights suplex, but Molly turns it into a Tornado DDT -- and Show cuts off the tag. Molly goes low on Show to break, but Show grabs her hair and tosses her into the heel corner. Ivory kicks at Molly, then hits a spinebuster for two. Well, that's it, make the women main eventers now. Crossbody off the top misses, and FINALLY the hot tag to Hurricane. He charges in... and does nothing, as JR says that Hurricane refuses to hit a woman. Show comes in and gets punched kicked around, however. Dropkick and rana (!!) gets two. Ivory slaps Hurricane as all four get involved. Hurricane is caught from behind with the Showstopper, but Molly

dives off into the Molly-Go-Round. It gets two, but Show's kickout sends Molly flying into Ivory. Hurricane gets the Eye of the Hurricane as Molly delivers a Northern Lights suplex onto Ivory for the pin at 10:05. It was either that or Show pinning Molly, of course. Match was okay when Ivory was in it, less so when Show was involved. *1/2

- **Ric Flair** returns to our TV screen and gets into an argument with **Shawn Michaels**. Flair announces he'll be back soon, and tells Shawn to watch the next match very carefully.

- **Triple H** v. **Goldust**. Any hope in hell for Goldie to win this? Or is he just thrilled to be second from the top? Anyway, brawl to start, and HHH wins that easily. Shoulder thrusts in the corner and a clothesline level Goldust. Dust comes back with a sliding punch for two. Butt butt gets two. HHH tosses Goldust and sends him postward. Goldust goldbricks on a slam attempt and gets a sort-of bulldog out of it for two. HHH USES THE KNEE~! to take over. HHH punches away at Goldust. Great moveset, bro. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. Powerslam gets two. Goldust punches away to come back and gets a lariat and the Flip Flop and Fly for two. HHH clips Goldust and GOES TO SCHOOL as this match quickly becomes a **Flair/Dusty** clone. Well, Dustin > Dusty, but Flair > HHH, so I guess it's a wash. Figure-four, but Dusty... er, Goldust... blocks. Goldust with a powerslam for two. The inevitable happens as HHH goes up top and gets slammed off. Goldust with a legdrop for two. HHH gets a kneelift for two. MAIN EVENT SLEEPER is reversed by Goldust, re-reversed by HHH, into a jawbreaker by Goldust. HHH rolls outside and finds the sledgehammer, but the ref confiscates it. Goldust rolls up HHH for two. HHH nails Goldust with a lariat and a kneedrop for two. Suplex gets two. HHH catapults Goldust into the ref. Goldust low blows HHH, then delivers Shattered Dreams. Curtain Call as the ref rejoins us... for two. HHH slams down Goldust, then heads outside to regain his sledgehammer. As the referee tries to take it away, though, **Michael Shane** returns and superkicks Goldust. HHH gets KICK WHAM PEDIGREE just to make it official and wins at 13:54. I don't think anyone's surprised that **Shawn** would ask his buddy to look after his nephew, are we? *3/4 No announcement yet, but I'm sure we'll get it on RAW.

- Royal Rumble ad, focusing on the Rumble itself and the first announced match: **Angle/Hogan**. I don't know if they'd really run a face/face match at this event, but at least Hulk isn't in the Rumble itself, which can only be a positive.

- Main event, Inferno match, World Title: **Kane** v. **Chris Benoit**. And these flames are TOTALLY on fire, making it very difficult to see anything. Benoit has limited mobility in his knee from the wrap, which the announcers note. Kane pounds on Benoit to start, and gets a suplex out of it. Choking follows. Kane holds Benoit close to the fire, but Benoit elbows away and tries for a snap suplex of his own. The leg won't allow him to have it, so Kane punches him back and delivers a press slam. Benoit punches Kane's gut and chops away, but can't move Kane to the flames. Kane kicks Benoit's leg and tries to pull off the wrap, but no dice. Benoit blocks an early chokeslam attempt and gets an armbar. Kane stands up and delivers a Death Valley Driver to break, then tries to roll Benoit to the fire. Benoit again wriggles out and changes into the German suplex combo,

then attempts to ignite Kane, with no success. How Benoit was able to roll on that leg I'm not sure. Benoit gets a dropkick and a spinkick with the wrapped leg, and that sends Kane DANGEROUSLY close to the fire. And this is a Kane with exposed arms and face, remember. Both men charge with clotheslines for the double KO. Crowd is trying to stay in this, but without the ropes, both men are lost. Kane up first, and he goes for a powerbomb, but he can't manipulate that leg and Benoit slides down the back, collapsing as he lands. Kane kicks the leg a few more times, then tries to drag Benoit over by the leg. The flame gets too close for comfort, though, so Kane brings him back to the center of the ring. He tries to hyperextend the leg, but Benoit kicks him away as the crowd squeals, thinking that's the finish. That's one thing about these Inferno matches that's good -- ANYTHING can be a false finish. Benoit chops at Kane's chokeslamming arm to prevent any KO moves, then tries a rolling armbar. Kane just drops down to stop it, then gets **Abyss's** torture rack drop. Kane goes to toss Benoit into the fire, but Benoit grabs the arm and gets the Crossface -- the one move where his straightened leg actually helps. Kane starts tapping, but the announcers astutely point out it means nothing in this match. Oh no. Benoit lets go and drops his bandaged leg on Kane's arm, hurting both of them. Kane is up first (nearly grabbing the ropes out of instinct), and Benoit charges at him. Kane catches Benoit and nearly sends him fireward, but Benoit slams on the breaks. Kane goes for a Tombstone, but while upside down, Benoit grabs the leg and tries to get an anklelock. Kane kicks him off, then goes for a chokeslam... but his arm gives out and he drops Benoit prematurely. Benoit drop toeholds Kane and tries for a second Crossface, but Kane simply stands up and grabs Benoit, tossing him legfirst into the fire to win at 20:35 as Benoit's leg wrap is ablaze. Looks like it might have been an okay match, but the goofiness of the Inferno rules really hampered it. Crowd was hot, sure, and I sense a rematch given that Benoit made Kane tap out, but the rematch needs to be a straight-up match. Otherwise, we'll get crap like this again. *1/4

The Bottom Line:

It started out so well, but the last few matches were simply not of PPV-quality. Everyone tried, but everyone tried in ECW and it still sucked. I'm not sure what the problem is -- on paper, this looked like it had a chance to do well, and the lowercard matches certainly delivered, but it seemed that the last two were just not clicking. I want to like this, but I just can't.

Thumbs in the middle, leaning down.

12:55 AM

We were driving back to Orlando from Armageddon. All of us were talking about how much of a disappointment the execution had been. What could have been a good PPV had been spoiled by a rough ending to the main event, and we all knew the Royal Rumble would have to be a step up when it arrived in six weeks.

As we got to the hotel, Trish and Stacy were standing outside. Trish waved at us,

then winked at me. I responded as subtly as possible, causing the girls to laugh. Chris saw I was a little red-faced and pulled me aside.

"So is that why you couldn't talk to Trish?"

"Huh? What?"

"You made the deal with her, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Andy, relax. I know all about it."

"How?"

"I've been here longer than you have, remember? Heck, I've even been Trish when she's done that."

"You have?"

"Yeah. Look, ol' chap... oh, there I go, sounding like a Harvard person again... look, Andy, what you do is your business. I told you I wasn't going to get mad if you played along. Besides, she's harmless. She would never lead you the wrong way."

"Yeah, but... I dunno. Something that much fun should be wrong."

"Why?"

"Because I felt like I was giving in to a guilty indulgence."

Lindsay chuckled as we entered the lobby. "Look, Mave," she said, returning to Chris as though it were second nature, "what she does, she does to get a rise out of us. If you didn't wanna do it, you could've said no. She's not going to sleep with anyone here -- she's just what we would call back at Cambridge a free thinker."

I turned to face him. "You mean a quasi-flower child?"

"Yeah, if you want. She's actually kind of funny that way. She'll do anything to get attention. But basically, she just wants to fool around while she's still single."

We entered the elevator. "Does she ever do more than fool around?"

"Not that I know of. At least, not with me. Why, did she with you?"

"No! Er, no. I mean, we were in the hot tub and stuff, but nothing X-rated."

"I thought as much... yeah, she's just a big tease, isn't she?"

"Well... basically."

We stepped off on our floor. He looked at me and smiled. "So," he whispered, "I'm guessing you needed to blow off some steam of your own afterward, eh?"

"L-- Chris!" *Whew. Nearly blew it.* "That's none of your business!"

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "Oh, lighten up. You gotta learn to have some fun, man. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow. Make sure to call me, got that?"

"Sure." I entered my hotel room and sat down on the bed, confused and exhausted. This had been a long weekend, and to top it off, I was more concerned than ever over Amy and Matt. *I guess what I did during the day was my business... but it would be nice to be able to affect Matt. I just don't know how to reach him.*

I was dreaming.

I entered the tunnel and looked around. There were three unmarked paths I could take. My instinct told me that one led back to RAW, one to SmackDown!, and the other to somewhere I hadn't been, but I couldn't tell which was which. I studied each path. They all looked exactly the same, except for one detail -- the floor. One was carpet, one

was hardwood, the other was tile.

I continued searching for a clue. I wanted to go back to RAW, back to Lindsay, and back to the life I was now used to. I wanted to be in a position where I could do something to talk to Gregory or Amy. I searched for some clue, any clue, that would tell me which floor went where, but there was none. The walls and ceiling of each path were identical.

I squinted into the distance, trying to see if a figure could appear in the shadows at the end of the hall. I couldn't find one. I took a few steps down the carpet hallway, to get a better look. Nothing. I retreated and tried the tile hallway and the hardwood hallway. No matter which way I went, the view was exactly the same.

I looked upward. The convergence of the three hallways was open-air, and a single light shone on the center. I stood directly in the center and closed my eyes. "Okay... it's out of my hands," I said to no one in particular but myself. "I get it."

I opened my eyes and looked down each hallway. I had a feeling that whichever one I chose would not take me to RAW. I didn't know why, but I thought the one I would take would lead me to foreign territory. I felt nervous. "This better not be a trap," I shouted. "Or I'll... I'll..." *or I'll be captured and die.*

I closed my eyes again and began to spin around in place. I kept spinning until I felt myself lose balance and fall over. I slowly got up -- not dizzy, since I had no body, but certainly disoriented. I looked straight ahead. I was facing the carpeted hallway.

I took my first step down the hallway, knowing somehow that I was going somewhere unfamiliar. I kept moving, pacing myself, wondering how this would help me with Vince McMahon. *Was I headed into Linda's body? Shane's? Maybe someone who works at WWE.com... I just don't know. But I have to get there.*

My pace quickened. I looked around for clues as to whether this was a trap. There were none. The hall remained the same as it had been. I looked to the end of the hall. I saw a figure emerge. I stiffened momentarily, then tried to get a better view. My instinct told me that this figure was not one to be afraid of.

"Come on, Andy. We need you here." It was a female voice, but one I'd never heard before. I didn't trust it out of human self-concern, even though I felt a hint of familiarity in the entirety of the figure.

"I can't leave Vince. I need him."

"We know. We'll make it up to you next time. But you want to help Matt, don't you?" As I stepped closer, I began to see features I recognized. The dark black hair stood out first, followed by the slender arms. It was a female body, certainly, but I saw more of the Hispanic skin tone than the feminine features. She smiled, and the smile -- the alluring, friendly, welcoming smile -- tipped me off finally.

"Stefani?"

"Welcome back!"

"What are you... what am I..."

"Relax. You're pulling double duty this week. I came here to find you and get you. We're losing Jeff. I need the backup. You're the only one who knows of our plight. I don't know if what I'm doing is smart, but it's what we need to do. I'm scared."

"Wait... so I'm being pulled off my assignment? Does St. Peter know about this?"

"Probably. But you're not completely leaving, either. You'll still be able to work on Vince from where you are. I asked if you could be an NWA person, but I guess this'll

do."

"Wait... you know who I am before I do?"

She winked. "Tricks of the trade. Ben and I were alerted that someone would be joining us this week from another assignment. I figured it would be a close friend of someone who needed saving who, you know, just happened to be a wrestler, but... this is better. Don't worry. You'll be fine here."

I paused. "I really should go back."

"Nonsense. You can't. The decision has been made. But forget about it. You'll be more help here than you will back there anyway."

"How?"

"You'll see. Now, follow me." She walked down the hall, leading me onward. I looked around. *Well, this is legit. But why do I feel I'm betraying Shawn?*

"I... I can't."

"Yes you can."

"No -- I mean, it's not right. I have co-workers. I have my own interm--"

"Yes, and you still will. They've been through this before. In fact, you've seen this happen. Why does this bother you?"

"Because I... I'm afraid."

"Well, this is rather sudden, I'll admit. Sit down, I'll explain." I sat down as she sat next to me. "You see, you'll still be a WWE employee. You just won't be exclusive to the WWE. Remember when you were BG and you visited us?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, something like that'll happen this week. I'm here to tell you that there's no reason to panic when you wake up and you're not in Orlando for RAW. I wasn't... completely honest with you. When I said we needed backup, it's because Jeff's near the point where we think we can push him all the way. It'll take more than just Ben and myself, so I asked if we could get other people. You're one of them. Thing is, you're the only one who knows what's happening. Everyone else will just think they're in the right place at the right time."

"This is all so weird. Besides, I feel like I'm being rushed into it. I already have one stripe -- to get another so soon... the pressure..."

"Don't worry about that! Worry about your own mission. This is a warning... actually, you know what, forget it. You're not ready for this. Go on." She pointed me back where I came from.

"Wait... no. I shouldn't. You've asked me for help. I don't know why, and I don't know how this happened, but you manipulated the system to get me to a spot where I can help you. Maybe it's a group thing, maybe it's just the three of us... it doesn't matter. I'm just scared I'll be unfaithful to my mission."

She shook her head. "Trust me. You won't. God thought of that. Now, you ready?"

I stood up and sighed. "Lead on."

Monday, December 15, 2003, 08:44 AM
Louisville, KY

The alarm had been buzzing for almost fifteen minutes. I still couldn't move out of bed. I was disoriented, confused, and attempting to figure out what was up with me. I looked around and saw I was in a bedroom, not a hotel room. Stefani was right; I was somewhere new.

I took a moment to regain my senses. I had to think of where I was and how I got here. I examined my new body. I was female, with medium skin and long brown hair. I was very athletically built, too. On my dresser, next to the now-familiar glasses, were tons upon tons of makeup. *Who could I be?*

I heard a loud knock on my door. I silenced the alarm and shouted, "Yeah!" A second woman answered. She had brown hair and a round, pale face. Her blouse and skirt were black, and her accessories made it clear she was trying to look trendy.

"Like, thanks for finally turning the alarm off, snoozer," she said, speaking with a slight Californian accent. "C'mon already. We gotta be at the training center in a little over an hour. Corny won't like it if we're late again."

"I'll be ready. Keep calm." She rolled her eyes in response and walked off. *Corny -- Jim Cornette. I'm down in the minors!* I hopped out of bed and grabbed my bath supplies, including a towel. I walked over to the bathroom across the hall. The other woman was fixing breakfast in the kitchen.

"Hey, don't be too long! I can't have you totally wasting the hot water, you know!"

"All right!" I closed the door and set everything down. As I turned on the shower water, I looked in the mirror. The face that stared back at me was at once strange and familiar. It was one I knew I had seen before, but couldn't figure out where. I kept it in my mind as I set foot in the shower.

All throughout cleaning up it bothered me. *Who am I? What woman could I be? And how will I help both Matt Hardy and Jeff Jarrett? I can't be in two places at once, can I?* I rinsed off and stepped out, taking a second look at myself after wiping the steam off the mirror. The other woman's voice called in, "Would you hurry up already? Your breakfast is, like, getting cold."

"You're not my mother, you know!"

She grunted. I heard her walk off. I kept looking at the reflection as I dried off. It occurred to me that I was finally comfortable in a woman's body -- no gaping, no concerns about sex, and no period of adjustment. Still, it didn't help answer the key question... until finally the long-lost memory slapped me in the face.

I'm the new girl. I'm the one from the photo shoot. My name is Alexis Laree.

TWENTIETH WEEK

Monday, December 15, 2003, 01:45 PM
Louisville, KY

We came back from lunch, stiff but ready to continue. My roommate -- whose name I hadn't yet overheard -- was talking about her work out in LA, where she had the honor of working with Danny Doring. She said she wanted to be in the WWE down the line, but her favorite memory was still appearing at ringside in an NWATNA dark match.

"I'm just wondering," I said, "do you ever think you'll get in the ring?"

"Well, like, it would be nice," she replied, "but I'm not ready. I have my hands full with Ryan as it is."

"How so?"

"Well, he's out in Canada on the off-days -- you know, the scouts found him when they were looking at those two guys Kane beat up -- and he's being groomed by the Snake to be a main event star eventually. Of course, I don't know if he has it, but he thinks so. It's just so bothersome dealing with his ego -- like I'm holding him back or something. What's up with that, man?"

"Everyone thinks that. Don't let it get to you."

"I know, I know... Like, I'm just glad I was able to get my foot in the door. That work with EPIC has been such a big boon to me, and now they got me doing the occasional appearance in IRON too. I'm telling you, SoCal is just totally rad for wrestling! You should come on out!"

"I'd love to, but I'm committed to a bunch of shows this week."

"Oh, don't worry, babe. When it's time for X-mas, I'll bring you to meet my peeps."

"That's great of you... I'll see if I can. I had some plans already to spend time in Stamford getting prepared. I'm supposed to make the Leap soon."

She gasped. "Really? That's so awesome! Oh my God! I can't believe it! You're going to rock up there, I just know it."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. It's just a shame I can't be up there with my buddies."

"You mean, Joey? Oh, I'm sure he'll get a call eventually. That sort of thing happens, you know."

"Yeah... but by that time, I'm sure he'll have a new life. I just wonder if I can keep everything normal while I'm on the road all the time. I mean, right here, I'm a quick drive to Cincinnati for us, a quick trip to Nashville for NWA, and a trip to Philly for Ring of Honor. I'm not sure I can handle flying all the time."

"Hey, lemme tell ya, hon... when I started out, I was thinking, there's like no way I'll be able to go anywhere but LA. It's my life, you know? But, like, this came along and I realized that I had a bigger love for my job than for anything else. Besides, you know, you don't have to leave it all behind. I still have my family, and my friends, and my way cool car at home. You don't have to dump it all when you reach the big time. Besides, that would be a major snobout, right?"

I laughed. "They teach you well under the sun, don't they?"

She smiled back. "Hey, just cuz I so talk from the Valley doesn't mean I think

there. You know that."

We entered the training center laughing and sharing our witticisms.

04:55 PM

"Okay, y'all, gather round and listen up!" Jim Cornette, he of the thousand-mile-an-hour mouth and opinionated philosophy, had been coaching us on everything from what to say all the way to how to say it. His training was an invaluable thing, as was his discipline. Every day from 10 to 5 we worked in the ring and on wrestling ideals, whether it be how to land, how to throw, how to swing a chair, how to sneer just right, or anything that would benefit the show. As a result, Ohio Valley Wrestling was almost a major independent league of its own.

Of course, the talent level didn't hurt. We had a mishmash of the future stars and past WWF heroes thrown together to bring about our little show. Rumors were flying that Test and Rob Conway were due to take time off from the big league and work on their skills for a few weeks. Meanwhile, others with WWF experience, such as Big Boss Man, Bull Buchanan, Eric Angle, Orlando Jordan, and Jacqueline helped with the training and the pacing of the show. Everyone, though, had the same goal: to get The Call.

"Okay, guys and gals, I gotta say that today was a decent day out there," began Jim Cornette in his motivational talk. "We got a lotta momentum working up for our Garden show on Saturday, and we gotta make sure we keep it that way. This week's TV is due to tape on Wednesday, as ya know, and we wanna do the hard sell on the Garden show. Anybody know they won't be at the taping, lemme know right now." I raised my hand. "Yeah, Lex, I know, you got Nashville. Anyone else?" No one.

"Good. Now listen up. The boys are talkin' a lot, and there's a bunch of people who are almost ready to return or move on to TV. Victoria, they're lookin' at bringing you back soon, and I gotta say I'd approve of it in a few weeks. Look at how people who've made the jump are doin' now. Look at how Dinsmore did in his time. He's commanding top dollar around the nation. Look at the Maximos or Michael Shane. They're regulars on the shows. Even if this is the end of the line for some of you, don't get mad. Do what you love, and love what you do. Ray, bring it in."

We gathered in a circle around Ray Traylor, the elder statesman of OVW. As the Big Bossman, he and Bull Buchanan were the only ones to appear in multiple WrestleManias. Certainly, he was the most experienced, having seen it all in his long, illustrious career. *Heck, he was there when Vince was sane.*

"Okay, boys, I been talkin' to Corny here, and that was a good session today. Some o' y'all wanna hit the weights with me, follow me when it's done. But I wanna see everyone eatin' right and gettin' rest. We got the Garden this Saturday, and it's a show we've been buildin' to the whole year. If we don't go out there and kick ass, I may have to dish out hard time on my own, you hear me? Now, O-V-Dub on three, ready! One, Two, Three!"

"O-V-DUB!" We all shouted as we lifted our hands out of the huddle. After it was done, Cornette and the Pritchards applauded and told us we were dismissed for the day. My roommate took my arm and called me aside.

"Hey, like, you wanna go get some dinner with Ryan and me? We gotta work on the weekend show, ya know."

"Sure, sounds like fun."

06:58 PM

After a long and eventful dinner, we were getting ready to pay the tab. Ryan -- who played Keiji Sakoda in OVW -- was busy calculating the tip, while my roommate -- an LA native named Valerie Wyndham -- and I began to talk about plans to watch RAW that evening. Suddenly, we were met by a pair of boys who had wandered to our table.

"Hey, you're Alexis, aren't you?" said one, holding a pen and a couple of pieces of paper.

"Depends... who's asking?" I smiled back, pretending to be innocent. After my experiences with Cena and Nora, I couldn't be too careful.

"Dude -- can you get us tickets to the Garden?"

"On Saturday? Just show up, guys. We won't be sold out. Hey, I'll even look for you in the crowd if ya want."

They stared at each other, slack-jawed. "That would be awesome," one of them proclaimed. They handed me the pen and papers. "Can we, uh, have your autograph?"

"Sure... in fact, these guys are with me too. I'll get them to sign it."

"Sweet."

I signed both pieces of paper as I handed them off to Valerie. "Couple of guys here want some memorabilia," I joked.

"Oh, cool! What's your names?" She turned to them and tipped her sunglasses, which she kept wearing even indoors.

"Brad and Johnny."

"All right, then..." she pulled the papers to her and began to write up top. After putting their names on it, she wrote underneath. "Totally live the dream!" She then signed each paper "SoCal Val" and passed them off to Ryan.

After Ryan signed them, he handed them back to the boys. "Thanks, guys!" They both said. Then Johnny turned to me and whispered, "I hope you make it big, Alexis. We all love you."

I smiled. "Aw, thanks. Don't worry about me."

08:44 PM

RAW was about to begin. Valerie was going over her lines for the next OVW TV program. I looked at her as I flipped to Spike TV. "What's wrong, Val? Why memorize?"

"Oh, it just makes me feel better," she replied. "But yeah, I can do this over lunch tomorrow too." She put her script aside and sat down in the chair next to me, flipping up the footrest and leaning back.

I got a better look at this youngster. She was about my height, but not my build at

all. She had slightly more weight -- not enough to be fat, though; just enough to be round. What I noticed most of all, though, were her legs. She said that EPIC liked to comment that she was the next Stacy Keibler while she was there -- and although she didn't have the height, she certainly had the build. *What I wouldn't give to be a guy in OVW this week rather than a gal.*

"So, you think that Michael Shane guy is gonna be a big thing?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sure. He's got the skill. He's got the breeding, certainly."

"He's hot, too, isn't he?"

"Well..." I thought of how to phrase this, since judging male hotness didn't come naturally to me. "He certainly looks like a Heartbreak Kid. I don't know if he'll have Shawn's all around looks, but he's not bad."

"Yeah, I know... I hope I get to manage him someday. Actually, just about anyone would be a step up."

"What do you mean? You haven't had good wrestlers to manage?"

"Well... not exactly. I mean, I did get to manage that Danny Doring guy over at a show in Maryland once. That was wicked. But I'm generally paired with losers cuz I'm an unknown outside of Cali. I mean, look at Ryan. He's okay and all, but he's got no name value. Plus he's Japanese, so he takes it all serious. Ugh, I hate that."

"Well, it's his job, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess... but I'd rather manage someone like that Carly guy."

"He's a hot commodity, that's for sure."

"Yeah, real hot. Rrowr."

"Valerie!"

"What? He is."

I rolled my eyes. "Let's just watch the show."

"Oh, come on... like you don't think he's hot."

"I'm going steady, remember?"

"Oh, you're no fun."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Dec. 15 / 03.

- Live from Tampa, FL.

-Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **DDP**.

- RNN opens, as always. **Randy Orton** shows highlights of the previous night, including their tag title win. He invites **Evolution** out to be his guests. **Bischoff** announces that **Goldust** was traded last night to fulfill a request from a SmackDown! superstar who will be here TONIGHT. Also, he says their group isn't quite complete, and brings out the newest member: **Michael Shane**. Predictable. Shane declares he's the next Showstoppah and will be the future of the business, blah blah blah, when WEEKEND UPDATE WITH **3 LIVE KRU** comes on the Tron. **Konn** declares that, in a news flash, no one gives a crap about Michael Shane. **Road Dogg** does sports and proclaims that at least half the members of Evolution tested positive for ugly. **Ron Killings** reports that a his foot has

been found in places the sun doesn't shine while doing weather. **HHH** finally has enough and challenges them to a match tonight. Not that I want to see the match, but the Kru is always good for a laugh.

- Women's Title: **Ivory v. Trish Stratus**. Well, they're trying to re-establish the gold, which is good. Of course, the matches may be counterproductive, but they're trying. Ivory forearms Trish to start, and a slam gets two. Trish slaps back, and the two catfight for a while. Ivory grabs a headlock, and Trish suplexes her for two. Rana gets two. Ivory up top, but a crossbody misses. Trish suplexes her for two. Wow, TWO types of suplexes -- talk about variety. Stratusphere gets two. Ivory rolls her up for two. Trish tries the Stratusfaction, but Ivory shoves her over the top rope instead. Back in, it gets two. Superplex (!) gets two. Death Valley Driver finally finishes for Ivory at 6:24. Kudos to them for pushing women's wrestling, but do they have any wrestlers who are women? I mean, this isn't joshi. *

- **Christian** comes out with NEW Intercontinental Title. He brags about being the champ and says he will hold the belt until it's time for the big prize. Booker T gets NO REMATCH, not now, not ever. Good. He issues an open challenge, which is never smart, and... the Lo Rider music hits!

- Intercontinental Title: **Christian v. Chavo Guerrero**. Chavo rushes him to start as the crowd goes CRAZY for him. German suplex gets two. Rana gets two, as **Page** puts over Chavo's lucha past. Christian bails and Chavo hits a pescado, wowing the crowd. You can tell he's loving every minute of this, too. He pastes Christian with a few punches and tosses him in for two. Christian gets a thumb to the eye and an armdrag, then hits a slam for two. Unprettier is blocked, and Chavo gets a spinkick as Christian bails. Chavo gets suckered into the STEEL steps outside, and back in, Christian gets a series of elbowsmashes for two. Tornado DDT gets two. Full nelson, but Chavo with a mule kick to break, drawing a HUGE pop. CHEAT TO WIN~! Dropkick to the knee and El Paso Lasso follow. Christian makes the ropes. Chavo up top, but the corkscrew moonsault misses. Christian gets two. Christian just has no clue how to handle Chavo. Christian gets a German suplex for two. DDT gets two. He tries a gutwrench, but Chavo hits a headscissors out of it. Christian finally has enough and walks away at 7:33, drawing MASSIVE boos from the crowd. Smart move to get Chavo out of Eddie's shadow, and it appears the crowd wants to love him every step of the way. ***1/4 And yes, that's with the lame-wad finish.

- **Chris Benoit** comes out, and the crowd is totally burned out right now. He demands a rematch with **Kane** at the Rumble, and they show footage of Kane tapping to back it up. No response from Kane, so he goes hunting for him instead. Backstage, he runs into **Booker T**, who is also upset about losing at Armageddon. He says **Bischoff** is forcing him to qualify for the Royal Rumble while **HHH** gets a reservation. He cries foul. Yeah, me too. Benoit keeps searching and beats up **Mark Henry** for fun.

- Royal Rumble Qualifier: **Booker T v. Kevin Nash**. Oh, joy, he's back. Booker fires away to start, getting a shoulderblock and crossbody. Nash catches Booker and gets a

sideslam for two. Snake Eyes gets two. Well, that's Nash's moveset, so he hits an abdominal stretch. Booker breaks with a hook kick and attacks the leg of Nash. Lariat and missile dropkick FINALLY knock Nash down. Leg lariat, Spinaroonie, axe kick, good riddance to Nash at 2:11. **DUD** Booker celebrates in the ring, which would make good TV, but instead we head backstage to show **Shawn Michaels** walking. That's the Clique for ya.

- **Shawn Michaels** heads to the ring with a serious look. He says that his nephew committed treason, but that **Shane** is his own man. He mentions how he wanted to make a special challenge last month for a final match, but after beating Shane, he feels he can go again. However, he still has the challenge to make, and says that he expects an answer at the Rumble. **Coach** comes out to press for details, but HBK simply says the guy "already knows I want him". Okay, that was weird, and really, with all the legends being contacted already for this so-called Showcase match, I have no idea who's left to pair with Michaels that won't be a disappointment.

- **Evolution v. 3 Live Kru**. Yes, folks, **Stacy** is technically in the match, although she does nothing but watch the whole time, thankfully. **Konnan** and **Batista** start, and Konnan punches him down and gets the rolling kick. **Orton** dives in with a missile dropkick, and all seven men brawl. **HHH** beats up **Killings** and gets a kneelift, allowing **Shane** to try a crossbody. That, however, is caught, and Killings and **Road Dogg** do a nice double-team slam. The ref regains control as Killings and Orton stay in the ring. Orton slugs Killings down, but puts his head down and gets sunset flipped for two. Killings with a headbutt, and Dogg gets the funky punches and kneedrop for two. Batista gets a MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER during a run-in, though, and Dogg is face-in-peril. What else is new? Shane gets a swinging neckbreaker and a headscissors as we head to commercial. Coming out of it, HHH has a suplex for two. He USES THE KNEE off of a whip for two. Batista gets a powerslam for two. Orton with Play of the Day for two. Shane goes up top, but the elbowdrop misses. HHH cuts off the hot tag and gets a neckbreaker for two. Orton scores a superplex for two. RKO is blocked, and Dogg gets a desperation belly-to-belly suplex. Hot tag Konnan, who goes nuts on all four heels. NOGGIN KNOCKER to Orton and Batista for laughs. Carpetmuncher on Orton gets two. Everyone returns to the ring, and HHH stops to proposition Stacy, allowing Road Dogg to roll him up for two. The ref tries to restore order, but Batista powerbombs Konnan and Shane gets the Picture Perfect Elbow for the win at 15:11. This was what it was. *3/4 HHH poses in front of Evolution in the group pose. Remember who the real star is, kids.

- Main event interview: **Eric Bischoff** returns and calls out **Benoit**. Benoit threatens Bischoff unless he gets his rematch. Bischoff says he'll get it, but it'll be in a cage, and no escape rules. He says he'll take personal joy in seeing Benoit's leg snap and his body get ravaged... and the camera pans back to show **Kane** standing behind Benoit. Chokeslam, Tombstone, and powerbomb, then Kane steps on Benoit's neck (with **JR** having flashbacks -- nice touch) as he lights a match. Security drags Kane away, and the EMTs get Benoit, end of show.

The Bottom Line:

Well, it's been working so far, and it's not like they've had a definitive win by Kane yet, so you might as well stick with it. Chavo Guerrero looks like he'll take off into the stratosphere given enough time, and some of the people not used (Molly, Lita, Big Show, Hurricane, La Res) may be puzzling but ultimately a good thing. They can all practice their trade in OVW while waiting for the Rumble.

Besides, if I hear one more word about that fake pregnancy, I think I'll shoot my TV screen.

Tuesday, December 16, 2003, 10:55 PM
Nashville, TN

"Hi, Shawn, it's Andy."

"Hello. Where ya been?"

"In Louisville. I'm Alexis Laree right now."

"You're in the minors? Why?"

"Well, apparently another mission is about to be completed, and they want as many people as they can to take part in it. So I guess I'm a friend of a friend of someone who needs saving. I don't get it either, Shawn. I just know I've been doing a lot of work here."

"That's cool. You gonna be all right? You haven't had a good history as a woman, have you?"

"Shawn, it's okay. The good news is I can still reach Matt. A few of the SmackDown! people have been saying he's getting weird."

"Yeah, I've heard. He's not in the best frame of mind right now. Well... if God says you gotta be Laree, be Laree. We're gonna miss you."

"Thanks. Give Lindsay my love, please."

"Already done. Catch you next... wait, the WWE's off for the holidays next week. Well, I'll talk to you soon."

"Thanks, Shawn. Bye."

I hung up and lay back on the hotel bed. *What a weird week this'll be. I'm surrounded by people I've never met. I'm stuck in a world I've never seen before. I'm away from everyone who means everything to me, and being forced to work with a bunch of folks who don't know me and don't want to know me. It's like I'm starting over.*

But I'm not, really. I've got Ben and Stef to talk to. And certainly Shawn is just a phone call away. What's the big deal? I'll do fine, right?

Oh, I know what it is. It's being on the road all the time. It's not knowing where my next big move will be or what my next assignment will bring. It's having to learn new names, new faces, and keep all of them separate from each other. On top of that, it's making sure I don't slip up and call one person by another name or anything that might cause me to leave Vince's case.

Welcome to the life on an indy wrestler.

I guess I never realized how good I had it in the WWE. Sure, I was forced to be

someone new every week, and half those people I meet are undesirable people, but they're my family now. I know many of their likes and dislikes already. I have people who I can turn to when my character needs a new way to go or I need to get my nightmares out of me. Everyone provides a different feeling of comfort or benefit. I even learn from those I dislike -- sort of.

Above all, though, it's where I've made my home. I've been doing this now for about four and a half months. All the time, I've been learning who the good guys and bad guys are and how to get good ideas through. I've developed new friends, new respects, new love, new hatred, new memories. I've done more here than I thought possible.

But at the same time, I have no home, except maybe some lamp I'll have zero access to this week or next. I have no old chums, because they all think I'm in Heaven now. I have no behavioral pattern, because I adopt everyone else's every week. I'm a vagabond, a wanderer, a pilgrim.

Wait -- didn't the early prophets wander from place to place, with nothing of their own but their ideas of how to live life? Weren't they specifically told to lose all their earthly connections? Didn't they sacrifice, form new bonds, learn new evils, and all that? What makes me different? Are a few thousand years enough to make me unique?

Maybe I should talk to St. Peter and see how he did it. In the meantime, though, I just have to do what I think is right. I have to be careful to avoid temptation and all that. I have to make sure I don't fade away or become demon food. I can't be like Kathleen was. I have to be me.

Whoever I am.

Wednesday, December 17, 2003, 02:45 PM
Nashville, TN

I showed up early at the Asylum, as the ring crew was setting up the ring for tonight's show. I looked around for a familiar face I could find somewhere. Although it was amusing to see so many people change appearance by just putting on my glasses -- *Stefani wasn't kidding when she said she was going to get help* -- they were all strangers to me.

"Alexis... there you are. We've been looking for you."

I turned around, confused. A scary-looking, veteran face looked back at me. His eyes seemed to indicate a kind, gentle individual, even if he seemed a little lost at times. I could tell he'd been through the wars just by looking at him, and even if I hadn't recognized the face, I knew the type. Just seeing him brought out a mixture of respect, anger, and pity.

"Rick," I replied, "what are you doing here? You on for tonight?"

"In a fashion. I was told to get you. A few of us were to get together before the show."

"Wait -- is Mr. Jarrett holding a meeting?"

"No... no, but he is involved. C'mon."

I followed Rick, observing his movements as I did so. He walked with a bit of a hesitation, as though he was uncertain where to go next. He wore his letterman jacket

close to his body, as if hiding something, a suspicion augmented by his head being on a swivel. We rounded a corner and entered a back room. Two other wrestlers were waiting. One I recognized immediately as Marcus Bagwell.

The other, though, was less familiar. He was a shorter man, with regular-length black hair, but nothing really stood out. He had on a blue-and-black singlet with wavy lines on it. He smiled as I entered the room. "We've been waiting for you."

Rick sat down and loosened his jacket. A pair of glasses fell out. *Oh, right.* He wiped the sweat off of his brow and began to speak. "Okay, guys, you know why we're here, right? This is the week we go after him. I got a lot of people who wanna help save him out there, but we gotta do this. Any concerns at all?"

"You think he's gonna listen?" I turned to the other guy. "I mean, I'm just a valet, Rick's just an old man, and I doubt you or Marcus has any cred with him. He listens to people like Dusty and Russo, right?"

"Hold on, girl," the other guy said. "We all thought that at first, too. But he's been so mixed up he'll listen to everyone at least once. Besides, you don't think Marc here goes way back?"

"It's not that... it's that it's just us. What can we do?"

"I thought that myself for a while," said Marcus, speaking for the first time, "but then I talked to Sting back in the day. I told him about the power God has over people... you know, I wasn't the only person in his ear, and I wasn't the only one telling him about life and death, but something stuck with him. He's one of the most pious men I know now. It's a shame I won't see him much now that he's off to the WWE, but hopefully he'll be back soon."

"See, that's just it," Rick said. "We CAN do this. I know we can. Marcus, you've been trying for months now, and some of us... well, faith's important and I'll leave it at that. But the problem is that Jeff's obsessed with Vince. He's sold his soul to the NWA to be #1 in wrestling. We gotta let him step back and realign himself."

"Yeah... besides, he'll never beat Vince." *And Vince's soul has been sold to a much more influential authority anyway.*

"Alexis, please... don't crowd the issue. The point is..." Rick seemed to be searching for the right words. "...help me out here, guys."

"It's all right," said Marcus, placing a hand on Rick's shoulder. "The point is, Alexis, that you can't focus on earthly deeds. You know this. There's more to life than life. You've gotta focus on the hereafter, too. God wants us to succeed only so much as we realize it's through Him we get our strength. Otherwise, what's the point?"

The other guy smiled. "So how do we convey this to Jeff without sounding like some preacher dude?"

"Well, we can always just use examples of our own life. I know that's what got Sting to think about it. Besides, a lot of the locker room usually sticks around. If we're lucky, they'll help us out. I know a lot of them have religious roots. I mean, it's the best we can do."

"What if we fail?" I had a hard time believing what I said, even as I said it. I didn't want to put any more pressure on Ben or Stefani -- at least one of whom was in this room -- than God was already putting on them for granting their request. I waited for a shake of the head or a slap of the wrist. Instead, Marcus merely shrugged and smirked.

"If we fail," he said, "then we try again. As long as we try, we do not fail. Okay,

guys, catch you after the show. Let's do it."

We adjourned to stretch and prepare for our match. As I left, I turned to look at the other guy. I didn't recognize him, and didn't know if I should have. I waited for him to leave, but before he did, he pulled something out of his gym bag and put it over his head. As soon as he did, I recognized him.

So that's what Shark Boy looks like without the mask...

06:11 PM

I found Rick again, this time carrying my glasses nonchalantly so that he would be sure to see them. "So, Rick," I said, trying to be subtle, "give me some background so I don't break character."

Rick looked at me for a second, then seemed to catch on. "Go talk to Jerry over there. He'll fill you in. I'm sorry I can't be of much help... the ol' Gremlin's mind ain't what it used to be."

"I understand." I walked over to where Jerry Lynn was and slipped my glasses on. *Yep, that's Stef over there. So that means Ben must be Rick. I wonder, then, who the others are.* I tapped him on the shoulder and let him see me wearing the glasses. "So, Jer, how do I look?"

"Cute. You can take them off," he said tersely.

"Don't you know who I..."

"Yeah, yeah... so's everyone. Look, I'll talk to you, but you gotta get rid of those. Trust me, there's people here who wouldn't understand." I removed them. "All right... what's up?"

"What's my story right now? I gotta know how I'm supposed to play."

"Okay, here's the drill. You're still a member of Raven's Gathering. You noticed he's got his own host segment nowadays, right? Well, you're involved in that this week in the background, of course. Anyway, they're starting to try to branch you out in the hopes that you'll stick around. So basically, you've got the attention of one Lash LeRoux, who's trying to win your heart over. Of course, he doesn't know what he's getting into with Raven, but he's been acting all sweet backstage. Every time he seems to be making progress, Raven steps in and hustles you away. Last week, he told me -- okay, he told Jerry Lynn -- that he was gonna march on in and the hell with Raven. So that's where we stand."

I thought it over for about a minute. "So basically, I'm torn between loyalty to Raven and a thing for Lash?"

"In a way... I mean, you want to try it, and you want to reciprocate his kindness, but Raven's... well, he's Raven. He has this hold on you. You'll see when he goes over it. The guy is incredibly clever when it comes to getting the flow of things."

"All right... you're not, uh, expecting me to be much help tonight, are you?"

"Nah, Raven's in his own world with... oh, you mean with Jeff? Well... do what you can. I brought you here because I trust you." He leaned in closer. "Believe me, Andy, I know you can do this." I took a step back and stared at him for a second. I didn't need to say a word; he knew what I was thinking. "C'mon, you're the only person here who works

for Vince and the NWA. Who else could you be but Alexis?"

I sighed. "Guilty," I said. "Now lemme prep for tonight."

08:55 PM

All four of us waited for the cue backstage. The lonely guitar chords played, and we all nodded to each other. Before heading through the curtain, Raven had one last piece of advice: "Stay loose."

We walked out, Raven leading the way as always. CM Punk and Julio Dinero -- my fellow members of the Gathering -- followed, emotionless and unconcerned. I stood behind all of them, trying to show as much emotion as I thought Alexis could get away with under the circumstances.

Raven entered the ring, pushing aside the black cloth covering the ropes as he did so. Punk and Julio slid under the ropes, grazing the cloth. They plopped down in opposite corners, their eyes transfixed on Raven's. I entered as Raven had, through the ropes, much to the Asylum crowd's disappointment. I paced back and forth behind Raven as he took the mic from a stagehand, glaring at him in the process. He shot a look at me, and I stopped and perched myself on the top rope.

"Commensurate with my status as one destined to clasp my fingers about the NWA World Title," began Raven in his trademark polysyllabic, preaching tone, "the time has come to speak with a man who spat on the legacy of this glorious championship. It is time for a man who has tried in vain to destroy me to face me once more. The moment has come for this man to promulgate his hopes for his own success and another's failures to the world. It is time for a man I loathe with every fiber of my being to step into the Nest."

Raven leaned over the cloth as Punk and Julio remained motionless. I hesitantly looked at Raven, although he had his back to me. *Here was a man who had it all and didn't even know it. His way with words is unparalleled. What I wouldn't give to have him on our side tonight.* Raven merely continued his opening address.

"It is time," he said, almost as if reading the sentence at a trial, "for one Jeff Jarrett to come to me. It is time for Jeff Jarrett to face the epoch of darkness. Jeff Jarrett, it is time for you to avail yourself of me."

Jarrett's country music chords started up as the crowd cheered their native son and top star. Jarrett slowly walked to the ring, well aware that he was outnumbered and, worse, that Raven and his minions were quite unpredictable. I saw no emotion out of either Punk nor Julio as Jarrett entered. Raven merely stared.

I took the time during this segment to examine Jarrett, as a lioness looks at her prey. Jeff was simply fired up -- but not the fire that comes from the thrill of doing one's work. Something in me told me that he seemed to be on a mission. It didn't seem to matter to him whether he personally put on a good show. There was a secondary goal when he entered the ring, but what? Before I could answer, Jeff grabbed a mic. However, before he could answer, Raven held his hand up.

"In this place," he began, "I alone allow you to speak. In the future, I recommend you still your tongue until permission is given for you to curse the ears of those about you

with your meaningless drivel. You are on my time, and you are in my world. I make the inquiries. Did I speak slowly enough for you to fully absorb my edicts?"

Jeff simply stared a hole at his quasi-adversary as a mix of cheers and boos went up in the crowd. I smiled and nodded. *That's my leader there.* Out of each corner of my eye, though, I saw nothing from my fellow followers. Jeff seemed ready to throw a punch over those few words. Instead, though, he turned Raven so that eye contact was unavoidable.

"Listen here, Raven. I came here for one reason, and one reason only... And it damn sure wasn't to take any lip from you!"

"In this place, Jeff, you will accept whatever I feel the inclination to bestow upon you..."

"Hey, I just came here to talk about Shane Douglas! I came here because I assumed maybe my view might be shared by someone with a past involving the Franchise!"

Raven almost smiled. The crowd began to buzz. I slipped off the top rope and turned around to see what was going on. Raven, oblivious, continued. "I do not share my views with those of a lower order. You and your quests do not concern me. There is no--"

At this point, it became clear to everyone what the disturbance was. Shane Douglas, with whom Jarrett was feuding, had stormed the set. Punk and Julio, finally aware of the intrusion, held Shane back for a moment before Raven flicked his hand to signal for them to let him pass. By this time, Jarrett was ready, and both men began to brawl. I ran to Raven and hid behind him, hoping not to get caught in the crossfire. He turned to me and seemed to judge with his eyes, as if to say, I'll deal with you later. *He's so good at what he does... wow.*

Douglas and Jarrett continued brawling. They slammed each other off the guardrail and around the stage as we looked on. Punk and Julio seemed only to wonder if Jarrett would return. Raven's eyes, however, told a different story. It was clear that Raven was interested only in why the spotlight was stolen from him -- why he could not control his own segment. *I wonder if there's a difference between Raven and Scott Levy... if he's always in character... if it even is a character.* Finally, they disappeared and left us alone. Raven sneered and began to speak.

"Though am I pleased to be rid of such lowly scum," he said, drawing a mixed reaction from the crowd, "this leaves us with little to discuss. Alexis..."

He stared at me. I froze where I was. There was something in Raven that transcended his character. He had a sort of magnetism that made you afraid of him, and yet respectful of him. In his face was the collection of scars of a thousand battles, and yet not one feeling of pain or regret. *My character... Punk's and Julio's too... would follow him to the ends of the earth. I wonder if any people in this building would do the same.*

"Alexis," he continued, "do you..."

Before he could finish, or even start, his thought, Louisiana music began to play. Raven whirled his head around and faced the entrance, where Lash LeRoux emerged, grinning nervously. He touched his long sideburns for luck, then strolled to the ring. I noticed his right hand carried a dozen long-stemmed roses, while he had a microphone in his left. As Raven wasn't looking, I allowed myself a smile. When Raven turned to face me, I quickly replaced it with a blank expression.

Lash continued on his way to the ring, marching through the ropes and right past

Raven. He headed for me, but Punk and Julio abandoned their posts at the corners and went to him. I held my arms out, motioning for them to stop. Lash approached and presented the roses to me. Unable to remain in Raven's grasp, I smiled and took them. I brought them to my face to take in their aroma when Raven seized them from my hands. As the crowd boomed, I held my hands in pain, as though dozens of thorns tore across the skin from the force of Raven's grasp. Unmoved by my pain, Raven turned to Lash with disdain in his eyes.

"And you mean what by this? Do you mean to entrance Alexis with gifts of love and devotion? With gifts of affection and warmth?" Raven stared at Lash, as if trying to make him fall on his knees and beg for mercy. Lash, however, was unmoved, instead showing confusion. He tilted his head to the side, as I imagined Don West asking the viewers what business this is of Raven's.

"With ahl due respect, Rayvin," Lash replied, at once cavalier and frustrated, all mixed in his Cajun drawl, "Ah simply couldn't stand that this beautiful woman be without these beautiful flowers for another solitary minute. I meant no--"

"Let me tell you what you meant, Lash," stated Raven, as if a drill sergeant berating a private who couldn't get the corners of his bed perfect. "You meant to undermine my status as Alexis's guiding force. You meant to take her from the Gathering and make her yours alone. You meant, you impudent swine, to dirty her soul with your wicked derivations from the path I have chosen for her! She will have none of it, nor shall I."

Lash stammered for a reply, but was unable to find one. He tried to walk over to me, but Punk and Julio held him back. I looked into his eyes for a second, but could feel Raven's stare through Lash and into my soul. Both of them looking for me to choose him. I could do nothing but lower my head in shame, unable to accept either fate.

Lash seemed stunned. He turned back to Raven, ready to fight for my honor. Raven held up his hand, and Punk and Julio grabbed Lash to hold him back. I walked to the corner and slumped, just as Punk and Julio had before, and as Raven did many times. Condemnation rang in Raven's words as he spoke.

"Punk, release him. Lash, hold your fire and listen. I know how to settle this. In one week's time, you will find yourself in a new world, Lash LeRoux. A world full of pain, suffering, and shame. You find yourself in a Clockwork Orange House of Fun match..."

The crowd went mad at the announcement. I merely buried my head in my hands. *What have I done? Well, I mean, what has she done? Wow, just being with Raven makes me lose sight of who I am. I wish I knew why.*

"With CM Punk! Cast him from my nest!"

Punk and Julio threw Lash to the floor. As Lash got up, he yelled at Punk about how he would make him pay. Raven gave the signal, and Punk and Julio returned to a position behind Raven. Lash went over the guardrail into the crowd to avoid what he figured was a gang beating. Raven left, with Punk and Julio behind him. I got up and slowly followed him, lowering my head as I did so. *She's let someone down... but who?*

10:15 PM

"Congratulations, boys," said Jeff as he entered. "That was one hellacious show out there. We got ourselves a bunch of kickass matches for next week, and I can tell the Asylum will be packed to the hilt with guys wanting to see the show. Now, get ready for next week, cuz we wanna make sure they have a happy holiday!"

As people began to put their stuff away, Marcus Bagwell stepped forward. "Jeff... there's something here that I... well, a lot of us... wanna talk to you about. You see, we think that, uh, well, you're really dedicated to this. In fact, some of us wonder if maybe you're... too dedicated."

"What do you mean, Buff? You think I oughta take a vacation?"

"I think you need to re-examine your life. See, what if TNA gets pulled off the air? Where are you then?"

"Well, I... I guess I'm retired. I'm workin' the occasional indy for the thrill of it."

"But where are you... inside?"

"Wh... what the hell you talkin' about?"

"Where is your spirit if this company is taken away?"

Jeff shook his head. "You ain't throwin' any of that church crap at me, are ya?"

"Jeff, it's not crap! It got me through my broken neck! There's lots of people who have their own stories. They wanna let you know. We all want you to be able to get the peace of mind that comes with being soulfully balanced."

Jeff looked around the room. "You all are in this too, huh?"

"Not I," said Punk. "This man upstairs stuff is a lot of hooley to me. But Buff's right about one thing. You've plunged yourself into this company. Money's not the answer. You gotta live right. You gotta be healthy."

"Oh, can it, CM. You know I don't smoke, and you know I'm loyal to my family. What the hell are you on anyway?"

"Jeff, you don't live to make yourself better. You're living to make this company better. You've lost who you are. Look at me. I'm focused on making myself a better person every single hour. That's something you should be doing, too."

"Yeah, fine. I can do that." Jeff turned and faced Marcus again. "But what do I need some Hellfire and Brimstone shit for in my life?"

"Is that all you think God is?" Marcus walked to his locker and grabbed a Bible. "Listen, Jeff... don't you know that God loves all of us? Don't you know that He wants you to love Him? Same with Jesus. Jesus was just like us, Jeff... well, 'cept he was the perfect role model and all..."

"Save it, Buff. I heard it all before. What's in it for me anyhow?"

"Eternal happiness."

Everyone turned around. Jerry Lynn stepped forward. "You think I could've survived being tossed from job to job, working in three separate countries, if I didn't have something to base my life around? That's what God is, Jeff. He's a railing you can balance yourself with. He's the ultimate prop, designed to keep you from falling down. I can't tell you how often I've been kept sane over in M-Pro trying to work with a culture I know nothing about... just by realizin' that we're all God's children. It makes me want to try that much harder."

"Beautiful speech, Jerry. Anyone else got a testimonial?"

About a dozen of us raised our hands. *Wow. When Stefani said she was bringing*

backup, she MEANT it.

"All right, I'll listen. Might as well humor ya."

One by one, each of us began to tell stories of how the person we were had had their faith get them through difficult times in their life. For some, it was an injury or getting fired for one of numerous offences. For others, it was a near-death experience -- Rick's tale of nearly dying in a car wreck seemed to hit home with Jeff somehow. When it came time for my turn, in the middle, I thought of who I was, and where I worked before.

"Jeff, as you know... I'm dating this guy Joey Matthews... and he used to work in this company that the Hardy Boyz started. Well, a couple months ago, I had to be there when Matt called him... to tell him Jeff died. He and I cried for hours on end. It seemed like such an unfair thing. But when we entered that church for the funeral... and we saw the images of the saints and apostles... and of Mary and Jesus... it occurred to me that Jeff may have left us, but God never did. He was going to help us get through this trying time. He would make us strong enough to handle being without him... and I... you know, I was starting to doubt my faith before then? Not any longer. Not after I... not after that day."

As finally, Julio gave his story of growing up and knowing God saved him from street life, Jeff seemed to be wavering. I couldn't tell if he was trying to come up with a reason not to believe us or a reason to believe us. However, the silence of all of us waiting for his answer was broken by Punk again.

"This is such crap," he said. "You can't believe all that God shit, can you? It's like Marx said... religion's just a drug. And I'm not about drugs. You all are deluding yourselves if you think there's some guy who loves all of you and wants all of you to join him. You're born, you die. That's IT. Don't you get it?"

Suddenly, a smaller man walked in. I had no idea if he had heard the entire conversation, but I realized no one else saw him. He was handing out towels to people as he went through. Jeff finally noticed him and turned to him. "What about you, B.P.? What do you think about God and stuff?"

B.P. looked around. He seemed nervous about answering. Finally, he spoke. "Personally? I look at kinda pragmatically. If there's no God, then whatever we believe is of no consequence. Like the Punk said, we're born and we die. But... if there is a God -- and I ain't one to say there ain't -- then by loving Him, and believing in Him, and following what He wants, we gain so much more than just trying to go it alone. It just makes sense to believe because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain... right?"

Jeff sat and thought. I could see the wheels in his head turning. "Y'all want an answer now, doncha?" A few nodded heads appeared. "Well... I don't know. I'm thinking I gotta think it over. Y'all have given me a lotta things to sort out. It's gonna be hard. But... hey, y'all make a big deal outta Christmas, doncha? Well, lemme come along to a prayer meetin' with y'all that day. I'll see if it means anythin' to me. May not be a waste o' my time after all. Alright, clear on out. They want us shut down by 12.... and I'll see y'all next Wednesday."

We all went to get our belongings. Jeff turned to leave, then stopped. "Oh, and I guess a merry Christmas too, while I'm at it." He smiled. I looked around. Other people smiled back, except for Punk who seemed confused. However, I could say with certainty that Jerry Lynn -- Stefani -- had the biggest smile of all.

Thursday, December 18, 2003, 02:35 PM
Louisville, KY

I got home early from the trip to Nashville so that I would be able to prepare some food for Valerie after her day of training. While most of OVW had Thursday off to recover from the TV show, Val insisted on going in and getting extra mic work done. She left a note saying she wanted everything to be perfect for Saturday.

I started to boil the water. *I was never a good cook while I was alive. I was a guy; just thinking about learning to cook gave me a rash. But now -- well, I guess Alexis is very good at it. There may be a benefit to working within other people. If only I could carry my capabilities from one week to the next.*

There was a knock on the door. *That's strange. I didn't think Val would be home so soon.* I went to look through the peephole and nearly squealed in delight. She knew the face, even if I didn't. I opened the door and jumped into the arms of the guy waiting for me. "Joey!" I said ecstatically. "What are... what are you doing here?"

He set me down and kissed me. "I wanted to go with you to Final Battle. You show up all the time for me -- now you have a big show, and I should show up for you."

I let him in and followed him. Joey -- Joey Matthews, one of 16 or so wrestlers who had been given the label of "the Future" -- walked over to the kitchen. "Cooking dinner already?"

"Well, it's my turn, and I wanted it to be ready for when Valerie got in," I started before turning off the water, "but I think she'll understand."

He smiled. We held hands as we walked back to the bedroom. As we approached the door, he stopped me and picked me up, carrying me into the room. I felt light as he kissed me again while setting me on the bed. I pulled him down to me as we kissed again, longer and stronger. His hands moved around my back and under my shirt.

I pressed myself closer to him as he slid my shirt up. I rolled myself on top and pulled back just long enough for him to remove it. I kissed him again, then began to play with the hem of his shirt. He moved his hands slowly, caressing my back along the way. I felt complete with him around as he went to touch my chest.

Suddenly, I gasped. His touch was no longer inviting, but alarming. He hadn't changed anything about his approach, but I began to feel cold and alert. I felt like I jumped back, even though we were still only a couple feet apart and in contact with each other.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I... I don't know..." *What was it about his touch? He loves me!* I began to search Alexis's memory banks for any indication as to what was wrong. I found nothing. "It's probably nothing," I said, sliding into his arms again. We kissed as he slid his hands down my spine. Just as he reached the pantline, though, I slapped his hands away.

"No, don't! Don't... please..."

"Are you all right? Did something happen to you?"

"It's... it's not that..." *What is it? Why am I not allowing him to have fun? Why can't I? It was just fine when I was Maven, wasn't it?* "I... I'm sorry. I guess I'm not as in the mood as I thought. Just let me... let me handle things."

"I don't understand. What did I do?"

"You're fine. It's not you, Joey. It's..." *what IS it?* "...it's me. I'm just not feeling right now. I don't know what's wrong."

"Alexis, are you hurt? I'm confused."

"I am too. I wanted to be with you so much, but... now that you're here... every time you... I just feel like I shouldn't. It's like I..."

I stopped. It hit me what the problem was. The problem wasn't with Alexis. It was with me. I didn't want Joey to touch me. I didn't want him feeling my chest or my hips or my inner thighs. I didn't want a guy doing any of that to me.

My God, no wonder I was ok with Maven and not now. Maven's a guy, and Alexis is a girl... and so was Nora.

"You what? Alexis? Is there something you need to tell me?"

My attention was snapped back to Joey. *How could I explain this to him? He'd never believe me -- and I'm not allowed to tell anyway.* "I'm sorry. But... with Amy... and what they're going through..."

Joey sat up, allowing himself to look into my eyes. "Alexis, girl, I won't do that to you. If somethin' happens to you, I want you to know I'll always be there. Why do you think I stopped right now? I want you to love me as much as I love you."

"Oh, Joey, I do," I said, feeling like I was melting from the sentiment. "But... I'm just scared."

"Of what?"

"Joey... you can't always be there. We don't run in the same circles for much longer. When the big boys call me up, I'm going to be all over the country. You'll find someone else, like Becky or Ally. It's just the way it is. You're away from someone long enough, and they leave your life for..."

He placed his fingertip on my mouth to silence me. "Not a chance. Why would I settle for them when I got you?"

I hugged him. *He's saying everything I want to hear right now. He respects me.* We fell back on the bed and remained in each other's arms.

05:14 PM

I felt a hand rustle my shoulder. I slowly looked up to see Valerie standing over the bed, smiling. I looked around. We must have fallen asleep together. My shirt was no longer the only thing I didn't have; my dignity was missing, too.

"Val!"

Joey woke up as well, confused and embarrassed. "Hi, Valerie. Um..."

She laughed. "Oh, you two go ahead. Just wanted ta letcha know I was home. I'll be in the living room if ya need me. Just make sure to keep the door closed and not be too loud."

I looked at her, almost in shock. She laughed as she walked out, closing the door behind her. I looked at Joey and smiled. "I've never felt more at home than in your arms right now."

"Me too," he said.

07:35 PM

We slowly woke up to the smell of meat being cooked floating through the apartment suite. I got up and put my shirt back on, then helped Joey out of bed. We kissed again, then went to join Valerie. She was in the kitchen, prepping a big meal for the three of us.

"Val, it's my day you know."

"Oh, don't worry, girl," she said. "This is so totally my honor. Besides, I figured you'd be too tired to cook anyway," she added with a wink.

My eyes went wide as I stared at her. "Val, what's that all about?"

She giggled. "Take a joke, Lexi. You're fine. Now, get the good wine out of the fridge. It should be just the right temperature for the meal. Joey, you are going to LOVE this."

Joey leaned over the grill and took a deep breath. "Oh, yeah, this is the kind of cooking I can live with! Wait..." he looked at Valerie suspiciously, "there isn't any of that new age crap in here, is there?"

"Joey!"

"Well, I had to ask."

We all laughed and spent the evening talking and eating and reminiscing. It was so much fun we almost forgot that SmackDown! was on. Almost.

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Dec. 18 / 03, taped Dec. 16.

- From Jacksonville, FL.

- Your hosts are **Michael Cole** and **Tazz**.

- Opening match: **Matt Hardy** v. **Ultimo Dragon**. Matt Facts: Matt has a high sperm count, and Matt is a bachelor again. Okay, seriously, WWE, either shit or get off the pot here, because this is getting loony. Hardy goes after Dragon to start, but Dragon ducks a lariat and scores a rana. Handstand headscissors and handspring elbow send Matt out, and the Asai moonsault follows. Outside, Matt sends Ultimo into the STEEL steps and German suplexes him on the floor. Yeah, I don't think Yoshi needed his cervical vertebrae anyhow. Back in, it gets two. Matt with the yodelling legdrop for two. DDT gets two. Ultimo gets a legsweep and drop toehold to take over, and a standing moonsault gets two. To the top, but Matt grabs him, and the two fight over a superplex, which Ultimo wins by reversing in mid-air for a crossbody for two. Ultimo chops Matt into oblivion, then tries the ropeflip Asai DDT, but Matt ducks and Ultimo splats near the ropes. Matt pins him (with feet on the ropes) at 6:54. **Tajiri** runs in and goes ballistic afterward with kicks. Yeah, Matt doesn't need to get over or anything, considering he's the MOST ENTERTAINING HEEL ON THE ROSTER. God, I hate **Vince**. ***

- And **Stephanie** is back. Did we need her? She announces what we knew from last week: **Angle** and **Hogan** will meet at the Rumble. Again, I fail to see the point, since it's almost impossible to get a good match out of Hulk anyway. Meanwhile, tonight those two want to team up, so they get **Haas** and **Benjamin** in the main event. That might be good, if the right people don't wrestle. Oh well -- the WWE doesn't listen to anyone but **Vince** anyway.

- **Los Maximos** v. **Rob Van Dam** and **Goldust**. This can only help in the long run, since Goldust knows how to put a match together and RVD is crazy over, so the Maximo boys can learn from them. **Jose** starts with Goldy, and he gets in a leg lariat and rana. Goldust ducks a dropkick and scores with a sliding punch. Jose gets a swinging neckbreaker, then **Joel** hits a corkscrew moonsault for two. The boys switch off freely, never really tagging in and out and confusing the hell out of the referee. Jose gets a dropkick to Goldust's knee, then Joel scores a Thesz press off the top for two. Goldust is put in the Tree of Woe, and both Maximos gets baseball slides. Jose scores with a neckbreaker out of the Tree of Woe (ouch) for two. Joel adds a senton bomb for two. Jose goes for a sunset flip, but Goldust punches him down and gets a powerslam, hot tag RVD. RVD goes aerial with Jose, sending him down with a flying knee to the face. Joel gets a belly-to-belly, and both Maximos bail straight into an RVD pescado. Jose returns to the ring via a guillotine on Goldust, so Goldy comes in and punches him down. RVD gets a springboard crossbody on Jose, but Joel saves and the Maximos get a double suplex for two. Goldust tosses Joel and hits Shattered Dreams on Jose, but Joel tries to come off the top only to be caught by Goldust for a powerslam at 7:03. Total Nonstop Action that Jarrett's group WISHES they could put together. ***3/4 See what happens when you put people like the Maximos in there with actual wrestlers like RVD and Goldust as opposed to more spot monkeys like the X Division?

- **John Cena** talks about how he owns **Rhyno** in every way possible, including two or three we don't hear up in Canada. Rhyno enters the ring with a counterargument ("You suck") and the two brawl. As Rhyno heads to the back, Cena tells him to join the Rumble and feel the thug pain, which Rhyno accepts. So that's four guys now in the Rumble, counting **HBK** and **Booker** from RAW. Oh, and **HHH**, too, so five.

- **Eddie Guerrero** v. **Rey Misterio**. I don't think this'll touch their Halloween Havoc classic. Eddie punches him down on the outside to start, including a trip to the Lo Rider. Rey vaults off the Lo Rider and gets a rana. Back in the ring, Eddie gets a clothesline for two. Splash Mountain is maneuvered out of, as Rey lands on his feet and gets a seated dropkick on Eddie. Eddie staggers straight into a crossbody for two. Rey gets a headscissors into an armbar, but Eddie counters with a Samoan drop. Eddie gets the slingshot senton for two. Rey decides to borrow YOU CAN'T POWERBOMB **KIDMAN** for two. Rey goes up top and gets a spinkick for two. Eddie gets a modified chokeslam (!) for two, and keeps choking away. The crowd cheers him anyway. Eddie is my hero. Eddie rips at the mask and nearly gets it off, but Rey bails and hides under the ring as we go to commercial. We come back with Rey airballing on the West Coast Pop, and Eddie pinning him for two. El Paso Lasso, but Rey makes the ropes. Eddie puts his head down,

and Rey backflips over him into an Edge-O-Matic for two. Eddie bails, so Rey gets a somersault hilo to wow the crowd. Back in, Rey forearmms Eddie and gets a handspring mule kick for two. Now that's different. Eddie hits a German suplex for two, then the rolling verticals. Rey slides down on the third one, into a rollup for two. Eddie reverses the rollup and has the tights for three at 13:44. CHEAT TO WIN~! Match seemed to have no real flow to it, but it still rocked. ***1/4 Eddie then announces he'll win the Rumble to a HUGE pop. This is going to make the **Angle/Hogan** match very interesting, because they've been building Angle as Eddie's opponent, but Angle is doing great as a face. Hogan would be a good heel against Eddie, but given the X8 match, I don't know if they CAN turn him heel anymore. So that leaves three faces feuding for the belt entering WrestleMania, which is never good.

- **Undertaker** v. **Brock Lesnar**. Well, it's Rumble time, so I guess Callaway needs some ego stroking as we head to Mania. It'll be interesting to see how they do this. Lesnar does some amateur wrestling to start, into a legbar. Taker reverses by kicking Lesnar flush in the face, then grabs a headlock. Lesnar tries to throw Taker off, but Taker hangs on, so Lesnar turns it into a pinning combo for two. Taker grabs the arm, but Lesnar yanks it away and switches to a full nelson with bodyscissors. Taker makes the ropes. Lesnar tries a fireman's carry, but Taker hangs onto the arm and rolls through into an armbar. Lesnar bridges out and mounts Taker, but Taker interrupts the ground'n'pound with the goozle. Lesnar fights it off with elbow strikes to the arm, then wraps the arm around the ropes. Lesnar tries a Fujiwara armbar, but Taker blocks and goes for a front chancery. Lesnar tries to tackle Taker down, but Taker calmly sidesteps and goes for a forearm shiver with the bad arm. Lesnar does a 1/2 nelson on the bad arm into a rollup for two. Taker grabs Lesnar's leg and goes for a spinning toehold, but Lesnar powers out of it. Taker returns to a headlock, adding a few quick twists which Brock sells. Lesnar punches at Taker's bicep, then tries something vaguely resembling the Rings of Saturn, but Taker's feet are in the ropes. A frustrated Lesnar goes for a clothesline, but Taker ducks and gets a few punches to Lesnar's neck, followed by a dragon sleeper for the tapout at 5:54. No better or worse than any other worked-shoot fight I've seen. *1/4 Of course, Taker outwrestles the wrestler, but I'll let it go for now.

- **Shelton Benjamin** and **Charlie Haas** critique the last match in the back, then promise they'll outdo it in the main event.

- **Paul London** and **Nova** v. **A.P.A.** Remember these guys? Didn't think so. Nova and **Simmons** start, and Nova gets an enzuigiri right off the bat. London in, and a dropkick and bulldog follow. Simmons with a powerslam, but Nova dives off the top and legdrops Simmons on the way to the hot tag. London gets a Russian legsweep for two. London Bridge gets two. Nova back in, but Simmons gets the Angry Man Spinebuster, hot tag **Bradshaw**. Fallaway slam for Nova, but London gets a superkick to stop Bradshaw. Spin Doctor finishes at 3:42. This was there. 1/2*

- **Kurt Angle** promo. He says that **Guerrero** is simply another sore loser whom no one can respect. He claims that he'll face **Hogan** and be a man, win or lose. Tonight, someone will tap out. If this is building towards an Angle heel run, it would solve a lot of

problems. I wonder if it'll work though.

- Main event: **Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin v. Kurt Angle and The Orange Goblin**. A reader requested I bring the nickname out of mothballs, so that's for him. Hogan, of course, isn't stinking up the joint like he used to -- clearly he's been keeping in great shape -- but it's still hard to imagine he'll be of much use one-on-one. Anyway, Haas and Angle start, and Angle gets a headlock takedown into an armbar. Haas stands up and reverses to a wristlock, and Angle gets a jawbreaker. Hogan enters and punches away, then gets the ten punches and bite. Shelton clotheslines Hogan down, and Haas goes for a leglock, but Hogan kicks him off. Angle back in, and Shelton tackles him from behind as Hogan argues. Shelton gets a gutbuster as Angle plays Ricky Morton to no one's shock. WGTT get the leapfrog choke while the ref is distracted. Haas enters with a German suplex for two. Doomsday Device gets two, Hogan saves. Haas tries an Angle Slam, but Angle flips out of it and DDTs Haas. Shelton cuts off the hot tag, though, and WGTT get a superkick into a German suplex for two. Angle runs chest-first into the turnbuckle, and Haas rolls him up (feet on the ropes) for two. Shelton superkicks Angle again, but the 450 misses, hot tag Hogan. Punches for everyone! Hogan eats boot on a charge, and WGTT get their atomic drop/superkick finisher for... two. Hulk up, but Angle gets flipped into the ring as the ref loses control. Hogan and Angle do a Doomsday Device on Haas, but Shelton ducks a Hogan lariat, which Angle takes. Angle and Hogan get into an argument, and WGTT dropkick Hogan into Angle, then roll up Hogan for the pin at 11:54. Angle and Hogan milk the dissent for all it's worth. *3/4

The Bottom Line:

Well, the wrestling was great in the first hour and okay in the second, which makes this a positive show in my book. However, if they're going to do something with Matt/Hurricane, the Rumble is the time to do it. Otherwise, a lot of people are going to be wondering what the heck is going on.

Oh, and that Hogan guy might want to try working, too. It's all the rage.

Friday, December 19, 2003, 12:44 PM
Louisville, KY

"Okay, everyone, that's lunch!" Cornette blew his whistle and dismissed us. Valerie and I went over to the side, where we unpacked our bags and began to eat. Joey was watching the practice, lost in thought. I called him over.

"Something on your mind, hon?"

"Yeah, there is," he said. "I've been in negotiations with a group in Japan called Wrestling Marvelous Future. They're thinking of signing me. It could be the big break I'm looking for... but..."

"But what? This is what you've wanted, isn't it? You always talked about being seen over there."

"Yeah... but after what you said to me yesterday, I don't know. I feel like I should go ahead and decline. I... I don't want to drift from you, Alexis. I really don't. That's the last thing we need."

"Thanks. But you have my permission. Follow your dream." I kissed him to let him know I meant it. Joey remained by my side as we ate, preparing for the weekend in our bodies, our minds, and most importantly, our hearts.

Saturday, December 20, 2003, 06:45 PM
Cincinnati, OH

We were backstage at the Gardens. Nerves were running high. A lot of the women were wondering if this would be the time they'd be declared ready for the Big Stage. We all knew Jim Cornette held our future in our hands. Some of us were more acutely aware of it than others.

"You know, it doesn't matter if we make the WWE, does it," asked Nattie Neidhart, attempting to stifle a grin. A member of the Hart family legacy through her mother, she had been born and raised in the Stampede region and was blazing a trail for the next generation of Harts -- or so she claimed. Others didn't see it that way.

"Just who do you think you're kidding?" Gail was frustrated, and everyone saw it. She had been to the top of the charts and was now back down to nothing. Her sudden demotion -- coming a few weeks after her humiliating loss at Survivor Series -- caught most of the women by surprise. *Not me.*

"Look, are you doing what you love? Isn't that enough?"

"Is it? Answer me this: are you happier back in Calgary or here in OVW? The door's open for you to leave at any time."

"Girl, calm down," said Jacqueline, maintaining her character's level of sass even off-camera. "We all ain't big dreamers here."

"And what about you? Don't you wanna go back to where you don't need to wrestle? You're so damn lucky -- all you need is to show off your tits and Vince will give you a job."

"Femmes, femmes, s'il vous plait," muttered Precious Lucy, the champion who moonlighted with the Rougeau-owned FLI. "Each of us has our own path to glory. It doesn't matter what our goals are -- we are here. We have a show. We need to do a show well, non?"

"Hey, she's right," I added. "Look, this may be my last time down here, so I want it to count, you got that? I don't want any jealousy to get into whether or not people are moving up or stuck where they don't belong or anything like that. If you let that affect you tonight, you're gonna have a lousy show, and then you'll never get the call."

"Nice to see some of us are still motivated," snapped Gail. "What do you need the call for? You got Raven to fall back on."

"Hey -- that's not the issue here. The issue is that we have to focus on this show. I'm on TV on Wednesdays as much as anyone else here. In fact, I have more pressure -- I don't get a bad day. I don't get to be edited out if I screw up. I'm here, all the time, and nothing can stop it. You wanna trade schedules, Gail?"

"Hey -- one month ago you'd have killed to be in my spot. You know it. I've been seen by crowds 10 times this size. Where have you been?"

"Hey, hey -- what's with all the bitterness?" Victoria stared at the both of us. "You don't hear me complaining, do you? I mean, it doesn't matter, but... look, Alexis is right about one thing. We gotta focus. We gotta be the best out there. Let's make the men jealous, shall we?"

There was an uneasy silence as we looked around. Finally, Brittany Summers spoke up. "I dunno about you, but I wanna kick ass tonight! Let's go!"

07:22 PM

On my last night in OVW, I am in the first match. That just ain't right. Our opponents, Brittany Summers and Miss Natural, awaited in the ring. I turned to my partner -- Nattie -- and smiled. "You ready?"

"Of course I am. Let's have fun." That's the attitude I need!

We headed to the ring as my RoH music, "Seven Nation Army", kicked up. The crowd let out a huge cheer as I exited the backstage and came to the arena. I did a full spin on the way to the ring, then waited in the aisle for my partner. As the Hart Foundation's old music began, Nattie Neidhart joined me, charging the whole way. We both slid in and did stereo dropkicks on our foes. The bell rang.

Summers yelled on the outside as the referee moved me back to my corner. Miss Natural slid in and began pounding on Nattie, screaming all the time. Summers tagged in and grabbed a DDT, then covered for two. Summers struck away at Nattie as the crowd seemed bored. *This match is going nowhere fast. I can see why they gave the girls time to work together, but what am I doing here? Oh yeah, Alexis is leaving soon... whatever, Corny.*

Natural and Summers worked together on a double suplex, and again Nattie kicked out at two. Natural went for a cobra clutch, but Nattie bealed her over, then dropkicked her in the back of the head. She got up and, without much trouble, tagged me in. The crowd got excited again -- *I guess they like that someone competent is in the match* -- as I kicked away at Natural, then knocked Summers off the apron. Natural charged me, but I caught her with a back body drop, then a shining wizard as she got up. *Might as well use something I learned from all my other times around the horn.* I covered Natural, but Summers broke it up.

Nattie returned, and she tossed Summers from the ring. At this point, I looked at Nattie. "Let's do it now," I said. She beamed, then went for Miss Natural. We were going to perform something we had discussed as a finish backstage. Nattie held Natural up, much as her famous father before her had done. I bounced off the ropes and charged at Natural, leaping up and clotheslining her as Nattie fell forward. The Hart Attack lived again. I covered, and the crowd counted three.

We both celebrated in the ring, but it wasn't to last. Gail Kim, who was to face Precious Lucy for the Women's Title later that night, ran into the ring and stared me down. Tensions were high in the ring as the crowd watched. Thankfully for everyone involved, Gail simply smiled and hugged me. The other women in the match lifted me on

their shoulders as I took in the cheers of the crowd. For them, it was the loss of one of their own. For me, it was time to move on.

09:54 PM

It had been a long night. Everyone brought their best game, and Cornette was beaming with pride. Divine Storm won the tag belts from Kenny Bolin's henchmen with help from Shannon Ward, who was somehow able to hit her Frankenscreamer on Buchanan during a melee. Precious Lucy was still women's champ, while Johnny Jeter beat John Hennigan to retain the TV Title. The big news, however, was Carly Colon becoming the new OVW champion over Eric Angle -- news which meant that Angle might have been ready for a call-up soon.

As we all packed our bags and headed our separate ways, Valerie stopped me at the exit. "Um, just so you know, I'm gonna miss you," she said, dropping her Valley act and simply being herself. "You've taught me a lot in the short time I've been here, and I hope you succeed up in the big time. I want you to do well -- but I won't lie. It'll be nice to see you come back." She smiled. "Have fun in Philadelphia. I'm rooting for you."

I was touched. I didn't expect such an outpouring from someone who rarely took herself seriously. After all I had been through -- not just this week, but overall -- I couldn't believe that I wasn't expecting this. I didn't know how to react. My mind was racing as I put my last belongings in Joey's truck as we headed for Philly. I turned and hugged Val. "I'm gonna miss you, kid," I said.

"Hey," she responded, "what are friends for? Keep in touch, girl."

Sunday, December 21, 2003, 10:55 AM
Philadelphia, PA

We arrived early at the Murphy Rec Centre to let Rob Feinstein know we were here. As we got out of the truck, I stopped dead in my tracks. A familiar face was in line for tickets.

"Joey," I said, prodding him, "check out who's here."

Joey took a look and nearly dropped his bags in surprise. "Is that Matt?"

"Yeah... what's he doing here?"

"I guess the WWE's taking Christmas off. Man, I had no idea that..."

"Neither did I. You think we should talk to him?"

"Now? I'm not sure that's a smart idea. I mean, he's not exactly... well... you know, why not, Alexis? Let's go see how he's doing."

We walked over to him, trying to remain inconspicuous the whole time. Matt was at the ticket office, and had his ticket in hand, as he headed back to his car. Joey stepped up the pace and tried to cut him off, but Matt kept walking. Finally, I simply called out, "Matt!"

Matt, startled, looked up, nearly banging heads with Joey as he did so. He saw us

and smiled. "Hey, guys... ready to go tonight?"

"Yeah," said Joey, "but... but what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I just figured I'd show up and watch you guys as part of my vacation. Seeing as I have no one really to go home to... not anymore... well..." he faded. I looked at Joey. *What do I say?*

"Matt, I'm sorry. This can't be easy."

He took a deep breath. "You know... Jeff was just... he was such a good guy. I can't believe that I... it's not right." He was near tears. "And as if that's not enough... what happened with... with Amy... God, I hate this."

Joey put his arm around Matt's shoulder. "It's okay, Matt. It really is. Go ahead and cry."

"No... I can't. I'm a man. Look, the thing is... I just wish I coulda talked to them and... and maybe this would all be different. If only I insisted Jeff not have one more match. I never knew he... he would slip like that. It's so scary. I don't understand why God is doing this to me."

I sat down on the car roof and held Matt's head in my arms. "Matt," I said, "it's not that. You're not being punished. Everything happens for a reason. Why would you think God is punishing you? Jeff's the dead one, and Amy's the pregnant one. How is that your punishment?"

He looked me in the eyes, his tears beginning to subside while his frustration grew. "Because I have to live with it! I have my entire life ahead of me and no brother to share it with! I was in love -- you hear me? IN LOVE -- with Amy, and she ruined it all. I don't know if I can look her in the eye again. She stabbed me in the back. They all did!"

"Easy, Matt, easy," called Joey as he moved in on the situation. "Matt, you'll move on. The first year is always the hardest. But time will get better. You'll find someone new. You and Amy just weren't meant to be, that's all. Alexis and I may not be meant to be. It all happens."

My ears perked up as I heard that last statement. *We what? Is he upset over Thursday night? I though I explained that! Wait, no I didn't. But I... it's not her fault. Does he really think she doesn't love him?*

Matt, however, interrupted and provided a discourse. "Joey, I appreciate the sentiment, but it's not that easy. You've never had your heart really, honestly ripped out of your chest. It's happened to me, not just once, but twice. And it happened because of two people I thought would never betray me.

Jeff said we would always be together. He was telling me we'd be 40 and we'd be teaming up or going against each other every step of the way. He wanted to get back on his feet -- I could tell he was ready to start again. But he lied. He wasn't going to get back on his feet. He was never going to get on his feet again. The bastard left me -- this was his repayment for all the times I took care of him!

And Amy... she was by my side the whole time. But after Jeff died, she started acting strange. Like she was scared. I thought it was just because she lost control when we were all together. Hey, that happens, all right? But she went and got pregnant. That sort of shit doesn't happen from one time -- you gotta work at it. How long was she sleeping with him, anyway? Don't you know? How long?"

"Matt, stop!" Joey's eyes indicated a disgust with the proceedings. "Matt, don't blame them. You don't know. You're making yourself into a victim here. What about

Amy? She's homeless right now because she's scared of you. What about Jeff? How do you think he feels looking down from Heaven and seeing you dissolve into beating up on his friend? Matt, for your sake, you gotta turn it around. Now."

As Joey and Matt argued, I saw something. My eyes went wide. I hopped down from the car and grabbed my bags. Joey and Matt saw me. Joey called after me, "Where are you going?"

"Don't mind me," I said. "I have to check in with Rob." In truth, I had seen something else that made me think it was time to do an end run and keep a full-blown incident from occurring. Two people had just walked up to the ticket counter and ordered tickets for tonight's show. Matt hadn't seen them, and with any luck, he wouldn't. I raced after them as they headed to where Matt was. They saw him and began to talk amongst themselves when I arrived.

"David, Amy," I said, short of breath, "we should move on." Quickly, I took them aside and led them to a lunch location, where Matt would never know they had already arrived and would be seeing the same show he was. *I don't know where everyone's sitting tonight, but I do know that we're one step away from a first-class blowout. That's the last thing that needs to happen here.*

Sunday, December 21, 03:44 PM
Philadelphia, PA

Ring of Honor Presents
ROH FINAL BATTLE 2003
Live from the Murphy Rec Center, Philadelphia, PA

MAIN EVENT
ROH WORLD TITLE
ELIMINATION RULES
Samoa Joe © vs. CM Punk vs. Christopher Daniels

FOUR-WAY BATTLE FOR THE #1 CONTENDERS TROPHY
Danny Maff vs. Mark Briscoe vs. Kid Kash vs. Frankie Kazarian

I QUIT MATCH
Homicide vs. Steve Corino

ROH TAG TEAM TROPHIES
TAKA Michinoku and Men's Teioh © vs. Psychosis and Super Crazy

LAREE'S LAST HURRAH
Alexis Laree vs. Simply Luscious

PLUS
* AJ Styles vs. Bryan Danielson

- * Raven vs. Trent Acid
- * BJ Whitmer vs. Matt Stryker
- * Joey Matthews vs. Jimmy Yang

Showcase Matches start at 6:00 PM

Main show begins at 7:00 PM

Tickets are \$12, \$10, \$8, \$5

Call 214-xxx-xxxx or visit www.rfvideo.com for more information

I stared at the flyer over and over as David and Amy were off sightseeing. I didn't want to think about the match I had -- that would take care of itself. Luscious was fully capable of doing a good match, and Corino was certain to be at ringside to help her out. I was more capable than most female wrestlers, and the outcome was never in doubt. Instead, I began to think about Amy.

This is crazy. I set her up with David. We both needed a rebound -- a morale boost. We got it. Now, I'm wondering if I should've just let them both go their separate ways.

Why did I kiss him? Why did I do that? David's not right for her. She needs someone stable -- that's one thing David's never been. He's always doing something psychotic, always living on the edge of sanity...

Hang on, what am I saying? That's his character. You know the real David is a sweet, young, innocent kid. He's just someone who wants someone. Isn't that what we all want? Isn't that what you want?

Lindsay. What is she thinking about me right now? I've been so far away from her, and I'm thinking of everyone else's romance. I should be thinking about me, and my life, too! I've done so much to hurt her recently, and she's taking it so well... but is she setting me up?

She's gonna snap. She has to. I can't believe she's taking this so well. What's her secret? What's her perspective? What does she know that I don't? Maybe she's... what if... oh no, I can't wonder that. It's not right.

I'm so scared. I haven't seen her in so long, and now I'm... I'm getting jealous of what I did! That's basically it! But why? What's wrong with me? Quick, think -- what have you been through?

I was Lita and I dated David. I was Maven and I had an encounter with Trish. Now I'm Alexis, and I'm dating Joey. Just once, I'd like to be able to be with Lindsay -- somehow. Just once.

Wait, what am I saying? I was just with her, over vacation! Man, that seems like another lifetime -- another afterlifetime, even. It's because of Darren. He's messing with me. Even from the cell, he is. Everything I do, I feel like it's a mistake because of him. Why can't I just wipe that from my memory?

Well, I guess I could! But it would require wiping everything out. My time here -- gone. My friendship with Owen -- gone. Poor Kathleen's lesson -- gone. And Lindsay -- she'd be long gone. Even if we met, she'd never really think of me. She'd move on like that. I don't want to make that sacrifice.

Life is about the good and the bad, and taking them together. Life isn't about picking and choosing which you want and which you want to get rid of. I'm the sum of all my weaknesses and all my strengths. I saved Scott, but I lost Nora. I helped Lindsay and ruined Kathleen. I can't hide from it. It wouldn't be right, no matter how nice it would be.

I closed my eyes and got a quick nap.

"Hello? Alexis?"

"Hm? Who's there? Is it Monday yet?"

"Not quite. I just need to talk to someone."

"About what?"

"Well, it's about Joey."

"Oh -- yeah, he's a hottie, isn't he?"

"Well, I guess... but that's not what I'm thinking of."

"What is?"

"I don't know what he thinks of you -- and it's my fault. I cut him off while we were in bed."

"Oh... what did you say to him?"

"That I couldn't. Not after what happened to Amy."

"Uh-huh."

"Will he understand?"

"I think he will. But I don't know if I do."

"Didn't you hear?"

"Well, yeah, I heard, but... that shouldn't bother me. I mean, I trust Joey. I trust him completely. He'd always be there. We're gonna get married, you know."

"Right... as soon as he comes back from Japan, I'm sure."

"Japan? What would he want to do there?"

"Oh, you weren't awake to find out. He... he's been talking to one of the groups in Japan -- I forget which. He might be leaving for a few dates on tour. Something he can do while you're with the WWE, you know?"

"Oh... right. Well, I guess that makes sense..."

"You don't sound too thrilled."

"It's just that he always wanted to be a superstar. He wanted to enter the WWE. But he can't do that if he's always on tour in Japan. They don't take anyone with overseas commitments. It's too much pay."

"Well, it may only be for this year."

"Perhaps... but then what? What if he likes it? What if he wants to stay there? You know all about what that Low Ki guy is doing, moving to Japan. I don't want Joey to be like that. He's my boyfriend -- he's supposed to be with me."

"Are you jealous?"

"Of him? No! Why would I be? I have my own career. I have my own life. You know this. I want him to be by my side, but... well, I expect him to sacrifice some."

"Shouldn't he expect the same from you, then?"

"Well, when we get married, I'll be the one taking years off the road at a time for the family, won't I? That's my sacrifice. The least he can do is accept working close to

home for my benefit."

"Have you talked to him about this?"

"Well, we're not ready to get married, so I don't think it has to be an issue yet. Besides, if he goes to Japan, then I'll get worried. Till then, he's still my Joey."

"Right."

I opened my eyes. *HER Joey? Oh dear.*

08:34 PM

"Seven Nation Army" struck up for the second time in two days, as I walked out of the curtain. I expected to be greeted with the usual face reaction. Instead, I was nearly booed out of the Murphy Rec Center. I entered the ring and looked around, almost in surprise. *What is this? What did I do to them? Oh, that's right...*

I didn't even hear Corino's music play. I just saw him entering the ring. He took a mic and stood beside me. My opponent and his manager/girlfriend, Simply Luscious, looked on.

"You people oughta be ashamed of yourself. This lady is following her dreams, and you should respect that. I thought this was a ring of honor! Apparently, you're the same selfish, pathetic, Philly lowlifes who thought the ECW Arena was the Temple of the Arc of the Covenant! People need to live! She's working three jobs just to make ends meet! Now, with one signature, she'll never be hungry again, and all you people care about is that you'll never see her tits bouncing around in the ring for your juvenile enjoyment. You make me sick! You know what? You can forget about my match. Homicide, I'm sorry to let you down, but it's off. I'll see you in a more deserving venue!"

He flipped off the crowd and walked away. Luscious and I remained in the ring, surrounded by jeers. A huge "You Sold Out" chant erupted at me. I could see Luscious staring at me, wondering what to do. I was tempted to just start playing heel and let it be.

Then, they got worse. It started in the back row and was filtering its way down. It was the kind of thing that would make most people cringe, but in Philadelphia, it was considered the pinnacle of wit. After about thirty seconds, I stood in the middle of a sea of fans, all of whom were following the lead of someone in the balcony, and all of whom were saying the same thing.

"Two Bit Whore! Two Bit Whore! Two Bit Whore!"

I couldn't stand to be out there. I buried my face in my hands, hoping this was a nightmare that would go away. I felt tears in my eyes. I felt a kind hand on my shoulder, and only momentarily looked up to see Luscious offering her consolation. I thanked her, but I couldn't face her or anyone else. Everything was a mess.

Then, the booing turned to cheering. It became louder. I couldn't see what was happening, because of the tears in my eyes, but another individual had entered the ring. He threw his hands up, and the crowd began cheering even louder. It wasn't until a "Version 1" chant began that I realized what had happened.

"Now that I have your attention," Matt began after ripping the mic out of Gary Michael Capetta's hands, "I wanna say that you people need to think about what you've just done. Doesn't it bother you that she's crying now because of you? This person is my friend. I am honored to have her be that. I am humbled that she would look upon me as a friend. And when someone makes my friend feel miserable, I will do something about it. Tonight, I see a couple thousand people who deserve to be made miserable.

Let me make this clear -- in this city, down the road at the Spectrum, all of you gave me a standing ovation for the courage I displayed and in a show of solidarity for my brother, God rest his soul. But when he came here, and when he gave his heart to all you Ring of Honor fans, you told him you hated him. You refused to cheer him. You wouldn't show him the slightest amount of respect. The instant he stepped into the ring, you wanted him to leave. Lemme ask -- what had he done to you? Nothing. But you rejected him.

Now, what has Alexis here done to you? Nothing! She is going to be back. She'll be back when we visit again. Hell, the Royal Rumble's coming here in a little over a month. And I'm sure that all you fans who are out here questioning her lifestyle will be standing as one and starting some R-O-H chant when she walks through the curtain in the Wachovia Center. When she leaves, you treat her like shit! But when she visits, you treat her as a guest of honor.

Well, which is it, Philadelphia? Which is she? Make up your fucking minds! Either you love her or you hate her. Choose now. But let me tell you this: if you love her, then what you did was uncalled for and pathetic. And if you hate her, then I hope she never graces this hellhole with her presence again, and that'll go double for me! This isn't Version 1 talking to you; this is Matt Fucking Hardy! Now, do I have your attention?"

The crowd, which had begun by cheering him like there was no tomorrow, were now throwing garbage into the ring. One person even jumped the guardrail to take on Matt. Matt tackled him and began punching him down. All around me, things were falling into chaos. I saw Gabe Saplosky at ringside, motioning for us to head to the back. We did so, as Rob Feinstein emerged from behind the curtain and the crowd began singing "Na na na na" at me. The show was heading to an early intermission.

10:44 PM

I didn't go back out. I couldn't. They had already rejected me. Mine was to be the last match before the intermission -- instead, it never took place. This was supposed to be my fond farewell -- it was a nightmare. Luscious looked at me, and I could see her biting her lip in our private locker room.

"I'm telling you, what they did out there was fucking stupid," she said. "It's not just that we couldn't wrestle -- it's that they think so goddamn highly of themselves. Man, what's next? Will they shit all over someone like Homicide when he jumps? Is anyone safe?"

I didn't respond. I was still hurt. The echoes of that chant -- *I can't even think of what it says without feeling like I'm hurting her again* -- rang through my head. I was livid. I was also very upset. I wanted to go home again.

There was a knock on the door. "We're okay," Luscious called out. Rob Feinstein entered. He was still the young, ambitious man I knew from when I visited him at Michael's as Teddy Long. This time, though, he seemed different. The anger in his face when he talked about Vince was there now, but it was accompanied by a frustration -- and, if you saw it the right way, shame.

"Alexis... I'm so sorry. You deserve better. You really do. I can't believe they'd... after all this time. I thought they were better than this."

"It's okay, RF. You didn't control them. They did this on their own. I'm just glad Matt was there to put them in their place."

"Yeah... I admire the guy. He told it like it was. This is one thing I couldn't stand. If only we'd just... I don't know. The ECW crowd would always respect you after the match. They always would chant things like "Please Don't Go" and stuff. I don't get why it changed. I don't blame you for refusing to perform."

"Thanks... I guess. I just wish Steve hadn't..."

"He did what I told him to. He wasn't leaving. They hadn't personally insulted him. But I think he was holding back. He said he wanted to do it right in Dayton. I don't blame him -- this crowd doesn't deserve to see the blowoff. Not the way they behaved."

"So, what, Rob? Are we gonna stick to the Rex?"

"No... no, we'll be back here. In a couple months, I'll just lead off with a message as myself. I hope they listen. I hope they understand. We had such high hopes for this show, and... dammit. I'm sorry. I really am."

"It's okay, RF. Like I said, you weren't under control. Anyway, I gotta go. I don't know if I could stay here."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, neither can Joey."

I turned around in surprise, halfway out the door. "What?"

"He quit. He said he didn't want to work in this town again. He was saying he didn't care if he never made the big time or if he was stuck in Southern California for the next 20 years. I still remember his exact words: 'No one who does that to her deserves to see me.' He's a good man, Alexis. You're very lucky."

"Thanks... I guess... well, bye, RF. And thank you for the opportunity."

"Thank you, Alexis. And I don't care what these fans say -- you're welcome back to Ring of Honor any time you want."

I turned around and walked out the door. As I headed to the exit, Joey was waiting for me. He held his arms out and accepted me in a loving embrace. I broke down in tears all over again. "Thank you," I sputtered out.

"It's all right."

We headed out the door, where a few fans had gathered. "Alexis," one of them said. I didn't even look up. "Alexis, we're sorry. We don't condone what happened in there. That ain't what Philly's all about, it really ain't. We love you, girl. We can't wait for you to come back at the Rumble."

I looked up through tear-stained eyes. "Thanks, guys," I said meekly before burying my head in Joey's arms again. The fans started a "We Love Laree" chant as we walked to Joey's truck. I saw Matt waiting there, along with David and Amy. They all hugged me in turn, adding their condolences and sympathies.

As I got in, I turned around to wave goodbye to all of them. I sat in the truck as Joey talked to the three of them about that night. I didn't hear it all, but one thing Matt

said stuck with me for a long time.

"Yeah, I'm still kinda mad at her. But that's not important right now. In fact, it's kinda hard to be mad after seeing what an asshole you can be when you kick someone out. We'll talk about it, don't worry. I guess I needed a reality check. Heck, David invited me over for the holidays, so... I guess I just want to be her friend, that's all. I don't know if I can love her, but I'm not throwing away three years either."

Monday, December 22, 2003, 05:45 AM
Stamford, CT

I woke up slowly and looked around. I couldn't make sense of where I was -- it all looked so unfamiliar. I walked over to the window and looked outside. I was about ten stories up.

"You up, honey?"

I turned around. A woman was looking back at me, smiling a beautiful smile. I knew her face, and immediately, I knew me. Still, I had to answer.

"Yeah, I... I just figured I'd start getting some working out in."

"Could you wait a couple hours? I'll go join you."

"Sure. Just lemme wake up."

I walked over to the dresser and got a workout uniform on. I headed to the mirror, just to confirm my suspicions, even though I was certain from the woman in the bed. Indeed, the face I saw staring back at me belonged to a long-haired, powerful man. It was Christmas week, and I would be working on Vince like I never had before.

"C'mon, Hunter," said the woman -- Stephanie. "Let's have a private workout first." I smiled. *It's good to be Triple H.*

TWENTY-FIRST WEEK

Monday, December 22, 2003, 03:44 PM
Stamford, CT

"Don't mind me, honey. I'm just calling Shawn."

"Oh, okay, Hunter!"

I picked up the phone and called in. *I hope he's home. After this week, I need someone to talk to. This has been just... if Stephanie hears me, she'll never believe it.*

"Hunter, bro! Good to hear from ya!"

"Caller ID, Shawn?"

"Of course. You know that."

"Right... um, listen, you alone right now? I gotta discuss something."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Well... I had a rough week last week, you know."

"No... what do you mean? Wait... who's calling?"

"Well, that's just it. I'm not sure I can say."

He sighed. "All right, hang on..." *I hope he doesn't think I'm burdening him by constantly having him move around like this. I'm just so nervous. I can't talk to him without sounding weird. And if Whysper or Stephanie heard anything... oh dear.*

"Shawn?"

"Yeah, I'm clear now. Okay, Andy... I figured you'd call. Lindsay's already checked in. So, what's bothering you?"

"Well... last week was... a lot of bad things happened personally, and I just wanna... I wanna just talk about it, you know?"

"That's why I'm here. What happened?"

"Well, Joey came over, and he and I were, you know, getting frisky I'd guess you would say... and I had to stop him. I freaked out. It's cuz of Darren."

"I don't understand. He's in jail."

"Yeah, but... I had to stop Alexis because of me. I couldn't handle being touched. It's funny, really. I have no problems being a guy -- heck, Stephanie and I..."

"Right, right, I get it. So, it's okay when you're male, but not when you're female. That's strange. Well, I guess I won't understand, since I'm kinda locked in to being a guy, but... why do you think it is?"

"I don't know... I guess I... some parts of me just have memories. No, that sounds stupid. I mean..."

"Andy, look... I don't pretend to be an expert. I can't. All I know is that right now, you're feeling kinda weird. That much is clear. Look, I don't blame you for being scared of being on the receiving end of sex... but... well, it's not as easy as that. You have to be able to work through these things. Darren's not going to hurt anyone any more."

"I know... well, I know, but I can't accept. Everything has a memory attached to it. Everything I do... I don't know if I ever want to lead anyone into Mexico again because of what happened to Zach. I don't know if I want to work with someone who died young because of how I treated Kathleen. I know I'm not comfortable being a woman because of... of... God, I can't even say it."

"It's all right. It's all right, Andy. Just don't do it, and don't get yourself into a

situation where it might happen again. You have freedom of choice. You can learn from your mistakes if you want. You can also run from them... and I'll give you one guess which one's easier and better for you."

"Yeah... I guess. But other things happened too. I don't know if you heard, but Matt and Amy are on decent terms again. But I had to suffer for it to happen."

"I don't follow."

"You read the Internet at all?"

"A little, but... you can't trust what they say. Every fan has an opinion. Heck, there's probably a bunch of guys out there who think they know how the WWE should run and are telling all their friends about it."

"Right... but did you see the results from Philly last night?"

"Philly? Last night? What was that?"

"Alexis was in a show for a group. It was her... her last appearance with the group. And they basically... they weren't too friendly. I was in tears when it was done. I couldn't even do the match because... because I..."

"Calm down, calm down, Andy. Take a deep breath and tell me all about it. Just stay calm, all right? We can't have Vince seeing you like this; you know that. He'll prey on you. Now... what happened?"

"Well... the show was in Philadelphia, and she was scheduled to make her last appearance. As I came out of the curtain, everyone started booing. They were saying, you know, how I sold out and all that. Now, that I expected to some extent. I mean, yeah, I was moving to greener pastures. And Steve -- Corino -- he was so cool about it, basically cutting a heel promo before his valet's match with me. I was all ready to just heel out for the match."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because they got worse. They... they were calling her... she... I..."

"Andy, just spit it out."

"They started chanting that she was... was..." *Those words. They echo in my mind. I gotta get them out. "...that she was..."*

"Andy... was what? I can't read your mind!"

"That she was a two-bit whore! All right? They called her a whore! They called me a whore! This after I couldn't even do anything with Joey a few days before... I'm not... I know I'm not."

"Andy... please... I know you're not, too. And that... that's just wrong. Philadelphia fans are just... there are times when you just wonder, why on God's green earth do you ever perform for them? I hated it every time. Guys like me -- who worked on the basis of sex appeal -- it didn't matter how much I worked my ass off for them; they never wanted to see me. Philly is... you're not a bad person, Andy. Don't let them get to you."

"Okay... right... I guess..."

"Anyway, you said this helped Matt? How?"

"Yeah... um... well... Matt got in the ring to defend her. The crowd cheered him, you know, at first... but then they... they started booing him too. One guy even tried to attack him. They had to go to an early intermission because of it all. And... and I never got to say goodbye to her fans. This was the thanks I got."

"Andy... it's okay. That's her problem now, not yours. I'm sure something will be worked out. It has to be."

"Thanks... it was all just a rough week. Doing three shows, and having to help other people... it's all..."

"Yeah, I was gonna ask. Who were these other guys that needed your help?"

"I can't tell you. But I can tell you what we were doing."

"Okay."

"We were working on... on Jarrett. Jeff. They thought he was almost ready to convert, and they wanted to hold an intervention. I think there were about a dozen of us helping out. It was crazy. Of course, we weren't all being helpful. That punk..."

"Which punk?"

"Oh, that's his ring name. CM Punk. He kept saying God was crap and that you couldn't believe it at all... and he was really ticking me off."

"Why?"

"Oh, he thinks he's so good, cuz he doesn't drink or smoke or do drugs or any of that... whoop de doo. He still doesn't know how to live his life if he can't accept the possibility that there's a God out there. And I know there is."

"Yeah, of course He's up there, watching over us. Was that ever in doubt? But... well, some people feel they don't need Him. Those are the hardest ones to get to realize the truth. But you can't worry about him. You were there to help with Double J. Did you?"

"I think so. I mean, I won't know -- he's attending some service on Christmas, though. We'll have to see if it helps. It was cool that people like Bagwell were there on their own, though."

"Yeah, Marcus is really a nicer guy than anyone gives him credit for. The guy got a bum rap. Of course, he also brought some of it on himself, but... he doesn't deserve the prima donna crap he gets. The man survived a broken neck. There was no reason for him to be walking again. I remember asking Scott about it -- he was scared stiff when he saw the shot Marc took. And you know how hard it is to scare a guy like Scott."

"Yeah... I understand. But anyway... oh, actually, there was something else I wanted to bring up. Something kinda weird -- I don't know what it means, if anything."

"What's that?"

"Well... when I was out there and Raven was talking, I found myself... this is so strange... it was like I wasn't Andy anymore. I wasn't even Alexis anymore. I was Laree, the character, the on-screen flunky in the Gathering. Do you follow what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. That sort of thing happens all the time. The good promo guys make everyone else around them better. It means nothing. Don't worry about it."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. Hell, it happened to me a few times -- I'd really get into the story. And you know what? The promos I did during that time were some of the best I ever had. Don't worry about it."

"All right... um..."

"Something else on your mind?"

"Yeah... who's Lindsay this week?"

"Why? You wanna talk to her?"

"Yeah."

"Well, she said she was Nora this week, so... I don't think it would be a good idea to talk to her. Her emotions are still a little fried, you know?"

"I... I guess."

"Hey, you'll see her next week, right?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. Don't worry about it. Hey, have fun, you got that? You're right next to Vince, you're married to Stephanie... Merry Christmas, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. Merry Christmas to you, Shawn."

"Chin up, bro. You'll do great. Catch ya later."

"Sure... bye." I hung up slowly and began to ponder what I was and how I got there. *I'm Triple H. I'm not Alexis anymore. So what happened to her -- shouldn't it be wiped clean? Shouldn't it? Or do I have a memory because I choose to continue my work. I guess it's like I thought yesterday before all this began... I am the sum of what has happened to me and what I have done. I cannot deny my own low points without denying my strengths.*

I'm here for a reason, right? So let's get to it.

08:55 PM

"Okay, that's good. Remember, we're making a DVD out of the shows this week, so I want you to make sure you got the footage ready. No screwing this up, right? Right. All right, I'll make sure it comes off the way I want it. Oh, don't you worry; you'll know. Good. Okay, after the show. Right. Bye."

Vince hung up the phone. He joined the rest of us in the living room within Titan Towers, where we were all ready to watch that night's Best of RAW. Vince and Linda were on one sofa, Shane and Marisa on another, and Stephanie was with me on the third. I put my arms around her as placed her head on my shoulder. She looked up at me and smiled, mouthing the words "I love you" to me.

We kissed quickly. I was surprised with how much passion and energy I could feel in a quick kiss. I began to think of the wedding. I remembered feeling the cold when Triple H said his vows. I couldn't help but wonder if Stephanie knew I -- he -- was a phony. *Was he still even a phony? And what would that make me?*

I looked over at Shane, who was lovingly rubbing Marisa's womb, where their first child would emerge in a few months' time. I remembered Amy, and Ivory, and what both of them were going through. *I can't imagine how difficult it'll be for Amy down at the Flair house if she winds up breaking David's heart. He really liked her... I think. But I don't know if they're right for each other. They're just... something isn't real. I wish I could say what it was. Still, she's in a stable situation. That's important.*

I turned and faced Vince, who had his arm around Linda's back. *If only he weren't in such mortal danger, I would be touched by his display. I have no doubt that Linda loves him. I also have no doubt that Vince is a man who needs fixing, and that maybe she can help in some way. At least I know what my strategy is going to be when the time comes.*

When it comes? The time is this week. It's now. I looked down and held Stephanie -- poor, sweet, innocent Stephanie -- closer to me as the show began.

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Dec. 22 / 03.

- Live from nowhere.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Jonathan Coachman**.

- **Ross** tells us that tonight we'll look at the 10 biggest matches of the past six months, as well as the big moments that made RAW so special over that time frame. **Coach** is anticipating guests stopping by, which becomes a running gag throughout the night as he keeps running to the (offstage) door when a doorbell rings.

- #10: **Booker T** v. **Chris Nowinski**, SummerSlam. Joined in progress (as they all are) with Booker going for the Bookend, but Nowinski forcing him out due to Booker's bad arm. **Rodney Mack** (whatever happened to that guy, anyway) drops the arm over the top, getting Chris a Double Arm DDT for two. Nowinski bails and distracts the ref off of a slingshot, so **Jazz** gets a chairshot. Nowinski blows a hammerlock slam, and Booker takes over until Nowinski uses the FACIAL APPLIANCE OF DEATH for two. Booker with a clothesline and the usual to win, then a Bookend for Rodney.

- Review of **3 Live Kru** debuting in a six-man against the **Right to Censor** (speaking of gimmicks that came and went), combined with a series of their greatest hits from WEEKEND UPDATE~!

- #9: **3 Live Kru, Lita, and Trish Stratus** v. **Right to Censor, Gail Kim, and Jazz**, Survivor Series. This was contested under elimination rules, and is simply highlights, which is a VERY GOOD THING, thank you very much.

- #8: **Christopher Nowinski and Rodney Mack** v. **The Dudley Boyz** v. **Hurricane and Goldust** v. **Big Show and Christian**, RAW on October 20. JIP with it down to Desticane and Show/Christian. Christian works the arm a little. Show legdrops Hurricane for two. Unprettier gets two. Hurricane gets a drop toehold in desperation, and hot tag Goldust. Goldust goes ballistic on both heels, but Show hits the Showstopper for the pin and the titles, which would be important since it got both men into the Chamber.

- **Batista's** return is highlighted from the same RAW, as he and the gang beat the living crap out of **Shane McMahon**. I could use all two hours watching a show called "Best of the McMahons Getting the Crap Beaten Out of Them", personally.

- **Molly Holly's** surprisingly popular run to the top is shown, starting with her September 8 run-in that established her as a babyface. This, logically, leads to...

- #7: **Booker T, Goldust, and Molly Holly** v. **Evolution**, RAW on November 3. JIP with **HHH** getting rolled up by Molly for two. Trips roids out and potatoing Molly, then adds a boot choke. Powerslam gets two. Legdrop follows for two as the crowd beings

absolutely turning on HHH. Molly slides outside, and **Batista** tosses her back in. HHH then USES THE KNEE~! for two. **Orton** hits a desperation armbar as he sees if Molly's still alive. Molly gets a crossbody literally out of nowhere, hot tag Goldust. Flip Flop and Fly on Orton, axe kick and Spinaroonie by Booker on HHH. **Bischoff** runs in and KOs the ref, but HHH's sledge shot hits Orton by mistake. **Shane-O-Mac** gets the Skytwister on Orton and punches out Bischoff as Molly returns and crawl onto Orton for the win. Emotionally sound, if technically a car wreck.

- Highlights of the Tag Team Title Tournament, including the return of "**Mighty**" **Molly** and the chaos between **3 Live Kru** and **La Resistance**.

- #6: **Evolution** v. **Dudley Boyz**, vacant Tag Team Titles, Armageddon. JIP as **D-Von** gets the hot tag and cleans house. **Orton** gets the Wazzup Drop, but **Batista** gets the Angry Man Spinebuster on D-Von to get even. **Bubba** gets the Bubba Bomb on Batista for two. 3-D on Batista sends him out of commission, but an RKO puts D-Von out. Bubba's leg goes, so Orton RKOs him to win the titles (without losing once in the double elimination tournament).

- #5: **Shawn Michaels** v. **Michael Shane**, Armageddon. This is highlights, with a full showing of Shane's post-match punking of his uncle, which I also approve of even though the match was actually quite good.

- We review **Michael Shane's** run in the WWE, including getting the pin in a few six-man tags and officially joining **Evolution**.

- #4: **Randy Orton** v. **Rob Van Dam**, RAW from August 25. JIP with RVD slamming his shoulder into Orton, but stumbling during the shoulder thrusts. Orton goes to a single-leg crab (with **Ric Flair** on the outside yelling instructions in psychology). RVD makes the ropes, so Orton dropkicks him out. Back inside, RVD gets a shot with his good leg in, but during the stepover enzuigiri he stumbles AGAIN on the bad leg, and Orton tries an anklelock, which turns into a Flatliner for two. Orton goes for the INDIAN DEATHLOCK OF SEVERE DISCOMFORT, and RVD punches him away. RVD falls flat during the Five Star, so Orton slaps on a figure-four until RVD passes out and is "pinned". This was easily the RAW Match of the Year.

- #3: **Chris Jericho** v. **Shawn Michaels**, RAW from July 21. JIP as Shawn bodypresses Jericho for two. Jericho goes up top but is caught with a dropkick on the way down. Shawn gets a backbreaker, atomic drop, and clotheslines. He catapults Jericho into the corner and rolls him up for two. Jericho gets a Northern Lights suplex for two. Bulldog and lionsault (on the second try) gets two. Powerslam for Shawn gets two. Flying elbow (NOT Picture Perfect) gets two. Jericho goes low, but gets a chair kicked into his face and is in la-la land. **Ric Flair** distracts the ref, thus fulfilling his reason to be at ringside, and **Randy Orton** RKO's Shawn on the chair as Jericho... crawls... over... for... two. Walls of Jericho FINALLY makes Shawn tap out. Too bad both men were out of action soon after this match.

- Speaking of which, we get a look at **Jericho** blowing his leg out in a match against **Kevin Nash**. Who knew leg injuries were contagious? This is followed by a series of the best of RNN, including **Austin** announcing he'll return at WrestleMania.

- Royal Rumble ad.

- #2: **Triple H** v. **Chris Benoit**, World Title match, Unforgiven. Highlights are shown, which is good because the match was hideously overbooked. Benoit wins with the Crossface and FINALLY gets a REAL World Title reign... for all of two months. Sigh.

- We get to see **Shane McMahon**'s return as he costs **Randy Orton** the I-C title in a lumberjack match against **Booker T** on October 13. I worry that Shane's survivor series match is #1, but thankfully nothing comes of it.

- #1: **Molly Holly** v. **Christian** v. **Big Show** v. **Booker T** v. **Chris Benoit** v. **Kane**, Elimination Chamber, Survivor Series. Clips are shown, highlighting each pinfall as well as some major spots. The pop when Molly pins Show still has to be heard to be believed. Kane tossing Booker through the glass still looks impressive, and for once, Kane didn't botch the fireball at the end.

- **JR** and **Coach** are joined by **DDP** (carrying a menorah and dreidel) to wish everyone Happy Holidays and build up next week's RAW.

The Bottom Line:

Pretty decent for a clip show. Not easy to argue with some of their choices, though it's clear from looking at it that HHH isn't going away any time soon. Thankfully no mention of Lita's pregnancy angle on this show, which means not only is that insipid angle gone, but I get \$20CAN from Scotsman.

And we all know that it's the season for giving, right?

11:45 PM

"What's wrong, honey?" Stephanie looked over at me as I lay up in bed, thinking. She showed a genuine concern on her face as she set her palm against my cheek. She smiled, obviously trying to get me to do the same.

"Well... it's about your dad."

"Yeah?"

"I'm just worried about him. He's been behaving kinda funny, right?"

"What do you mean, Paul?"

"Well... the stuff he's done with Shawn's student, and when he was gonna fire Nora... I don't get it. What was that all about?"

Stephanie rolled back to her side. "Oh, Daddy's just stressed out. All he can think

of is the WWE and helping the fans."

I looked at Stephanie. "Do you really believe that?"

"Usually. I mean, sometimes..." she blew her hair out of her face. "Okay, I'm trying to defend him. I don't know what goes on in his head. I never have. He's... he's not all there. I'm scared, Paul. I woulda thought Christmas would bring out the best in him, but all he can talk about is the show. It's like we're second in his life."

"Yeah... why do you think that is?"

"I wish I knew. But he's... he's not the Daddy I remember. Things were so much easier when Hogan was running the show... I mean, no offense. You're awesome out there, of course, but... Vince just seemed happier when the program was more childlike."

I smiled at Stephanie's attempt to butter me up. "Steph, honey, you don't have to stroke my ego. But you're right... things seemed so much easier before... before the feds."

"Yeah, that's it! That's when it all started getting weird. And especially over the last few months... he doesn't make sense anymore. It's like he's trying to alienate us. What do you think it all means?"

"Maybe Vince is possessed." *Uh-oh, I wasn't supposed to say that...*

"By what, the business? Yeah, I guess... I just wonder... he's thrown everything he has into making WrestleMania so special... what'll he do when it's over? Will he care enough to continue?" Her eyes brightened. "You don't think he'll turn the company over to Shane and me after it's over, do you?"

"I don't. This is Vince we're talking about. He's not quitting until he drops dead. And with any luck, that won't be any time soon. Don't worry, Steph. Your time will come."

"Oh, I don't mind waiting. It's not that... it's that I want Daddy to be happy and healthy. I don't know if it'll happen. I mean, just today, he was busy putting together the shows for this week. It's Christmastime! What happened to the spirit of family?"

I chuckled. "Maybe three spirits will visit him on the 24th."

"Paul!" She giggled.

"What? It might happen. You never know where the spirits of Christmas could be. Heck, you could be his personal angel. You're already mine."

"Oh, thank you, honey," she said, leaning over to kiss me.

"Look, it's a little late to worry about it right now. Let's work on it with Shane and Marisa tomorrow. If it's really a problem, we'll know how to handle it. Besides, there's always time for family this time of year, right?"

"Yeah... good night, Paul. I love you."

"I love you too, baby." *Well, for this week I do. Hopefully, after I leave, he'll still care for her.*

Tuesday, December 23, 2003, 02:48 PM
Stamford, CT

Okay, five more. Four. Three. Two. One. Finished. Wow, I've never really spent this much time working out before. I guess I never really put too much into my physique when I was all the other people. It seemed more important to be good than to look good.

On the other hand, I feel better for it. Sorer, but better. It's like I now have a sense of accomplishment here. I mean, with the other people, yeah, I felt like I'd done something, but... at the same time, who I was wasn't something I had control over. Now, I feel like I'm actively helping to mold Triple H. Okay, it's shallow, but it's a feeling.

Look at Stephanie over there. She's busy working her arms on that one machine, trying to stay in bodybuilding shape. She's so confused... I can just tell. She's worried about her family -- and about Vince. I guess we all are, but... if she can't do anything, why can I?

Maybe she can do something. Maybe I can, too. But it requires getting her to realize she has the power. Deep down inside, I sense that she doesn't believe in herself. Why wouldn't she, though? She's got skills that you can't teach -- Internet reports be damned. She's sexy, she's smart, and she's... well, she's Stephanie. Any other last name than McMahon and she'd be a pin-up model around the world.

But why is she changing herself? For whose sake? Her own? Her father's? Mine? I don't care what she looks like, do I? She looked better when she was an All-American girl instead of a musclebound walking boob job. But... that was her decision, I'm sure.

Wasn't it? I wish I knew. Wait... I can find out...

I stood outside the door where I knew Hunter would be waiting. I thought long and hard about whether to enter, since I had been hopping in and out quite a bit recently. I had a nagging feeling that, while what I was doing was fine, I was going to regret it. *Still, it has to be done.*

I opened the door. Paul Levesque -- Hunter -- was waiting as I expected, but something was odd about him. I had to squint to look in. His entire body was lighter than I had seen from Alexis just one week earlier. He turned to look at me, and I nearly walked right back out of the room; his eyes were a pair of bright golden discs.

"H-h-hunter? Are you... okay?"

"Yeah... who wants to know?"

"Not important. You just look funny."

"What are you sayin' about me, kid? Look, I'm just fine. I got it easy, don't I? I got a great life, I got a hot babe I can do whenever I want, I've got instant access to being at the top of the wrestling world, and when the old man kicks it, I'm the new owner. What's the big deal about that?"

"Hey, maybe you have it easy now, but you ain't always gonna be alive, you know."

"Pfft! Fuck that. I am alive -- that's the important thing. More than that, I'm set for life. Who's gonna knock me off? You?"

"I might. You never know. Or maybe Stephanie might. Nah... you two are in love -- that should be obvious." I looked him over and quickly saw otherwise -- no matter what Stephanie felt, Paul had yet to give his heart to her.

"Stephanie? Hey, don't get me wrong, she's a hot piece of ass that's got all the power, but do you believe I married her for love?"

I tilted my head in confusion. "I should hope so. It's not like you to say otherwise."

"Hey, I'll keep up appearance when I'm in charge, don't get me wrong. The beauty is, whoever's me has to play my game. They can't change my style too drastically -- it'll show through. Hell, I know of a couple guys who tried it, and they didn't make any progress."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard them tell Vince on my behalf that they wanted to give up the title. Vince thought the whole thing was a joke. That's how brilliant I am: I joke about laying down to Jericho every day, to the point where Vince wouldn't believe it if I said I had to. Hell, I only gave up the title to Benoit because I couldn't use it on my honeymoon. And whenever I want it, it's coming right back to Daddy."

I felt sick. I glared at him. "You're disgusting, you know that? You're a pathetic individual who doesn't seem to understand why we're on earth in the first place!"

"Sure I do. We're here to get ours and get out. There's no heaven or hell... if there is, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here for your sake. I'm here to make the world better. And how dare you think there's no heaven -- I've seen it! I've seen Hell, too, and your kind of crap would go over really well down there, you know that?"

"Fuck, man... don't preach to me. I don't need your shit. You're nothing to me. Literally, nothing. Just like the fans are nothing, and Jericho's nothing, and... no, Vince is something. But only while he's alive. Once they stuff his ass into the ground, he's nothing, and I'm something."

"Why obsess over the WWE?"

"Why? Because I have earned it. Don't you get it? I've suffered through the most humiliating year of my life, stuck with stupid valets and meaningless feuds. That bitch Joanie -- god, what a fugly girl. I thought she was a cross-dresser at first, you know? And guess what -- when I saw the chance, I upgraded. Now, I've got Steph right where I want her -- in my pants."

"Is all you think about the sex? Didn't it mean something to get married to her?"

"Sure it did. Made me an heir to the McMahon fortune."

"Yeah, you and Shane."

"Shane? Ha! I've got Vince certain Shane was responsible for the InVasion crap. I watched Vince screw that up in seven different ways, and then when it tanked, I got him to exile Shane. Shane's nothing more than a stunt monkey now. And Steph... well, there's a reason I'm the heir."

"That is?"

"Vince hates her. HATES her. I didn't even have to do anything about this -- he's a crazy old man who wants his women to be dolls. I've never seen anyone more weak-spined than that old bag Linda. And Steph... ha! I am Vince's child now; she's just arm candy. Look, pal, lemme explain... you remember when that fucker Regal got put in the joint? You were there, right?"

That last question set off alarm bells in my head. I saw what he was trying to do. I had a feeling he wanted me to tip my hand so that I'd get re-assigned. If I played naive, I could keep my job and keep him talking. I did my best. "What about when he got arrested?"

"She went to him and was cryin' and whinin' about how Vince had to show some compassion to women. I guess the old man melted a little, cuz she said women were

gonna be wrestlers now. How sad is that, man? But you know what the sweet part is? After he got back, he came to our room. He said she was so lucky they were in public. God, you shoulda heard the promo he cut on her. She was so fucked up after it was done, all I had to do was there-there her to get some tail."

I don't get it. Did the demon take over that fast? What did this all mean? "Okay, so Vince was acting. So what? What does that have to do with you?"

"Simple. Steph hasn't had any guy treat her right her whole life. She doesn't see Shane as a guy, just a brother. She can't appreciate him, or anyone. It's to the point now where you show her a little kindness and she melts. That's why the other guys eventually just play along with me -- they get to nail Steph so easily. Trust me, after seven days of seeing how pathetic that bitch is when she gets a nice word, you'll feel nothing about treating her like a toy."

As he spoke, I felt bile rise within me -- even though I didn't have bile to rise or a body for it to rise in. His casual references to sex, even with his wife, made me flash back both to what Darren did to me and to what he did to me that same week. He smiled as he mentioned how I'd feel about her, making me want to punch his lights out. I was ready to tell him exactly how I felt about him when the alarm bells went off again.

"No, Hunter. No, I'm not gonna tell you you're wrong. I won't say how misguided you are. You know that. I can see it in your eyes. You prefer your earthly ways. But that's not why I'm saving my breath. The fact is, you want me to get re-assigned. You want me to get yanked out of here so you can go right back to being in control. I can sense it. Well, guess what, Hunter. For the next few days, Vince is going to see how wrong you are, and Stephanie will understand what true love is. Then when you come back, we'll see just how effective you are."

I walked out of the room, taking one last look over my shoulder at him. He laughed and smiled. His golden eyes glowed as I closed the door, seemingly being the only evidence of his existence near the end. He had gotten so faint I could barely see him without the light.

I stood outside the door for a few minutes, unwilling to move forward and unable to go back. *He's not gonna make it for much longer, is he?*

As I snapped out of it, I buried my head in my hands. All those things I couldn't tell Hunter for fear of blowing my cover, I had to get out. I had to find a way to tell him what a scumbag he was without anyone knowing any better. I had no idea how to do it. No one would understand.

"Hey there, son," sounded a familiar baritone. I turned around to see Vince entering for his workout. "You feeling all right?"

"Of course... just thinking about what to do for Christmas for the family, you know?"

"Need to go shopping? Hey, there's plenty of places downtown. Just try to avoid the rush. Or better yet, write down what you want, and I'll have an assistant go get it. Whatever's best for you."

"Hey, thanks. I'll get it all written down. Um... yeah, there's only a couple things really that I wanted to get." I struggled for the right words. What I had to say next would

go a long way toward determining how easy it would be to reach Vince. "Um... something kinda bothers me."

"What is it? If this is about the Rumble..."

"No, no, not that. You see, I've noticed something... I treat Stephanie a hell of a lot better than you do, and... that just seems weird."

Vince raised his eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... well, remember the night Darren was arrested? Remember how you came into our room after it was done?"

"Has that been bothering you all this time? Look, I was really frazzled. I said a bunch of things that night -- I can't even remember the specifics. Well, not really."

"It's not just that one night. I've -- well, we've all noticed that you... seem to... your eyes are disturbing me."

Vince laughed. "Oh, come on, Hunter. Don't be so jealous. I'm not that twisted."

"Vince, don't play dumb... I should just come out and say it. I saw the whole thing that night. I was around earlier when the girls were comforting Nora, and then I heard you and Austin yelling at each other from my room. Stephanie went out to investigate... but she didn't have to tell me anything. I heard. I'm sure the whole floor heard."

"Hunter, you remember something: I'm in control of a multi-billion dollar empire. I'm the man whose decisions change the world of wrestling forever. You are my true heir. You are the man I trust to keep the McMahon vision alive. Don't let some feelings you have for some girl keep you from fulfilling your destiny."

"Wh... some girl? Forget that that's my wife; that's your DAUGHTER!"

"She WAS my daughter. Only by birth. As soon as she came out of that demon-infested womb my wife has, and as soon as I saw she didn't have McMahon grapefruits, I knew she was a mistake. Don't you get it, Hunter? She wasn't my son; you are. She's too pathetic to know what love really is. How do you think I was able to get her to marry you?"

"She loves me."

"She loves you because I made sure she did. I didn't want some Canadian fucked-up Hart bitch like Test as my son-in-law. I broke that up and made you her on-screen husband. I did everything but fire Cupid's arrow! All the time you spent together... how you could've ever liked that beast Chyna I won't know."

"Vince... I like a woman who's into physical fitness. You noticed how much Stephanie's been hitting the weight room? She looks awesome out there."

"Yeah... yeah, I noticed. Why do you think I paid for her to get new tits? She may be your wife, but dammit, Hunter, don't ever let that cloud your vision. Be the man of the marriage, you got that? That's what I saw in you from the beginning. You took your punishment like a man and came back for more. That's why I trust you. Now don't go soft on me, Hunter. Divorce laws are easy in Connecticut. Remember that."

He turned around and walked off, making sure to keep his back straight and his chest out. I shook my head at him, then looked for the glasses next to me. I put them on. Vince's demon was staring back at me, smiling a million-dollar grin. It flipped me off again.

Shit.

09:51 PM

I got into the bedroom and prepared for an early night's rest. Stephanie wasn't around yet, and I was hoping I would just be able to go to sleep early. I listened in on the radio as they announced the usual bad news that media members love to play up, even in the holiday season. *I don't want to hear about murder and stuff. Can't they focus on the positives this time of year?*

"Hey there, dear... what's on your mind?" I looked to the door, where Stephanie was in her casual outfit, likely soon ready to turn in as well. She seemed genuinely concerned. "I heard you talking to Daddy this afternoon. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah... well, kinda." I felt a pang of guilt. *I have five days to make her feel appreciated before someone else takes over.* "You see... your dad made me realize something. I... I haven't been the best husband to you."

"What are you talking about? You're wonderful. You're so generous to me, and you're a great lover. What else is there?"

"Steph... have I been generous to you without being a great lover?"

She stopped. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... I wonder if I only ever treat you nice because I expect something in return. You know... like I'm putting a coin in the machine or something."

She laughed. "You've got such a way with words. Don't worry, Paul, I love you. Doesn't that matter?"

"It would if... if I gave you a reason to love me. But you... I... no. You're just kind to me for no reason. And it... I just wonder... why?"

"Because you love me. Everyone thinks so. Daddy tells me all the time to be grateful someone loves me enough to marry me."

"Oh, c'mon, Steph. You think you're that hard to find a paramour for? You had Andrew... now you have me. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Andrew? Don't kid yourself. Daddy didn't like him, and he would've never treated me right... like you do."

"How have I treated you? Look, Steph, I'm thinking I'm doing something wrong. No, I know I have. I've taken you for granted. Vince, your Daddy, talks all the time about how I'm his heir and about how Shane isn't right for the business and... well, he says other things, too. I just look at how he and Linda are, together after so many years of marriage, and... I hope we can be together. But I want it to be even better. I don't want you to be a shell of who you are now. I want you to be YOU."

"Are you saying Mom... what are you saying?"

"Stephanie, even I can see it. I heard it in your dad's voice. I'm not sure he cares whether I love you or not. I think he sees the marriage as sealing the deal. You should've seen him in the church that day. He was grinning this smug, arrogant smile. And you remember what he said the night Darren was arrested."

"Look, what he said... he's right. I pushed the issue, and I made him uncomfortable."

I took a deep breath. I could see all the signs of psychological undoing in her that I did in Nora. "Stephanie... darling... how long has it been since your father told you in private that he loved you?"

She began to think. "I... I don't understand."

"He's pushing everyone away. You were worried he was getting overburdened by WrestleMania. He's got hundreds of people who are working on the same thing, but I guarantee you they and all the talent are home with their families enjoying the holidays. Why is Vince still working and pushing the family around? Why isn't he taking time to enjoy the season -- to enjoy you?"

"Paul, he loves me."

"Does he? Is that why he puts you in a catfight with a woman his age? Is that why he has 20 thousand people call you a slut? Is that why he chewed you out just minutes after seeing Nora approach him in shame?"

Stephanie was confused. Her eyes were wide, and in them I saw conflict. "I... but he... why does he do this?"

"Steph... what have you done for yourself? Did you marry me for yourself? Did you do this for you or for me?" I slowly ran my fingers up her chest to emphasize what I was talking about, then without turning my hand, lifted her chin so she was looking me in the eye. "Stephanie... I don't want to see you hurt. That's why I'm apologizing. If I kept behaving the way I started, I'd be... I'd be turning you into a nothing. I don't ever want to be responsible for that."

Tears of joy formed in her eyes. "Really?"

"Really... I love you too much."

"Thank you... thank you so much." She kissed me on the lips, then the neck, then down my shirt. I quickly stopped her.

"Wait... you... you don't have to do this. I'm not trying to get you in the mood."

She looked up at me. "It's okay. I am in the mood. I've never felt more in the mood before now, either."

I dreamed that night. We all did.

I looked at Lindsay, Owen, and Greg as we sat in a circle in the middle of the Tunnel. I noticed that each of them were as downtrodden as I was. It's like they all knew at once, without me even having to say it.

"Honeymoon's over, isn't it," Greg finally said to break the uncomfortable silence. "I was afraid of that. And here I am... I can't do anything about it."

"Sure you can," I replied. "Why not?"

"Well... my time's almost up."

Lindsay gasped. "Really? That's wonderful!"

"Not really, it isn't... I'm not looking forward to it. I always thought that when I got the call-up, it would be at a time when I'd be ready for it. I guess I'm getting close to it... let's see, I'd be 54 now, and my family had a history of cancer, so... I guess I wasn't meant to last long. I just... I was hoping I could live my full lifespan on this side of the world."

"Wait a second," I said. "You're going to Heaven and you're... upset? Why?"

"Because I've been doing this for so long. I'm used to it. I mean, no one wants to die, and this is kinda like dying. I'm not gonna be able to see anyone I've been working with or... or any of you guys. And now that the demon's getting stronger... I'm leaving at

the wrong time, I really am."

Owen patted him on the back. "Hey, we can't control when we leave. You know that. You think I wanted to die? Heck, none of us really wanna be here. We'd rather be in our own lives, being with our own families, loving our own wives and children... which reminds me. There's something you can do."

"Yeah?"

"Come with us tomorrow night."

I stepped in. "Wh-where are we going?"

"Oh... I wanna visit Bret. I want him to get better. You know, stop being so bitter and cynical. I see it ruining his life. It's time for him to step into the present. I want your help to do it. You up for it?"

"Sure... what do we have to do?"

"Well, the first thing is we meet here tomorrow night to go up to Calgary. Then... listen..." Owen began to describe his plan.

After he finished, we were ready to head our separate ways. I turned to Lindsay and confronted her. "Lindsay, I... I'm confused."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I've done a lot of bad things -- fooled around with Trish, slept with people's wives... I just... I feel like I'm cheating on you sometimes. I don't know if I feel comfortable always coming back to you. I just know one of these days, you're... you're gonna snap."

She laughed. "No, Andy, I'm not. There's something inside me that says, this is IT. This is right. You know, while everyone else was out this week, and I was at my place in Minnesota, I started imagining you were there. I wanted you to be there. I miss you."

"You do?"

"Yeah... but... well, something's coming up. With Greg leaving, and with Kathleen still gone, we're gonna get new people. I already know that someone new is joining. I know because... they want me on SmackDown! to tutor that person."

I began to shake my head. "No... they can't do this."

"Sure they can. Andy, don't be so selfish. I'm not important, and neither are you."

"What do you mean, I'm not important?"

"Look, we can be replaced! You know that very well!"

"You'll never be replaceable. I don't want you to go away. No, you're doing this cuz you're mad at me."

"I'm not upset over what you did out there, but the way you're acting right now isn't exactly endearing to me."

"What, my apologies?"

"Your grovelling! You're as bad as Stephanie is. You're all tied up in me. Yeah, maybe you think I'm the sun and the moon or whatever, but guess what -- this is your job. 24/7, whenever it's necessary, it's your job! Get it?"

"I get it. You don't! Don't you know what love is? Don't you remember how you felt with Terry and how you feel with me? Doesn't that matter?"

"It matters, all right. But you gotta stop worrying about me. You can't smother

me. I have to be my own spirit too, you know."

A sense of dread crept over me. "You took this assignment on purpose, didn't you?"

"You know... no, I didn't. But maybe it's better that it happens this way. Andy, I still love you... I think... but... we need to see if we're really able to stand the test of time. Andy, you've got to live YOUR life now, not mine! Stop worrying about how I feel and get back to task!"

I felt almost angry at this point. I was ready to scream. "Do you love me or Vince? Which is it, huh? You wanna be Linda for the rest of her life? Would that make you happy? I thought we meant something. I thought I meant something, and now you're telling me you'll be better off without me? Did you do this to Terry? Did he mean anything when you were done getting laid?" A sharp blow to the face cut off my tirade. I stared at her.

"Shut up, now! You don't get it!" She began to regain her calm. "Look... I love you, but I am loyal to the job at hand. If we break up, my existence continues. But if I betray Vince, I cease to be, and we cease to be a couple. I need priorities, and quite frankly, so do you. Just work on Vince. He needs you -- he needs all of us -- more than you realize. Please, Andy... there will be time for us later. But right now -- we have to try to exist on our own, too."

I was speechless. *Is she... what does she mean? Why did she hurt me? What am I...* "Are you breaking up with me?"

She sighed and hugged me. "No. No, I still love you. But I want you to be yourself. I love Andy, not an extension of me. So c'mon... do what you think is loyal to yourself. I'll catch you later. Got it?"

She smiled and kissed me. I forced a smile on my face, then waved back as I walked off. *Yes, she still loves me. But it doesn't change the pain I feel. How do I show her I can be a good person for her?*

I may not be able to show her... but I know one person I can show. Maybe if I show Stephanie, Lindsay will get the message. Besides, by being a good husband to Steph, I'm making her better adjusted. Then, she can help us help Vince. That would be what Lindsay would want, wouldn't it?

Wait. There I go again. It's not about what she wants. I have to stop worrying as much about her feelings. Yeah, I don't want to cheat on her, or pretend she's not there -- it's important that I remember when I'm acting and when I'm being me. But I do know what God wants. He wants me to save Vince McMahon.

And if making Stephanie realize she's worth something is the right step -- and I can't see how it wouldn't be -- then it's the step I'll take. I turned to face Lindsay. "Wait!" I called. She turned around.

"Hm?"

"Lindsay, I... I'm going to take your advice. While I'm Triple H this week, I'm going to make Stephanie realize she is a good person -- and she is. She's wonderful. She's a sweet, loving, loyal, devoted... everything I like in you. But... well... she doesn't believe in herself. If I make her believe in herself, I think she can help fight back the demon, right?"

She shrugged. "Go for it. It's worth a shot. But do it because you think it's right." I walked off, uncertain how to take this last piece of advice. I couldn't tell if the next thing

I heard was said or something I thought, but I could've sworn I heard Lindsay say as I left, "That's my man."

Wednesday, December 24, 11:45 AM
Stamford, CT

Stephanie was busy making lunch in the kitchen. I went up to her and embraced her. She pushed away slightly.

"Not tonight, honey," she said.

"I know. I just wanted to say I love you."

She turned around and smiled. "Thank you."

Wednesday, December 24, 2003, 07:48 PM
Stamford, CT

We gathered again around the television. Vince had called DirecTV and set up to get the NWA program. The weird part -- to me, anyway -- was that he did this on his own, as if it were some family tradition. I turned to Stephanie, who was seated next to me under my arm.

"Steph... do you like these guys?"

She looked at me and giggled. "Well, they're okay... I mean, you're still better, honey."

I half-smiled, trying to determine if she was saying that because she thought I wanted to hear it, because she believed it, or because it was what wives said to husbands. "Yeah, but... well, they could be our next competition. Do you want them to do well?"

"Kinda. See, the thing with the brand extension... it's just not the same. Yeah, there's competition, but we aren't trying to put each other out of business. Look at how things were with WCW. We wanted them to be buried. We got that. But... I miss the feeling of needing to go out and be on top of my game every week."

"Don't you feel that way anyhow?"

"No. I don't, really... and it's sad, because I really should. But you see... we're set. Our livelihood isn't on the line like it was back then. There have been times when you and I and everyone... we've all gone through the motions."

I began to think about that statement. *I've gone through the motions a few times myself. A lot of things I should've put effort into, I didn't because I thought they weren't important. If I'd only done more in terms of cleaning up my room or studying that extra hour for exams, I could say I left it all out there. But I didn't, and it left me feeling... kinda cheated.* "I know," I finally said. "And all things considered, it was stupid of me to take stuff for granted."

"Stuff?"

I looked her in the eyes. "Well, people too." We kissed as TNA's credits ran.

09:13 PM

Nashville, TN, via satellite

The Gathering's music played as the crowd turned to the entrance. Rather than Raven entering, though, CM Punk headed to the ring, joined by Julio Dinero and Alexis Laree. Laree constantly looked back as the crowd gave a mixed reaction to Raven's lackeys. The camera showed the fence lined with weapons, then also pointed to a sign from the Heel Section, reading: "We Love Laree -- Fuck Philly!"

Vince turned to us. "What's with the Philadelphia sign?"

Shane stepped in. "Oh, at some indy show Alexis was working in Philly, the fans were giving her a bunch of crap for signing a development deal with us. I mean, it's Philly. It's where ECW was. You expect class?"

"Shane," interjected Linda, "Philadelphia is one of our best markets."

"I never said otherwise," he said with a shrug. "They're just a different breed."

A Cajun theme piped in through the PA as Lash LeRoux entered to a hero's ovation. He carried a tiny box, wrapped in red paper and tied with a bow, to the ring with him. Before entering, he presented the gift to Alexis, who blushed and accepted it. Julio got in Lash's face about it, but Lash ignored him until Punk dove over the top onto the pile.

The two combatants -- Punk and Lash -- exchanged right fists outside the ring as the crowd began doing duelling chants. The Heel Section was vocally behind Punk, a tweener, while babyface Lash had the support of the rest of the Asylum. Eventually, Punk tossed Lash into the ring and the bell rang.

Punk slammed Lash's head into the turnbuckle, then stared at the camera, seemingly possessed. He went to the fence and grabbed a chair off of it, measuring Lash. Lash ducked under the chair shot, then punched down Punk, ending with the Bourbon Street splits and an uppercut. Punk bounced off of the ropes into a belly-to-belly suplex. Lash found the chair and began to stalk Punk.

Punk slowly got to his feet, and when he turned around, Lash beamed him with the chair for two. Lash picked Punk up and tossed him into the fence, then blew a kiss to Alexis. Julio shot her a dirty look as Lash climbed the top rope and waited for Punk. Punk saw it coming and ducked the missile dropkick, then went back to the fence and secured a whip.

As Lash slowly crawled around the ring, Punk laid in the shots with the leather. Lash howled in pain as Punk wrapped the whip partially around his fist. He grabbed Lash by the red hair and nailed him with the fist wrapped in the whip. With Lash down, Punk looked for another weapon. He found brass knuckles.

As Punk smiled and turned around, he was caught with a spear into the fence by Lash, sending the knuckles flying. Lash then began to grind Punk's face into the fence, drawing blood. As Punk stood up, Lash delivered a suplex onto the previously-used chair. It was Lash's turn to find the whip and use it.

As the strokes landed on Punk's back, Julio jumped into the ring and clocked Lash

with the brass knuckles previously discarded. Punk slowly got to the top rope and measures Lash, but his flying elbow was caught with a boot, causing a double knockout. Julio entered the ring and rolled Punk on top, but the ref only got two. With both men bleeding, Punk began to punch Lash's cut open more before looking back to the fence. He stared at the barbed wire that held the weapons in place, then called to Julio for help.

The two men pulled all the weapons -- including a crutch, a lead pipe, and a guitar -- off the barbed wire, then pulled the barbed wire itself off of the fence. Julio then walked over to Lash as he got up and wrapped the barbed wire around his face. Lash screamed as Alexis cringed at ringside. Julio began to wrap the barbed wire slowly around Lash's body as Punk grabbed the lead pipe. The crowd was now booing the Gathering as Raven walked to ringside, smiling. Punk wound up to take a swing with the pipe, but never got the chance.

Alexis grabbed the pipe out of the way, then tossed it to ringside. Punk and Julio confronted her about this as Lash tried to untangle his body, resulting in poke marks everywhere. He slid outside, past a tuxedo-clad Mike Tenay and a lime-green-suited Don West, and grabbed the ring bell. He returned to the ring, having somehow disposed of the barbed wire, and began to crack both Punk and Julio over the head with the ring bell.

Meanwhile, the camera noticed Raven pull Alexis out of the ring, and in the background (behind the fence) he was lecturing her. She stood there, conflicted and nervous, as the match continued. Lash went up to the top as Julio and Punk both got up. He nailed a crossbody on both bloody men (Julio having apparently bladed during the chaos) and covered Punk. It was only two. Julio was tossed into the fence, then over the top rope. Lash seemed to have the match wrapped up as he went for the Whiplash.

However, before he could get it finished, Raven entered and smashed the crutch over his head, flooring him. Punk went to cover, but Raven pulled him off. He ordered Punk to go to the top. Punk nodded, then dragged Lash over and prepared to hit the top-rope pedigree -- known in other circles as the Pepsi Plunge. Lash struggled on the second rope and managed to toss Punk over his head. Punk crashed in the center of the ring as Raven rolled his eyes and yanked Lash off the ropes.

At this point, security (black-shirted) grabbed both Raven and Julio and escorted them from ringside. In the chaos, Lash went to pick Punk up, but Punk hit a low blow. He grabbed the guitar and broke it over Lash's head, then covered. At two, though, Punk picked Lash up. He looked straight into Alexis's eyes and ordered her to the top. She obeyed as Punk held Lash up. Alexis hesitated, seemingly making eye contact with both combatants, then jumped. Lash escaped, and Alexis wound up hitting a rana on Punk instead. Only after she got up did she realize what she did. She stared blankly as **Lash hit the Whiplash on Punk and covered for the three-count.**

As we listened to the Asylum crowd cheer, Vince seemed to be taking notes. I looked at him and saw he had a notepad in his lap the whole time. He tore off a piece of paper and handed it to Linda, who nodded. "What do you think they're discussing?" I asked Stephanie.

"Oh, they probably saw someone who they liked," she said nonchalantly. "How do you think we discovered people like the Maximos? Ooh, look, there's more."

Indeed, Lash was celebrating in the ring, barely able to stand and his face covered

in blood. Alexis checked on Punk to make sure he was okay, then went to Lash and did the same. Raven re-emerged, his face showing disappointment and rage.

"Alexis," he yelled into a microphone. "Your time for wavering has passed. It is imperative that you make a decision. Do you wish to see the light of my teachings, or would you rather succumb to the cruel intentions of Lash LeRoux? We will find out next week. For you see, I have just cleared with Mr. Callis that Lash LeRoux will face myself next week. However, as this is Raven's Rules, I add one extra rule to the match, one which you will be interested in hearing. I am making you the official, Alexis."

The crowd cheered the announcement. Raven stared at Laree and continued. "And Alexis, I anticipate that there will be no confusion as to your belief system when I am done. I will expose this man for the dangerous fraud that he is. You will see that I am the path to redemption. I have your best interest at heart. And I will make you make the final decision in that match, and for your future. Quote the Raven, Nevermore."

I was mesmerized by the whole speech. *Wow. He sounds dangerous. It's hard to believe he's just acting. Where was all this potential, all this charisma, all this excitement when he was a WWE star? How did he not get a chance?*

We met in the Dream Tunnel, ready to go to Calgary. Owen said the word, and we were thought over to just outside Bret's room. I looked around. Everything was the same as in Vacation -- including, unfortunately, our size. "So," I said nervously, "now what?"

"Follow me," Owen said. He flew to Bret's side as we all followed. He stood near Bret's head, barely audible over the snoring. "Put your hands right here," he said, pointing at Bret's temple. "This will let us in and out of his dream world. Through here we will fix him."

I obeyed. As all four of us stood by, pressing on his temple, I felt a vacuum-like pull on my hands and body. I turned to Owen, his face calm. *Could it be he doesn't feel what I feel? Or is he used to it by now?* Before I could answer, everything went white, then gray. We were now normal-sized and in Bret's room again.

"What happened?" I whispered to Greg.

"We're in his dream now... all we have to do is get his attention."

"What if he wakes up?"

"Then we'll be ejected. Don't worry -- it's perfectly safe." *For my sake, I hope you're right.*

Owen motioned all of us to wait outside, then approached Bret's sleeping dream body. He shook it, causing Bret to sit upright with a start. "Who-- what---" he stammered before looking at Owen. "Owen! Bro! You're... what are you doing here?"

"Well, Bret... it's Christmas. I've got a few friends here who want to show you what you've become because... frankly, we're not happy about it."

"Why not? I'm retired. What would you have me do -- risk another coma in the ring?"

"No. It's not your physical state. It's your mental well-being. Bret, if you continue the way you are, writing about all the grudges you hold and obsessing over what might

have been, you'll never be happy, and you'll never be able to help the world. Isn't that what you want?"

"I... of course. But Owen, I... look... I'm washed up. I had everything, and I had it stolen. Shouldn't this bother me a little?"

Owen bit his lip. "Only if you let it. Now listen, I'm here to warn you. My friends are gonna be showing you your life, and explaining more what I mean. I'll be along for the ride, but they're the guides. I trust them. I want you to trust them."

Bret stared at Owen. "How can I?"

"Don't you think I'd have your best interest at heart?"

"I don't know. You're so far gone from my life that I..."

"Bret, please. Trust me. I'm not pranking you. I'm deadly serious. I'm scared."

Bret sighed. "All right. Where are we going?"

Owen smiled. "I thought you'd see it that way. Lindsay, come on in!" Lindsay entered, smiling to Bret. "Bret, this is my friend Lindsay. She's been following your life for a long time, and she wants to try to figure out how you got here. Now, since it's Christmas, we'll focus on that, right?"

Bret raised an eyebrow. "What is this, a joke?"

"Not quite," Lindsay said. "We don't choose how to help you. We just show you what we can."

Bret folded his arms. "I knew I shouldn't have read Dickens last night."

"Come on, Bret... pay attention. Now, what is your earliest real Christmas memory?"

Bret thought. "Well, when I was -- actually, it was Owen's first Christmas. I remember leaning over the bars of his crib cage and looking at him, you know, playing with some mobile toy... he never looked happier. There was something in him that just, you know, made me smile."

Lindsay looked at Owen. "I bet you were a cute baby, too."

"Yeah, funny -- can we stay on task?"

"Okay, fine. Do you remember anything else about that day?"

Bret thought. "There was later in the day -- down in the Dungeon -- when Bruce and I, you know, we were practicing and trying to be like the guys in Stampede and on TV at the time... and Bruce wound up... injuring me. I mean, he didn't mean it, but... the fact is, I spent that night in a cast, and most of the day waiting for an X-ray."

"Does that bother you?"

"Well... I dunno. A little. It bothered me then."

"Okay... any other childhood memories of Christmastime stand out?"

"A few... I mean, I remember when Dad talked to me for the first time about entering his company. I must've been, you know, 17 at the time. It was something I was interested in, sure, but... at the same time, I knew I was the star of the high school team. I... I didn't want to give that up, or give up doing this in college or... or even the Olympics. And Dad was talking to me about how the Olympics didn't matter, cuz they were such a longshot, and... I didn't wanna hear it. But I went along anyway."

"Why? Bret, you know Dad would've understood."

"I dunno if he would've. He wanted all of us to help out with the family business. Why do you think it was so hard to... to go to Vince in the end? I mean, Tom and Davey... they were just wrestlers. We were family."

"I think you misunderstood Dad all this time. I really do. But that's okay, Bret. He'll forgive you."

Bret began to show concern. "I don't know... I just wish I'd... I missed his death. I was out on the radio when I heard... I couldn't be there."

Lindsay desperately tried to change the subject. "What about your early WWF memories? Don't they mean anything?"

Bret searched his mind. "A little... well, I remember being in Boston in 1992, after winning the title. They were setting up for an Iron Man match with Ric Flair, you know, to solidify my spot up top. And a lot of the guys, you know, people like Savage and Perfect and that group... they were like, who's this fool running things? He won it on a fluke. He's not gonna last. And I just remember being so angry that Shawn was being seen as a bigger contender when I had the main title. I just never understood who they wanted to be the champ... I mean, Luger wasn't due for a few months anyway."

"Bro... isn't there anything positive? Remember in 1995, when you were the Champ and you and Davey had that awesome match? We were on top of the world!"

Bret shook his head. "What, that shithead? I carried him through that. I carried him every time. We were the real talent, Owen. He didn't belong in the ring with me. I should've faced you, but... they didn't want us working together. You know that."

"Bret... how good you are in the ring means nothing. It's how good you are outside the ring... but fine. Any other memories you wanna share?"

"Well... I remember '99. It was the first Christmas without... well, that we were apart. And I was in Washington... we'd just done the big nWo thing. They wanted me to ride out in this car, and I remember jumping in and taking off. I was like, what am I doing? My seat belt isn't buckled, it's cold and may be icy out there... this is the kind of thing that killed you. I felt like a sellout."

Lindsay looked at Owen, who shook his head. "Bret," she said, "It's not about that. You have to focus on the good, right? Doesn't it matter to you that... that you have thousands of fans? That you're alive and well? That you can live comfortably? That Blaine will never have to worry about finances? Aren't there blessings to be had?"

"Those. They're meaningless. Look at all I lost to get there. I lost Brian, and Owen, and... I lost my job. I lost a lot of personal respect. I never felt good enough. I wanted to be the best. I couldn't look Dad in the eye and say, I'm sorry, I'm not the man you were. I had to be the best. That's why I got mad at everyone who would cut things out from underneath me."

"Like Shawn?"

"Oh, God... what a self-centered bitch he was. All he cared about was himself. He didn't want to improve in the ring... he just wanted to get laid and get high. Why should I care what happens to him?"

"Didn't he become good? Didn't he turn his life around?"

"That's his story. I don't buy it for a minute. He's just a... he says what he needs to. He's a politician. I can't believe he could con so many people into believing what he said."

I could hear no more. There wasn't any more memory to relive. Besides, it was my turn to show him where he was at that moment. I was the spirit of the present, and my time was now.

"And what of you?" I said as I walked in. I tapped Lindsay on the shoulder.

"Sorry, Lindsay. I think someone else should take a run at him. If we can't change how he feels about the past..."

Lindsay looked at me, slightly perturbed but understanding. She walked aside. Owen continued. "Bret... maybe if you saw how people are doing now, you'll pull yourself out of this... this rut. I've been watching it. I died almost five years ago. Montreal... that was six. Your career ended four years ago. Bret, I love you, and it's time for you to see... people change. Please, believe it."

Bret simply shook his head. "Like who?"

"Well," I said, "wouldn't you be interested in hearing what people are doing right now for Christmas? Think about it. People are learning what the true spirit is all about, and you seem to be missing the boat."

"Oh yeah? In what way?"

"Look... look at Test. You know what he's doing right now? He's counting down the days until January 31. He's looking forward to making the big step in his life. He's gonna get married. Married! Remember the feeling of love you get from family? Well, he's about to get it again for the first time."

"Yeah, good for him. So what? What does that have to do with me?"

"Bret... when was the last time you talked to everyone in your family? How did you treat Davey, your brother-in-law? Or Neidhart?"

"Them? They're not my family!"

"Then what about Diana?"

"She... she chose him. She chose him over me."

"Bret, she doesn't have to choose anyone OVER anyone. She still loves you. Your family loves you. And you can bring them together. Why don't you?"

"They don't really believe in me, do they?"

"Sure."

He thought for what seemed like a long time. "I don't know... it's just gonna be hard to see all these people again."

"It's always hard to make up," I began, semi-consciously thinking of the blowout Lindsay and I had the night before. "You know, you're gonna fight with a lot of people. We're all different. That's why we're all special. But you gotta know that the people you love are the ones you'll always fight with because when you're done, you become stronger. No, that's not quite right. What I mean is..."

"I think what you mean," Owen interrupted, "is that you'll have differences of opinion with lots of people, but family and friends -- the ones you can count on always -- will be there even after the differences, and love you because of them. I mean, think of me, Bret. We fought all the time, but do you hate me for it?"

"No... that's what I loved about you, was that we could do all that shit and be together again when it was over."

"Exactly. And that's how Diana and Neidhart and everyone's going to be. I'm sure of it."

Bret slumped back in bed. "But what about Shawn? You expect me to make up with him?"

I smiled. "I don't expect it. I'm counting on it. Shawn has been waiting for years to settle the account with you. He feels it's the one hole in his life. You think he can enjoy Christmas and his new-found spiritual glory while still being held in contempt for his old

ways? Bret, you can ease the greatest hurt in wrestling. Just accept his contrition."

"He's a phony."

"How dare you say that ab..."

Owen cut me off. He stared at me, as if to indicate I was about to overstep my authority. After I nodded to assure him I'd be silent, I waited for Owen to continue. "Bret, give him a chance. For me?"

"He's gotta prove it to me. I want to hear it."

"I'm sure you will."

"But Owen, it's... dammit... there's still... I mean... my life isn't fun. I'm stuck at home. I'm separated from most of my family. I'm doing the occasional guest column and that's it. My life's hitting the bottom."

I stepped in again. "You think this is the bottom? Bret, look around you. I'd love to live here. And have you been to downtown anywhere recently? Damn, people there don't even have houses. Many of them would be better off dead. But you know what? They celebrate. They celebrate their lives, and their families, and their positives. Why can't you see how blessed you are? This kills me. You were my role model."

Bret stared at me. "Were? What about now?"

"Now... well, you're not the person who became my role model."

"Go away! I don't need this! Owen, what the hell are you pulling on me? Is this another prank? Do you care about me, or are you just out to berate me?"

"Bret, listen! Listen to yourself! We're trying to show you what you have, and you're shoving us aside! We don't care that you're not perfect. We like who you are. Lots of people do. I hate to do this, really, but... maybe you need to see the future."

"Future? What could there be in the future?"

"Let me tell you," said Greg as he walked in. I took my cue and left, standing next to Lindsay as we watched. "Bret, do you want to be seen as a man who had it all and wasted it? That's where you're going. That's where you are right now, in fact. Look around you, dammit!"

"Hey, don't be so harsh."

"Well, they tried other ways, and now I'm gonna make it clear to you. You are ruining what you have. You are wasting away in this house. Don't you ever want to be remembered as something other than a washed-up former athlete? Give! Give of your heart! Forgive if you have to! Make peace with others."

"Others? I can't even make peace with myself."

"You'd better fix that immediately, then. Look into your soul and realize that you have problems, yes, but they're redeemable. YOU are redeemable. Can you live a life outside of being the Hitman?"

Bret was silent. Owen put his arm around him. "C'mon, Bret. I know you can. I know you're a good man. Where's the brother who would enjoy life and living? Where's the brother who wanted to be a community leader? Where's the brother who vowed he would change the world?"

"He died in 2000... when he was told never to do what he loved again."

I exchanged shocked looks with Lindsay as we took in that statement. *So that's what's been bothering him all this time!* Greg took a deep breath and looked at Owen. Owen consoled Bret. "Bret... he doesn't have to die. You have another calling. Be your own man. Be who YOU want to be. Doesn't it excite you to be a father, a husband, a

brother, a community leader? Do that! Use your column to help bring Calgary out of the debt and doldrums and into the good life again. You have the influence. Please... use it."

"I... I don't know... I don't know if I can. I've tried to do so many things, only to have outside forces cut me off at the knees."

"Bret... don't let them get you down. Fight them and beat them. They're nothing compared to the heart and soul you have in you. When you wanna do something, you really put your mind to it, and no one gets in your way. Please, bro. Enjoy the life you have. It's the only one you get."

"Where do I start?"

Owen smiled. "Start with family. I want to be able to see all of you together, even without Mom and Dad."

Bret smiled. "I'll work on it." Owen and Greg slowly left the room, grinning. We looked at both of them as they exited. Owen had a tear in his eye. Greg simply felt a sense of accomplishment, as though he knew he was going out on top.

"Guys," said Owen, "let's make sure Bret ain't the only one having a Merry Christmas."

We returned to the Tunnel, and as we did, Owen let out of scream of joy. We all joined in it, high-fiving and hugging each other. We felt we had pulled Bret out of it. All that positive energy he had when he wrestled was going to be positive in the rest of his life. As I headed back to being Triple H, I turned to Owen. "Owen," I said, "you think he'll listen?"

Owen beamed. "Of course he will. He'll be the best human being there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be. Any less... just wouldn't be Bret."

Thursday, December 25, 2003, 08:58 AM
Stamford, CT

I slowly walked down the stairs of our living quarters, wiping the sleep out of my eyes. I had had a long night, and I certainly wasn't looking forward to the rest of the week. I had been alone basically for two weeks now, and with Lindsay replacing Greg on SmackDown!, I was guessing Shawn and I would be working short-handed.

My worries soon melted, however, when I saw what was in the hallway. The tree -- a 15-foot monster in the center hallway -- had gone from bare to alight. *Vince's hired help must've worked all night for this! No wonder Stephanie and I are the first up. Speaking of which, where is she?* Red, blue, and silver lights adorned seemingly every branch. Just about every WWF/WWE ornament ever made, along with a few more personal ones, hung all around. Underneath was every size package one could imagine -- some as big as I was, and some smaller than my hand. The place had apparently been transformed.

I didn't know how to react. I wanted to be a child again. I felt like a child again, staring at a tree that had magically been filled with presents overnight. But I knew it

would be wisest to wait for everyone else. Still, the sight of everything -- the gifts, the music, the lights, the general decorations -- made me torn between two ideals. I went back upstairs to see if anyone else was up.

As I looked into my bedroom, I saw that it was empty. Stephanie hadn't yet come back from wherever she was. *It's not like her to be gone this long. She's usually around the house, wanting to spend time with me or with her mother. Why is she missing?* I went to check on Shane and Marisa's room, but as I did, I felt a hug around my waist. I turned. Linda was there. "Merry Christmas, Paul," she said.

"Thanks, Mom," I replied. *I could never call her Linda. It's just not right.* "Say, uh, you seen Stephanie? She got up before I did and I can't find her anywhere. Did she go out to get dinner?"

Linda smiled. "I was hoping I'd find you early. We got up this morning to take care of something. Follow me -- she wanted me to show you something."

We headed back downstairs to the tree. I noticed a few large packages in particular. Linda pointed me to the largest of these -- nearly as tall as I was, propped up in the corner. "I want you to read the card on that one. It's one she and I put there this morning."

Confused, but excited, I went to the package. It was covered in WWE label wrapping paper, and a card rested just under the big red bow in the front. I took the card and opened it.

"Dearest Paul,

I went through a lot of trouble all night last night making sure this was just right. You asked me what the perfect gift would be for me this first and best Christmas together. I hope this gift lets you know my answer in some small way.

Love,
Stephanie

PS -- Take this gift upstairs before you open it."

I smiled and picked the gift up. I was stunned by how heavy it was -- over 100 pounds, by my estimation. "Wow... what's in it?"

Linda shrugged. "You'll have to find out. Where are you taking it?"

"Well, the note said to move it upstairs before opening... man, I'm gonna have to get a good grip on this." I turned around and carried it, the gift's back on my back, with the bow on top. I slowly climbed the stairs back to the top floor. As I did, I thought I felt the contents of the box shift. *That's strange.* I moved past Shane and Marisa's room, peering in as I did so. The two were still asleep, curled up next to each other, her in his arms.

I finally made it back to our room and stood the gift upright. I walked around to the back and began to tear away, starting with a few holes that had been punctured into the back. I saw a large, red, wooden plank with the WWE logo painted on it in white, but I also saw something else unusual. The board had holes in it, and the holes had wires protruding out of them. The wires were paired in four spots, and each pair was twisted

together.

I moved to the left side and unwrapped. I saw another wooden board, also all red. In addition, there was painting on the side -- in bright white letters, the word "Stephanie" in fancy, almost calligraphic font. I moved over to the right side, now uncertain I wanted to know what was inside. The right side had the same thing as the left. The only thing protecting the gift's identity now was the bow and front wrapping -- although by now I had a good idea what would be inside.

I quickly ripped off the bow and the rest of the paper, only to find another slab of wood, this one with hinges on the side. The wood was painted to resemble a Barbie doll display, only with Stephanie's likeness on it. In addition, there were several tiny holes in the front of the box. *Yeah, holes in a box the size of a human. It makes too much sense.* I saw the front panel had hinges built into it. I slowly opened.

There she was, dressed in the same doll's outfit painted on the front of the box. She smiled as I opened it all the way. "Merry Christmas, Paul," she said. "I just thought this would be a cute way to say that the best gift you've given me is yourself."

I was confused. "Wait," I said half-jokingly, "I thought I was supposed to show you my sentimental side."

She laughed. "Well," she said, "you have. You have been. I heard you talking to Daddy the other day, and I remember what you said to me about how you were sorry you didn't appreciate me. Paul, I just wanted you to know how much that meant to me. You're my favorite person... and you know, you were man enough to come clean. Now," she said smiling as she slipped out of the very loose wires around her wrists, neck, and feet that were allegedly keeping her in the box, "how about we see if you're man enough in other areas?"

"Wait," I said, not even sure why. Something just made me want to back off. "Steph, um... this isn't right. I mean, let's wait, can we? Right now... I know you love me, and I really love you, but... I don't want to just have you be my toy, my... doll. I want to be able to appreciate YOU. You're more than just Vince's heiress, his princess, my... wife. You're a person. Please, let me understand that person."

"But Paul," she said, looking at me as though I'd lost my mind, "don't you love me?"

"Of course. That's why I'm asking to wait. Yesterday, I wanted to show you I didn't need to sleep with you to love you. Don't you understand? Right now I... I'm not sure. I just need you to feel good about you as a person rather than as a uterus."

"But... but why? Don't you think I... I don't understand."

"Steph... I want you to think about something. How does your father treat you?"

She began to lower her head. "Daddy cares for me. He tries to make me better. You've seen it."

"Don't fool yourself. How does he treat you?"

She sighed. "Not well... but what can I do? He's promised me that I'll take over if I follow what he says. He's already at odds with Shane." I didn't answer. "I mean... I want to be able to run things, and this is the only way, right?"

"Steph... you'll get to run it when he retires no matter what. I'll make sure of it. The way he's going, he may not outlive Linda anyway. But that's not the point. The problem is that you... you need to stand up to people. Your dad controls you. He's manipulative. He's... man, he may even be abusive."

"So what do I do, just tell him?"

"No! You gotta soften him up. Remember how you handled it in Idaho -- when you made him see what he really thought of women? I think you really made a difference. I thought... I was sure... he was ready to give women a chance. Steph, you gotta believe me. You have the power to make him better. And the better he is to others, the better he'll be to you."

"You really think so? But... but what about us, Paul? I mean... you're really bringing me down here."

"Stephanie... you mean more to me than your body. I'm serious. I want you to be a better person, and the first step to that is not to be down on yourself all the time. I... I hate to say it but, you let a lot of things happen."

"Well... I saw what Daddy did to Shane. I just don't want that to be me."

"Listen, Steph... if it's your dad's temper you're worried about, let me say that if he tries to hurt you, he answers to me. If it's his pursestrings that worry you, don't be worried. You're very employable. You're capable. You'll make an honest living if you have to. I believe in you. I love you. You make me... human."

Stephanie's eyes glistened as she threw her arms around my neck. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

- The Rant for A Very SmarKDown! Christmas, Dec. 25 / 03.

- Well, happy Festivus and all that. Peace on earth, and goodwill toward men and women. Unless you're **Saddam Hussein**. Or **Darren Matthews**, for that matter.

- From wherever.

- Your hosts are **Tazz** (dressed as Santa) and **Michael Cole** (dressed as an elf). It's as disturbing as it sounds.

- #10: **Vince McMahon** v. **Zach Gowen**, Double or Nothing, SummerSlam. Can you believe THIS main evented the second biggest show of the year? JIP as Zach goes flying through the announce table and **A-Train** and **Big Show** waddle to ringside. Train punks out the ref, allowing a three-on-one until **Kurt Angle** makes the save and cleans house. Anklelock (by Zach, of all people) on Vince, but Big Show knocks out a second ref and creates havoc. **Undertaker** gets the turn to clean house, but **Eddie Guerrero** hits him with the US Title Belt, and everyone runs to the back. Zach takes advantage by hitting Vince with his leg -- er, his OTHER leg -- for two. Vince slugs out the third ref, and all the zebras walk. Vince gives Zach a mugging, then Stunners him into oblivion... for two. Stamford Jam misses, and Zach gets the corkscrew moonsault as **Michael Cole**, referee for hire, counts three. Sports Entertainment 101.

- Highlights of the next night in El Paso, as **Hulk Hogan** runs wild on the **F.B.I.** (remember them?) and **Zach** busts out the one-legged Sharpshooter on **Nunzio**, which is just sacrilege.

- #9: **Eddie Guerrero v. Tajiri**, US Title, SmackDown! on August 5. Highlights are shown, which is good because both these guys make tons of appearances on the countdown. Eddie wins by cheating, like you had to ask. This match indirectly started the Eddie feud with **Undertaker** that catapulted Guerrero into the stratosphere.

- A discussion of the Tag Team Titles leads to a pair of highlight packages, with commentary from **Eddie**, **Haas**, and **Heyman**...

- #8: **World's Greatest Tag Team v. Tajiri and Spanky**, WWE Tag Team Titles, SmackDown! on September 4. Highlights skim over Spanky and focus on Tajiri, of course. Tajiri blows the mist to get DQ'd, ruining an otherwise great match. **APA** stick their nose into the fun afterward, building to TLC V.

- #7: **Team Japan v. World's Greatest Tag Team**, WWE Tag Team Titles, SmackDown! on December 4. Highlights take up 10 minutes, as they flash between clips of the match and discussion from **Charlie Haas** and **Paul Heyman**. Heyman even stays in character, talking about his concern for **Ultimo's** arm and how it may have caused a submission. Heyman is just awesome. Match ran an ungodly 32 minutes and led to the champs retaining.

- **Tazz** brings up a statistical oddity: the WWE World Title hasn't headlined the SmackDown! side of a PPV since July. The announcers discuss **Eddie** and **Taker** some more, leading to an AWESOME highlight package containing the two of them.

- #6: **Eddie Guerrero v. Undertaker**, cage match, No Mercy. Just highlights, with the announcers promising more later. Hmm...

- #5: **World's Greatest Tag Team v. Mattitude v. APA v. Spanky and Tajiri**, TLC V, SmackDown! on September 18. This is from Raleigh, and the crowd is SERIOUSLY cheering the local guys on. Spanky even takes the hint and plays heel. JIP as ladders are plentiful. **Moore** with the first highspot of the match-let, a split-legged moonsault onto **Simmons** involving the ladder and the top rope. **Spanky** nearly gets the belts, but Moore dives onto the ladder, sending everything crashing over into **Haas**. We get the SPLIT SCREEN OF DOOM as **Matt Hardy** battles Tajiri in the ring and **Bradshaw** tackles away about two feet of padding on the outside. Moore and Simmons set up a table pyramid outside as Haas slaps the Haastruction on Matt, with Spanky dropkicking him. Ouch. Simmons hits the Dominator on Matt, but Tajiri gets the Buzzsaw Kick on Simmons. Bradshaw begins stifling the hell out of Moore before a low blow ends it. WGTT do the leapfrog choke off the ladder onto poor Moore. Spanky superplexes **Shelton** onto a ladder. A series of contrivances leads to Haas going through the top table, then Tajiri and Bradshaw, then the lower two tables. It looked good on paper. Matt gives Spanky the Twist of Fate, and the hometown boys climb to the top (with Matt doing the honors) to a MONSTER pop. This was pretty much the last time Matt was happy, too.

- The announcers talk about MSG that weekend, and both give fond memories of **Jeff**

Hardy, followed by a ten-bell salute. Well, they didn't give **Owen** any real respect either without marketing him for every dead dollar he was worth...

- #4: **Rhyno, Eddie Guerrero, Chavo Guerrero, Charlie Haas, and Shelton Benjamin v. John Cena, Rob Van Dam, Kurt Angle, Undertaker, and Hulk Hogan**. Clips of each elimination, with special Sable-Cams and Steph-Cams throughout for extra footage. Chavo smokes Hogan with a chair to get DQ'd. RVD gets the Five Star to eliminate Haas. Shelton gets the 450 on Cena to send him packing. Rhyno gets the GOAR GOAR GOAR on RVD on the outside and he ain't coming back. Hogan goes over Shelton with the usual. Eddie frog splashes Hogan and pins him in the single most shocking development EVER. Rhyno punks out Taker, who in turn punks out Rhyno so Angle can pin him. Angle then makes Eddie tap out to the Anklelock to get Sable fired. Sadly, we get no PLAYBOY CENTERFOLD POSE OF DOOM at the end.

- #3: **World's Greatest Tag Team v. Filthy Animals**, SummerSlam. This of course got MOTY at RSPW, so they JIP with **Kidman** and **Shelton** doing the single most innovative spot I've seen: duelling LADDER shots. **Rey** and **Haas** break it up with a 619 and Hotshot, respectively, and everyone's down. WGTT set up the infamous Ladder Bridge, but Rey and Kidman knock them off. Shelton drags Kidman to another ladder, but YOU CAN'T POWERBOMB KIDMAN! The bridge falls apart and Haas takes a shot to the noggin in what looked unplanned. Filthy Animals build the bridge again, but Shelton crotches Rey when he tries to cross. Haas climbs, but Rey gets the Pop-Up Rana on him. Kidman now attempts to get the belts, but Shelton breaks that up, leaving the bridge standing. They go outside, and Kidman knocks Shelton onto a table the **Dudley Boys** left behind from earlier, then tries a Shooting Star Press off the ladder onto the table. And misses. Rey and Haas both climb, but Shelton pulls himself THROUGH the Bridge and gets the belts as the bridge collapses beneath him. This was an easy ***** ladder match, so of course it was forgotten about by the end of the night.

- Royal Rumble ad.

- **Cole** and **Tazz** show a montage of the funny SmackDown! moments. **Hulk Hogan** "rapping" may be a perfect 100 on the Unintentional Comedy Scale, but I'd have to check with **Bill Simmons** on that one.

- We see **Vince McMahon** sticking his nose into the World Title match at SummerSlam, which leads to...

- #2: **Brock Lesnar v. Kurt Angle**, WWE Title, No Mercy. JIP as the ref eats the table. Brock grabs the ringbell, and Kurt blades off of a dozen shots. Brock up top, but Angle superplexes him off, then uses the ringbell on his own. Anklelock, but Brock gets an enzuigiri and some Greco-Roman throws for two. Kurt rolls Brock up for two. F-5 is reversed to a Tornado DDT by Kurt, but the moonsault -- well, as always -- misses and the two get a pinfall reversal sequence. Anklelock, but again Brock makes the ropes. Angle Slam is flipped out of, but Brock misses a Brockline and Angle rolls him up for the pin and the title. Eh.

- And now, the reason we've been flying through this, as we present the #1 match in its entirety. From my review...

- #1: **Eddie Guerrero v. Undertaker**, US Title, SummerSlam. Eddie runs over the bike with his Lo Rider out of the gate, and Taker is PISSED. Eddie eats the STEEL steps and gets tossed in, where Taker slugs him out, yelling about his bike. Eddie goes low and gets a rollup for one, leading to a slugfest. Eddie wins (!) and gets a monkey flip and a rana for two. Taker chucks Eddie with a military press, then gets a flying clothesline. Eddie drops out of a slam attempt and gets a DDT. Slingshot senton gets two. Undertaker reverses a German into a bulldog. Taker rubs his forearm in Eddie's face, but off of a whip Eddie gets a leaping DDT and a double KO ensues. Eddie charges, but flies out of the ring. Taker goes OLD SCHOOL, but the REDNECK ZOMBIE OUTTA CONTROL NO HANDS PLANCHA misses and sends Taker crashing THROUGH THE LO RIDER'S WINDSHIELD! Hot damn, Taker's feeling his oats here. Taker blades (duh), but Eddie eats a suplex on the hood. Eddie spits "rubbing alcohol" into Taker's eyes, and the poor ref eats a Tombstone. Taker tries to cover, and Eddie clubs him. A blind charge sends Eddie to the outside, and into the crowd they go. They race to a production tower -- where have I seen this tune before? -- and Taker punches Eddie around. Chokeslam is blocked, though, as Eddie runs up top. Taker follows and gets punched and chaired to the floor. Taker tries climbing, but as he reaches the top, Eddie gets a quasi-Van Daminator to send him flying. Wait, TAKER took that bump? And on top of that, EDDIE hits the frog splash off the tower!!! Did someone build a time machine and find 1997 Mark Callaway? EMTs arrive, so Taker comes back, literally hitting Eddie with the stretcher -- first by rolling it, then by SWINGING it. Back to ringside, as Taker chokes on Eddie, but Eddie breaks and works Taker's cut up to .7 Muta. Frog splash hits the knees back inside, though, and Taker covers, no ref. Okay, so Taker had to establish himself as better. Thanks. Taker checks on the ref, so Eddie dives off the top and onto Taker. HOOD ORNAMENT OF DOOM slashes the cut even more, but Taker grabs it and nails... the ref. Oops. Eddie begs for mercy, then chop blocks Taker. UFC punching, but Taker grabs the chokeslam out of it and hits it. The ref is revived with smelling salts or something, as he enters the ring (even HE'S bladed) and throws the thing out at 22:53. Eddie slides out of the Last Ride, then gets the El Paso Lasso. Taker breaks it, but Eddie reverses the Tombstone... INTO ONE OF HIS OWN!!!!!! Taker sits up (it's his move, after all), and the two brawl to the back as the Usual Idiots try to separate them. Taker brought his serious working boots because he knew he would look better, but hey, if this means a rematch where Eddie goes over, more power to them. Wild deathmatch, though not the best I've seen. ***

- We get **Eddie's** now legendary "Viva Guerrero" promo to wrap things up, as the boys wish us a Merry Christmas.

The Bottom Line:

If you have any doubt SmackDown! is better than RAW, I hope this dispelled it. Even with the Orange Goblin stinking up the ring, the most awesome action has been on this

show, especially in the tag ranks. Sure, Angle/Hogan is the headline right now, but you gotta love Eddie being an instant star.

Ho ho ho! Oh, wait, that's Torrie, Dawn, and Nidia...

Friday, December 26, 2003, 10:55 AM
JFK Airport, NYC, NY

Vince and I got ready to board the plane to El Paso to begin the daily grind again. I looked Stephanie in the eye as we stood at the gate. "Now, Steph," I said, "remember what I told you. I love you, and I want to love a person. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course," she said before kissing me. "I'll miss you, Paul."

"I'll miss you, too," I replied. The funny thing was, I really would miss her. Not HHH, me. Over the past week, I'd come to see her as a special woman who, somehow, was going to be important in Vince's life. *Once she believes she has the power, she will use it. When she uses it, we will win. I know it.*

Saturday, December 27, 2003, 09:48 PM
El Paso, TX

Motorhead's rendition of "The Game" played through the Convention Center as the crowd began booing maniacally. I stepped out onto the stage, staring at the crowd, almost smirking as I did so. I struck the pose, then poured the water over my head, drinking a little of the rest. I carried this in my mouth as I climbed onto the apron. On cue, I sprayed it out for the crowd, posed, and entered the ring. *That was fun.*

I awaited my opponent. Normally, Vince would've had me in a match where I'd win. This was no normal occasion, though, as the Lo Rider music played and hometown hero Chavo Guerrero came out to a standing ovation. He stood on the stage, looking all around and soaking it all in. He dashed to the ring and started the match before the bell, punching me down and adding chops and punches while the crowd went crazy. I escaped from the mount and tried to whip him into the ropes, but he reversed it, then hit a cross body block. I rolled out of the ring to slow things down, but really it was to be in position for his huge dive onto me that sent the crowd into a frenzy.

Chavo got up and played to the crowd as a huge "Chavo" chant broke out. I returned to the ring, waiting for him to get in. He climbed onto the apron, but before I could charge, he vaulted himself into a West Coast Pop-like move on me. I remained on the defensive as he hit a dropkick. I tried to get up, but he continued flying at me, this time with a forearm as I staggered backward into the turnbuckle. He climbed up top and began the 10 punch countalong, with the crowd doing some Spanish counting. Right around 10, though, I went low and shoved him off, causing the crowd to boo. *This is too easy.*

I smacked Chavo with my taped fists in the center of the ring, then whipped him

into the ropes and hit a facebuster. Chavo staggered around, so I grabbed him into a neckbreaker and covered. Earl Hebner counted two before Chavo's arm shot up. I sneered and stood over him. I picked him up and suplexed him, then ran in with a kneesmash. I covered again, and again I only got two.

Frustrated, I began choking him down while glaring at the referee. I lifted my hand deliberately at four, then grabbed his hair and pulled him off. I went for a huge right hand, but he took advantage of the opening and got a front dropkick on me, sending me backwards into the ropes. He charged, but I caught him into a spinebuster and covered. Again it was only two, and now I turned my wrath from Chavo to Hebner.

I got in his face and argued the count vociferously. He maintained his stance, so I shoved him to get his attention. He shoved back as the crowd began cheering. I turned around and soon saw why they cheered: Chavo was back up and he nailed me with a superkick. I fell flat, then waited for Chavo to get up to the top rope. As he did, I shook the ropes, causing him to land on the turnbuckle. I climbed up after him and hooked him for a superplex. As we flew through the air, the flashbulbs went off. We both landed, but Chavo floated over on top and got two. *Okay, now I'm ticked.*

I clotheslined Chavo down and began stomping him. I threw him into the ropes and nailed him with a running DDT. I stood over him and flexed, ready to deliver the final blow. I picked him up and kicked him in the gut. The crowd was starting to throw trash into the ring. I hooked both arms...

...but before I could go any further, Chavo backdropped me over his head. As I staggered to my feet, he grabbed my head and ran up the turnbuckles. He connected with a Tornado DDT, then covered. Three seconds later, I sent the fans home happy by doing the job to the hometown hero.

Sunday, December 28

We were all gathered in the Tunnel. After a long weekend and a wonderful Christmas spent apart, we were there to share stories and say our final good-byes. Owen, Lindsay, and I were all upset to various degrees, while Greg seemed to be smiling -- though it was hard to tell from his faint complexion.

"Greg, buddy," said Owen, who had had the most experience working with him, "I'm going to miss having you around. You always knew how to help me when I wanted to take time off... you did so much with Vince... I'm proud of you, bro."

Owen was almost in tears as Greg sat propped up in the corner -- fainter than ever, since he was soon to disappear and wing his way to Heaven. Owen reached forward and hugged what was left of Greg, who seemed rather serene, all things considered.

"Greg? You okay?"

"Yeah, Linds... why?"

"You're just... there. You're not happy or sad or... you're going to Heaven! Doesn't that mean anything?"

"A little," he said, measuring his words. "I'm tired right now. I just feel like they'll have me wake up there. It's funny... I never thought I'd be tired without a body, but I've been doing this for so long, I guess... the time is just right. I feel kinda... peaceful, really."

I thought about him as I stood there, viewing what was left of him. I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something within the sympathy. Sure, I'd only known of his existence for a few months, which is why I perhaps didn't feel any real attachment, but something else bothered me, deep down, that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Greg... I'm going to miss you. Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Join me at the gates," he whispered as his body became nearly invisible. We all waited as Greg appeared to convulse -- at least I think he did. It was hard to see. The last traces of Greg appeared to fade from view as he coughed out a final "goodbye". Soon, I could see nothing.

After a few minutes, I slowly stepped forward into the place he once was. I reached down to touch where his shoulder had been -- but I felt nothing. I grasped at the air where he was -- and indeed, it was all air. I looked back at Lindsay and Owen, both of whom were ready to burst into tears. "He's... really gone," I finally said.

Lindsay buried her head in Owen's arms and let loose a barrage of tears. Owen comforted her. "He's off to a better place now. He's going to be happy for all eternity."

"I... I guess so..." Lindsay was barely able to control herself. "I'm just... he... I can't believe it. He was such a good man, he was. He did a lot to help all of us. I'm going to miss him."

"But... wasn't he only here a few months?"

Owen shook his head. "More like a year or so. He knew this was his last tour of duty, so he chose to be here for his final year. I never saw a guy have more fun with his job. He loved being here. I just don't know if... if the next guy will be as much of a sport about it."

"Wait, wait -- Owen, let's not get all lost in the clouds and stuff," I interrupted, finally realizing the problem. "Greg was a womanizer. He was always hitting on the Divas. And... you know his mind wasn't always the purest. I just wonder -- was he really Heaven material? Think about it."

Lindsay shook her head and stared at me. "Andy... how could you... what are you saying? This isn't any time to..."

"Now hang on," I said, not sure I was in control any more. "It's not like he just died. In fact, he's been dead longer than he was alive. When this happened to Owen's dad, we were congratulating him. Now's not a time to be crying because we lost a friend! We're supposed to be moving on. It's just as if he got reassigned, right?" There was no reply. "Uh... right?"

I saw a pair of withering glances in my direction. I began to sense judgment was upon me, even though I wasn't scheduled to face it for 50 or so years. Lindsay's tear-stained eyes made me wither with their shock and dismay. Owen, meanwhile, seemed to be holding back rage, a very uncommon emotion. I wanted to crawl somewhere and let them forget I existed.

"Andy," Owen said, finally responding to my statements, "don't you dare believe that. What just happened... it's... we're allowed to react as we want to, aren't we?"

"Well, within reason, I guess you..."

"AREN'T WE???" Owen backed me against the wall, seemingly ready to punch my lights out. I cowered in the corner, holding my hands over my head and trying not to look him in the eyes. I felt him breathing on my hair, trying to hold back. I realized my teeth were chattering from fear -- something I'd never expected them to do before.

"W-w-w... well I... I m-mean..."

Before I could even get out what I meant, I found myself back by the gates of Heaven. St. Peter wasn't there, though; instead, it was a group of 11 others, seated behind a long bench. I looked over and saw Greg in front of them, worry etched over every part of his brow.

These are the Apostles. Greg is at his judgment. But why am I here?

"Mr. Goss," said the man in the center, "you have been brought here because yours is the remaining issue facing Mr. Owens before we pass judgment. It appears that a certain Miss Kathleen Gray's annihilation is the topic. We are attempting to determine who, if anyone, was responsible for her turn from us."

A full minute passed as I pondered this. I knew full well the gravity of the situation. If I stood there and said that I felt Greg began to corrupt her, began to make her believe in worldly things above heavenly things, he would be shut out. If, on the other hand, I said it was not his problem, and that it was a natural consequence, the last hurdle would be cleared, and the gates would open for him. His fate was almost literally hanging on my word.

"Why get me?" I asked in an attempt to stall while I considered my testimony.

"What about Mr. Hart? He worked more closely with the two."

"We are not necessarily here for an expert opinion, Mr. Goss," the leader replied.

"We are here for yours. After all, you are the one who feels the strongest about this." *Am I? Why? Do I really feel it matters still?*

"John, sir," offered someone down the bench, "perhaps the witness is right. Maybe we should call this Hart fellow to testify instead. After all, isn't the truth important?"

"Thomas, my friend," John said in turn, "it is not for him to decide. We have called Mr. Goss for a specific reason. He is the person who felt most passionate. We were told what lies in his heart. Now it is up to him to determine if it's truly there."

I took a deep breath. I knew what had to be said.

"Gentlemen," I began, "when Miss Gray was destroyed in that most horrific manner, there was a time when I thought Mr. Owens here to be a party to the act. I did not believe so in the direct sense; my own eyes had witnessed the deception of her friend, whose name I forget. However, I thought that maybe his influence had led her to consider the heavenly path meaningless.

However, that was one of many beliefs and blames I had. I remember thinking I had been to blame as well. In fact, it was partially my words, my thoughts, that sent her into a non-helping mood. In addition, I felt that our other colleagues had not been forceful enough in changing her opinion. I never really considered what I guess is the... true... cause."

My voice tailed off. I was right. I hadn't considered it, and I was hoping I would stall for enough time to know what it was. It didn't work. I just stared at the Apostles -- they had to be; 11 of them, John, Thomas -- and with my eyes, asked them for advice.

"I can safely say," said one, "that it would take a great man to admit to his mistakes. That is why Peter is at the gates, and we are merely a tribunal. However, I still

remember the words Jesus said to my brother: if you hold them bound, they will be held bound."

Something in that phrase made me realize what I had to do. It was no longer a matter of whether he was responsible or not; it was a matter of whether I felt he deserved entry or not. This was all a smokescreen, a game I had to play along with. I then thought of how I would feel if my decision went first one way, then the other.

"Gentlemen, I realize this may not be the best of reasons given... but it's the one I have to give. At issue here is whether Greg here doomed another person. You are asking me to pass judgment. By doing so... you're giving me the chance to doom him. No matter how I feel about who's responsible for Kath... for Miss Gray's ultimate annihilation, if I send him to Hell on the theory that he sent her there, I would in turn doom myself. That's a level of hypocrisy I'm not ready for. I cannot hold him responsible. If you wish, you can blame me or Miss Gray herself... but please, let him in."

"Thank you," said Andrew -- Peter's brother. "You may go now."

"Where were you?" Owen was absolutely wide-eyed when I returned.

"You wouldn't believe me," I said, still trying to regain my bearings. "All I can say is that if the two of you want to go to Heaven and meet him at the gates, there won't be any problems."

Monday, December 29, 2003, 09:44 AM
San Antonio, TX

I slowly arose from the bed. I felt like a new man. What happened last night had given me the desire to move on, even though Lindsay was now on SmackDown! Still, that left me alone, unless someone else came along. Somehow I knew we wouldn't be left with just three people.

I looked around the room, then stretched a little. Next to me was another person's belongings, complete with yin and yang emblems. *RVD? No, he's on SmackDown! and I'm on RAW, right? So who am I?*

I looked over for my glasses. When I saw them, I saw something with them and knew I probably wouldn't need a mirror to find out who I was. I picked up both objects, then checked myself with the glasses in the reflection of the other object. *Oh, yeah... this'll be just fabulous.*

That object was the Intercontinental Title belt. A quick look without the glasses confirmed my suspicions. I was Christian.

TO BE CONTINUED