

# FOURTEENTH WEEK

Monday, November 3, 2003, 02:33 PM  
Cleveland, OH

I slowly walked to Shawn's car. I dragged my bags behind me and my belt over my shoulder. Normally, I'd be doing to this because I'd be worried about keeping up appearances. Today, though, I wasn't sure my heart was in it.

I slumped past various wrestlers, most of whom gave me a warm hello and a smile. I half-heartedly returned them. *Why am I working? Why am I here? Don't these people know I've suffered hardship? Doesn't God know I'm in no mental condition for this? Why would He do this to me?*

I saw the trunk open and tossed my bags in. I held onto the belt and walked around to the passenger side. As I went to get into the back seat, I heard a voice call me. "Nora! There you are!"

I turned around. William Regal was headed for me, dressed impeccably as always and with a grin on his face. I waved and did my half-smile. The sight of him triggered something in the back of my mind -- a fear. I knew my instinct was right. William was bad news.

"Listen, Nora," he said in his usual charming voice. "This whole thing you're getting involved in... well, the boys up top have big plans for you if you keep up the good work. And since I'm your strongest advocate, I expect you to work doubly hard to impress me. This Chamber can make or break your career. You know what to do."

"Sure," I said, even though I wasn't certain yet. "Are you going to give me a note now?"

"Oh, no... no," he said. "I want to watch the show first, of course. Why make plans that can't be followed through? No, the note will be in its usual place. I meant to say, though, last week you were wonderful. So no need for a critique... just the usual others."

"Right," I said quietly.

"Is something wrong, sunshine?"

"Oh, I... I got bad news from home last night, that's all."

"Do you wish to talk about it?"

"Not right now. You wouldn't... understand."

"Oh. Very well then. I hope things get better by later on in the week. I shall see you soon."

He placed his arm on my shoulder. I just smiled and returned the favor, although I began to feel dirtier from just having touched him. *I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I already know Molly hates this guy, but can't or won't say why. But something about that hug... the worst feeling... maybe I'm just out of sorts.*

I got in. Eric Bischoff was sitting beside me. "Hey there, babe. Everything doing well?" He gave me a Cheshire cat grin as he spoke. I slapped him out of instinct.

"Don't talk to me like that! You know I don't want to hear that sort of thing. You're a creep! You... you..." I became flustered. I grabbed my glasses from my pocket and put them on. "You." Seeing Lindsay there didn't make me feel better.

"What? What's wrong?"

"What do you think? I don't wanna be here. I don't wanna have to do this. I don't

understand why it is that this week I've been given a job I can't refuse. I just want to go into Recovery and stay there for the week. Just... just let the whole thing... go."

I started to cry again. Eric leaned over and put his arm around me. I felt two sensations -- the slimy phoniness of a Bischoff gesture, and the warm understanding of Lindsay's embrace.

"Andy," I heard, "I feel the same way."

I slowly looked up, pulling the glasses off as I did. "You do?"

"Yes. It hurt me as much as it hurt you. It's not fun. It's... it sucks. But you know what? We have a mission. We gotta stick to that. Our goal is Vince -- don't forget it."

"How can I... we..." I felt a mental block.

"What? How what?"

"We can't even save our own."

I buried myself in Eric's shirt and continued to sob uncontrollably. Everything I had kept to myself around Gail that morning, and everything I had pretended didn't exist with the girls at lunch, and everything I didn't want William to know, was all pouring out of me. We were alone, and I was free to let it show.

"Andy... we tried... that's all that is asked of us. You did your best... you couldn't help her. She made a decision. I'm... I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you back me up? Any of you?"

"It would not have done any good. She never listened to us, Andy."

Suddenly, my despair was coupled with rage and justice. "Why aren't you upset? Why doesn't this bother you?"

I stared into Eric's gray eyes. The fatherly gleam was gone, replaced with a sort of regret, like that of a parent who lost an argument with a child. I could feel Lindsay's true emotions coming through the icy exterior. Whatever she refused to feel couldn't be held back.

"It does. It bothers me more than anything. It's not even the shock or the imagery anymore... it's the feeling that... it's another person I knew, that I couldn't do anything about. I guess after a while... you... when it happens often enough, the numbness sets in. I know the first time I saw it I was a wreck. But now... eight years later... you just get..."

No, no. You never get used to it. You never get used to the feeling in the pit of your gut saying you failed. You never, ever get used to hearing the final anguished scream as they get digested in the belly of a Hellspawn. You can't get used to staring into the face of Evil at work. It doesn't happen. But after a while, you can play the part. You can play the part."

I could barely see Eric anymore through the water in my eyes. "What part? Why were you so matter-of-fact about it?"

"Because you weren't. You aren't. You need a shoulder to cry on. You need someone to give you comfort. I need to be that person. I need to be your strength. If not me, who?"

I leaned into his chest and clung on, much like Kathleen had done to me in Recovery before. "Thank you."

Lindsay began to rock me back and forth like a baby in his mother's arms. "Just get it all out. Life goes on."

Shawn climbed into the front seat and closed the driver's door. He looked into the back to see us consoling each other, both with tears in our eyes. "Man, you're that upset

about going back to work?"

Slowly, Lindsay began to tell him the whole story. Shawn pulled over to the side of the road before we reached the Gund Arena. We all hugged each other and cried together before going on our way.

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05:49 PM

"All right, people... sorry I'm late. The meetings were a little cantankerous in there." Eric entered and posted the booking sheet on the Diva wall. As he turned to leave, Lita let out a shriek. She was unprepared for Eric's entrance.

"I'm terribly sorry, Amy."

"KNOCK NEXT TIME, YOU IDIOT!"

As Trish and Gail began to calm Lita down, I walked up to the wall. Stacy was with me as we looked over the sheet. The two of us being alone gave her opportunity to talk.

"So, what's with the notes?"

"Hm?"

"William. I saw him drop in here and put a note with your stuff a couple weeks ago. What's the big deal?"

*What do I say? I don't know. But wait... I bet Molly's stock answer will come out.*

"Oh, that? He's just teaching me how men wrestle with women. You know, so I don't look out of place?"

"Then why the secrecy?"

"Stacy... think about what I just said. A guy meeting with a woman during the week to discuss how the different genders wrestle together... doesn't that sound the slightest bit like an excuse Andrew would make with you?"

She giggled. "Yeah, you're right. Ooh, we get an opening salvo against the RTC this week! How exciting!"

"You're going to be on RNN?"

"No... but we respond to something on RNN. See?"

I double-checked. Sure enough, Steven was going to attack Trish on RNN, and 3 Live Kru would be her knights in shining armor. "You know, I was wondering... why would the RTC attack women? I thought they'd be against that."

"I don't know... they certainly haven't said why. Maybe they'll give a reason tonight. Sure caught us off-guard last week when they were told to attack Trish and Lita." She shrugged. "Probably something about a woman's place."

I rolled my eyes. "Can't Gerwitz do any better than that?"

She shook her head as we laughed. After she left, I looked at the sheet a second time. I was in the overrun. I was going to take part in the main event. *Me. Molly. A woman. In the main event of RAW. And fighting for the World Title. The first woman wrestler to do so. And that's about 10th or 20th on my list of problems right now.*

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10:39 PM

The previous six-man was coming to a conclusion. Maven, Rob Conway, and Chris Benoit were squaring off against Kane and La Resistance. It had been announced earlier in the night that the four midcard tag teams would go four-on-four in a table match at Survivor Series. *Yeah, the Dudley Boyz in a table match. I'm shocked, really.*

"One minute, Molly." Kevin Dunn and Shane McMahon were calling the shots backstage. In the ring, Kane had just put the Tombstone to Maven and gotten the pin. As the music hit, Kane stood up and picked Maven up a second time. Conway tried to cut it off, but Dupree and Grenier handled him well. Benoit flew in and was disposed of by Kane. Maven was then tossed into the guardrail from the ring.

"Now?"

"Not yet..."

La Resistance returned to the ring and waved their flag. Kane grabbed both of them from behind by the necks.

"Remember, you're a surprise to him."

"Right."

Chris Benoit dove in and clipped Kane, then tried for a Sharpshooter. Dupree, showing appreciation that only a Frenchman could, broke it up before Conway recovered enough to chase everyone to the back. Benoit was tossed into the corner by Kane, who stood and yelled at the Champion.

"Now!"

I ran as fast as I could down the aisle as the action remained focused on the ring. A cheer went up from those who noticed, but most of the arena was caught up in Kane ready to dismantle Benoit. I darted up the stairs and climbed to the top rope, right over Benoit. Kane stared at Benoit, then quickly looked up before looking back down. If you weren't looking for it, you'd never see it. But I was -- it was my cue.

I arched back to get maximum momentum, then sprung forward. My legs flipped over my head as I headed toward Kane. I landed legs and backside first on him and expected him to fall back. Instead, he caught me, leaving me swinging upside down for a few seconds. I tried to pull myself up while my shirt fell down over my face -- *great, THERE'S the next big photo on WWE.com*. As I looked back, I saw Benoit crouching against the ring, looking up at Kane, then back at me.

I tried a second time to pull myself up, but this one was just to get momentum. I felt the rush of someone moving quickly behind (which, in this case, was underneath) me. I quickly uncoiled and pulled my legs over my head again as Glen did a full flip forward. When we both crashed, he was on his back, and I was in the UFC position, pounding away at him. To the audience, it looked like Benoit chop blocked Kane, allowing Molly to do a rana.

Kane tossed me forward as I rolled out and onto my feet. He stood straight up and cornered me. I began to shriek and plead my case as Kane stared at me, mayhem in his eyes. I still had one spot to go and no way to get there, thanks to Glen catching me. I lunged out and kicked him, but we were too close and my kick was lower than I anticipated. Fortunately, for once that was a benefit.

As Kane doubled over, I backed my way up to the top rope and dove again. This time, the Molly Go Round connected all the way through. I dove off and slid out of the

ring as Kane sat up and shook it off. Benoit waited for me, and we ran off together. However, I tripped on the way back, and Kane came stalking after me.

As I crawled backwards up the stage, Evolution -- who was scheduled to be in the 3-on-2 main event -- came out and looked at Kane. HHH stole JR's microphone and spoke. "That's right, Kane... she's an opponent... do what comes naturally to her!"

Kane stopped and stared at HHH. He yelled loudly, "That's what you'd want!" before stepping past me and continuing to backstage. He was done with me. I wasn't done with the show.

HHH grabbed me off the ground by the hair and dragged me to the ring caveman-style. I scooted on my feet and hands in an attempt to keep from having it hurt. Orton and Batista followed, as HHH tossed me casually into the ring. He got in and yelled.

"So, Molly... you wanna play with the big boys, huh?... You wanna prove you can be a champion?... Face a real champion, then! Tonight... you'll be In This Very Ring... you see... we've decided to give our opponents a break... and even the sides."

I did my best half-dazed, half-confused, all-scared look at HHH. I crawled aside and begged off as the three of them surrounded me in the corner. Just as it seemed hopeless, Booker T and Goldust charged in and started attacking from behind. I kicked Orton low and crawled through his legs to get away, trying to get him to tire himself out chasing me. Goldust sent HHH out of the ring, while Booker T and Batista fell over the top, leaving us alone. Orton caught me.

A shot between the shoulder blades kept me down, as I yelled in pain and put my hand to my back. Orton picked me up and set me on the top rope, flinging me with a hiptoss halfway across the ring. He covered, but I shot my arm up at two. Orton dragged me to his corner, where Batista tagged in.

For the next minute, I was flung all around the ring and ringside area. I got press-slammed over the top onto a diving Goldust. I got thrown backfirst into the turnbuckles. I got slammed on the mats and the ramp. I even was sent over the top rope back into the ring from the outside. Batista smiled as I lay in pain. HHH demanded a tag.

HHH went for a Pedigree, but I was dead weight. He tried a second time, and this time I rolled him up for two. This made him even angrier, and I could tell. He backed me into the corner and slammed his fist into my face hard. The tape caused a bruise to my cheekbone. *Any other environment where a man hits a woman with 10,000 witnesses, he's arrested.*

I fell down in the corner, propped up by the bottom rope. HHH placed his boot in my throat and began to lean down. I flailed around and gasped for air. *Oh, crap, he's being stiff in here! Why?* He picked me up and slammed me down with one arm, driving his shoulder into my chest. At two, Booker broke it up and slapped HHH a few times. I heard him say, "What's wrong witchoo?"

As the ref escorted Booker away, Orton came in from behind with a waistlock suplex to keep me down. HHH then dropped his leg on my head -- not the shoulders, the head. My ears rang as he turned me over. He yelled, "Stay down, bitch," which earned him the coveted asshole chant. He picked me up, but I was in no condition to get thrown around. When he whipped me into the ropes -- adding a little extra at the end -- I slid out of the ring and stumbled to the ground. Batista, unaware of what was going on (I hope), tossed me back in. *Thanks.*

HHH charged me as I slowly rose, and flew recklessly with his knee aimed at my

face. I ducked a little, but still my forehead crashed into him, knocking me down and for a loop. I wasn't out, just unaware. He covered, and through sheer instinct, I put a foot on the rope. HHH smiled as he picked me up and said, "DM." He then tossed me by the hair -- before I could react -- over to his corner. I rolled over and looked up. One or two of my hairs were stuck in his tape as he tagged in Orton.

Orton assessed the situation and applied an armbar as I lay down. "Nora," he whispered, "what happened?"

"He... he hurt me," I muttered.

"Dammit! I was afraid of that. Don't worry, I'll get you out." I slowly wormed over to the ropes as he pulled me up. He sent me in, then ducked his head. Out of desperation, I punted it, then threw my full body weight into his chest, knocking us both down. I began to crawl slowly as Orton crawled after me. He grabbed my boot, but I kicked him away. With one final lunge, I got to Goldust.

I rolled out of the ring and could only hear the crowd going crazy for every punch that floored Evolution. I remained motionless, face up, as I saw Booker T run into the ring as well. I imagined all five men were in the ring, and when the flashbulbs popped all around, I guessed Booker was doing a Spinaroonie.

I heard booing and kept still. *That would be Eric doing a run-in.* Eric climbed onto the apron in front of me and punched Earl Hebner. *Okay. Now HHH is going for the sledgehammer. Now Orton is holding Booker for the shot. Now HHH is swinging.* The crowd cheered. *Now he's missing and hitting Orton. And now Shane is heading to the ring... time for me to return to consciousness.*

As I slowly pulled myself up, I saw my timing was a little off. Shane hadn't arrived yet, but was on his way. Booker and HHH sent each other out of the ring and brawled on the outside. Shane dove in and hit a Skywister Press on Orton, then knocked Bischoff one for good measure. Bischoff chased after Shane as the referee came to.

I slowly, laboriously, crawled across the ring. I barely made it over to Orton. With Molly's last ounce of strength, my arm fell on top of him. The referee crawled over as the crowd chanted along: 1! 2! 3!

The greatest feeling was hearing Lilian Garcia shout, "Here are your winners, the team of Goldust, Booker T, and Molly Holly!" As I lay motionless, waiting for Booker and Goldust to help me up, a single thought crossed my mind:

*I need cooler music.*

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11:13 PM

After being helped to the back, I walked slowly to the ladies' locker room. As I did, I passed Stephanie and Eric chewing HHH out for stiffing me out there. I rounded the corner and ran face-to-stomach into Big Show. I looked up -- way up, since he was a good two feet taller than Molly -- and took a deep breath.

"Hey," he said, his voice sounding reassuring. "Congratulations."

I muttered a thank you and walked aside. Big Show understood and held the door open for me, yelling, "We got a walking wounded here!" As I stumbled into the locker room, Trish and Lita grabbed me and helped me sit down.

"Are you all right, Nora?"

"Yeah, you look awful! Is that a black eye?"

"You look like you got mugged!"

"What's wrong?"

I simply smiled. "I need new music."

As everyone laughed, I grabbed a towel from my stuff. As I did, a note appeared.

I read it.

"Nora Tue/Wed 0000 yours DM -- PS talk 2GK"

*Talk to... Gail Kim? Why?* I tried to put it out of my mind as I got undressed for a long, hot shower. "Nora?"

I turned and faced Stacy. "Something wrong?"

"You usually don't shower with us. You're too modest for that."

I smiled. "After tonight... I'm too sore to wait. Just... yeah."

"You want me to leave?"

"Nah. I can deal with it."

And surprisingly, I could.

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02:35 AM

Buffalo, NY

Eric, Shawn, Gail and I pulled into the hotel at Buffalo in Shawn's car. Gail and I talked about the match the whole time on the way up. Eric and Shawn joined in with their perspective. Eric kept saying, "What Hunter did... that wasn't right. Shawn, you gotta talk to him."

"I did," he replied eventually. "Thing is, he said he was told to do that."

"Wha? I never told him... I guess Vince wanted to make him an asshole. Wish he'd been more careful."

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08:44 AM

Buffalo, NY

After a brief night's sleep, Gail and I woke up the next day. I was so sore I could barely move. Gail came over to my bed and checked on me.

"You gonna be all right, hon?"

"I think so... just very sore from last night."

She laughed. "Hunter was a mean old man, wasn't he? Here, lemme help." Gail turned me over and began to give me a backrub. As she worked me over, my pain began to go away. *She's good. Scary good.*

"Gail," I said as I felt her soft hands maneuver on my back. "Did Darren tell you anything last night?"

"Oh, yeah... he said you wanted a critique of the match. He gave it to me, so I could have you read it."

"A critique?" *That sounds phony.* "Did you read it?"

"Nah. It's none of my business. Let me find it." She got up and walked off, leaving me with a pitiful attempt to roll back onto my back. *Why did Hunter do that? Who told him?* I looked up at the mirror. *At least the black eye is gone. Guess it wasn't as bad as I thought.*

"Here you are," said Gail. "Oh, by the way, I'm gonna be in late again tonight, so don't wait for me."

"How late?" *If she says after midnight...*

"Around 3 or so. Don't worry about it."

*Great.* I opened the note. I wished I hadn't.

"Nora--

What Mr Helmsley did was what will happen to you in the Chamber unless you do the right thing. The last two weeks Lance has been there, but not this time. I have control of your well-being, and no one can help you. You had best be on your top form.

--Darren"

"So," Gail said, "is Lance coming over to take you out again?"

"No... he couldn't make the trip this week."

"Too bad... you two would make a nice couple."

"Gail," I said shocked. "He's married."

"Oh... that's right. I can never keep it straight anymore. Of course, not much about me is kept straight," she chuckled. Something in the chuckle seemed weird. But Molly didn't know what it meant.

*Or did she?*

"Could you leave me alone, Gail? I need time to get up."

"Oh, sure... I'll be back in a half hour or so... you know, just go have breakfast."

She stopped fiddling with the tea set and stepped out. I lay back and tried to zone out.

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"Molly? Are you here?"

I walked into the dark room as before. I looked for a sleeping Molly, but saw nothing. Suddenly, her shadow appeared against the back wall. It stood up and turned either its face or it back to me -- it was impossible to tell.

"Who are you?"

"You're... Molly?"

"Yeah. What's left of her."

"I'm here to help. You're having a dream... do you need help?"

"Thanks... but I want to handle this."

"What is Darren doing?"

"No... nothing... it's my fault. I'm sorry."

"Nora, just tell me."

"Don't call me that! I'm Molly!" There was a pause. "I'm sorry... I'm just... he..."

"What is it?"

"I don't wanna say. But Gail's in on it."

"She is?"

"Yeah... she lets it happen. I don't know why. I don't. But she's always my roommate, and she always leaves, and he always... I've said too much. You don't need to know. I'm sorry. Whatever it is, he's not at fault. I bring it on myself."

"That can't be true."

"I said I bring it on myself! Case closed!"

I started to back off.

"Could you leave the door open please? I need... the light."

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My eyes opened wide as I snapped out of it. This told me nothing I didn't already know. Regal was a bad person, I knew. He did something, I knew. He did it while he and Molly were alone, I knew. Its nature, I could only guess at or think I knew. But I knew someone who might know.

Gail returned. "You feeling better, hon?"

"I don't know," I said. "Gail?"

"Yeah?"

"Where do you go all the time? Could you... stay in? Just this once?"

"Oh, no, I can't. See, I have friends I wanna see. I just wanna go out and have a good time. I... I don't think there's anything wrong with that, is there?"

"I guess not, but... I feel like I don't know you." *In many ways.* "I mean, can I go with you just once?"

"Maybe next week, okay? This time... it's just not right. By the way, what does Darren do here?"

"Don't you know?"

"Well, I can guess what you two do."

"Look... tomorrow morning, I'll let you know, and you tell me where you go all those nights. Deal?"

"Deal."

We shook hands and hugged. *I was one step closer to solving this mystery.*

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Tuesday, November 4, 2003, 06:17 PM

Buffalo, NY

As I wandered backstage, I saw Eddie Guerrero pacing back and forth, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. I almost felt he could be a kindred spirit, if only I could get away with talking to him. Of course, I couldn't. People must not know.

*Maybe if I ran into Owen or Greg, things would be better. Ugh. I have so much on*

*my plate right now. As if being Molly and feeling like I'm going to be hurt tonight when the clock strikes twelve isn't bad enough for one week, it coincides with Kathleen's... her... annihilation.*

*She's gone. She'll never come back. Not in Heaven, not in Hell, never. It's like she never existed. And she doesn't exist because I couldn't talk her out of it. I couldn't convince her Tommy was bad. Heck, I'm not sure I believed he was bad. But we didn't know, and we were supposed to be cautious. So instead, I watched her freeze up, and melt down, and be...*

*But... but was it me? I was following orders. I was told to get away. I was told to save myself. But that's... selfish. I... why was I told this? Did they know she would do this? Did they not care? Aren't we supposed to help each other? Couldn't she have been saved?*

*Wait... could she? I tried to talk to her, and she just shoved me aside and blamed me and them for everything. She hated being an Angel... and Tommy provided her with the possibility of being something new. I don't think it's what she had in mind, but she chose to turn her back on us.*

*She turned her back on us, yeah, but not on God, did she? Did she ever think of God? Did she believe there was a God? I never asked. I don't know. All I know is, she thought more about herself than her purpose. She thought her fate was her own.*

*But we all do! We all think of ourselves from time to time. She just chose the wrong time.*

*No, think harder, Andy. She said it herself: "If this is Heaven, I'd rather be in Hell." She got her wish. So why do I feel so bad? Because in getting her wish, she became lost. She blinked out. Gone. She got tricked by the Devil's Army. And I saw through it -- we all did -- and we let it happen.*

*Lindsay... she's upset too. She tried. She hated it. But she knew that it had to be. In the end, it's her decision. Kathleen freely chose to throw us and everything we stood for aside in exchange for the promise of earthly pleasures. It's not just here: it happened with Shannon and with Stephanie. I am exonerated.*

*But I'm not feeling any better.*

"Se-Nora-ita... heh heh." It was Eddie, chuckling at his own butchering of the Spanish language. "Que pasa, mami? What brings you to the opposition, eh?"

"Oh, it's you," I chuckled. "We're here to see the tapings. Eric and Shawn brought us along because they wanted to see what they were up against. They're very impressed with the way everyone got elevated here."

"Well, it helps when there's no ego or injury, you know... poor Jericho, man," he sighed. "Anyway, you gotta see me tonight, man. We got Hogan and RVD in a match -- Chavito and me do -- and then after the match, they have me doing this promo basically talking to Chavo. I'm so nervous, man... it's about Angle... the title. We're the stars of the big match! Not Rhyno or Hogan! I'm so... odelay!"

"Wow, yeah, that's wonderful, but... Eddie... what are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know. I need an angle. I need a story. I need... it's not just the title. That's old hat. That's been done. I need something more. Something bigger. Bigger than the title. Bigger than both of us. Bigger than..."

"...all of Mexico?"

"Nah, that's too big." Then his eyes lit up. "That's IT! Gracias, muchas MUCHAS gracias, Senorita!" He planted a huge kiss on my cheek and gave me a noogie like I was Chavo instead of Molly.

"Hey, hey! Easy!"

"Oh, sorry, mamacita. I'm just... you're a genius! I must prepare! Tonight... will be MY NIGHT!"

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07:45 PM

As Velocity was being taped, I waited in the back with Eric and Paul. Paul seemed subdued as Ultimo and Tajiri looked on. Tajiri shrugged, seeming to indicate he didn't know what was going on. Eric motioned for them to leave, and they walked away for a while.

"Paul," Eric said, trying to be both himself and herself at the same time, "I guess... you heard."

"I did." He shook his head and removed his ballcap, running his hand over the thinning hair on his head. "It's awful. It's brutal. I can't even imagine what it's like. I don't want to. What went wrong?"

"She just... got fooled." I was scared to say the rest of what was on my mind. "She was with someone she knew. How were any of us to know that he was with a Demon? Though it explains his behavior... damn. He killed her twice."

Paul shook his head. "So young. So innocent. So naive. Didn't you people warn her that something like this could happen?"

"Hey, hey," Lindsay replied. "Ask Owen or Greg."

"Yeah," I added. "According to Owen, he told her about it. Where are they?"

"Owen is off working right now. He got Tazz. Greg I haven't seen... I mean, he called in, but he was Super Nova, so he's stuck working with Cornette right now."

"Cornette's on our side?"

"Not like that, no. I mean... Greg's off the case this week, I guess. And... quite frankly, I don't think Owen's gonna last either. He's been miserable all day today and yesterday. He couldn't keep it together when he talked about it."

"Paul, you know he won't last," Lindsay interjected. "He never does in early November."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, at least he has a reason now."

"He's that bad about Hell that he can't complete the next week?" *I mean, I'm shaken up by it, and I can see that, but... it doesn't make sense.*

"No, it's not that. It's... oh, crap, SmackDown! is starting. I'd better get going."

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09:24 PM

It had been a wild night. Already, Billy Kidman had enlisted the APA as his backup for Survivor Series. Matt Hardy and Nick Dinsmore had performed in what

looked like it would be a show-stealer given the right time, but Brock had interrupted it and destroyed Dinsmore again with three F5s. On top of that, Hogan and RVD just beat the Guerreros in a shockingly good match. But now was the moment.

Eddie had asked that everyone gather around. He said he felt he had "it". Something had clicked, and he wanted everyone to know about it. The SmackDown! locker room gathered in the back, with the exception of those who were needed for the match. We all watched as Eddie approached and got the set-up line -- "Uncle Eddie, c'mon... it'll all be all right when we win at Survivor Series, right?" -- from Chavo.

"NO! It's not about Survivor Series anymore! It's about who I am! You see, what happened out there -- that was an embarrassment. A 50-year-old man, a relic, a link to the past just put me down and pinned me! That's not who I am! Don't you see, Chavito -- we're more than wrestlers now!

I went back to Juarez, to Tijuana, to Distrito Federal... everywhere we go, they say the same thing! 'Oh, Eddie, you beat the Undertaker in a cage -- when do you get your shot?' That's what they care about -- my SHOT! They want me to be Champion! And dammit, Chavo, I want to be champion too! But then this garbage happens -- this -- egofest by two of Vince's women, and now I have to sit on the sidelines and know that even if I beat Kurt Angle, it will mean NOTHING!

Don't you get it Chavito, mi sobrino, it is our time! This is more than just about my shot. I'm not even me anymore! Forget Sable, forget Stephanie, forget Kurt Angle and think! Think back... back to our days in Lucha. When your father, my brothers, my father -- we ruled the roost, Chavito. And when that happened, I decided it was time to go to Japan, and bring the legacy of mi familia to a new land!

And you know what they did? They spit on it! They put me in a mask, and they made me the Black Tiger! I am not a mask. I am a MAN! I am a GUERRERO! So I came back and went to America. I've been everywhere, Chavito. I've been through hell and back in a way you can't even appreciate! I got you your job in WCW, and from there you went to here. You didn't have to wrestle in front of 300 people in a day care center in order to prove to yourself and to some fatcat suit you could last!

Well, now I know I can last! Vince McMahon knows I can last! EVERYONE knows I can last, so what happens? I am told that SmackDown! is going to decide its GM by having both sides draft teams. And I am conscripted to be with Sable. You think I care about Sable? At all? You think she means a thing to me? It was just a way to keep their top challenger, me, Eduardo Guerrero, from having a shot!

But know this, mi sobrino, it's not just about winning the WWE Title. That relic who beat -- he's never seen a Latino hold the highest honor! No one from Mexico has ever been WWE champion! Our time is past due! And I am the right man at the right time!

So when Kurt Angle runs out of challengers I will be here to tell him, bring it on! And I will tell him so all of Mexico can hear me, and they can rise as one and shout VIVA GUERRERO! And then, the last and the best of the sons of the god of Mexican wrestling Gory Guerrero shall claim the place his father so richly deserved -- the undisputed greatest in the world! El tiempo -- esta -- ahora! The time... is now."

On the screen, Eddie stood and waited for a response. Chavo merely stood with his eyes and mouth open, contemplating Eddie's words, his history, and his destiny. Tazz and Cole were silent on commentary as the image faded to a commercial. In the back, we

all let it sink in. No one spoke for over five minutes. We were all too blown away.

Eventually, Eddie returned to the back. As he did, Hogan came up to him. The room was silent. Here was the locker room leader confronting a man who called him a relic, the past, and an embarrassment. He looked Eddie down, then smiled. He shook his hand.

"Brother," he said, "take it from ol' Hollywood. That was worthy of an Oscar."

We all laughed and applauded. Eddie had made his mark on the wrestling world.

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11:47 PM

We finally got back to the hotel room. Gail began to set her stuff down and look for a suitable dress to wear for the night out. I was exhausted. I hopped into the shower to clear my mind.

*Thirteen minutes, I thought as I turned the water on and got in. In just thirteen minutes I'll learn the meaning of that note. Tue/Wed 0000. I assume we're meeting here. If not, he'll find me. DM will find me.*

*Why did he need to have HHH rough me up? Why did he need to have a message sent? Why will he make sure Molly is hurt in the Chamber? What's the point?*

*And what does Randy Orton know? He said he was "afraid of" Hunter hurting me. Was it just because he saw what happened, or did he have some knowledge? It's too late to ask him. He didn't come along for the ride anyway.*

I heard a knock on the bathroom door which startled me out of my train of thought. I peered out from behind the curtain. "Yeah?"

"I'm going out now, Nora. I'll be back in a few hours!" It was only Gail.

"Okay, have fun!"

I went back to scrubbing off. As I did, I felt uneasy. Molly's body was sending me messages of trouble. Her sixth sense was making me dread what I expected. As I turned the water off and began to dry up, I felt strange. For whatever reason, it seemed I was dirtier than before the shower.

There was a knock at the door. I wrapped the towel around me and peered through the eyehole. William was on the other side, waiting. He knocked a second time.

"Gimme a minute," I called.

"What's wrong?"

"I just got out of the shower."

"Oh, that's all right. You can let me in."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

I slowly opened the door. *Whatever these notes mean, I'm about to find out. It's just a few minutes after midnight. William's about to enter the room. As Eddie would say, "El tiempo esta ahora." The time is now.*

William walked into the room. He came over to me immediately and waited for the door to close. As soon as it did, I felt him force a kiss on me. I played along, thinking that maybe I could avoid trouble. Then I felt his hand run up my leg.

"Wait," I said, pushing away. "Slow down. I'm not ready for this."

"Nora, it's not your call and you know that." William's eyes, normally a strong gray color, turned bright blue. *Too bright*. "You know what I'm here for, and you know what I can do if you refuse."

"William, look... I..."

"Nora, listen to me. Do I have to remind you why you're here?"

"This is my room!"

"Don't play ignorant with me, you little wench! You are in this organization because I let you in! You know that Mr. McMahon wants nothing to do with normal-looking women, and your full-sized caboose would be the first out the door if he had his way!"

I started to walk backwards, slowly. Something in William was different. He was expressing an emotion I never knew he had. He certainly wasn't the gentleman I remember.

"Darren, please," I begged. "Get out. I said no. That's enough."

"Oh, no... no it isn't. You see, your hero Lance isn't here to help you anymore. He's still in Cleveland, wondering where you are. I'm one step ahead of you, Nora. You will give me what I want."

"But I... I... please." I began to look around for something, anything, that would make things better. As I did, William lunged for me. I stepped aside as he fell onto the bed. I tried to lock myself in the bathroom, but I couldn't shut the door before William was up. I was pressing against it with all my might as he tried to open it.

"Listen to me! You know this is inevitable. You know what will happen if I am denied. Your career is at stake here. There's no way a woman can make the kind of money to earn a living in the minor leagues. I can ruin you!"

"No! Don't do this! You have no right! I can stop you!"

"You? Stop me? Never! You haven't before, and you won't start now!"

I frantically searched for an item to prop against the door, but couldn't find any. My only hope was to use his momentum against him. I felt a rhythmic thumping against the door, much like the demons on Halloween. I timed it, then flung the door open at the last second. William tumbled in, running straight into the vanity as he did so. I dodged him and made a dash for the door, but his hand grabbed my foot. As I kicked away, he grabbed my towel and tore it away.

I dove for cover behind the bed, as far away from him as possible. He stormed out, then paused. He reached over to the tea set and pulled out a packet from the sugar container. "Almost forgot this -- wouldn't want any evidence."

"Get away, you monster!" I yelled. I found Gail's alarm clock by the side of the bed and hurled it at him. I came up woefully short, as the clock bounced at his feet.

"We mustn't have any destruction of personal property now. Your temper will get you in trouble." He approached me as I cowered in the corner of the room, trying to put as much distance as I could between us. Tears of fear began to run down my face as he leaned over me. "Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. It's your choice."

I couldn't respond. The tears came too quickly. I just wished I could say I was dreaming. I thought back to the dream of being chased by a creature. I knew now what creature it was that was chasing me.

"Fine... but it will be done," he said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me upright. As he spoke next, his other hand roughly grabbed me between my legs. "We had a deal

when you arrived. I gave you a job, and you gave me this," he said, squeezing with his downstairs hand as he spoke to emphasize the point. "It's time to pay. Now, do the right thing."

He forced his lips upon mine as I tried to wiggle out of his grips. He changed one hand from my wrist to the top of my head as he began to shove me downward. I fell to my knees in front of him as he reached into his pocket. "I'll take care of up here. You get me ready down there," he ordered.

He put the packet he had taken from the sugar in my hand. I examined it. It was too small and square to be for sugar, and why would he give me that? I saw a circular bulge from the inside. I looked at him as he removed his shirt. I knew what was in the package.

"What are you waiting for? Get to work!" I was too scared to do anything else. I had to think of something. His hands had taken his shirt off and moved to my chest, grabbing me and pulling at me in a way that gave him pleasure and me pain. I undid his pants and slid them down with his underwear. I never felt more disgusted in my life to be a man.

"Put it on, wench!" I stared up at him as he smiled gleefully. I fumbled with the packet, too scared to keep my nerves together. Finally it opened. I took the latex and started to put it on him, making sure it was a good fit. After doing so, I started to try to get up. His hand pressed me to the ground. "You're not done."

I stared at his waist and the condom covering him. I knew what he meant when he said I wasn't done. *I never understood why any woman would do this, and right now isn't the time to find out. Wait... I think I have a plan.* I grabbed him and pulled him to my mouth. "Well," he said, "put it in." So I did. I bit him.

William yelled and jumped backwards, grabbing himself as he did so. I dashed for the towel, trying to get it on me so I could leave the room. Before I could get to the door, though, I felt him grab my hair. He dragged me and hurled me onto the bed, much as HHH tossed me into the ring before. He turned me onto my back and pinned my arms to the bed.

"That was stupid, Nora, very stupid," he growled. "I would've at least given you a chance to enjoy this. Now you're going to give me only what I want. Do you understand? I can hurt you. I can ruin you. Play smart."

He pulled me off the bed and forced me onto my knees again. I took a hold of him and stuck him in my mouth as before. "If you bite me, you will be sacked. I guarantee it," he said in a low, threatening voice. I simply did what he wanted, sliding my lips along the condom as his hands grabbed at my head and shoulders. After about a minute, he pulled me back.

"That's better," he sneered. "But I'm not done. Lie down." I did as he said, lying prone on the bed. He climbed over the top of me as I shook with fright. I tried to scream, but he anticipated it and covered my mouth, staring at me.

"No one can help you now. Gail is out for the night. These walls have no ears. And even if they did, no one can get through that door without a key. You will be mine."

He grabbed me behind my back and held me close to his chest, nearly squeezing the air out of my lungs. His right hand slid down my back and around to my inseam, then inside me. He began to open me up as he guided himself inside.

With each movement, my pain increased. With each breath he took, my urge to

scream became louder. I could only cry as he held me next to him, flattening my body and shaking it with his movements, making me feel a fiery pain as he jammed himself deeper. My vision began to blur, then drain as if someone were decolorizing it.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, everything stopped. He set me down on my back as I felt him slide out of me. He smiled and kissed me on the lips. I was too numb and shocked to do anything. The tears almost stopped.

"I knew you'd do the right thing," he said. Slowly he turned around and got dressed again. I noticed him keep the condom on for the time being as he adjusted his underwear and pants to hide evidence of his crime. He sat down on the bed and placed another mocking kiss on my forehead as he slid his shoes and socks on.

"Thank you, my dear. You were so gracious. It was a wonderful time." He stood up and smiled at me as I continued to shake and stare at the ceiling. I heard the door close. I was alone again.

I stared up at the ceiling as I lay prone on the bed. Kathleen was a distant memory now. I had my own reason to cry.

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I found myself slowly walking in the room. I kept the door open so that I could see where things were. I sat down in the corner and waited for her to notice me. I saw her shadow seated against the wall.

"So," she said, "he got you too."

"How do you know?"

"We know. You don't think we don't get told when our time off is coming up?"

"So you know who I am?"

"I know what you are."

I tried to fight back tears. "I'm sorry. I tried. I... I couldn't."

"I know. I try too. It's not easy. He's... he's too strong for me. I let him do it."

"I don't believe you had a choice."

"I always have a choice. I said no. He said it didn't count. I made my decision to let him do it, then."

"But you said no, and that's enough. He's stepped over the line, right?"

"You tell me. Couldn't you have done something?"

"I did what I could. I did everything I could. I know how proud you are of your... your purity. I tried to stop him. But I gave in. I let it happen."

I saw her stand up. "Not anymore," she said. "I've been a coward too long. I can't let this continue." She slowly slumped back down again. "But what... can I do? He's so much bigger."

"I know... I know he is," I said. "But others will believe you. The police see this all the time."

"Why do you think he wears a condom? It's so he doesn't leave a trace. There's no indication that anything happened. It's your word against his, and who do you think people believe?"

I paused. I stared down at the ground, then back at her shadow. "Where are you? I only see your image."

The shadow's arm spread out in my direction. "That's all I am now. I've lost

everything to him. I don't know if I'll ever recover. I'm... I'm worthless. Molly's worthless. This whole thing is worthless. I wanna be free of this -- so that I won't feel pain again."

Her arm retracted and seemed to cover her face. "Nora," I whispered, "are you saying you want to die?"

Her head shook. "I wish I could."

"But what would that solve? It won't do you any good."

"I know," she sobbed. "suicide is a great evil. I'm not supposed to kill anyone, myself either. I'm alive -- but I wish I could just die."

"Nora, please... this won't last. He can't do this forever. Sooner or later he's gonna get caught. He has to. No one can break the law and get away with it."

"Thanks," she whispered. "But he can. He has a position inside the company. I'm just a nobody. He's friends with the boss's son-in-law. I'm an outcast, and a prude, too. He's a guy. I'm just another body. I'm not even good enough to be in the photo shoots -- why would he want me around?"

"But you're the Women's Champion. You're in the main event. Why would he give you these things if you were worthless?"

"Because... because William tells the RAW guys to do it. Everything I get in that ring is based upon how I treat him. If I let him fuck me, I get rewarded. If I refuse, I'm made to look bad." She seemed to think of something, and spoke with more urgency. "What did you do?"

"I... at first I ran, and I tried to stop him. I even... bit him. But after that, he told me he could ruin me, and I just... played along."

"Oh... okay... that's ok. I was afraid you'd get me fired. I just want to stay here."

"Nora, it's not worth it."

"I'm not worth it." She turned away from me. "You see that belt I carry? That's all I am. That's my identity. I'm a sack of flesh with the Women's Title attached to it. If he takes that away... I'm just his fucktoy. I don't mean anything."

"You can't possibly think that... you can't."

"Gail does. Why do you think she deserts me? She's in on it. She has to be. They have to be working together. I can't believe she..."

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03:14 AM

"Nora? Nora?"

I was shaken to by a jostle on my shoulder. I looked around. I still couldn't make out any colors. I turned my head. Gail had returned with a concerned look on her face.

"Are you all right? What happened?"

I tried to hold back the tears. *I couldn't tell her the truth. She'd never believe me. She would think I'm trying to smear Darren. Nora's right. Right now, I am just a sack of flesh.*

"It's... it's my fault, Gail. I let him."

"Let who? What?"

"I've said too much."

"No. Nora, listen to me. Are you hurt? Your boobs are red. Did someone hurt you?"

I just stared at her. If you'd asked me if I even had a body, I could've only known by seeing it spread out, stripped, and left behind. I could barely feel it.

"Fuck!" She yelled. "Shit! That son of a bitch! God damn him... I should've known. Come on, girl. Get dressed. I'm taking you to see a doctor right now."

"Wait..." I mumbled. "Not tonight."

"All right." She walked to the foot of the bed and looked at me. "Man, that looks bad. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know. Why did you hide this?"

I slowly rolled over to my side and sat up. "Why do you think?"

"Did he do this to you?"

"Who?"

"Never mind. You're in no condition to talk. Get some rest." She leaned over and hugged me. I shoved her aside.

"Back off. Not now." *Why am I doing this? She cares!* "I'm sorry. I'm just... please..."

"No, I understand. I know more than you think. Shit. That motherfucker. No wonder you're usually so modest."

"What do you know?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. I'm sorry." Gail turned and walked to the door, then stopped. "Do you want to sleep alone tonight?"

"No," I muttered. *I don't know if I ever will again.*

"All right," she said. She walked to the other bed. I touched her wrist to stop her.

"Gail," I whispered. "Just tonight... you wanna share a bed? I'd feel much better if I knew where you were."

She smiled and shook her head. "No," she said. "That's not smart. You don't want me near you. Go on, get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

I stood up. "I need to shower." I felt like I had a flu. I slowly, gingerly, walked to the towel. My legs hurt as I took each step, as pain signals shot through me from my crotch. I bent over and picked the towel up from where Darren had flung it. I walked slowly into the bathroom and turned the water on. I let the shower flow as I crawled into the bathtub. I lay down in there, letting the water hit my body, as I cried myself to sleep.

Wednesday, November 5, 2003, 09:35 AM  
Buffalo, NY

I was awakened by a nudge on my shoulder. I looked up. Gail was staring at me, her face a mask of fear and concern, her arms trembling. As I looked at her, she breathed a sigh of relief.

I looked around. I was still in the bathtub. The water had stopped running -- doubtless because Gail turned it off. The plug wasn't down, so there was no puddle for me to rest in. *I must have passed out here last night.*

"Nora... oh, thank God... you're alive." Gail knelt down and hugged me.

"Yeah, of course I am... what did you think?"

"Well, you didn't come back last night from here, and I woke up and I heard the water running for hours on end, and you were just lying there and..." she began to

hyperventilate.

"Gail, I'd never do that. I'm not worth the razor blade or the pills." I smiled as I spoke, but Gail was more put off by the statement itself. "Never mind. Help me out."

She grabbed my arm and pulled me up and out. I stepped out of the tub and took the towel from her, wrapping it around me. She hugged me again. "I'm glad you're safe."

"Thanks."

"Nora, I'm sorry. I did this to you."

"How?"

"You might want to sit down. Come on."

We walked back to the twin beds and sat facing each other. Gail paused to gather her senses. I flopped backward onto the bed. Just walking had hurt me all over. The combination of my bruises from Darren and the stiffness of the bathtub left me a physical wreck.

"Nora?"

"I'm listening. Go ahead."

"Well... see, Darren tells me when he's going to be coming by. And that's why I'm never around when he shows up. I'm sorry. I feel like I betrayed you."

I sat up as she said this. I slowly turned to her. I knew she was weighted down by something, but I didn't know what. Her jet black hair was the only thing I saw as her face was buried in her hands. I began to feel angry.

"Gail... how could you? Why would you let this happen?"

"I didn't know! You gotta believe me! I thought you two were... well, that you..."

"Oh, please, Gail... how could you think so little of me? You know I take pride in who I am... was... dammit." As soon as it arrived, my anger vanished. I didn't have the strength to hold any emotion for more than five seconds. "It's okay. You're right. I wouldn't know. But why... where do you go?"

"Out," she said. "I visit the bars. I find people. And depending on what happens, I don't come back till the next morning."

"Gail, are you saying... wow. They really paired opposites, didn't they?"

"How?"

"Well... I believe in staying out of bed and you bel... no, that's not fair of me. I'm sorry. I'm being so stupid right now." I buried my face in my hands to avoid looking at her. *Why am I treating her like shit? She supports me.*

"Nora, please, don't be so hard on yourself. It's okay. You're right. We are opposites. At least, kinda. Well, what I'm saying is, Darren knows something about me."

I looked at her. "So he's... what? I don't understand." *Andy, this is obvious. You should know this.*

"Nora, I'm in the same boat you are. As long as I do what he says, I'm safe. But if I refuse, he can ruin me."

"Ruin you? You're already pretty low on the totem pole. How much more do you have to lose? It's not like you have a title or a job."

"I have my dignity."

Now I was totally confused. *Dignity? Who cares if she sleeps around? No one bothers Rena about it, and it's not like the guys care. Heck, knowing the fucking pigs around here, she'd probably get a push for being the company screw.* "Gail... the guys here would probably think more of you if you told people you slept around. Heck, some

might even volunteer. I'm sure someone like Kev or Eric would be happy to..." *Good God, what am I saying? Are these even my words anymore?* "...dammit, I'm sorry. I don't know what's going on. I'm being such a bitch right now. Dammit."

"Nora, no! Don't be hard on yourself!" Gail came over as I threw myself back on the bed. She leaned over, her gray eyes -- or at least, right now they seemed gray much like everything else -- staring into mine with an expression of a kind of kinship. "Look, it's not your fault. And you know what? I don't care who he tells or what he makes me do. I'm going to make sure this doesn't happen again."

I looked up, squinting to indicate confusion. "Tells what? Makes you... huh? Is he doing this to you too?"

"This? No! He's not! What he's... it's nothing compared to what you're going through. And that's why I don't care what it takes. Hell, I might as well tell you."

"Tell me what? What's the big deal? Gail, come on! I don't like this! I'm no mood for guessing games!"

"All right, all right. You'd better get comfortable. This is gonna be a little tough for me to say." I adjusted my position on the pillow so that I was ready to listen.

"Nora, I'm... I'm a homosexual. I like other women. There, I said it. I might as well get it out right now. I haven't told anyone else in the WWE this. Apart from you, there's only one person who knows. Darren."

He saw me out on the town with someone I found back when I first got promoted, right after Badd Blood. He followed me to her place. The next day, he could quote for me where I'd been and that I'd shared a kiss with her in public. He said he'd tell Vince unless I followed his instructions.

He said that he would make sure I was paired with you on the road, and that once a week, when he said, I needed to be out of the room. It didn't matter where, and it didn't matter what I did, but he wanted time with you. He said the two of you were old friends back in OVW, and you were just taking time to talk. I thought you were dating, I swear!"

I didn't respond for over five minutes. I tried to think of what she said, but I couldn't focus. My mind jumped from being disgusted by her lifestyle, to being angered at her complicity, to being sympathetic at her shame, to being enraged by the very face of Darren, to being ashamed I let Nora down, to being sick of myself. At one point, I even felt like I should've been destroyed and not Kathleen. *God, help me.*

"Nora? What is it? Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, I did... I just... Gail, what's the big deal? I don't mind. I'm not scared of you or disgusted by you. I mean, if more guys act like he did, I might join you."

She laughed. "No, it's not that easy. Do you realize what would happen if Vince knew I was a lesbian? Do you have any idea what he'd make me do?"

I blinked. "Leave?"

"No! Worse! Nora, I'm not ashamed of my choice. I am what I am. But I would be ashamed of what Vince would think I was. I don't want to be his idea of a... dammit, you remember the whole HLA thing, don't you?"

I rolled my eyes. "How could I for..." *How could I not see it earlier?* "Ohhh. And you think he'd make you do that in public?"

"I know he would. And you know he would. The man is a perverted little freak. He's a shameless bastard. I'm working here because it's the best place I can, but... if I'm supposed to be some dyke-whore..." -- she spat the word out as if it were poison -- "It

would be awful."

"But... can't you quit?"

"Nora... can't you?"

My heart sank. *He has both of us behind the 8-ball. If Nora blows the whistle, she'll be forced into losing match after match, eventually stuck doing Heat and walking out the door with no credibility. If Gail doesn't comply, she'll become a caricature, some sex kitten for the rest of the Divas. She'll go from the next big thing to another big bag of hormones.* "Gail... I'm sorry. What can we do?"

"Nora, give me a week and I promise I will think of something. I promise that. Next week, when he shows up, he won't have anything on either of us. And I'll be damned if he lays another bone on you, you got that?"

"But... what about you? You'll be..."

"Fuck what happens to me. Nora, this is more important. I don't care anymore. I... You know what? Being reduced to a certain archetype on TV... if that's the worst I got to worry about, then what the hell is wrong with me? We're talking about your life here, girl! Now, look. Get dressed. I'm gonna take you to the medic's place."

"Thanks..." I rolled up to a seated position, then became aware that I was only wearing a towel. Gail was looking at me to make sure I was capable of getting through the day, smiling and dabbing a tear from her eye. I suddenly became very self-conscious. The magnitude of Gail's coming out sank in on me -- on Nora. Fortunately, it also occurred to Gail.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I... I just realized... um, do you want me to turn around or wait in the bathroom?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing you haven't already seen." I paused as I walked over to the dresser, flipping the towel off behind me. "Gail? Am I pretty? I know I'm not anywhere near as good as the other girls, but..."

Gail put her finger to her lips, quieting me. She walked over and looked me straight in the eye, not even noticing my body. "Nora... you're a beautiful person. Don't you ever forget that. And don't ever let anyone tell you you're not. You got that? Now, c'mon. Get ready."

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10:22 AM

We finally made our way to the lobby as Shawn and Eric were headed to the car. Shawn saw us and got our attention. "There you are, ladies. What's up? Everything okay?"

I looked at Gail, then at Shawn, then back at Gail. "Let me tell him... them. In private."

"Um, I'm not sure you should. I'd like to..."

"Not about you. About..."

"Oh, sure. Okay, go ahead." We hugged as I moved away and over to them.

"Guys -- we need to talk. Alone." Shawn and Eric looked at each other, then turned around and headed to a door. Shawn produced a card and slid it in the door. The conference room opened as Eric and Shawn let me in.

I went to sit down at the far end of the table, slowly walking to my seat as if facing an interrogation. As I sat down, I heard a gasp, followed by some whispers between the two. *What are they speculating? They probably think I did something wrong. They'd be right... I let her down. I know I did. I could've stopped him and I let him do it. I've failed. I'm gonna be sent elsewhere. I might as well say goodbye.*

"Andy?" I looked up. Eric was sitting next to me, wearing the glasses. "Andy, what happened? Are you all right?" I shook my head. "It's Darren, isn't it? What did he do? What's the answer?" I didn't respond. "Look, tell me!" I began to cry. "I'm gonna kill him. You hear me, Andy? I'm gonna take him out -- that bastard doesn't deserve to live!"

"Lindsay, please!" Shawn snapped her to attention. "Calm down! I know you're upset. I don't blame you. Whatever it is, it was pretty big. I saw the same thing you did. Just let him tell us, and whether he tells us or not, you gotta be calm. He's in no mood for this."

*What the hell is he talking about? He's treating me like a 2-year-old! I'm not 2, I'm 23. I can handle this. I know I can. Can't I? Can I? I've done a lousy job of handling it so far. Why should this be different? Shit, I should just ask out.*

"Andy, look at me. Please." I looked up at Shawn. "Everything's going to be okay. I don't know what it is, and you don't have to tell me. But whatever happens, just know I'll be here, and Lindsay will be here. We'll help you. Owen and Greg too, I'm sure. Andy, you can count on us. We're with you all the way." He produced the Recovery lamp. "You need this?"

"Wait," Lindsay interrupted. "Not here."

"Oh, right... you wanna go back outside, then?"

I shook my head. All the will to fight was gone. I just wanted some time to let the world pass me by. My mind was gone. I was facing people who trusted me -- my friends - - and I felt more ashamed than I did with Gail, because these were MY friends, and they knew ME.

"What do we do, Shawn? Do we just let him sit there and mope?"

"Well... if he wants to talk, if he's ready... he'll act. It's all we can do. We're off the clock. We can wait."

"I know we can, but... how long? I mean, does he expect us to sit here all day?"

"That's not important. Lindsay, I would do the same thing for you, and you know it."

"Whatever this is... no, it's never been this bad. I can't even see a form. If we leave him there, he's just going to be a shadow all day. We gotta make him do something."

"No... we can't make him do anything. Look, I don't know what it is and I don't care. It's not important. What's important is that he is in control of his life. Right now, he... I don't know. I'm worried that if we leave him be, he'll hurt Nora."

"I know that! I know he's capable of it! That's why we need to act now! We can't just let him be himself now. He can't live -- we gotta make him live."

I just heard the words as they went back and forth. The voices seemed to grow louder and more personal. *I can't believe Lindsay and Shawn! They're acting like my parents! I'm a fully capable adult, not some kid on his first day of kindergarten! I can live! How dare they...* "BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP!"

They turned to face me. I continued. "You have no idea what happened! You can't tell me how to behave or what to do! You can't make me do anything I don't want! I'm

not letting it happen! Not again! That son of a bitch... he took what I had. He made me feel like SHIT! I'm not letting you treat me like shit! You're not gonna... you won't..." I broke down in tears. "You can't... let him... me... it's my fault..."

I sat back down and slumped over on the table, unable to look up. "I failed." I kept repeating those two words over and over. I felt a hand on my shoulder, a masculine hand. Instinctively, I slapped it away. "Don't touch me--" but it was Eric and not Darren. "I'm sorry."

"Oh my God... Andy... what did he do?"

I tried to regain my stability. *They're going to judge me on this. I know it. I'm going to be a failure for not stopping it.* "I let him do it. I couldn't stop him. I just went along. He... he was hurting me. He said I was stupid for fighting him... so I... I just let him... I did this... to her. To me."

"He beat you?" Eric's jaw dropped as I looked at him. I slowly shook my head and went back to sobbing. "Then what is it? If he didn't beat you, what did he do?"

Shawn's voice seemed to be coming from an ether. "Lindsay... let him tell." I slowly looked up. Eric's face, although in black-and-white, seemed to glow with concern and compassion. *She wants to help. I can't trust her. I gotta tell her. I'll be telling him. Them. I..* "Shawn, could you leave for a second? Please?"

He walked to the door. I waited until he was gone, then looked back. Eric had sat down and was watching for the door to close. When it did, he reached out to embrace me. I shoved him away. "Don't. Don't do that."

"Why?"

"It's just-- I can't-- it's not you. I'm-- I'm sorry."

"Andy, c'mon, just spit it out. What did he do?"

I looked up with tears in my eyes. "What did he do?" Eric nodded. "Me."

Eric's face went from confusion to realization to shock to rage. "I'm sorry, Andy. I had no idea he was doing that. I had no clue he was gonna... What do I do?"

"First off... don't tell Shawn. It's not his business. He'd just think I needed a transfer. He wouldn't want anything to do with me."

"Andy, you know that he--"

"Please!"

She waited for a few seconds. "All right. I'll keep it safe. Who knows?"

"Gail. That's all. Well... and Darren. But Gail saw me zoned out -- I was talking to Nora -- I didn't even move after... oh God... I let him keep doing it."

"Andy, no! Stop thinking that! Look... you need to rest. You need to get out. Tell Shawn to let you out... he knows you need it. Andy, I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do..." Eric's eyes welled up. "Should Eric know this?"

I shook my head. "She'd be fired if she told. And Gail's... don't ask her about it. Don't let her know you know. She's in trouble too."

"I'm... not sure I understand, but... that's not important right now. You need to get help. She needs help too. Are you going to do anything about this?"

"Yeah... Gail's gonna... gonna take her to see a doctor. I feel so ashamed. I had a chance to fix things and I... I let her down!"

"Andy, please. Just believe me when I say it's not your fault. You're just fine. C'mon, smile for me." I kept my head buried. He tried to lift my chin up, but again I slapped his hand away.

"I'm sorry... I just keep seeing him in you. Your hands... the skin reminds me... it's just now I hope. Just let me do this on my own."

Eric nodded. He stepped aside. I slowly walked to the door. As I reached it, I turned around. Eric was trying not to cry.

I exited the room and saw Shawn standing outside. He and Gail had been talking the whole time. They both saw me and smiled. "You ready now?" Gail asked.

"I think so."

"You sure? Your face is red. You don't wanna lie down?"

"No... I think I just need a breather. Shawn, do you have those oxygen cannisters?"

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Saturday, November 8, 2003

Recovery

I stared at the walls of the room, finally able to be myself again. The past three days were filled with tears and healing. My shame at being unable to help Nora was subsiding. I began to feel colorful again.

*What happened to me? How did I fail? Why wasn't I considered a failure? I let Nora down, didn't I? Wait, one at a time.*

*What happened? I was overpowered. I was raped. I might as well give it a name, and say what it was. He didn't just screw me or fuck me -- he tried to destroy me. He's probably destroyed Nora. I'm not gonna let him take my dignity. I'm going to keep living my life.*

*Wait, is that right? Isn't that just hurting her all over again? No... not if I don't forget. Not if I remember what it was like. And not if I keep in mind what responsibility comes with being male. I might not be a guy next time -- okay, I probably will be, since I don't think God would make me live as a woman so soon after this. But when I am... no more of that Brian stuff. No more ignoring a no. I'm gonna be extra careful.*

*But then... did I fail? Am I a failure? Yeah. Of course. I let it happen. I let her down. I made her live it all over again. Didn't I? In the end, I stopped fighting. I gave up. But why did I give up? I was scared. I was... I feared he'd beat me up. But he did anyway. What did I do to stop him? I ran. I threw things. I injured him... I hope. But it wasn't enough.*

*Could I have done more? I don't know. But I can't imagine what else I could've done. I tried to escape. I tried to hurt him where it hurts. It wasn't enough. So why do I feel like I failed? Because it happened. Because somewhere, something this bad... I can't imagine someone would do this out of malice. But that's what he did. She's innocent. And if she's innocent, then so am I.*

*Wait... shouldn't this have a bigger impact on me? Shouldn't I be more shaken up than this? Maybe. I guess I'll find out when I return. It's easy to be brave when you're safe. Anyone can do that. I gotta try to be brave when it counts.*

*No, more than that... I gotta be the better human when it counts. What he did to me, I ain't gonna do. But that's easy. Is that the only lesson -- don't rape? I knew that! Wait. Go one step further. Make it a positive... can I? Yes I can. Respect.*

*When I was Stacy, I didn't respect her. I took advantage of her. I stripped her down... well, I had to do that to get clean. It's a fact of life. But then I objectified her for Andrew. And I... that vibrator... I did it again. I took advantage of her body for my pleasure. Not anymore. I know what it's like now, and quite frankly, I prefer the good feeling. But I don't need to do that again.*

*But what if... Lindsay. She still loves me. I could tell... she wanted to show it. But I couldn't... I was seeing Darren's hand, feeling his touch. I can't keep flinching at her. She did nothing. She was... I've suffered enough for both of us. What she wants, I'm going to make sure she gets. I won't make her suffer just because of me.*

*But what if I'm not ready? Why would I subject myself to this again? Or subject the next person I am? That would be worse! But if I'm setting the line too far away, I'm going to cause trouble. But if that line is there, and it gets crossed, I'm going to be hurt. But if it isn't crossed, she'll be hurt.*

*I wish I could just turn back the clock and keep it from happening. But it's too late now. It's done. I have to live with it.*

*Somehow.*

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Sunday, November 09, 2003  
Recovery

*One day. One more day and I'm out of here. One more day before I return to the real world. One more day before that bastard Darren gets what he deserves. One more day left for him...*

*...wait, calm down. It's not just him that'll bite the dust, it'll be you! Mutually assured destruction... and I don't want to suffer the same fate Kathleen got. I don't want it. I prefer Heaven to Hell. So I guess I have to get over him.*

*No, that sounds bad. Getting over him. I don't want to forget what he did. I don't want to forget how he treated me. I want to make sure it never -- NEVER -- happens again. Not to me. Not to Nora. Not to anyone at all.*

*But, come on, be realistic here. It's gonna happen. All you can do is make sure you don't do it. The rest is just unfair to ask. Isn't it? I mean, I barely have control over myself from one week to the next. I don't have a myself from one week to the next! How can I stop this from happening again? Well, I'll start with me. I'll never do this.*

*Wait a second... why am I obsessing over this? It's not me, it's Vince. Vince is the problem. Darren's another thing altogether. In fact, he's not even what we're talking about. Why am I here? For Vince McMahon. I am here for Vince. I am...*

*Yeah, I know I am, but I'm still upset. I'm not sure I can focus on this mission. For that matter, I don't know if I can focus on any mission. I can barely focus on my own thoughts before getting all self-pitying and pathetic. Time off hasn't done anything to change that. I'm just a wreck.*

*But am I asking for too much too soon? Shouldn't I have a couple weeks off in order to heal? I'm not really going to be back out there Monday, am I? Was Kathleen? No. She was able to spend week after week in Recovery as she saw fit. I'm sure Greg and Owen were too. I'll be asked to stay. I'm sure of it.*

*But what if I'm not? Then I'm going to fail and get transferred. Right? I mean, that's what happens when you fail, isn't it? You either die or leave the case. There's not much in between. No room for error, right when I need it more than anything else.*

*No, that's not fair. There's something I need even more. I need support. Not from others -- they've been just fine. I need self-support. Confidence, that's the word I'm looking for. I need to know I'll do the right thing. I need to know I'm not gonna screw this up.*

*Oh, who am I kidding -- I will screw this up. I screwed up last week. I screwed up in Hell. I'm gonna keep doing it. I've been a disaster. I oughta just leave. I oughta... I need a new job.*

*No, I'd screw that up too. No matter what I'd do I'd just let someone down. Why am I still alive? Why am I still capable of helping? Shouldn't I have just frozen up and been stuck in the middle, maybe being allowed to explain my plight once a year? That's where I belong, isn't it?*

*But it can't be, because I'd already be there. There's a reason I'm still alive. There's a reason I'm still able to move, and to think, and that I can heal. My image is restored, my vision is back. That has to mean something, right? That doesn't just happen on its own, does it?*

*Of course it does. I'm in Recovery. I'm supposed to be getting better. But it can only help me physic... well, physiologically. My mind is still racked with pain. I'm still a wreck. I'm still pathetic. I'm still going to be trouble for everyone next week. Nothing I do will ever change that.*

*In 1984, O'Brien said about the torture chamber that what happened there was forever. What happens to me is forever. This crime -- this attack -- this blight of inhumanity is forever. I can't do a damn thing to make it go away. I'm trying, I really am. I just want an easy assignment of some sort.*

*No, I don't. That's feeling sorry for myself. I want a tough assignment. Make me Nora again! I'll fight him off this time!*

*But... but what if I don't? No, too risky. Too pointless. I can't shoot for the stars -- I gotta do what I can do, not what I want to do. But what can I do? Anything?*

*Yes. Yes, dammit, yes. I'm notting letting Darren steal my freedom. I'm not letting him dictate when I live and when I don't. That bastard may be on his way to feeling my wrath, and I'll spend all year here if I have to, but dammit, I won't let him tell me what to do...*

*...Um, by lashing out, I'm letting him dictate my actions. Everything I do is going to be changed by what he did. Every reaction, every emotion, every idea is going to be shaped in some way by what happened. He altered my mind. He changed me.*

*I know he did. Everyone does. Lindsay changed me. Owen did, too. Even that fool Kathleen changed me. They all made me a different person. But I can control how they change me. I can make them make me better. This happened -- I can't undo the past. But I can undo the future. I can undo myself. Or, I can let myself be undone.*

*It's time to be active again. Yeah, active. I don't care what he thinks of me... if he ever knows I exist. I don't care what people like him think of me. The heck with what Vince or Pillman or Tommy think of me. They can't stop me.*

*Wait, what am I saying? Of course they can stop me! Some people can always stop me. Satan, if he wanted to, could destroy me without even blinking an eye. But he's*

*the big guy. And other demons -- they're too big for me. I wouldn't pick a fight with them...*

*THAT'S IT! Pick a fight. Pick my own fights. I have to choose who I can beat and who I must run from. Didn't Scripture say that if you can't win, don't fight? So if I set out to change the world, I'm going to fail because it's too much for one person. Heck, even Martin Luther King had SNCC and CORE.*

*So what can I do? Well, what are my strengths? What are my strengths in battling for Vince McMahon's eternal well-being? Does it depend on who I am? A little. Certainly, he'll listen to his children, or to Triple H, before he listens to Tommy Dreamer. But to what extent? Never mind that. What are MY strengths?*

*I know about the past. I know wrestling. Vince is always willing to talk wrestling. But wrestling is -- well, it's not the most morally leaning subject, so it wouldn't do me any good. Would it? Well, it's my foot in the door of his mind. Which is something. What else do I have?*

*I have Shawn Michaels. That's big. I have Paul Heyman. That's big too. Those guys -- God knew how to pick them. Shawn has Vince's ear and has had it for 10 years. Paul -- well, the man's a genius as a speechwriter, and better as a speaker. Those guys can get to Vince. They've gotta be able to do it. But then what? What can I bring?*

*I can bring listening. I can bring stealth. Vince doesn't know who I am. Wait, yeah he does. No he doesn't. His demon does, though. Oh yeah. The demon. That demon knows who I am -- he can see me a mile away. He knew who I was when I was asking for time off. He probably knows who everyone is. That doesn't do any good.*

*But wait -- Linda doesn't know who I am. Shane doesn't. Stephanie doesn't. Hunter doesn't. I can talk to them. I can get the message through to them, and they can get it through to Vince. Yes! That's it!*

*No, it's not. They're not allowed to know who I am either. The instant I say who or what I am, the whole mission is lost and I'm off the case. So can I be subtle about it? Can I be useful and still--*

*Oh, dammit, all this is for nothing. I'm one person. And yeah, I can help other people, but what good does that do? Eddie gave a great speech. He's gonna make some money headlining Survivor Series. Whoopee. What a help I was there for his soul! In fact, I've been pretty much a failure. John's being stalked, Jeff's dead, Amy cheated on Matt, Nora's a victim, Kathleen's gone, Tajiri and Shannon hate each other... and most of this is stuff I've been around, and that I've had some bearing on! Can I do anything good?*

*Can I do anything helpful at all? I wish someone could help me understand what I could do. But I'm alone. All those times I wondered why other people were here -- I don't wanna go through this without a friend right now. I'm... not up for it. I'm not right for it. I feel lonely. I'm scared of this. I am alone -- and no one can help me...*

*What was that? Did I hear something? Oh, no, never mind, it's just the lamp knocking into something, I'm sure. I think. But who's holding the lamp? Is someone going to come in here and get me? Am I in trouble? Oh, God, help me!*

*Wait a second... wait a second... they can't get me. They can't get in. October's over -- they're back in Hell, welcoming the dead and the demonized. So what did I hear? Anything? I don't know. I'm getting crazy here. I need time off. And I'm saying this while having time off. I should get out.*

*I don't think I could stand 7 more days alone. I don't know if I'm ready or not, but*

*I've been suffering and thinking and trying long enough. I want out. I want out tomorrow. I can do this. I just gotta tell myself I can do this. Believe in myself. That's the ticket. Believe, believe, believe.*

*Just keep telling yourself this, Andy. You can do it. You can get to Vince. You can get to him. You can soften that demon in there. You're one spirit, but you're stronger. You're better. You're capable. You really are. This didn't kill you, right? And don't those things that don't kill you make you stronger? Well, here you go. Be stronger.*

*I gotta be stronger. I gotta be ready. I gotta be able to do this. I can't rely on Lindsay or Shawn or anyone else to pick up the slack. This week sucked. It sucked a lot. But guess what -- you went to work on September 12, 2001, and you did 8 hours of labor. And that was in downtown DC. If you got through that, you can get through this. I hope.*

*Wait a second... I forgot! My biggest asset! God! Wait, that sounds really hokey. But... it's kinda true. Ultimately, who am I working for? Not for Shawn or Paul. Not for St. Peter. For God. I'm working to expand Heaven. And if God puts me on an assignment, it's because He believes I can do it! I was given Nora -- I went through this -- and there was a reason! God wanted me to suffer, so I could be stronger and I could go out there and kick some demonic tail!*

*Still, it woulda been nice if He toned it down a little.*

*Oh well... I'm rambling again. I need to lie down. All this thinking -- all this being alone -- it's wearing me out. I'm tired. I gotta rest up. Tomorrow starts another week, just like the other weeks. I guess my work is never done.*

*Well, not for another 50 years, anyway.*

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I dreamed. I didn't know I could dream in Recovery, but I did.

I was in the Dream Tunnel, sitting up. Owen was leaning down to see me, smiling. "How ya doin', champ?"

"Not so good, O. I... I had a bad week."

"Yeah... Lindsay and I talked about it here the other day. I wanted to see if I could get you to be here. I wanted to tell you... that we all care for you, and we're all willing to do what it takes to make sure you... you... I don't even know the right word."

"It's okay. You don't know what it's like."

"Not directly. No I don't. But my sister... after Davey lost it... she had such a hard time. I don't know whether he did anything to her or not, and I don't know who to believe anymore. But I do know that thinking it could've happened to someone I knew and loved scared me more than any other feeling on earth. And after it, too. And now it has happened. And I... I don't know what to say."

"Well, you've said enough. Thank you. I'd just... rather talk about something else, really. Like... well, other than me, how was your week?"

Owen chuckled. "You wouldn't believe it. On Wednesday, when Gordo and I thought we were done with the tapings, Vince calls us into the office. He insists we do new commentary for one of the matches. He wants us to talk about Eddie -- he's not even in the match. He says he heard that promo Eddie did, and he wants to make it the Big Story of the show. I... I'm stunned. He took what he felt and he made it the biggest thing of his life."

"Yeah, I know... so he's a main eventer. Whoop de doo."

"No, you don't understand. It's more than that. He's been so kind and generous around everyone. He really has become a model citizen. And you know what? I asked him, what was the difference? How'd he turn the corner? He said it was Undertaker. He said it was the generosity the guy showed him in their feud. And that started with you, Andy! You did that!"

"So?"

"So, that's not all. He told me where he got the idea for his promo. He said you gave it to him. Well, that Molly did. But you were Molly, so... the point is, Andy, you've made him a great person. You've made him want to be a better man. That's the greatest thing you can do is to make someone want to do the right thing. He went from being angry and paranoid to being on top of the world."

"Sure -- because he was on top of the world. It's funny how mood changes when your life turns around."

"You're putting the cart before the horse, Andy. If Eddie was still an angry guy with a bunch of problems in the head, he'd be getting the matches, but they wouldn't be clicking. He'd get interview time, but he'd go for a minute or two. He's ready now. He wants to make everyone better. And you set him on that path. You did good, Andy. You really did."

I looked at him. "Thanks. I... it just doesn't seem like much. I mean, my whole life system of trust has been ripped away from me. You wouldn't understand."

Owen's smile left, replaced with a more serious look. "Andy... I'm the one guy you work with who really, truly does understand."

"Wha... how?"

"Andy, you remember what day it was?"

"No... they all kinda blended together after a while."

"Okay, I'll tell ya. It was November 9. That day always means something to me. That day means something to anyone who was there, and who knows me, and who knows my trust was betrayed."

"November... ninth... November... of... nineteen... ninety... seven! Oh, my goodness, how could I forget? It's only the biggest day in pro wrestling history!"

"Relax, relax, don't blow it out of proportion. But you know I was reluctant to start working when I first got here. Well, that's why. Here, lemme sit down." He did so. "It was a rough day for all of us. We all were wondering what was going to happen. Bret was out of a contract and demanding a screwy ending so he could leave as champion. Vince wanted the belt back. Well, neither man would budge, and we saw what had to be done."

"Owen... you don't need to lecture me on this. Vince screwed Bret. I'm sure it wasn't the first time he'd done something to stab someone in the back. Sure wasn't the last either, was it?"

"No, you miss the point." Owen's lips stiffened as he remembered the time back then. "Vince did the right thing. He really did."

"Wha-- why? He had Bret's word of honor. He knew Bret was loyal to him. He had no reason to believe--"

"That's not it. It wasn't about Bret, although I sure thought it was at the time. It was about the title. Vince's most prized possession was the World Wrestling Federation

title. It meant more to his company's on-screen credibility than anything on earth. Remember how hard he pushed for Benoit after the chaos in WCW? That's why. Titles mean everything.

Bret forgot that. Bret forgot he was an actor, playing a role, working with a prop. He thought he was a national hero, he thought Canadians would be pissed off if it came down to losing on his home turf, blah blah blah. He screwed up. I wish I coulda told him that."

"But Owen -- he gave Vince his word."

"Oh, yeah... that means something. Bret wasn't under contract. When someone under contract has a belt, they become a live wire. When Jeff was gonna jump -- you know, I was Jeff then. Jarrett... when he was ready to jump, I made sure the lineage of the title was intact. Double J probably woulda just showed up with it. And would you have blamed him?"

I shook my head. "No, I guess not... but... that was after this. What had your brother or any of you done to make Vince think he needed to do what he did? He ruined Bret's life. He destroyed Bret's sense of well-being. He..."

"No, no! Bret let it be destroyed. He became focused on what happened to him. You know, the first vacation I got, I went to see him in WCW. I went to listen to him backstage. All he could talk about, two years later, was how Vince killed me and screwed him. The man became obsessed. He lost his... he lost it. He just plain lost it. I didn't know him anymore. One of these days -- I want the chance to save him from himself. Not from the devil... I'm certain he'll avoid that. But he's not going to be able to enjoy life if he... he can't get over this. I'm scared."

"Owen," I said, grabbing his shoulder. "Owen, do you forgive him? Vince, I mean."

Owen thought about it for a long time. "Yeah... I do. He did what he had to do. Bret was the problem. I wish I had the perspective back then that I have now. I'd have been able to tell him, relax, bro... it ain't worth the fight. No one cares. But now I look around at all the comments being made by the fans... Hebner still gets shit for it. Vince gets shit for it. Bret's ego may have confused an entire nation of wrestling fans... it's so weird."

"Weird, yeah, but it made your brother a legend."

"He would've been one," Owen sighed, "even if he lost in five seconds that night. And as far as respect and legend go -- Bret's lost all the respect and all the legacy he had by whining it away. Look back -- Bret didn't want to turn heel; he didn't want to put Austin over; he demanded that the family stick together. He did a lot of bad things. He's not a saint."

"You're just saying that cuz Shawn's on our side now."

"Look, Shawn will admit he was awful back in the day. But Shawn also knows that it wasn't up to him. He did what he was told to do by a higher authority."

"Wow."

"What?"

"That's... profound."

"I don't understand."

"We do what we're told to do by a higher authority. We're replaceable. We're not supposed to let ego and politics get in the way. We have one target, and that target

determines our success and failure. We're in a wrestling universe 24/7, Owen!"

Owen smiled and laughed. "Yeah, we are. Of course, our prize is a little more important." He went to put his arm around me. I scooted away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing... just... not right now, please."

"Okay... sure. Um... I guess I'll see you this weekend, man."

"Hm?"

"For Survivor Series."

"Oh, yeah, of course. I'm sorry, Owen, I..."

"No, I understand. I would be too, I guess. Well, good luck, and remember -- I'm here for you, man."

He turned and walked away. I smiled as I left the Tunnel.

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Monday, November 10, 2003, 08:00 AM  
Boston, MA

*I'm back.*

I was set to begin another week in another hotel room. This one looked markedly different from the last one I'd seen, thankfully. No more flashbacks to that night -- I'd had enough in Recovery anyway.

I rolled over to face the wall. I heard Saliva's latest single on the radio. I slowly began to shake the cobwebs from my head and my body -- then realized, I had a pretty big body. This was easily as wide a girth as I had had in my time here.

I slowly worked my way to my feet, feeling a little awkward with the weight I was carrying. I looked around and saw the person in the other bed, and a slew of glasses on the dresser between us. One was red, one blue, one black, and one white. They all looked rather fake.

*Uh-oh... which one's mine?*

I held my hand out in front of me as I rolled back over the bed to the glasses. As I tried on each pair, I looked at my hand. First it was the black one. *Nope -- no change. Funny, it's usually the black one anyway.* Then I tried the white one. *Still no change -- these two must be props.* I tried the blue one. *Ah, here we go -- this pair must be mine.* I looked at the red one, and out of curiosity, tried it, too. *Wow. This pair works as well. Why would they be color-coded? Aren't they usually black?*

I then heard a snort from the bed next to me. I looked up, glasses still on. Lindsay was trying to get some sleep next to me. *Wow. Just when I needed it, I'm paired with someone for the week. What a relief.* I took the glasses off. Lindsay was gone, and a big black man was in his place.

*Duh -- that would explain the other phony glasses, wouldn't it? Well, looks like I'm gonna be doing some furniture destruction this week. I always wanted to do this. Thanks, God, for giving me a fun assignment this tough week back.*

*I'm gonna like being Bubba Ray Dudley.*

## FIFTEENTH WEEK

Monday, November 10, 2003, 10:55 AM  
Boston, MA

I returned to the room from breakfast in time to see D-Von finally getting around to getting up. I smiled. "Long night?"

"Don't remind me," he grumbled. "I was up all night thinking about a friend."

"That's nice to hear you thought of me."

"Yeah, I... what?" That got his attention. He bolted upright, staring at me. "I wasn't thinking of you... it was this... um... wait, I..."

I grinned an evil grin, then pointed to the table. He saw all four pairs of glasses lying next to each other. "What the--?" He tried on first his white pair, then a blue pair. He smiled. "Andy... you're back! You're ok! Oh, thank God!"

He leapt out of bed and hugged me heartily. "We're together," I said. "But I gotta admit... I'm gonna need your help. I need you now more than ever... ok?"

"Of course. What else are we for? I'm not gonna toss you aside."

"I... I hope not... I mean..."

D-Von handed me the blue glasses, then went back to get the red. I put them on and saw Lindsay sit down and put the other glasses on. She was clearly concerned.

"Andy, can you trust me?"

I found myself stunned. It wasn't that she doubted my loyalty. All of a sudden, I found I did. I couldn't answer. That hurt more than even saying no.

"Andy?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I don't know who I can trust. I've given this a lot of thought. I've done nothing but think. And the... the whole time I thought, this is easy, Darren's the enemy, avoid him, and so on. But... but when it comes down to it... I can't feel comfortable around anyone. I'm sorry... it's not you."

Lindsay was stunned. "Wait... what are you saying?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but... I'm not sure I can be useful right now."

"Sure you can."

"How do you know?"

"You're here. God believes in you. I believe in you. Andy, if there was any way I could take away this scourge from you I would. But all I can do is show my love and support for you... and that's just the way it's gonna be. But don't worry -- you'll get everything I can give you."

I looked carefully into her eyes as they hid behind the glasses. "You mean it?"

"I've never been more serious to you."

I walked over and sat down next to her. For the first time since Darren touched me, I felt the need for contact. I placed my arm around her as she cuddled into my shoulder. "Thanks, Lindsay. I don't know why, but... hearing you say that... means so much... I just hope I can get through the week... the assignment... the rest of my life."

"Hey," she said. "I'll always be here... in spirit, anyway." She winked and laughed. I hugged her before my glasses fell off. As I pulled back, my eyes went wide and I jumped away. "Ew! Back off!"

Lindsay -- who now looked like D-Von again -- fell over laughing as I tried to brush the germs of contact off of me. To her, this was funny. I was legitimately freaked

out. *After last week, I hope I never have to be intimate with a guy again. That was just too much.*

"I'm sorry, man..." D-Von said through gasps of breath. "I'm so... you look funny... oh, man..."

"This isn't funny!" I called to him. "This isn't! I... I'm not ready for that. I don't know. When it's you... you're so non-threatening. I'm okay with it. But a guy... I... I don't know, but..."

She sat up. "What is it?"

"...something about a man's touch. It's all in my mind, though. When I'm looking at you, it's okay. When I... I can't explain. I'm sorry."

"I think I can. You're flashing back, aren't you?"

"No! It's not that! I clearly saw D-Von, not Dar... but... maybe. I don't know. This is all a new experience for me."

"It would be for me, too. I'm glad I'm not going through what you are. But we're in this together. All of us. Owen knows, and Greg's gonna know. Shawn knows. Paul knows. We're all on your side. Together, we'll figure out a way to make this work. I know it."

"How? We're split. It's gonna have to be you and me. And I'm dead weight."

"No, you're not! You're the biggest help. You know his method. You can do this! Now come on! We got a life to live!"

*Oh, yeah, Lindsay. Testify! Wait, that's her line...*

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06:29 PM

Shawn was in a bad mood. He didn't talk to us the entire time we were headed over to the arena. He unpacked his gear in silence and was curt and terse with most of the stagehands. Lindsay and I decided to put everything on hold until we figured out what was wrong with our boss.

"Hey, Shawn..." I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and scowled at us, but soon after his face returned to its normal expression.

"Sorry, guys. You wanna talk?"

"The question is, do you?"

Shawn nodded and led us to a door. He slid his card in, and the three of us entered the conference room.

"What's wrong, man," asked Lindsay. "You look like you got some bad news."

"Well, not exactly. You see, Greg's in a bit of a bind."

"Why's that?"

"He's Brian Kendrick... but Brian's being seen as a bit of a troublesome individual."

I stared at Shawn. "Who, Spanky?" I blurted out. "But why?"

"Because he attended the memorial show."

"Really? That's all?"

"I guess. I mean, I wish I'd been there... for Jeff... but it's too late now. It's a shame, too. The guy had a great match, apparently, with Danielson. I know I taught those

guys well. But that's not it..."

"What is, then? Are you worried Greg will do something stupid?"

"Yeah, I guess. Already the guy's..."

"I know he is," Lindsay interrupted, using a firmer voice than I or ever Shawn expected. "He's not being responsible for someone who's been around as long as he has. You know, sometimes I wonder about the guy and why he's..."

"Oh, sure, now you're worried," I interrupted, scarcely believing the words as they left my mouth. "But when Kathleen was under his care everything was hunky-dory. I wonder if he even explained to her not to talk to anyone. The guy probably OK'd that last conversation! Now look where we are. We're a man down, and guess who's responsible!"

"Andy, stop!" Shawn cut me off before I said something I would really regret. "Look, I don't know what the hell happened with Kathleen, but it's not important right now. She's gone. End of story. What's important is that the two of you get back on the mission! I came in here to tell you what bothered me... now is something bothering you?"

I was taken aback. Somehow, he had hit the nail on the head. The way he phrased it... *he means more than what I was saying. He knows... somehow he knows.* "I'm sorry, guys. I... I don't know what use I'll be. Maybe I should... no, I'm not gonna quit. I'm gonna stick this out. I'm here for a reason... but... I wish I hadn't."

Shawn began to pause. "Lindsay? Would you step outside for a few seconds?"

Lindsay walked to the door. As her -- well, D-Von's -- black hand reached for the knob, I sat down next to Shawn. I heard the door click shut. I could only imagine what she was thinking.

"Andy... I think you need help."

"Why? What did I do?"

"No, no, no... not that kind of help. You need counselling. It'll help you, it really will. Whatever happened... and I know it was big... I want you to talk to me about it. I'll set some time up later in the week. I think you need it."

"Shawn... what good would it do? It happened. You're not going to stop it from happening again."

"Don't talk like that, Andy. My purpose in this isn't to keep it from happening -- it's to keep it from running your life. We have to focus on our mission. God has us here because of Vince. If God thought you were no longer an asset, He'd send you somewhere else. As it is, He believes in you. You know that."

*Yeah, so I've heard.* "But... you won't like me if I tell."

"Andy, that should be the least of your concerns. Look, out there I've got a ton of things to worry about. Lita's called in sick. Nora's a nervous wreck. Spike's been told this is his last night. And Benoit and Booker want to show they're deserving champions and not just placeholders. Nothing's going well. And that's just professionally. Personally, I'm being asked to help Paul prepare for his first PPV match. I gotta make an honest evaluation of my own nephew to see if he's ready for the big time. Kendrick's... well, not so much this week, but in the past he's been wanting me to stump for him. But ya know what? When I'm in here, I am nothing. My concerns, my crosses, my everyday foibles... they're meaningless. I'm concerned with what God told me to do. And you're the biggest part of that right now."

"Stop blowing smoke, Shawn."

"Hey, I don't do that any more! Not for this, and not now! You got a problem, and

I'm extending help. Do you want it?"

I thought for a long time. *Of course I want help. These guys are going out of their way to help me. But what do I do? It doesn't matter if I tell him my problems -- he'll just share them.* "Shawn... you gotta promise me something. Anything I tell you about backstage stays here. If you're gonna be my counsellor, I expect confidentiality. Is that okay?"

"Does that mean Lindsay doesn't know?"

I thought again. "No... she can know. But anything we talk about in here stays here. Got it?"

Shawn cracked a wide grin. "Andy... that's been the rule all along."

"Thanks. You've been more of a help than you can imagine."

"I'm just doing my job."

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10:24 PM

It had been a wild RAW already. An intergender Survivor Series match had been signed featuring the Right To Censor, Gail Kim, and Jazz against 3 Live Kru, Lita, and Trish Stratus. To make matters more interesting, Stacy Keibler had (again) been kidnapped by the RTC, who (again) offered her as ransom, this time at the Survivor Series. The rules were simple: a 3LK win meant the RTC would stop trying to convert her, while a RTC win meant that Stacy would submit to their rules.

Meanwhile, Booker T and Chris Benoit were preparing for their match with Christian and the Big Show in which, while no titles were on the line, there sure was a ton of momentum at stake. In addition, we were present in the back, waiting for the conclusion of a table match with Rodney Mack and Maven -- *ah, the simple days of logical booking are back again. Who is the pod person and what have they done with the real Brian Gerwitz?*

As we waited backstage for our cue, Shawn started up a conversation. "So anyway, Paul London called me and was all excited that he's making his Pay-Per-View debut at Survivor Series."

"Is he? Really, with whom?"

"He's going against the tag champs -- Tajiri and Dragon."

"Presumably, he has a partner, right?"

"No, D-Von, he's going alone... of course he has a partner. They're gonna see how he works with Nova."

"Really, awesome. I knew the guy had potential. I was wondering what took em so long to figure it out."

"Who knows... it's the WWE. They make things up as they go along half the time. Oh, ready guys, the match is almost over."

On the monitor, we saw Rodney Mack get set on a table as Maven went up. Chris Nowinski distracted the ref while Theodore Long shook the ropes, crotching Maven. *They don't need to distract the ref! Just interfere! Ugh -- we're surrounded by amateurs!* Rodney rolled off the table and climbed to the second rope. One back superplex through a table later, and the match was over -- with a second table propped up in the opposite



"Finally," Shawn muttered as we pulled in at the hotel room. "That New York traffic is a real bitch, man. All right, guys, late call tomorrow. Then we're off to Dallas on Wednesday, so get rested. Especially you, Andy. You look like you need it."

We got out of the car and piled our stuff out onto the curb. D-Von looked me in the eye. "Andy," he whispered. "I still love you, no matter what happens."

I heard Lindsay's voice, even through the filter of D-Von's larynx. "Thank you," I replied. "I wish the damage was that easy to heal."

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Tuesday, November 11, 2003, 02:44 PM  
East Rutherford, New Jersey  
(conference room)

"Thanks for doing this, Shawn."

"Hey, no problem. You need this. Trust me. Now... I suppose I should start by asking... if you want to tell... what happened?"

"You want the short answer or the long one?"

"Either one, Andy. This is for you."

"Okay... here goes... Darren... wait, you're not going to say this to anyone, are you?"

"I told you before, Andy. What we say here, I'll keep to myself. I'll take the oath."

"Thanks. Well... he... it was around midnight a week ago. I -- Nora -- had just gotten out of the shower, and... there was this knock on the door. And I opened it, and Darren let himself in and began to... to kiss me and feel me up and... it just didn't seem right. It wasn't the same... feeling I had with Stacy and Andrew, you know?"

"So you sensed something was wrong?"

"Yeah... I... I told him no. I told him to back off. He... he said that wasn't an option and he... I had to push myself away. I tried to lock myself in the bathroom, but... he was able to keep the door from being shut all the way. He was pounding on it... it sounded like he wanted to knock it in."

"The bathroom door, you mean."

"Yeah... and... I knew I was trapped. I didn't think I could hold out. So I had to try to get help... somehow."

"What did you do?"

"I... please don't make me do this."

"Andy, you're free to stop any time. I'm not keeping you here."

"I know, but... I'm lost. I feel like I gotta say it... but I don't wanna think about it."

"Okay... well, take your time."

"Right... well... .. he... I... I thought if I tricked him into hitting the door too hard, he'd lose his balance. So I... I did like in those comedies, I... I stepped aside and let him bash through... and yeah... he... he came right on through and left the door open. I tried to escape... but..."

"But what?"

"... .."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No, no. I have to... I have to tell someone everything. I need to let them know. You see, I... I ran for the door, but he grabbed my leg... and tried to pull me back... he got my towel and... and ripped it off. I got away from him, but... but I hid... I couldn't go outside, you know... cuz I was naked... but I had to... to get away."

"How did you get away?"

"Well, I... I tried to hide on the other side of the room. I threw something at him... I don't remember what it was, but... it stopped. It never hit him. He marched over to... to where I was... I was in the corner... I couldn't speak, couldn't move... I..."

"Go on."

"He grabbed me out of the corner... he acted like he owned me. He grabbed at me and... shoved me to my knees. He handed me this... this..."

"What?"

"...a condom. I didn't... I couldn't recognize it at first... like I didn't want to know. I mean, there's nothing else it could be. He... he told me to put it on him and to... to undress him."

"And did you?"

"He took his shirt off and... and I pulled the rest away... and I had to..."

"Cry if you need to, Andy. I won't judge you."

"I... I put the condom on him... and he wanted me... to... to... you know..."

"Go down on him?"

"Yeah... I'm sorry, I... I can't even say..."

"No, no. Whatever is comfortable for you. I'll try to help."

"Thanks... so I... I didn't do it then... I bit him instead. I thought I could get away if he was hurt. I tried to run for the towel... so I could put it on and get out... but he... he grabbed my hair and th... th... threw me on the bed... oh, God, this is so..."

"Shhhh. There's no need to continue. Just go at your own pace. We can stop here if you want."

"No... no, I have to say this. I have to tell you. He called me stupid. He told me if I -- if she -- ever wanted to work again... to do as he says. He tossed me onto the floor and... he pulled me to my knees... I... I thought I had to do it. I should've run again -- I should've gone for the door -- anything. I just..."

"It's all right. I'm right here."

"No... no, it's okay... so after I... I warmed him up, he threw me back on the bed and... and he pressed me against his body. He forced his tongue down my throat... he... he just didn't care about me. He wanted a fuck... and I let him... I stopped fighting him... I was too scared... too... Shawn, I'm sorry..."

"No. No, no need to apologize to me. You did everything you could. You were very brave. You did your best."

"No, I didn't! I let it happen! I let you down! I let everyone down! I let her down. I was put there for-- a-- reason... and I didn't... I just let her life... she..."

"Don't blame yourself. You're not at fault here. Let me ask you... did you agree to this?"

"No..."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Y... yeah."

"Did you try to fight him off?"

"I... I guess so... but I..."

"No buts... you did what you could. Andy, one of the things about this job is you're not always going to be able to do things on your own. All that's required is our best. Did you do your best?"

"I... I don't know... I let people down. Not just her... but K... Kath..."

"Kathleen?"

"Yeah."

"What about her, Andy?"

"...You know. You know what happened. I tried to be polite, tried to be... subtle about it. I didn't want to hurt the guy's... feelings... in case I was wrong. But she... she shoved me away. I made her turn her back on us!"

"Andy--"

"I sentenced her to death! I might as well have pushed that button that froze her! I let her die! I did nothing! I--"

"Andy, stop! You can't make people choose something. We have free will, dammit, you know that! If there wasn't any free will -- if people didn't make mistakes -- you wouldn't be here."

"Yeah... I'd be in Heaven, I know."

"No! There wouldn't be a Heaven. There wouldn't be any need for one."

"I... I don't understand. Shawn, all this talk... it's... well, it sounds nice, but... I still screwed up. I still... ruined two people."

"Andy... no."

"What's no?"

"You didn't ruin anyone. Do you remember SummerSlam? Cuz lemme tell you something, I do. I remember being in this room, right here, and seeing five people, some of whom had never met each other. And I remember one of the people I'd never seen before telling me he thought something was wrong. Andy... her life, to the extent that it is ruined -- which it's not -- her life was already like that. And you know what? She didn't do it. If what you've said is true... Darren did it."

"Darren... I... but..."

"But what?"

"Shawn, when I saw who I was, I knew I could do something about it. I figured I'd be able to fight him off. I figured I would have the courage to keep attacking him. But I stopped. I just stopped halfway through. And he... he kept going. Why did I stop? Why did I let him do it? I don't know. But I failed her."

"Do you think you committed adultery?"

"... .."

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think this was adultery?"

"Wh-- how do you mean? We weren't married."

"But adultery requires two willing parties. Were you willing? Did you want this to happen?"

"No!"

"Then you're fine. Look, I can spend all day telling you this, but you gotta believe it. You have to look into your heart and realize that, hey, guess what -- I was a victim. All

that new-age crap about how we're all victims... don't let it cloud your head. Sometimes it's just feeling sorry for yourself, but not you. Not you. You are legitimate."

"I'm leg... a legitimate what?"

"You are a victim. I don't know how I can get this through to you, Andy... you're still okay. Do you think Lindsay thinks less of you? Do you think Owen does? I can tell you right now, I don't."

"I do."

"Why?"

"Shawn... I wanted to wait. I died a virgin. I... I was proud of it. I wanted to... stay moral in that respect. I wanted the first time to... to be meaningful, to be special. I wanted to enjoy the feeling... with someone I loved. Then... then when I died, I thought... well, I'll never experience it unless... the conditions were right... and even then, you know, it... but this. I... I wanted it on MY terms. I wanted to respect my body, and the body of whoever I was! Shawn, I let her get violated... and I lost... I lost everything."

"Okay... Andy, what types of sex are there?"

"I don't understand."

"Well... apart from married sex... like, what are the terms?"

"There's... there's adultery and fornication... and then some other... weird kinky stuff. Why?"

"Andy... there's also a crime. What happened here was a crime. There is no shame. There is no... how many times do I have to say it? You didn't do anything wrong. Do you understand?"

"Was I married?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it's a sin."

"No! What was the first thing they taught you about sin."

"It's... it's when we break the rules. It's when we turn our backs on God."

"Can you sin by accident?"

"No... you have to... it... what?"

"Andy, some of us are born sinners, and some achieve that status. But you can't have sin thrust upon you. You can't be made to sin. Am I making sense?"

"Kinda... but that's easy for you to say... It's real easy... you can stand from 100 feet away and you can say, yeah, that's bad. But you don't know. YOU don't know! You'll never know how I feel. Never. Why am I even talking to you? You're just taking pity on me. I don't want your pity -- I want you to... I... .. I just..."

"It's okay, Andy. Just get it all out. Anger's natural. I'm not taking this personally."

"Thanks... it's just that I... I don't feel like one of you. I feel like I'm somehow... worse. I don't feel like an equal. Why couldn't this have happened to someone who's been around longer? Why couldn't Greg have had it happen? He's always going around chasing some tail! What did I do wrong? Why did You do this to me, God? What were You thinking? Do You give a shit what happens to me? DO YOU? ... .. Are You there... .. at all?"

"Andy, of course He is. God is everywhere -- and that's not just shorthand. Ask Him and He'll help you out. He will give you the strength you need."

"He should've given it to me when I was in that room. Right?"

" ... "

"Right, Shawn?"

"I can't say. Maybe -- maybe not. All I know is... it happened. I'm sorry it happened. You know, in fact it disgusts me what happened. You just tell me, and I'll bust his ass right now. I'll destroy him. But... but what would that do?"

"He wouldn't hurt her again. He'd be gone. He'd get his reward."

"Andy... when you first arrived, I'm sure you heard that we were after converting people and didn't think twice about it. I'm sure you thought, oh yeah, Vince is evil, gotta save him, blah blah, no problem. Well, guess what -- here's a problem. But the mission hasn't changed. It wouldn't change if we were the only ones left. Suppose Lindsay leaves, and Owen, and Greg. Suppose Paul stops being an intermediary. Heck, suppose I stop being one. Suppose it's just you. That won't change the mission."

"It would kill it. I'm worthless."

"No, no, no you're not! Do I have to remind you what you've already done? All the paths you've changed? All the potential disasters you've avoided? I mean, right now, think about Eddie. Think about Zach. Think about how they feel right now. You probably saved Matt from going crazy with grief! Does that mean anything?"

"I don't know. Ask Eddie how he feels about those Leones. Ask John Cena how he likes having an obsessive fan. Talk to Zach about Juarez -- he had a blast. Oh, and apparently Amy and Gregory finished what we started. Yeah... I've done a whole damn lot of good, haven't I?"

"Andy... that wasn't you. You're not a gang member. You're not a groupie. You... were you still Hurricane when they..."

"...no..."

"Right. How can you blame yourself? How can you look yourself in the mirror and say, this is what I did? Do you understand your own identity right now? Don't you know where you end and they begin?"

"I... .. I used to."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I... I understood who I was from one week to the next... and I knew that it ended when I ended. I knew when John told me the next week that he thought he was being followed... I knew that wasn't me. I knew I didn't encourage her. But now I... I don't know. I... I got fucked. But he wasn't after me. I had a chance to stop him... Nora was... she got hurt."

"Andy... did you talk to her?"

"Excuse me?"

"Did Lindsay teach you about the whole zone out and meeting with..."

"Oh, oh yeah. Yeah, she did. And... and I talked to her. Shawn... Nora's in deep trouble. She's basically existing. She's trying not to die. When I was in there... I don't know how I was, but... she wasn't even a being. She was an image on a wall. She lost all... definition."

"You spoke to a shadow?"

"Yeah. That's all she was. She never left the light. I couldn't see her... I couldn't see any... anything."

"Does she blame you?"

"...I don't know, Shawn. I don't... ..don't think she does. She... she seems to

think I was... but she knew what would happen."

"Andy... do you blame her?"

"No! Why would I... that's... that's stupid!"

"Well, Andy... it's someone's fault, isn't it?"

"Yes it is! Mine!"

"No! We've already established that you did nothing wrong. Right?"

"You've established that. I haven't established a thing. I still look at the fact that I... I had to face her. I had to tell her she got... she got hurt again. That she was... and I... it..."

"Andy -- just out of curiosity -- what were you expecting?"

"I don't know. I guess I thought... but that's just it. All the more reason. I had to know what was coming. I had to be able to see it. I had to be able to... to block it from happening. I knew, and I let it happen. I knew something bad would happen, and I let it happen."

"Andy... did... did you let Zach get beat up? Didn't you fight back?"

"Yeah..."

"How is this different?"

"... .."

"Andy, how is this any different? Weren't the results the same for you? Going off to Recovery... seeing in black-and-white?"

"How do you know? You weren't there."

"You don't think we don't talk about this? Paul and I know each other. We're going to be meeting with everyone on Sunday, right? Look, you've been through a lot. But when your vision goes like that -- when you find yourself colorblind -- you know what that means? It means you were an innocent victim. So stop blaming yourself and realize where the blame goes."

"D... d... d-darren?"

"Yeah. With Darren. And now that you know that he's at fault... what are you gonna do? Are you going to... get back to work? Are you going to sit there and feel sorry for yourself? Because I got a news flash for ya... the instant we leave this room, life goes on. Life goes on. I can't stay here forever. Neither can you. So you gotta get over this, and you gotta do your job. I don't care if it's something as little as performing your best for Survivor Series."

"Why bother? It's just wrestling."

"It's an avenue to get to Vince. The more people he sees out there busting their asses, the more he likes them. The more he likes someone, the more likely he is to listen. I talk to him all the time. We have great debates. It's how I try to get him to understand. But you know what? My words would mean nothing if I didn't live it. That's what you gotta do. Live the life -- let him see what happens when people follow the rules. Then... it's a long shot... but it's the best shot."

"So you're saying that everything has an impact? That by going out there and... and doing our best... and putting on a great show... we'll... we're helping?"

"I know it. I know that by performing, you get in his good graces. But it's more than that. It's how you handle it. Look, one of these days, you'll be in a position where you can make an impact. When you are, when you're someone who Vince knows and listens to -- I expect you -- no, I DEMAND of you -- that you use your power. It's the

only thing you can do."

"But what if I'm... someone like Nora? Or... what about Spike? What if he fires me?"

"Andy... just take it one day at a time, one week at a time. You're already making progress."

"No... no... I can't get over... the feeling... the sound... I can't sleep for more than a few hours. I keep jumping up and... and making sure I'm alone."

"To be honest... I hope in a way you never get over this. I hope you remember how it feels. You survived. Don't you know how powerful that makes you? Don't you realize how much you can gain from this?"

"No. This sucked. What's the good side of... of this?"

"Well... you've been there. Now when someone is in your spot, and you... they come to you for comfort... you know what to do. You know what they'll want because it's what you wanted. I'm not trying to dictate your life. I don't wanna do that any more than you want me to. But... Andy, every cloud has a silver lining. And one more thing, Andy."

"Yeah?"

"You're strong. You can handle this. I don't know what it is... but I think there's something... something within you... you're back out already. I'm... it's great. But it's unusual. You are strong. Use it. Use your strength. Be the rock others need. Don't you see it in yourself?"

"...I dunno... it makes sense, but..."

"But what?"

"But it's... it's so cheesy. I am strong, I am invincible... no I'm not. I'm a single person who doesn't even have a human life left to fall back on. I'm the most vulnerable person there is, aren't I?"

"That's just it. That's just it. You're the smallest... but... everyone has strength. A pawn can capture a queen. A single man can bring down a tyrant. There is power in one. Re-read David and Goliath if you have to. Just... believe me."

"O...okay."

"Look, I'm sorry. We gotta get back. I hope you feel better."

"I hope I will."

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Wednesday, November 12, 2003, 08:59 PM  
Dallas, TX

Lindsay and I trudged up to our room. As we passed our floor and got off the elevators, I noticed something. "Shh! Look!"

The elevator area gave us a view of Gail and Nora's room. William was at the door, having a conversation with Gail. She had her arms blocking access to the room. I couldn't make out the words, but I could sense anger and frustration in William even though his back was to us. Eventually, he walked off.

Nora emerged from out of view. She stood at the door and watched as William marched down the hall. I heard a door open, then close. Nora turned around and hugged Gail. They both went back inside together.

I turned to D-Von. His face lit up. We high-fived, then went on to our room. *You go, girl!*

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Sunday, November 16, 2003, 12:45 PM  
Dallas, TX

*Tonight is the night. In just about six hours, it begins.* I was looking forward to getting this overwith. I had spent most of my time in my room, trying to sort out my mind. Shawn had been as much of a help as he could be, although his and everyone else's mind was elsewhere. Which meant that I, a so-called locker room leader, had stayed on the sidelines -- reduced to being the same wallflower I saw in Nora.

There was a knock on the door. I listened. Shawn and I had a special signal in case he needed to reach me -- but this wasn't Shawn. I thought of just sitting still and hoping the person went away, but I figured it might be the worst thing I could do. I didn't want them to think I had evaporated entirely. Besides, my problems were mine, not Mark Lamonica's. I had to see who it was.

"Oh, Chris... sorry bout that, man."

"It's ok." A shorter man entered the room. His face was withered, betraying his older age although most thought of him as still-untapped talent. His blue eyes seemed sad, worn, and weary. Over his left arm -- which seemed out of proportion with the rest of his body -- was the World Title. Chris Benoit sat down next to me and sighed.

"What's bugging you, man?"

"It's about Jericho. I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Well... he's kinda busy, isn't he?"

"It's not that... it's that he usually keeps in touch with everyone. He was always the guy people could go to, you know, if they had problems. He'd listen. He'd sometimes even resolve them. I'm tellin ya, everything they say Hunter isn't, he is."

"So? Look -- he has rehab. Besides, why would you wanna talk to him now? Shouldn't you be off preparing for the show?"

"Nah... I don't need too much preparin', man. Besides, when I walk out there... it all comes naturally, man. I just feel the rush, and I gotta put on the best match I can with whoever I can. It's my way."

"Well, it seems to have worked... look at what you got for it."

"Oh, this? Man, this is nothing. The WCW title -- it was nothing. It was never about those for me. I've taken chances before in my career. I took them not because I wanted the glory, but because I wanted the challenge. That's why I left -- not for the money or the prestige, but because... well, WCW was suffocating. It wasn't my style anymore. Besides, all my friends were going too."

"You just wanted to be with Dean and Eddie, huh?"

"More than that -- I wanted them to succeed, and they needed me to get in. We needed each other, ya know?"

"But why not be the big fish in WCW?"

"You think that woulda lasted? You think it mattered that I was champion? I saw the tape. They were ready to make me fight again and again for it, and I knew in the end

it was just gonna go right back to Nash or to Hogan. Nothing against them, man, but... I was a temporary champion."

"And now?"

"Now? Now I'm enjoying the challenge, man. You could throw me in there with Big Show for 10 minutes, 9 of which feature him on an oxygen tank, and I'd love it. I wanna challenge myself. This title -- should I lose it tonight, so what? I'll just go to the next challenge. That's why I wanted to come here to RAW. I wanted to... I'd done it all. Angle and Eddie and Haas and Shelton... they don't need me. Who was left for me? Maybe Taker or Hogan, but... then what? I got more here than I can handle."

"Chris... something doesn't seem right. You're trying to tell me you don't care about politics, that you... you just go out and wrestle? What about that title? You didn't just get that handed to you, did you?"

"Well, think about it. I didn't win the fan poll, and Hunter was off for his honeymoon soon. You tell me. Besides, like I said, it isn't about the title. It's about being on the stage, being in front of thousands, and letting them think that, wow, he's a kickass wrestler. That's what I want."

"So if all your friends hadn't come with you -- if you didn't have people like the Radicals, like Regal, like Jericho... would you still be doing this?"

"Sure. I don't care about any of this political stuff. If the fans like me, they like me, and that'll get me the boost. If they think I'm boring, then I'll just do what I can and forget about their standards. In between, I don't know. It's not that big a deal."

"But it is! Chris, whether you like it or not, you're the champion, and you set the example. If you don't care about the WWE, no one will. If you don't care about the title, why should I? Why am I here? Just to go out and put on a good match? Then why have titles at all?"

"I don't know. I don't know why we need these things. I'm just keeping this warm for HHH to get it back eventually. You know it, I know it, everyone knows it. No matter what I do, the ceiling is there. I can't go any higher."

"Of course you can't! You're there! You're at the top! If you were some... some tag team wrestler hampered down by his best gimmick, then maybe you could take that attitude, but right now you are the champ. You have to try to raise the bar. Make HHH work harder than ever to be the best he can."

"It's no use, man. HHH won't improve. And besides, why would anyone waste their time trying to make other people better? I figure, you know, you gotta focus on yourself, man. Let the rest of the world get better." I stared at him, unsure I heard what I thought I heard. "Don't you get it? What do I gain by improving someone else? That's someone who will never thank me, never show gratitude, never repay the favor, and who'll make especially sure to step on my head as they climb up the ladder ahead of me on the way down."

"How do you know?"

"Because it happened every time. Look at the Rock. Look at HHH. Look at -- hell, look at all the guys in WCW. You got in a program with me, you knew I would do everything not just to make you look better, but to make you better, period. And my reward was midcard hell. I made HHH better through association. Now he's taken all my knowledge and discarded me as a threat who must be kept away. Austin demanded I get drafted away from him because he thought I'd show him up. It's the same story every

time. Everyone treats me like crap. Just wait until this is over. Wait until the title is back around HHH's waist. Then you'll see."

I was furious, and I knew why, but I couldn't say why. "So that's it? You're just going to stop doing the right thing because no one notices you for it? Haven't you ever heard of the martyrs? I don't think they got Hallmark cards for their acts. Dammit, Chris, you gotta be sane. You gotta think outside yourself. What does it hurt you to help? Why do you--"

"This ain't ECW, Bub! It don't matter how good you are. You gotta be in the right circles. Dammit, I'll be the first to admit that if Regal retired, I wouldn't cry. But he's got HHH and he's got Austin, so he's got a job. He could probably do whatever he wanted and..." his voice trailed off.

"And?" Nothing. "Chris, are you mad at him? I thought you two were friends."

"You know... I try to ignore politics. But it... it hurts me, man. He's changed. The man's in charge of the whole women's division -- he's gotten some serious power trip. And he's lettin' it get to his head. You know why Nora's the champ right now? You know why she's in the main event? Because she's screwing him on the side. She's basically screwing her way to the top. And he's letting it happen. What kind of... I don't get it."

*No kidding you don't!* I bit my lip ferociously. *How could I tell him how wrong he was? In the first place, he wouldn't believe me. In the second, he'd ask how I know -- and then I'd be busted. How can I be so stuck?* "Chris, I wouldn't rush to judgment. I mean, what are you basing this on? Would Lance be trying to take Nora away if she wanted to sleep with him?"

"Look, Lance is a nice guy, but he doesn't know. Besides, how do you know she isn't trying to--"

"Chris! Is this the same Molly Holly who prided herself on her virginity and not messing with the wrong crowd? Listen to yourself! How could you... why?"

"Because I know Darren. I saw him pull himself out of rehab, clean himself up, and turn in a hell of a performance to get his job. I know the man who has pride in what he does. I also know that he's never met a woman he didn't like. If she came to him, he'd take it in a heartbeat. You know they're screwing around. How can you deny it?"

*You mean, without blowing my cover?* "I won't. I won't deny it. But don't you think for a second you may have your parameters confused? I mean, who's to say he didn't have an open invite? First to accept it, wins the belt. Or maybe -- maybe you're mistaken. Maybe she's not screwing him."

"Oh, come on. Everyone knows he visits her on the road. What do you think they do in there? Anyway, that's not important. The thing is... people here... they think for themselves. I don't wanna be like that. But every time I tried to help someone, they just shoved it in my face. It's... well, I don't know what to do."

"You want my advice? First, cut other people some slack. You don't know what's in their head. You don't know what's really going on. That's one thing I've learned -- you can never know. Ever. You think you know, but you're just guessing, man. So basically, just be yourself. And if being yourself means you help others, then help others. Make the wrestling better. What can go wrong?"

Benoit shrugged. "I dunno. I guess... I just wanna be a good person, man. It's hard. What with everyone a bundle of nerves, and Vince just... whatever. He's losing it fast. And I'm afraid of what that means for me. I don't know who's real anymore. For all I

know, you're putting on an act right now."

"Chris," I said staring into his eyes so he would be forced to look at me, "I'm telling you exactly what I feel, and exactly how I think it is. You got one mission out here, and that's to be the best you can. Just do that. The rest will come to you."

Benoit thought, then smiled his gap-toothed grin. "Yeah," he said. "I guess I have been thinking too hard. I mean, what does it matter to me what Darren does or what Hunter does or what anyone does? I gotta worry about me. I guess I do, anyway. Thanks. I'm gonna head to the gym, man. See you tonight."

"All right, man. Take care." I watched him head for the door as I went back into thought. *"For all I know, you're putting on an act right now." If that's so -- and I am -- it's not the most convincing act. He actually thinks she's doing him... Darren has people convinced that's the case? I... this is gonna be impossible. I don't know what I'm gonna do.*

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06:14 PM

We all prepared for the Survivor Series telecast to begin in 45 minutes. The arena was filling up out in front. Nora paced the halls, waiting for Benoit and Booker to show up. I watched as Maven and Grenier played cards. Everyone was prepping in their own way.

Suddenly, a series of shouts emerged from across the way. A group of us raced into the SmackDown locker room, trying to keep up with the action. We saw Vince McMahon in the center, beating down on someone. His eyes were ablaze with rage. His kicks and stomps seemed to be finding their mark. *Who is he doing this to?*

Paul met D-Von and me at the door. "Don't go in, guys. He's not ready. He's... it's Greg. He tried too hard. Vince isn't in control."

"What's goin' on?"

"He basically assaulted him."

"So why isn't anyone stopping him?"

"Because they're afraid, Li... D-Von. He's... he fired Brian for what Greg did. Everyone's afraid to speak up. I don't get it. I don't know what to think anymore. This is serious. That... that demon... he's... something huge has to happen for Vince to get some semblance of control back."

"Is he... gonna... die soon?"

"I don't think so. But I don't know. I don't know. Just don't go in there. He might attack you too."

"Why is he doing this?"

"Because, Andy, he senses weakness. Greg is still upset over Kathleen. Owen is doing everything he can. You... well, Shawn told me about you. And Lindsay... I don't know. I think we're losing."

We shook our heads. I listened as I heard a groan from Brian. Vince yelled, "Now go clean out your locker, you little puke. How dare you tell me what to do!" There was a pause, then Vince spoke again. "What the fuck are you people staring at? Get ready for tonight, dammit! You got work to do!"

None of us spoke. I just stared at the entranceway as everyone waited for Vince to leave. Hogan walked over to where Brian was, speaking in a low voice. "I'm sorry, dude. I'm so sorry. I'll do what I can. Lemme help you get up."

As Brian was being helped out by Hogan, the locker room stared at each other. They saw the pipe on the floor, where Vince dropped it after swinging it. Eddie was the first to speak. "Guys... we can't let this happen again. He can't fire all of us. And if he tries -- we'll go to TNA and make him suffer. Listen to me, hombres. We gotta keep him from doing this again. No more apologies. He's gotta know when the show ends and begins. I want everyone's word in here that they will never, NEVER let this happen again. You got that?"

A few people nodded. Rhyno walked over to where Eddie was and proclaimed, "I'm with him on this." One by one, people crossed over to his side until only two people on the roster weren't there. One was Hogan, who was busy tending to Kendrick, acting rather than speaking though acting too late. The other was Undertaker. He sat alone.

"What about you, man? Are you not with us?" asked Eddie.

"It's not that," Taker replied, shaking his head. "Y'all don't get it. There's no competition. He can do whatever he wants to. And if we all leave, then he'll just find another whippin' boy. Already, I'm sure he's thinkin' about how he got over as a locker room leader. The man doesn't change. I don't know if it's the ego or the... roids or what. But he's crazy. He's also in charge. I'm afraid we can't do anything about it."

I listened. My heart dropped. *No, Mark... no. We can do something. We will do something. I don't know what it would take -- but Chris'll see that anyone can be changed, and that you do get appreciated. And you, Mark... you'll see him reformed.* I turned to D-Von as we walked back. "Lindsay," I whispered, "let's go prove that sonofabitch wrong."

"Oh, yeah, Andy," she said in return. "Test-i-fy!"

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*A video montage set to "Harder to Breathe" by Maroon 5 opens the broadcast. Clips show Kane choking down Benoit, Booker attacking Christian, Show chokeslamming Booker, Molly hitting Christian with the Unprettier, Christian flattening Benoit with the belt, and finally the Elimination Chamber kick things off. From there we go to Eric Bischoff and Shane McMahon staring down, with Evolution hitting a massive beatdown on Shane. We see Shane costing Randy Orton a fall against Molly in a six-man, then Randy's anger. We then go into the long history between Stephanie McMahon and Sable, with Test's involvement, John Cena's F-U on Sable, A-Train flattening Stephanie, and the participants in the ten-man brawling away. We see clips of Billy Gunn costing Rey Mysterio the Cruiserweight title, Torrie Wilson begging the APA for help, and Billy Kidman diving onto team Gunn on SmackDown. We end with the WWE preview shots for all eight matches, closing with the Elimination Chamber slowly lowering from last year's event as the song finishes.*

And now, RAW, SmackDown!, and World Wrestling Entertainment present...

## **SURVIVOR SERIES 2003**

Fireworks go off all around the Reunion Arena in Dallas, Texas, which we see is sold out. The fans go crazy as they hold their signs up in an attempt to be seen. Josh Matthews has the opening call.

"Deep in the Heart of Texas, everyone is wondering who will survive a night that has traditionally taught us to expect the unexpected! Hello, everyone, and welcome to Dallas, Texas, and the Survivor Series! I'm Josh Matthews with Jonathan Coachman, and tonight, we have action up and down an exciting dual presentation!"

"That's right, Josh, and the match everyone's talking about is the return of the Elimination Chamber! Chris Benoit, Kane, Christian, Big Show, Booker T, and Molly Holly all have the chance of a lifetime to put his -- or her -- name in the history book!"

"But that's not all, folks. Sable has been given the ultimatum: field a stronger team than Stephanie or take a hike! Tonight, she sees if it can be done as her squad -- Rhyno, Eddie, Chavo, Haas, and Benjamin -- meet Stephanie's force of Hogan, Angle, RVD, Cena, and the Undertaker! Can either team fit?"

"I have no idea, but right now, we have to get to our opening match, so let's take it to our SmackDown! crew of Michael Cole and Tazz for the call!"

The silhouette of the mask appears on the TitanTron, signalling the arrival of Rey Mysterio. Rey shoots out from underneath the stage and fires up the crowd on the way to the ring. In the ring, he awaits his partners. The APA's music strikes up as Ron Simmons and Bradshaw make their way to the ring, saluting the fans along the way. As they arrive, the music of Billy Kidman starts up. Kidman walks to the ring, arm-in-arm with manager/wife Torrie Wilson, carrying the US title. He pauses to receive a good-luck kiss from Torrie, then heads to the ring. All four men climb the corners and acknowledge the crowd.

The Tron shows a web browser, looking up Matt Hardy, version 1.0. It loads to 10%, then 30, then 70, then 100%. Matt Hardy and Shannon Moore enter the arena and hold up the V.1 signs as we learn that Matt runs his own promotion in North Carolina, and that Matt and Shannon are on the Atkins™ diet. Both men get into the ring as Jamie Noble's music starts up. Nidia leads her main squeeze to the ring as he holds the Cruiserweight title high, staring at Rey as he does so. As they get into the ring, Ass Man's music starts up, and Billy Gunn makes his way to the ring, pretending to be cool as always. He enters and mocks revealing his thong before Kidman attacks and the fight is on.

As order is restored, Hardy and Kidman get it on. Hardy controls early, but Kidman whips him to the ropes and rans him down. Moore sneaks in to dropkick Kidman out of the ring. Rey jumps in and pummels Moore, then hits an armdrag to send him outside before knocking over Hardy, Kidman, and Moore with a rolling tope. Everyone returns, and Kidman brings in Simmons, who catches Moore off the ropes with a spinebuster for two. Simmons powerslams Moore, but Gunn breaks it up. The ref escorts Gunn back as

Simmons tags in Bradshaw (which the ref acknowledges he heard). Bradshaw beats down Moore hard(er than usual), then tosses him in the Last Call fallaway slam. He signals, then tosses Moore into the ropes, **delivering the Clothesline from Hell and scoring the first elimination.**

Gunn jumps in and pounds on Bradshaw, who fires back in the slugfest. Bradshaw backs Gunn into the heel corner, where Noble tags himself in. Noble continues pounding on Bradshaw as the heels double team, but a double whip leads to Bradshaw ducking a double clothesline. Gunn and Noble go for a double back body drop, but Bradshaw punts Gunn and gets a swinging neckbreaker on Noble before tagging in Rey. Rey goes ballistic on Noble, nailing a drop toe hold into a headlock, which the two turn into a reversal sequence ending with Rey slingshotting Noble into the ropes, where he lands on the middle rope. Rey comes in and connects with the 6-1-9, then **the West Coast Hop takes Noble out and puts the Animals up to 4-on-2.**

Simmons, having entered to cut Gunn off, now takes a double-team from Gunn and Hardy as the ref inexplicably escorts Rey out of the ring. Gunn gets Simmons in a military press, then drops him. He picks Simmons up, delivering a Jackhammer for two before Bradshaw breaks. Hardy tags in and delivers a drop toe hold, followed with a legbar. Simmons makes the ropes. Simmons is whipped into the ropes, and this time gets a shouldertackle. He picks Hardy up for the Dominator, but Hardy goldbricks it. As Simmons leans over a second time, Gunn jumps off the top rope with a Fame-asser onto Simmons as Hardy rolls away. **The cover follows, and Gunn gets the pin on Simmons.**

Bradshaw immediately lands a Clothesline from Hell on Gunn, but on the cover is reminded that Hardy is the legal man. As Gunn rolls to safety on the outside, Hardy dives off the top with a sunset flip for two. Bradshaw gets up and tries to hit Hardy with a shoulderblock, but Hardy ducks, then superkicks Bradshaw for two. Hardy goes up top and yells, then drops the leg for two. Bradshaw catches Hardy coming off the ropes, but Hardy manages to push him over to get two for a crossbody. Bradshaw powers out of a headlock, then fires Hardy into the ropes. Hardy leapfrogs over Bradshaw, then flips back over him just to confuse him. Bradshaw spins around, only to be hit with a German suplex for two. Bradshaw slowly stands up, only to get kicked in the gut. Matt hollers, but gets lifted into the air by Bradshaw. A struggle ensues, but Hardy wins, **finishing the Twist of Fate to get the three-count and even the sides.**

Rey jumps in, only to get clotheslined right away by Hardy. Hardy and Gunn double-team him in the corner, hitting Billy/Chuck's old Code Red for two for Gunn. Gunn scores with a corner-to-corner clothesline for two. Hardy returns with the Side Effect to get a very close two. Hardy, getting frustrated, tries for a German suplex, but Rey flips over the top and clips Hardy from behind. As Hardy stands up, he gets hit with a rana to put him back down. Rey gets tags in the very fresh Kidman (who has been begging for the tag since Simmons was eliminated), who opens up on Hardy. Gunn takes his shot to fall off the apron, but that allows Hardy to clothesline Kidman. Hardy goes for a powerbomb, but that's just an excuse for Kidman to get a facebuster. Kidman is up first, and he hits a spear out of the corner. Hardy slowly rolls to his feet in a neutral corner, and

Kidman grabs him into the Kid Krusher. Hardy flips over onto his back, and **Kidman nails the Shooting Star Press to eliminate Matt.**

Gunn re-enters and gets attacked right away by Kidman. Kidman nails a swinging neckbreaker, followed by a seated dropkick on Gunn. Gunn is reeling as Kidman brings in Rey. Rey dives off the top into a back elbow on Gunn for two. Gunn tries to pull himself up by the ropes as Rey goes for the 6-1-9, but Gunn sees it coming and ducks, sending Rey spinning and crashing to the mat. Gunn picks him up and nails a butt butt for two. **The One and Only finishes Rey and brings us to one-on-one.**

Kidman jumps in and the two captains stare each other down. They lock up. Gunn gets a headlock, but Kidman shoves him out and lands a monkey flip, sending Gunn to the outside. Gunn slowly re-enters, but gets guillotined as he climbs back in. Kidman gets two. Kidman tries for the Kid Krusher, but Gunn pushes him off into the turnbuckle, getting a body vice on the way back into a back suplex for two. Gunn goes up top, but Kidman ducks his flying clothesline. Kidman tries for a moonsault, but Gunn rolls away and both men are down. Kidman slowly gets up first and goes for a suplex, but Gunn reverses to a Jackhammer for two. Gunn picks Kidman up, but Kidman slides out of the military press into a backslide for two. Kidman follows up with a flying forearm, but Gunn ducks and the poor referee collides with Kidman. During the chaos, Kidman's US title belt enters the ring. Nidia goes to use it, but Torrie cuts her off, and the two women begin to fight. Meanwhile, Gunn grabs the belt and pastes Kidman with it before depositing Torrie to the floor. He covers with one foot as the ref comes to, **and Gunn gets the three to steal the match.** RATING: \*\*1/4

Backstage, I was walking the halls between matches. RAW wouldn't start going for another 20 minutes, so I had the time to chill out. I passed Brian in the hall. "You okay, man?"

He seemed near tears. "I don't get it. Vince was... I don't know what I did. I just asked him... you know... I guess I was talking about what Shawn said to me. A lot of the Christian stuff. He just... I don't remember. I'm so confused. How did this happen?"

"I wish I knew." *I wish I could tell you.* "You talked to Paul? Maybe he can help you out."

Brian shook his head. "He doesn't have power around here. I... I'm sorry. I better get going."

"Stay strong, man. I hope you can come back." *Poor guy. He suffers for Greg's existence. That demon is gonna pay if I have anything to do about it.*

As we stay with the SmackDown! team, a rip-off of "Intergalactic" starts up as Nova and Paul London head to the ring. Both men await their opponents to a mild reaction as Cole and Tazz talk about how the champs had better not be taking them likely. Japanese music hits as the flames spurt up from the entrance. Ultimo Dragon and Tajiri hit stereo praying poses with Paul Heyman in between. As they do, the pyro goes off and the crowd pops for them. They both make their way to the ring.

All four men start with a brawl as Tajiri knocks Nova out of the ring. Ultimo follows him

to the outside, leaving Tajiri and London to start. Tajiri brings the stiff shots, but tries for one too many, and London dragon screws him out of the corner. Nova in, and he hits a legbar, continuing the work. Tajiri stands up, only to get clotheslined by Nova. London returns with a legdrop on the leg, followed by a standing half-crab. Tajiri makes the ropes. London hits the London Bridge for two. Nova returns, and the two punch Tajiri down in the corner before the ref escorts London out. As he does, Nova charges Tajiri in the corner, but Tajiri ducks and sends Nova into the corner instead. On the way out, Tajiri hits the Tarantula on Nova, but London pulls him off and drops him headfirst onto the apron. London then hits a thrust kick on the outside and rolls Tajiri back in, where Nova gets two. Tajiri slowly stands up, so Nova dropkicks the knee out and tries a figure-four. As he leans over to complete it, Tajiri mists him, blinding Nova. Tajiri then gets up and pastes Nova with a kick to the head, but that causes him to collapse, too. Both men crawl to their corners, and London and Dragon get the tags. Dragon chops London down, then fires him into the corner and sends him back out with a suplex. Nova gets clotheslined off the apron as Dragon returns to chop London over the top rope and out. With both men trying to regroup, Dragon hits an Asai moonsault onto them. Back in, London is dazed, but thinks well enough to avoid a Dragon rana. Nova returns and tries for the Kryptonite Krunch, but Dragon blocks it. Dragon tries for a German suplex, but Nova flips over the top. Nova tries for one of his own, but Dragon flips over **into the Asai DDT to get the three and retain.** RATING: \*\*\*3/4

I saw Paul return from his match. "Hey, Paul... um... is everything ok now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well... Brian just left, and G... um... he seemed like himself."

"Yeah, he is. I took the precautions. Now hurry up, man. Your brand has some catching up to do."

"Yeah, so I heard. Well, I'll go watch the next match. I hope it's a good one. I just... I dunno."

"Hey, relax. We're here for ya. Just don't do anything stupid."

"Right."

Teddy Long's blaxploitation music starts up as Gail Kim and Jazz are accompanied by the thugger and bugger himself. Both ladies get into the ring and await their partners. The sirens go off and the big red circle appears on the Tron as Steven Richards, Sean Morley, and Mark Henry head to the ring. They throw their right hands up like preachers as the boos rain down on them. Steven takes the mic.

"The Right to Censor believes that this match is the work of evil forces. We are simply attempting to show Ms. Keibler the error of her ways. However, it is clear that she does not wish to learn voluntarily, and we feel it is our duty to teach her. However, since we are a fair group, we have allowed this one last chance for her to continue in her sinful manners. But first, I give you our newest disciple -- and hopefully very soon, a more willing one -- Miss Stacy Keibler."

The sirens go off again as Stacy appears in the aisle, dressed in Ivory-esque RTC garb. She slowly walks to the ring, clearly uncomfortable with her outfit and with her new

forced allegiance. She climbs onto the apron as Richards holds open the bottom rope for her, preventing her from entering via the middle rope as she usually does. She slowly walks into the ring, clearly depressed.

"Keys to the City" interrupts the melancholy as Trish Stratus appears in the aisleway. She does a slow turn while removing her robe and cowboy hat and awaits outside the ring. The sounds of Boy Hits Car play as Lita appears. She dances her way down the aisle as she does, then stands by Trish. A close-up reveals she's already sweating a little. "Ashes to Dust" strikes up as the crowd cheer the appearance of 3 Live Kru. Konnan dances his way down the aisle, while Road Dogg and Ron Killings add the crotch chops for emphasis. All five get in the ring as Stacy exits.

Gail and Lita start the match. Lita tosses Gail into the corner, then follows in with a rana. Gail returns the favor, then both women lock up. Lita goes for the Twist of Fate early, but Gail shoves her off, then hits a bodypress for two. Trish enters and clotheslines Gail down a few times. Jazz cuts it off, then slams Trish down and applies a half-crab. Lita runs in with a rana to break as the faces switch off. Lita slaps away at Jazz in the corner, then suplexes her out. She goes up top, but as Jazz stands up, Lita doubles over in pain. She slips and falls off the top rope into the ring, rolling around and clutching her neck and stomach. Quickly, Jazz assesses the situation and **puts on an STF, allowing Lita a very quick tapout.** Trish and Gail enter the ring to check on Lita as a trainer helps her to the back. All the while, Lita is clutching her stomach and looking to be in pain from illness. No sooner is she gone, though, than **Trish rolls up Gail from behind to even the sides again.**

Morley enters and demands that Trish tag out so he doesn't harm a woman. Trish brings in Konnan, who punches away with Morley. Konnan gets back up into the RTC corner, and Henry tags in and begins double-teaming Konnan. Konnan is sent into the ropes, but recovers with a rolling clothesline. Henry gets up and is met with a second clothesline, but this time, he catches the arm and tosses Konnan down. Henry gets off a powerslam, then picks Konnan up. He applies a torture rack, **and the ref calls for the bell as Konnan screams in pain.**

Killings runs in and takes over where Konnan left off, pounding away. Killings goes up top as Henry is dazed, but his crossbody is caught into a fallaway slam. Henry covers for two. Richards comes in and hits a DDT for two. Killings ducks the superkick, then gets a German suplex for two. Killings tries for the Truth or Consequences (renamed the Kru Kutter), but Richards shoves out of it. Henry comes back in, and Killings dropkicks him twice, but Henry remains up. He tries a third time, but Richards trips him up from the outside. As Killings lies down, **Henry splashes him and covers for the three.** However, as Henry celebrates, Road Dogg dives off the top and **hits a Lou Thesz Press on Henry to eliminate him.**

Morley enters and hits Dogg from behind. He whips Dogg from rope to rope, following him in with a knee both ways. He goes straight to a Russian legsweep to follow, then tries to hold on with an octopus hold. Dogg squirms out to break. Morley tries a figure-four,

but Dogg shoves him off and punches him repeatedly, ending with the juke and jive punch. He comes off the ropes and lands the shaky legs kneedrop for two. Morley takes a whip into the corner, but channels Bull Buchanan and bounces out with a clothesline for two. Morley hits a neckbreaker for two. He tries for a back body drop, but Dogg **PLANTS** him with a DDT **and gets the three to even the sides again.**

Richards enters, but before either man can lock up, Dogg tags in Trish, who demands Jazz. Richards, saying, "because we respect women," complies. The two lock up and exchange forearms. Trish chops at Jazz, then tosses her into the ropes and follows with a clothesline. Jazz staggers, but ducks a wild punch, then gets the double-chickenwing submission hold. Trish falls back, and they land in the ropes. Jazz picks her up and gets a fisherman's buster for two. Jazz sends her into the ropes, but Trish reverses and flings her out over the top. Jazz slowly returns via the top, only to get caught with the handstand rana. Jazz tries to grab a hold of Trish's leg on the way over, but she frees herself and stands up. Jazz charges, but Trish ducks and sends Jazz into the turnbuckle. She grabs her from behind and hits the Dudley Dog -- which, now that no one's left to argue, is called Stratusfaction -- **and that gets her the three count.** However, Richards immediately enters and **hits the superkick on Trish to get a three count and make it one on one.**

Road Dogg enters and ducks a second superkick, grabbing the pumphandle. However, Steven flips over the top of the powerslam attempt and punches Dogg. Into the ropes he goes, and back out again into a back body drop, which propels Dogg over the top and out. Steven raises his hand, drawing boos, until Stacy decides to take matter into her own hands. She climbs up on the apron and rips her dress off to reveal a tight skirt underneath, then takes off her top to show the matching piece of the puzzle. Steven blows a gasket and tries to get her to cover up, and a long argument ensues with Steven, Stacy, and the ref who wants her off the apron. Meanwhile, Dogg slowly climbs back into the ring and crawls over to Steven, rolling him up from behind... for two. Stacy drops down as Steven irately stomps on Dogg. he tries a suplex, but Dogg instead cradles Steven for two. Steven slams Dogg down for two. Steven raises his hand again, but now Dogg is up behind him and punches him out. Steven slowly reels back, then gets shoved into the turnbuckle. He staggers backwards into Dogg's pumphandle, and this time **the Dogg Pound is enough for the three and Stacy's liberation.** Stacy dances with Dogg to show her appreciation. **RATING: \*3/4**

"You ready, buddy?" I turned around, seeing Rob Conway behind me. "Let's go out there and have some fun."

"Sure thing, Rob," I replied. As we headed to the entrance, we heard a horrifying sound of someone emptying their guts coming from the trainer's room. I peeked in to see Lita's head buried in a bucket. She slowly raised it and seemed weaker than ever.

"You okay, Amy?"

"Yeah... I'll get through... just a little... I dunno... I've been so tired. Just lemme rest a while."

"All right. Get lotsa water, girl. Get well soon."

"Yeah, thanks... oh, and Bubba?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell Darren I'm really sorry."  
"Sure."

The Harvard fight song plays over the PA as the first team enters as a unit. Chris Nowinski strolls forward, carrying his ubiquitous face protector. Rodney Mack follows, shadow boxing while heading down the aisle. Behind them are La Resistance, waving the flags and dressed in the berets and epaulets. Teddy Long is conspicuous by his absence as all four men get in the ring and await their opponents.

The Tough Enough theme music hits the air as the crowd cheers. Maven and Rob Conway emerge from the back, each one carrying a table with them. They set the tables up at ringside and pause, knowing the numbers aren't in their favor. That all changes when the fireworks head to the stage and "Get the Table" strikes up. Lindsay (D-Von) and I (Bubba) run out of the backstage area, carrying our own special table with a giant "H" on it for that Harvard guy. Before we get to ringside, though, the match is on with a 4-on-2 attack on our teammates.

We set the table down and charge the ring, punching and kicking anything that moves. I send Nowinski into the ropes, meeting him with a flapjack on the way out. As I pick him up, I get a lowblow from behind. It's Dupree, who grabs me with a Russian leg sweep. All eight of us remain in the ring as the crowd chants for tables. Dupree seems to want a figure-four, but I kick him off and trip him up on the way back. I look around -- *no one else in the ring but us and D-Von*. D-Von sees it, and I grab Dupree for a slam and tell D-Von to get up. From the slam, I pry Dupree's legs open and ask D-Von whazzup. He replies and dives straight into Dupree's groin. The dance begins, as I get D-Von's attention and announce it's time to... "GET THE TABLES!"

And we're off and getting as many as we can. One gets set up in each corner, with another in the center of the ring. I grab Mack, who was in the midst of helping deliver a 3-on-2 beating, and deliver a couple of European uppercuts. I try to whip him into a table, but he slams on the brakes. Meanwhile, Nowinski tosses Maven in and follows. I go to intercept Nowinski, tossing him out of the ring. As we brawl around ringside, I hear a crunch. *That would be Rodney Mack tossing Maven through a table for the first elimination.*

I toss Nowinski back into the ring and follow him in. I go for a piledriver, but he backdrops me out of it, perilously close to a table. Meanwhile, Conway gets a belly-to-belly on Nowinski to get him out of my way. I slowly get up to see Grenier and D-Von battling near the center table. I get in position, and Grenier acknowledges, trying to whip D-Von into the ropes. It gets reversed, and on the rebound, **Grenier takes a 3-D from us through the table to make it all square.** *That was fun.*

I remove the other three tables from the corners, setting them up in various parts of the ring. I'm placing the "H" table down when I feel someone pounding on my back. It's Rodney, who slaps on the Blackout soon after. I flail around on the ground as Rodney whispers to me, "Shit, I'm out next. How do we do this?" *I got an idea -- something Bam*

*Bam Bigelow once did.* I whisper back, "Brace yourself," then slowly climb back to my feet, with Rodney hanging on for dear life. As I make my feet I back us both up near on of the tables. I hear Rodney exclaim, "Oh sh--" before **I drop backwards, flattening Rodney through the table and eliminating him.** "Now was that so bad?" "Urgh." *Is that a yes or a no?*

No time to celebrate for me, though, because Dupree and Nowinski begin double-teaming immediately. I look around while taking the beating and see that D-Von and Conway are slowly getting up, with chairs lying beside them. *How did I not hear that?* Both men pound on me before Conway slides into the ring and clocks Grenier with the chair. Nowinski protests, but gets told all is legal. Frustrated, he climbs to the top rope as I stand in front of the "H" table. He flies at me, and I manage to catch him, turn around, and slam him through the table.

No, wait, that's what I was SUPPOSED to do. Instead, while catching him, one foot trips over the other. We both careen backwards through the table, **and instead of Nowinski, I'm out.** *Crap.*

Nowinski stares at the rubble, unsure what to do next. D-Von looks at me, trying to survey the situation. As I roll out of the ring and head to the back, I look over my shoulder. D-Von is busy conversing with Nick Patrick in an attempt to salvage the match. *Great, not only did I screw up, but now everyone knows something's wrong. Gee, thanks.* I slowly walk to the back, taking one last look and seeing D-Von and Nowinski getting tied up outside the ring while Conway and Dupree try to stall for time by being scientific in the middle of a table match. Finally, I disappear through the curtain.

"What happened? How did this happen?" Eric was immediately in my face, irate. I didn't blame him, but he didn't know what I was going through. "You were supposed to win. Now I got three greenhorns out there and one wrestler. You realize what a disaster this is?"

"Eric, please. Just... lemme regain my senses. I thought my arm was gonna go, and I was so worried about it I didn't see my stance. I'm sorry, man. It... I'm sorry."

"Hey, cut him some slack, Bisch." Booker T had walked by. "He's a veteran. It's one screw-up. You know he ain't like that. Bubba... you're alright. Don't worry bout it, got it?"

"Thanks... I..."

"Wait. I think I can salvage this. Follow me." Eric led me to a back room where a camera, a generic locker room backdrop, and Shawn Michaels were stationed.

Meanwhile, back in the ring, D-Von breaks up a figure-four on Conway. Nowinski follows, and after a bit of double-teaming involving the mask gone astray, Dupree is out of the ring. Conway rolls Nowinski onto a table as D-Von ascends the ropes. Conway fails to yell out Whazzup, but all things considered that can be forgiven as D-Von dives off and **drops Nowinski through the table with his low headbutt.** Unfortunately, Dupree takes this time to set up a table in a corner, then whips D-Von into said table before **hitting a kneesmash to send D-Von through it, reducing us to 1-on-1.**

Conway grabs Dupree and lifts him onto the top rope, belly-to-belly superplex throwing him halfway across the ring as officials attempt to clear the table carnage. Conway signals for the Iron Claw, slapping it on as Dupree fades fast. Dupree starts to tap, which gets Conway to release and celebrate. Of course, there are no submissions in a table match, so when Conway turns around, he sees a few things: that Grenier is back, that a table has been set up, and that **La Resistance are lifting him up. One Crepe later, and Dupree wins the match for his team.** RATING: \*1/4

I continued to bury my head in my hands as no music played, mainly due to having the wrong thing cued up. Finally, the French music started, but by this time, the match was a fiasco. "I'm... I'm sorry, Shawn... I'm really sorry."

"Relax, man. These things happen. Look, we got it all covered. Just wait for the cue and we'll do something backstage. Gotta hand it to Eric -- he knows how to cover up flubs. Maybe cuz he had so many in WCW."

*Cold. Fair, but cold.*

Generic rock-style babyface music plays as Nick Dinsmore enters the ring. Clearly, he is uncomfortable with being involved in this match, and looks around hoping to find a quick escape. "Here Comes the Pain" plays as Brock Lesnar enters. He jogs in place, then vaults onto the apron, the pyro going off in time to the jump. He jogs in place in the ring again, but makes the mistake of turning his back on Dinsmore, and the match is on with a sneak attack.

Dinsmore slugs Lesnar down in an attempt to get the advantage, then tries a running clothesline. Lesnar doesn't budge, then flattens Dinsmore with a lariat of his own, causing Dinsmore to spin to the mat. Lesnar picks Dinsmore up and tosses him into the corner, then delivers shoulder thrusts. Dinsmore is dead to rights, but Lesnar doesn't let up, adding an overhead suplex. Dinsmore tries to pull himself up, but Lesnar punts him in the ribs, sending Dinsmore flying over the top rope to the floor. Lesnar follows, but Dinsmore escapes the axhandle drop Lesnar employs, then rolls back into the ring.

Lesnar, more angered than hurt, re-enters the ring. Dinsmore ducks under a lockup attempt, then tries to sweep out Lesnar's legs. Lesnar doesn't move, then grabs Dinsmore and powerbombs him. He picks Dinsmore up at two. Lesnar goes for an F-5, but Dinsmore slides out of it and chop blocks Lesnar from behind. He tries to keep kicking the legs out, but Lesnar doesn't stay still long enough for the strategy to be effective. Lesnar kips up, but Dinsmore charges again with a clip. Lesnar crumbles, and Dinsmore tries for a figure-four, but Lesnar kicks him off and gets another overhead suplex on the rebound.

Lesnar nails a sidewalk slam and again picks Dinsmore up at two. He goes for a powerbomb, but Dinsmore reverses to a pinning predicament for two. Dinsmore gets a small package for two, and an inside cradle for two. Both men are up, and Dinsmore ducks a Lesnar clothesline, then tries another cradle only to have Lesnar grab the ropes to block. Dinsmore runs straight into the Brocklock bearhug, and Lesnar hangs on for 20

seconds before letting go of his own accord. He covers and again picks Dinsmore up at two.

Lesnar sets Dinsmore up for a powerbomb and hits it, then a second one without release. He pins off of this one, but again picks Dinsmore up at two, into a third powerbomb. He grabs Dinsmore, who by this time is clearly dead tired, and delivers the F-5. He covers, and this time **the ref fast counts so that he can reach three and save Dinsmore from a crippling.** Lesnar F-5s Dinsmore a second time to punctuate the beating. RATING: \*\*3/4

"Ready, guys? On in five, four, three, two--"

Backstage, I'm with Shawn Michaels. "Shawn, I... dammit, I'm so upset. I had him beat. I caught him. I shoulda just put him through the table. I don't know how I screwed that up."

"Relax, man," Shawn replies. "Just get them on RAW. There's always a next time. You guys still have some mileage left on your careers. At least some of us do."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, I... I don't wanna give away too much. Just see me tomorrow. I've got a bit of an announcement to make. In the meantime, how about you and Nowinski have a one-on-one encounter tomorrow? You can show him how good you really are."

"Yeah... I'll do that... but... wait... what are you gonna do?"

"Something that's been long overdue. Something I should've stuck with before. You'll see."

Shawn walks off, as I stand there with a puzzled look in my eye.

As the video package for the next match played, I walked back to the dressing room area. Spike greeted me before I could reach there, bags in hand. "Hey, bro," I said, half-smiling. "You leaving too?"

"Yeah... I just don't think I can take it anymore. I wanna settle down, man. I wanna go back to the old days, the ECW days. You know, I enjoyed the small-time. This global stuff... it's not me. I'll just see where I can go instead."

"Got any offers?"

"Most people don't even know my career's winding down. Tomorrow, it'll be announced that I asked for and got my release. Then I'll see where it goes. I'd love to do Nashville, though, man. That place looks wild."

"Yeah, it does... but wait. Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, I'm worried about you. This seems sudden."

"Trust me. It's me. I've thought about this. I want to go back to the way things were. Besides, I've got a family that misses me. I don't want to be an absentee dad."

"Well, good luck, Spike. You'll always be my little bro. You know that, right?"

"Yeah. Seeya round, Bubba."

"Thanks." Any sadness I and Bubba should've felt about this was tempered. In fact, as I entered, I was smiling. *The little guy left on his terms. He's making the right decision.*

The screen goes to letterbox. We see that 24 Carat Productions in association with Shattered Dreams presents... as Goldust stands at the entrance. He inhales, then extends his arms, setting off the pyro. He heads to the ring, where he climbs the turnbuckle and inhales again as gold confetti falls. He whips off the wig and waits. "What Does Everybody Want?" is shouted over the PA as Al Snow emerges, going old-school with the Head and the "EM PLEH" written on his forehead. He shakes Head to the crowd and gets into the ring, raising his arms. "Stand Back" plays as the entranceway turns green. Hurricane emerges and poses at the entrance, then walks to the ring and poses again on a turnbuckle. "Here Comes the Money" strikes up and Shane McMahon bounces out to the entranceway. However, before he can get to the ring, Evolution jump him from behind and begin the beating, causing all three freaks in the ring to join the ruckus in the aisle.

They all pair off, Snow with Batista, Shane with Bischoff, Hurricane with Orton, and Goldust with HHH. All eight men make it to the ring, where chaos reigns. Eventually, the six wrestlers leave, making Shane and Bischoff the legal men. Bischoff and Shane exchange punches before Shane backs up and tackles Bischoff. The two men roll around a while before Bischoff tosses Shane aside. Bischoff charges in, but Shane sidesteps and Bischoff hits the turnbuckle. Shane then climbs the turnbuckle, but his dive misses and both men are down. Bischoff rolls over and gets to Orton, who dives in and prevents Shane from making the tag the other way. Orton nails Shane with the RKO and tags in Batista. Batista lifts Shane up and gets the sit-out powerbomb before bringing in HHH. HHH kicks Shane in the gut and lands the Pedigree. Bischoff demands back in and gets his wish, circling Shane and acting like he's going to pile on. Instead, **he merely covers him to eliminate him.**

Snow jumps in as the count is going on and makes sure Bischoff can't promptly tag out. Having caught him, he delivers a Snow Plow to Eric. He tags in Goldust, who sets Bischoff up in the corner. As Snow distracts the ref, Goldust nails Bischoff with the Shattered Dreams kick. The ref then sees Bischoff slumped over and asks Goldust if everything's legit. During this time, Hurricane charges in and chokeslams Bischoff for good measure. Goldust covers, **and the pin is academic.**

Orton enters and pounds on Goldust, beating him into the heel corner. Batista enters and beals Goldust cross-ring, then delivers a powerslam for two. Orton returns and continues beating on Goldust, adding Play of the Day for two. A Russian legsweep by Orton leads to a figure-four, but Hurricane dives in off the top rope to break. Goldust slowly crawls to his corner as Hurricane is escorted out and tags in Snow. Snow slams down Orton and a charging Batista before being told by the ref he didn't legally tag in. In the chaos, HHH grabs his trusty sledgehammer and prepares to hit Goldust, but Hurricane yanks it away and tosses it aside. Batista enters and powerbombs Hurricane, then **covers for three as the ref has completely forgotten who's legal.**

All five people duke it out before the ref escorts out Snow, leaving Goldust to be triple-teamed. Batista -- presumed by the ref to be the legal man at this point -- gives Goldust a backbreaker for two. A sidewalk slam gets two. Goldust rakes the eyes on a second try and goes low, collapsing Batista. Batista gets up and charges, but Goldust backdrops him to the mat. An exhausted Goldust then tags in Snow for real. Snow mows down Orton and Batista (with HHH wisely staying on the outside), slamming and clotheslining each. Orton is escorted out of the ring by the referee, and HHH enters. He sets Snow up for the Pedigree, but Goldust grabs HHH off from behind and tosses him out of the ring. Snow sees Batista coming and ducks underneath, then slaps on the Beast Choker. Batista struggles for 20 seconds **before tapping out and giving the duke to Snow.**

Orton is ushered into the ring by HHH and demands Goldust come in. Snow hesitates, but Goldust has no problems and tags himself in. Orton tackles Goldust down and proceeds to work on the legs. Goldust makes the ropes, but in trying to pull himself up, gets kicked in the leg by Orton. Orton pulls him to the center of the ring, flips him off, and hits the Sharpshooter. Goldust makes the ropes, so Orton pulls him back. The ref demands Orton break the hold, and during the argument, Goldust goes low. The ref sees nothing (so he says) as Orton doubles over. Goldust uses Orton to pull himself up, then unleashes a torrent of knees to the face. He turns Orton over so they stand back-to-back, then hits the Curtain Call. He rolls himself on top, **and three seconds later, it's two-on-one.**

HHH stalls on the ring apron before Goldust brings him in the hard way. Goldust punches him in the corner, but a well-timed kick in the leg slows it down. HHH gets a figure-four of his own, but Snow runs in to break it. HHH whips Goldust into the ropes and nails him with a facebuster on the way out, then kneedrops his leg. HHH gets a kneebar, but Goldust finds the ropes. HHH kicks the back of Goldust's knee, but while attempting Stretch Muffler, Goldust rolls backward, resulting in the least likely (and least coordinated) rana you've ever seen. Snow gets the tag and pounds away at HHH, knocking him down with a shouldertackle. He signals for the Snowplow, but HHH slips out the back of it. He spins Snow around, kicks him in the gut, and Pedigrees him. **And since there's no way AI Snow's kicking out, we're at HHH vs Goldust to finish.**

Goldust slowly enters the ring, clearly nervous. HHH punches away at him, then chokes him down. He whips Goldust into the ropes and puts his head down, resulting in Goldust hitting a sliding punch. Goldust clotheslines HHH down, then gets a series of elbowedrops. HHH slowly staggers up as Goldust nails Flip Flop and Fly on him for two. Goldust carries HHH to the corner, but the ref tells him not to do "that kick", meaning Shattered Dreams. So Goldust sets him on the top rope and readies himself for a superplex, but his legs give out and **the pair crash to the mat with HHH on top, getting the three-count and the win.** RATING: \*1/4

I paced around outside during the video package for the SmackDown! ten-man. As I did, I heard two things that bothered me. One was Vince asking Sable if she was "sure you're okay with going all the way here." She was. *All the way? What does Vince have in mind?*

The other came from around the corner in the RAW dressing room. I eavesdropped as Darren appeared to be giving instructions to Christian and Big Show. "Now remember, gentlemen. I'm counting on you and the others to give Nora her initiation to the main event. Make sure she learns what it's like to be on top and pays her dues. You got that?"

"What?" asked Christian almost in disbelief. "You want us to punish her? It's no skin off my nose if she's in the main event. I'm going to treat her how I see fit. Do you have that?"

"Fine, whatever... but remember, I'm being serious when I say she needs to learn the ropes, and this is her opportunity."

There was an air of suspicion in Christian's reply: "Why are you so concerned about how we treat her? Did she piss you off?"

"Look, I'm in charge of the women's division. I want to establish the gap between women and men. Do you know what would happen if a woman looked good against a man -- how the man would look?"

"I dunno... Chyna didn't make people look bad."

"Nora isn't Chyna and you know it."

"Look, I'm gonna wrestle my match, she can wrestle hers, and I'll leave it to others to do whatever's right. Got it? Now, excuse me -- I have to prepare."

Christian stormed past me as he went to the holding area for his interview. I listened for Big Show's reply, but heard nothing. The only thing I could deduce was that the last two matches were going to be memorable, and probably for the wrong reasons.

I walked into the RAW locker room to join everyone else gathered around. There was a tension in the air. I saw a series of numbers -- 15, 20, 25, 30, and so on -- written on a blackboard, with all sorts of initials and chalkmarks next to them. "What's with the numbers?" I asked Booker.

"Oh, we're takin' bets on how long it'll take to go through the entrances for the next match," he said smiling.

"I see..." *And I thought I had a weird sense of humor.*

The wildcat growls and the whips crack as Sable walks down to the ring, perhaps for the last time. She is stylishly dressed in a one-piece suit that appears to be split on the sides. The leather reflects the lights of the arena as she rolls into the ring carefully. She looks to the entrance.

The electronic grunt of the jungle hits the PA as Rhyno enters. He pounds his chest a few times and stalks his way to ringside. He gets in the ring and pounds his chest again, raising his arms. He awaits his teammates.

VIVA LA RAZA is shouted as the Guerreros approach the ring in a customized Low Rider. Eddie is driving and Chavo rides shotgun. They pull into the aisleway and hop out. Eddie checks the chrome on the bumper as Chavo rolls into the ring. Eddie then vaults the top rope and poses for the crowd, who seem on the verge of cheering.

Championship-style music plays as Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin emerge in matching maroon singlets. The crowd makes an attempt to chant "You Suck" in time to

the music, but fails miserably. Haas and Shelton play up to the crowd, then enter the ring and high-five all their teammates. Sable stands in front of her group, gingerly dropping to one knee as they raise their arms around them.

"All Grown Up" plays as Stephanie McMahon walks out. She strolls casually to the ring and looks over Sable's team. She then turns to Sable and laughs before heading to the outside, where she awaits her team's presence.

WORD LIFE kicks off John Cena's music as he walks out, flashing the hand signal. He awaits on the outside as he carries a mic with him. He holds up the stop sign hand to Tony Chimel, then to the boys in the back.

"Yo, yo, yo, cut it--

Tonight's Survivor Series, and the target is Sable.  
This team can't beat the C-Dog, they just ain't able.  
A pair of cheating losers from down Mexico's way?  
You ain't better than us, you will never ever stay.  
A tag team calling themselves the World's Greatest?  
You're not even close, you're as bad as the Raiders.  
Then the Man Beast thinks he can beat anyone.  
Well before my rap is through, he will know his day is done.  
I'm the Professor of Old School, and I'm about to give classes,  
So when the night is done, I'll kick all yo--"

The crowd finishes.

"One of a Kind" hits as the pyro around the stage goes off. Rob Van Dam emerges from the back, pointing to himself and getting the crowd involved. He rolls into the ring and jumps around in place as the heels watch on, amused. RVD again points to himself, then climbs the turnbuckles and continues.

"Medal" kicks up as Kurt Angle joins his teammates, WWE Title belt around his waist. He waits at the top of the stage and points upward as red, white, and blue pyro goes off. He then heads to the ring while the crowd playfully lets him know he sucks. In the ring, he shakes hands with Cena and RVD before staring directly at Eddie Guerrero and pointing to his belt.

DEAD MAN WALKIN greets the Undertaker as the bell tolls. Undertaker shows up onstage, riding his motorcycle. He slaps his chest and raises his fist in the air, then maneuvers the bike around the Low Rider and does a lap around the ring. He goes to park, but by now there's no room to get back, so he sets the bike up in a corner of ringside, telling a fan to make sure he doesn't come near it. He climbs into the ring and throws his hands in the air again as flashbulbs go off.

"Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" gets the loudest reaction of the night thus far as

Hollywood Hulk Hogan limps out to ringside, playing the air guitar. He walks down the ring as the crowd goes crazy. He gets to the apron as Hendrix declares he's standing next to a mountain, and Hogan chops it down with the edge of his hand. In the ring, he poses to each side, then rips the shirt. He looks directly at Rhyno as all ten men go to separate corners.

Eric Bischoff turned off his stopwatch. "21 minutes 47 seconds." There were cheers and groans as money changed hands. *Some people are so easily amused.*

The Guerreros charge the opposite corner and begin a ten-man fracas that spills out to the outside as Sable and Stephanie scurry away to their respective corners. When the dust clears, RVD and Haas are in the ring. RVD kicks away at Haas in the corner, landing a spinkick for two. Haas reverses a DDT try into a Northern Lights suplex for two. Shelton is tagged in, and WGTT hit the leapfrog choke, getting Shelton two. Shelton tries to work the leg, but RVD somersaults out and brings in Hogan. Hogan outpunches Shelton and backs him into the corner, where he hits the ten-punch count-along and forehead bite to finish. Shelton quickly stumbles out of the corner and gets slammed by Hogan. Chavo tags himself in and dropkicks Hogan's knee. Chavo tries a spinning toe hold, but Hogan shoves him aside. Eddie distracts the ref while a frustrated Chavo tosses Hogan out over the top rope. Outside, Chavo grabs a chair from a "fan" at ringside (in reality, OVW prospect Chris Divine) and clocks Hogan with it. However, the ref hears the sound and turns in time to see Chavo holding the chair. **He calls for the bell, and Chavo is out.**

Hogan, however, isn't ready to continue, so Angle and RVD jump into the ring and attack WGTT. RVD and Angle do stereo Greco-Roman throws, then Angle takes Sabu's place in the double-team Rolling Thunder. Eventually, Shelton and RVD are the legal men as Hogan makes his way to the corner. Shelton hits a T-Bone suplex to block an RVD superkick. Eddie and Taker tag in, and Taker smirks at Eddie until Eddie slaps the taste out of his mouth and punches away. Taker gets tossed into the ropes, but rebounds with the jumping lariat. He grabs Eddie's arm and preps for Old School, but Rhyno shoves him off. Cena gets in and tosses Eddie with a fallaway slam to keep control as Taker tags RVD back in. Eddie brings in Haas, who punches away at RVD in the corner. His kick, however, is caught, and RVD hits the stepover enzuigiri. With Haas down on the mat, RVD hits a split-legged moonsault for two. Haas low blows RVD, but his attempt at the Haas of Pain is blocked by RVD. RVD then tosses Haas into the corner and hits his shoulderblocks, causing Haas to collapse out of the corner. RVD climbs to the top rope, **and the Five-Star Frog Splash gets the three.** Sable looks like she's about to pass out.

RVD wisely tags out to Cena, then exits the ring. Eddie enters and slugs it out, losing that battle. Cena tosses Eddie into the ropes, but Eddie hits a crossbody on the way out. Eddie rolls to safety in his corner as he taunts to the crowd, clearly torn on who to cheer for. Rhyno enters and pounds away on Cena in the corner, hitting a powerslam for two. Cena reverses a charge into a DDT for two. Cena goes for the F-U, but Rhyno wiggles his way out and clotheslines Cena down. Shelton returns and superkicks Cena for two. Shelton goes up top and hits a legdrop for two. Cena reverses a suplex into one of his own for two. Cena tries the super fallaway slam, but Shelton pounds his back while hoisted up

and drops on him for two. Shelton goes back up top, and pulls out a 450 splash -- something he'd done in OVW but never in the WWE -- **and that ends Cena's night.**

Taker strolls into the ring and soupbones away on Shelton. Old School hits, but gets two. Taker powerslams Shelton for two. Shelton blocks a chokeslam and hits a back suplex for two. Rhyno enters and pounds away at Undertaker. As Rhyno distracts the ref, Eddie enters with the slingshot senton. It gets Rhyno two. Shelton returns and gets a German suplex for two. Eddie enters and goes up, but the frog splash misses. Rhyno and RVD enter, with RVD a house of fire. All three heels bounce around for him off of punches and kicks, with Eddie flying over the top on a particularly nasty shot. RVD knocks Rhyno down, then goes for Rolling Thunder, but Eddie trips him. RVD heads outside as Rhyno does the same thing. RVD chases Eddie, which means he runs right into a GORE GORE GORE from Rhyno. Everyone returns to the ring but RVD, **who is unconscious and counted out.** Sable breathes a sigh of relief and adjusts her outfit, which appears to be slipping a little.

Hogan enters and punches away at Rhyno, then rakes his back. He goes for a slam, but that fails. Rhyno pounds him down from the UFC position, then taunts the crowd. Eddie comes in and goes for the Gory Special, spinning Hogan down for two. A back suplex gets two. Eddie chokes Hogan down, then hits the chinlock. Hogan tries to power up, but Eddie turns it into a bulldog. Shelton enters and superkicks Hogan for two. A clothesline gets two. A belly-to-belly slam gets two. Shelton gets frustrated, then pulls the straps down. He slams Hogan in the corner, then goes up top for another 450. This time, however, he under-rotates -- just enough for his face to hit Hogan's boot. Shelton staggers around the ring as Hogan gets to one knee, his eyes alight and his muscles bulging. Shelton tries to punch him down, but it has no effect as Hogan gets to his feet. One more punch, and Hogan points at Shelton. Shelton's next punch is blocked, and Hogan lands three right jabs to Shelton's temple. He throws Shelton into the ropes and boots him down. After signalling to the crowd, he runs the ropes and drops the leg. **The three-count is a mere formality, and Shelton is gone.**

Rhyno and Eddie look at each other as Hogan points in their direction. Each seems to be saying, "YOU go in!" Finally, Eddie sneaks into the ring and stares at Hogan. Hogan goes for the big punch, but Eddie blocks. Eddie begins to kick away at Hogan, doubling him over. Eddie hits the rolling vertical suplexes, then hits a legdrop of his own for two. Eddie goes outside and gets the slingshot senton, but that only gets two. Hogan goes back into his routine, shrugging off punches and firing back as he did with Shelton. The big boot sends Eddie near the corner of the ring. Hogan runs the length of the ring and jumps for the legdrop, but Eddie escapes, then grabs Hogan's legs. He pulls Hogan from the outside into the ringpost. Eddie then waits outside as Hogan crawls to the center of the ring. Eddie climbs to the top rope and slaps his chest. He dives off and hits an unsuspecting Hogan with the frog splash, **pinning him and stunning the crowd.**

Taker enters next and pounds on Eddie. He whips Eddie into the ropes and fires out with a tilt-a-whirl slam. He tries a dragon sleeper, but Eddie flips over the top and reverses it. Taker drops to one knee and mule kicks Eddie to break. Taker grabs the goozle and

prepares to chokeslam Eddie, but Eddie "accidentally" catches the ref while flailing away. With the ref down, Rhyno breaks the chokehold, drawing Angle in. Rhyno and Angle clothesline each other down and roll out of the ring. Eddie slips outside as well, fetching the WWE Title belt. He waits for Taker to try to pull him in, then cracks him with the belt. Taker staggers around as Rhyno returns to the ring and waits. As the ref comes to, he sees Rhyno hitting the GORE GORE GORE on Taker. **Rhyno gets the pin**, and Sable smiles as Stephanie seems frustrated. It doesn't last long, as Taker gets to his feet soon after and gives Rhyno the Last Ride. **Angle covers him for the elimination**, leaving Kurt Angle and Eddie Guerrero to decide Sable's fate.

The two men stare each other down and begin a hold and counterhold sequence. It ends with Angle nearly landing the anklelock, but Eddie breaks. Eddie clotheslines Angle to the outside and follows him with a tope off the turnbuckle. Both men battle around the ring, each taking a headlong trip into Taker's bike. Back in the ring (and with double bleeding), Eddie punches away at Angle, then hits a monkey flip. A tornado DDT gets two. Eddie gets a gutwrench suplex for two. Angle blocks a vertical suplex into an Angle Slam, but is too tired to capitalize immediately and can only get two. Angle goes for a legbar, but Eddie rolls Angle up as he bends down, getting two. Eddie gets a back body drop, then holds the Gory Special for a full minute as Angle screams and squirms. Finally, Eddie drops Angle into the ropes and covers for two before Angle's foot makes the ropes. Eddie goes up top and tries the frog splash, but Angle lifts his knees. Angle gets the rolling Germans, but the third one is blocked into a snapmare and dropkick to the back of the head. Eddie scrapes his boot on Angle's face and covers for two. Eddie tosses Angle into the ropes, but his rana attempt is caught by Angle into the ankle lock. Eddie inches to the ropes, only to be pulled away. He tries a second time, and this time Sable tries to help, but Stephanie runs over and slaps her away. Sable runs under the ring and Stephanie follows. Back in the ring, Angle moves Eddie to the far side of the ropes this time, and Eddie makes it halfway across the ring **before finally conceding defeat**.

RATING: \*\*3/4

As Angle's music plays, Stephanie emerges from beneath the ring with Sable's outfit. The announcers speculate on what this means for Sable while Angle peers under the ring and gives a double-take. Eventually, RVD and Cena return and head under the ring as well. They re-emerge carrying Sable, who is frantically clutching a blanket to her body. They stand her up as Stephanie approaches with a mic. Sable is too busy panicking and holding the blanket up. "Sable," Stephanie says, "allow me to do what my Dad made famous. YOU'RE FIRED!" Sable walks slowly to the back, but Stephanie adds one last insult by ripping the blanket away, exposing all of Sable to the PPV audience as she's too shocked to block the view. After about 5 seconds of focusing on Sable's body, the camera goes to a house show ad.

The RAW locker room gave a standing ovation to the debut of full nudity on Pay-Per-View. Shawn walked out of the room, disgusted, soon followed by the six people in the Elimination Chamber. I turned to D-Von and signalled that we should leave as well.

Sable was walking around casually backstage, not even bothering to cover herself. Gail emerged to wish Nora good luck, but not before giving Sable the lookover. *I don't*

*blame her -- this is certainly a golden opportunity.* Shawn, meanwhile, walked straight to Vince. "What was with that?"

"With what?"

"Did you have to put nudity on our show? Was it really that necessary?"

"Hey, she was fine with it. I want to know why you're not."

"Because it's unnecessary, unethical, and just plain pointless! She's just been fired and humiliated -- what's the point?"

"Hey -- she wanted to leave the WWE with a bang. I think she did."

I caught up with Shawn. "Hey -- you can talk about this later. Let's catch the main event."

Shawn's eyes never left Vince as they seemed to be scorning him. "Yeah," he finally said, "I'll talk to you later."

The Elimination Chamber slowly lowers as "Harder to Breathe" plays. Lilian Garcia explains the rules of the chamber for those who weren't around the last time. JR and Lawler talk about how dangerous and unforgiving the Chamber is, and about how they fear for the safety of all six individuals.

A Limp Bizkit remix of Tom Jones' "She's a Lady" plays as the crowd turns to the entrance, uncertain what to expect. Molly Holly emerges, garnering a nice reaction. She slowly climbs the steps and enters the Chamber, looking at all four pods in turn. Her eyes carry a fear, much stronger than Dinsmore's had been earlier.

"At Last" plays as a shower of sparks falls from the ceiling. Christian emerges, arrogant as ever and mocking the crowd. He circles ringside, seeing the chair Chavo had used in the previous match. He picks it up and carries it in with him to the Chamber, only to have Earl Hebner tell him to get rid of it. Christian shrugs and tosses it aside to the metal walkway outside the ring, causing a clanging as it lands.

"Well It's the Big Show" is heard over the PA system. After the pyro explodes, Big Show saunters to the ring. He gets into the Chamber and does the Chokeslam signal. He then walks over to the largest pod and gets inside.

"Can You Dig It Sucka" asks the PA as the crowd comes to their feet. Booker T appears on the stage, staring at his hand. He shakes his head first no, then yes, then raises the roof, setting off the pyro. He heads to the Chamber and repeats the roof raising as the crowd joins in.

Our Lady Peace plays next, as Chris Benoit arrives wearing the World Title belt. He stretches his arms out as he walks to the ring, then raises his arms upon entering the Chamber. He and Booker T shake hands, then head to separate pods.

Pyro goes off as the stage goes red. "Soul Chemical" plays and Kane emerges, towel over the head and eyes a bright white. He steps into the Chamber as Molly and Christian hide behind different pods. He raises his arms, then drops them, setting off pyro on all four Chamber tops. He slowly walks to the last Chamber and shuts himself in, leaving Molly

and Christian to begin.

They lock up, and Christian grabs a headlock. Molly shoves him off, but Christian lowers a shoulderblock. Christian grabs an armbar as Molly fights to her feet. She reverses with a twisting arm wrench, flooring Christian. Christian gets back up and stares at her, as Molly seems a bit claustrophobic. Christian locks up with her again and backs her into Benoit's chamber. Christian tries to punch her face, but Molly ducks and Christian hits the glass. Molly gets a series of armdrags, causing Christian to bail for the sidelines. Molly follows him out, but Christian regains control. An attempt to send Molly into the cage is blocked and reversed, and Christian is busted open. Molly follows Christian back in and delivers a rana for two. A sunset flip gets two as the two get a pinfall-reversal sequence that continues until Big Show enters.

As Big Show's pod lights up, Molly scrambles for cover. Show grabs her hair and flings her into his abandoned pod, then boots her a few times. Christian jumps Show from behind and applies a sleeper, but Show simply backs him into Booker's pod. Booker shakes his fist from inside the pod as Christian falls to a legdrop for two. Show picks Christian up, only to get hit with a low blow from Molly. Show turns to face her, then laughs at her. "You wanna play?" he yells as he picks Molly up and gorilla presses her into the cage. Show then stomps on her as she lies on the metal floor until Christian drops Show's throat over the top rope. Molly rolls back in and seeks security, while Big Show boots Christian down. Show whips Molly into the ropes, then drives a knee into her gut. Show tosses Molly again, but this time Earl Hebner and Molly collide and both are down. As Show laughs and taunts Molly, Christian finds the chair he discarded earlier and cracks Big Show over the head with it. He tosses the chair aside as Show is staggered, while Molly climbs a Chamber. Molly crosses herself, then flips forward, hitting a Molly-Go-Round from the Chamber onto Show. **Hebner and the entire crowd count three.** Molly celebrates, only to get caught from behind by Christian in the Unprettier. **Just like that, Molly is gone too.** Christian rests in the center of the ring until Booker T's pod lights up.

Booker unloads on Christian with chops and punches, then flattens him with a clothesline. He measures Christian, gets on his tiptoes, and drops the knee for two. Booker continues to chop away, then slams Christian for two. Christian gets a low blow, then hits a reverse DDT for two. He tries to walk the ropes, but Booker crotches him. Booker then suplexes him back in for two. Booker goes to the ropes himself and dives in a Houston Hangover, but Christian rolls away. Christian slams Booker for two. Christian gets a series of elbowdrops, then backs Booker into Benoit's chamber and chops him. Booker reverses and chops away himself, then whips Christian corner-to-corner. Coming out of the third corner, Christian gets back body dropped. Booker waits for Christian to pull himself up, then gets the scissor kick. He stares at Christian on the ground, then at his hand as the crowd gets the flashbulbs ready. He hits the Spinaroonie, but as he stands up, Benoit's chamber opens.

Benoit darts out and immediately clotheslines Booker down. Benoit adds to the chopfest by unloading on Christian. Booker grabs Benoit from behind and hits a German suplex

for two. Christian double-clotheslines Booker and Benoit. He tries an Unprettier on Benoit, but Benoit shoves off and goes for the Crossface. Christian blocks as Booker drops a leg on both men. Benoit gets up and stares at Booker, allowing Christian to roll him up for two. Booker grabs Christian in a headlock, but Benoit chops at the wide open Booker to break. Christian heads out of bounds as Benoit grabs an armbar. Booker gets to his feet, allowing Christian to hit a springboard dropkick. Benoit takes advantage and covers for two. Christian charges Benoit, but gets caught in the rolling Germans, with Benoit going for the fourth one when Booker axe kicks both men down. He climbs to the top rope, but the big splash hits Benoit's knees. Christian covers for two. Booker slowly gets up and pounds away at Benoit, but before Christian can join in, Kane is let out.

The participants pair off, Kane with Benoit and Booker with Christian. Booker fights Christian back to what was Big Show's chamber, and Benoit slams the door behind them, forcing both men to fight in a cramped space. Meanwhile, Kane punches away at Benoit, taking him down with a clothesline. He climbs atop the Chamber and hits another clothesline to Benoit as Booker and Christian fall out underneath him. Kane grabs Benoit for the chokeslam, but Benoit grabs the arm and gets a Crossface. Kane merely stands up and falls back on Benoit. Meanwhile, Christian gets thrown into the ropes. He ducks a Booker clothesline, but on the second try, Booker **nails the Book End and gets the three**. Kane stares a hole in Booker and abandons Benoit. He grabs Booker and throws him into Kane's Chamber, shattering the glass. **Booker is dragged out and pinned easily**. Benoit stares at Kane and chops him down repeatedly. He hits a snap suplex on Kane, then a lightning legdrop. He covers for two. He goes to the top rope and springboards off with the headbutt, but that only gets two. Benoit argues the count with the referee as Kane appears to have something in his hand. Benoit returns his attention to Kane. Suddenly, Kane spins around and tosses a fireball in Benoit's face. Benoit falls to the ground, screaming in pain. Kane picks him up and powerbombs him square in the center of the ring, **getting the three-count and the World Title**. RATING: \*\*3/4

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Sunday, November 16, 2003, 09:58 PM  
Dallas, TX

Nora slowly made her way back to the RAW locker room for the post-show talk. She sat down next to Gail, clutching her Women's title closer to her chest than ever before. As she sat, I saw something I couldn't believe. Her eye was swollen.

I wasn't the only one to notice. Gail leaned over and seemed to be trying to determine the cause of the injury. Benoit looked on in concern, his face contorted as if trying to decipher a puzzle. Big Show seemed to be getting tears in his eyes, while Christian gave him a withering glance. Unfortunately, there was no time for concern.

Eric Bischoff and Steve Austin had taken their places at the front of the room, ready to address the crowd. Austin was shaking his head, while Eric seemed slow to get up, hurting from the shots he took out there that night. Eric spoke first.

"Gentlemen, things did not go well tonight. I've seen bad events, and this wasn't bad, but... we can do a lot better. You and I both know that we are capable of an

outstanding effort at Armageddon, and the time for preparation begins now. Each of you has a chance to be left off the card based on the next few weeks. I don't care if we have to shuffle the whole lineup. I will not have a wasted effort like that. People were blowing their cues left and right. Not once, but twice, we had to re-arrange a match because of people making errors. I won't stand for that. We can do better."

There was some murmuring and a few heads turned my way. I stood up. "I just wanna say right now that what happened out there in my match is my responsibility. A lot of people are upset that the thing was a bad match... well, I can say that because I screwed up, everyone was flying blind, and that huge gap in the middle... it's my fault, guys. Sorry."

Amy stood up too. "Yeah, and... I don't know what happened up there. I know it's no big deal to some people, but, you know, I just don't want to let people down. I tried, and... I thought I could get through tonight. I guess I really couldn't, and... I put a lot of people in a bad... a... oh no..."

She raced out of the room. We all sat in silence as we heard her footsteps turn down the hall. Austin finally broke the silence. "Well, I... I guess if we're all done making each other's feelings better, there's somethin' else I wanna talk about. Poor Nora over here can't see out of her eye. That's a damn shame. I hope it was an accident, and I hope it came about in the ring. I'm gonna be studying the tape very carefully, and if I don't find evidence that this was caused by a bad shot in the ring, I'm gonna be one pissed-off SOB. I know what beatin' up a woman can do -- an' I'll be damned if anyone does it around here."

All eyes turned to Big Show -- well, all except mine. I looked at the people looking at him as he tried to speak. Christian's glance seemed the most furious, as if he knew the real story but felt an obligation not to speak and could only hope Show came clean. Nora seemed indifferent, unsure whom to believe. Darren smiled. Benoit shook his head, almost pitying rather than condemning.

"Nora, I..." Show began. "I don't know when it happened, but... I was treating you the way I treat most guys. I just... sometimes I don't know my own strength. You gotta believe me. I was trying to... to be a monster out there, and I just went overboard. I don't know how it happened. I don't know when it happened. But I'm sure I did it... can you... forgive me?"

"Sure," she replied, attempting to end the conversation.

"All right... that's settled then. Now, I don't want any trouble around here. I don't wanna hear anyone whinin' and bitchin' about how we got our asses kicked out there by SmackDown. We got our shot to show them up at Armageddon. I wanna see full out effort, or I might just have to whup all your asses up and down Texas. Am I clear?"

The locker room shouted in agreement.

"All right... now we got 20 or so hours to turn this bad ass around in Hidalgo. I want all your asses to report for duty tomorrow at 10 AM. I am demanding the best of the best out of all of you. I don't give a rat's ass whether you're first match on Heat or starting at 10:55. You will come ready to fight. Anything you wanna add, Eric?"

"Not at all."

"Good. Now troop dismissed. Look for me at the bar."

We all got up and left for our lockers. As I headed for the door, Christian stopped me. "Hey, man... I saw you were just outside the locker room while Regal and I talked.

You hear anything?"

"Yeah. I heard him asking you -- no, telling you -- to rough her up."

"Not quite what he said, but I get the feeling... like he wanted to send her a message about her place in the locker room. She's not even that big a deal, man. I don't get it. Anyway, I wanna talk to him about it, and I want some backup. You and D-Von gonna be there?"

"I will. I'll check with him."

"All right, I'll be right here."

I turned and looked for D-Von. He was already packing up his stuff, including both pairs of glasses. I got his attention. "Christian wants us to follow him. He's got a bone to pick with Darren. This might be our chance to get him to help us."

"Help us? With what?"

"Getting even."

"What are you... oh, come on. You know we can't tell. Look, we just gotta go with what he does. I'll be there, but you gotta remember -- this ain't no time for a vendetta. Our target is Vince, not Darren."

"Our job is to make the world better. I want him to stop."

"Fine... but now ain't the time for that. Let's just listen."

We high-fived, then returned to Christian. "Let's go."

"Right." He walked down the hall to the RAW booking committee's office for the night. We stood by as Christian knocked on the door. Gerwitz answered.

"Is something wrong?"

"I wanna talk to Regal. Now."

Regal's voice appeared from behind the door. "Can I help someone?" He walked to the doorway. "Oh, hello there, Christian. What can I do for you?"

"Step outside. This is personal."

Regal walked out the door and closed it behind him. "If it's personal, why are these two gentlemen here?"

"On my invitation. See, what I'm about to say may upset you, and I don't trust you right now. So I'm bringing backup. That out of the way, I didn't like what happened out there."

"What do you mean? Out where?"

"You ordered us to treat Nora roughly. You didn't say those words, but you didn't want us pulling punches or anything. I wanna know why. Why should you give us special instructions? Didn't you trust us to put on a good match anyway?"

"Of course you put on a good match, but... but I thought if you worried about her, the whole thing would look fake. I wanted you to rest assured."

"I am resting assured. I always was. But you mentioned more. Something about paying dues and not making us look bad. About there being a gap between women and men? Why would you hold yourself back? This is your work. I'd think you'd want us to be protective."

"Christian, please. I'm only trying to establish the proper pecking order of things. If you want to be seen as someone who got defeated by a girl, you can go right ahead. It's not my career that'll be flushed down the toilet when it happens."

"Oh, come on, Regal. One loss doesn't kill anyone."

"The bloody hell it doesn't! Would you want to be thought of as the guy who

faced some chick and lost? I know her. She's completely harmless. She can't do anything. She barely has credibility as the Women's champion. But... I'm under orders to a certain extent. I'm just saying that their place in the locker room is beneath the men. What'll you do about it?"

"I'll tell you just what I'll do," shouted Christian, now getting in Regal's face. I couldn't hear either man, but both were quite angry. Regal kept throwing out words that indicated he had no respect for women, and Christian seemed to have equally little respect for him. Suddenly, Christian shoved Regal. *That's our cue.*

I grabbed Darren and D-Von grabbed Christian. We held them apart, with the two still shouting at full force. Regal kept trying to break loose from my grasp as I held his arms behind him. Suddenly, my arm went numb -- Bubba's nerve problem was acting up. Darren got free, then turned attacked Christian as we tried to pull him off. A host of WWE stars heard the ruckus and helped.

I stared Darren straight in the face. "Look, you -- I don't care what your ideas are on Nora or any of the women. You will NOT hurt them. I KNOW you had Paul beat her up, and I SAW you have him take the fall. But I know, and he knows, just what the truth is. So shape up, asshole -- or I'll get you next."

"The fuck you will," he replied, then kicked me in the leg. A solid shot to the face knocked me over. I kicked back at him as he tried to jump on me, and soon people were separating us. Vince McMahon walked around, his eyes wide. "What the hell is this? Break it up! I want a full report of this tomorrow morning. Save it for the ring, boys!"

D-Von grabbed my arm. "C'mon," he said. "Let's go."

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That night, I prayed. Well, more accurately, I gave God a piece of my mind, if He was willing to take it.

"God, I... I know I haven't asked for much before. But I'm in a bad way right now. I'm messed up. I'm scared. And I... I don't know what to say. This whole month -- these past few weeks... So much has happened. And I've let it happen. I let Christian get hurt today. I let Nora... and Kathleen... I'm just not good anymore, am I? I tried, I really did. But... I don't know if I can handle it.

I'm losing. I'm losing it for You. I'm worthless. I'd take myself out, but I'm never alone. Maybe I need a new assignment or a new... a week recovering. No, that wouldn't do it. I'd just fail again, wouldn't I?

Well, they say You'd be here for me. Where are you? Where's the strength when I need it? What's Your plan? Is my screwing up a part of some vast goal? Is there a light at the end of this tunnel? Or am I just gonna be worthless. If that's why I'm here, why didn't I live?

I thought You cared. I thought You had a plan. I thought You could show me what all this suffering would lead to. Why do I suffer? Why do You make me suffer? Are You jealous that somehow I died instantly? Is that it? No, what am I saying? You don't get jealous. You don't need me. Oh, God, I need you.

I need help."

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Monday, November 17, 2003, 07:00 AM  
Birmingham, AL

I slowly came to. I was lying in a white room. *Oh, no... I'm back in Heaven, aren't I?* I looked around. I was in a normal bed, not my own. *Oh, whew. I'm still... wait, I'm still working?* I saw nothing on the ceiling but stucco -- no ceiling fan. *I'm not in Dallas, that's for sure.*

I rolled over on my side and immediately felt a sharp pain in my leg, forcing me to stop. *Man, Darren kicked me hard last night. Wait, it's Monday, so I'm someone new. Am I Christian?* I reached up and flipped on a lightswitch. I looked around again. The windows outside showed no light. I was alone in the room. By the door were various personal items, including an old WCW belt and a pair of crutches.

*Crutches?*

I went to find my glasses, but they weren't evident. *Maybe I was given the week off for re-assignment.* I searched frantically for a mirror, or any reflective surface. Finally I ripped off the covers. I saw why my leg hurt. There was a huge wrap around my left lower leg. In addition, I was somewhat immobilized from the waist down, with both legs pinned by a metal clasp. I stared at my reflection in the clasp.

*No wonder my legs won't move. It's so I don't rip my leg up again.*

I was recovering, not just emotionally, but physically this week. I wouldn't have to worry about being in the ring because I'd be nowhere near the ring. I was an injured Chris Jericho.

# SIXTEENTH WEEK

Monday, November 17, 2003, 12:45 PM  
Birmingham, AL

I was bored. My mobility was shot. My leg was bound up, leaving me unable to walk. My mind was left to wander. The only good thing was that I was left out of the chaos and tumult of everyday WWE life. I could rest. I could do nothing.

And for once, nothing is what I wanted to do. I sat back and took a long nap, thinking of all the damage I wasn't doing, and all the chaos I wasn't starting. I was certain that Shawn and Lindsay didn't need me around anyway. *They're experienced. They can handle this on their own.*

"Mr. Irvine? Your lunch is here."

"Oh, thanks. Just put it over here for now."

*This is more like it. This is how I wish I could always be. In a way, this is how Heaven should be. I mean, I didn't see enough to know what it'll be like, but if it's all harps and singing and stuff like that... how is that Heaven? The best possible existence is spending all day bowing down before another's majesty? It makes no sense.*

*What is Heaven, anyway? It's a place where everyone goes to live eternally happy when they die. It's a place that brings us all together, and where there is no pain, fear, hatred -- just a lot of pure love. And it's God's Home, and we're just His guests -- but we're His welcome guests, right? Or is it my home, too?*

*It can't be my home. I don't have a home. I'm a nomad. I'm a nonentity. I'm not a person. I'm... what am I?*

*What am I?*

*I'm hungry, that's what I am. Better eat the lunch. Man, I can't believe Chris has been here, suffering, for 3 months already. He got hurt around the time I died. The good news for him is he only has 6 months to go. I have an eternity.*

*What does it matter if I return? What does anyone care if I go back? I screwed up Kathleen, I screwed up Nora, and now I'm sure Bubba will feel the wrath. That stupid Darren. Stupid, evil man. Oh, I wish I could get my hands on him. It would be such sweet revenge to take him and...*

*No, no, NO! That would be wrong! That would be evil. I'm not that guy. I know I'm not. But why do I feel like I should be? I don't... get it. I'm angry, but I can't be angry. This week, I have to avoid feeling anything. Cuz feelings lead to actions. And I have no way to recover.*

*Besides, it's not like I can do much. I'm stuck in bed all day. Oh well. At least I get free food.*

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- The SmarK RAW Rant for Nov. 17 / 2003.

- Live from Hidalgo, TX.

- Your hosts are the Tenacious Three.

- Opening sportz entertainment moment: RNN with **Randy Orton**. Highlights from **Evolution's** big win are shown on the "OrTron 1500", complete with their destruction of **Shane McMahon**. His guest is **Big Show**, who seems rather subdued all things considered. His first order of business: he feels humiliated. Orton reminds him (complete with still photos) of the fact that he lost to **Molly Holly** in the Elimination Chamber. Show swears he's gonna make her pay. Okay then. Second thing: the tag titles. He doesn't want them. He says he had inside info from **Eric Bischoff** about the Chamber including all champions, so he grabbed a partner and won them. Now that the match is over, so is his title reign. That's different. **Steve Austin** interrupts and tells Big Show that he's working for one person as only he can. He then declares there will be a tournament for the tag belts, and it'll be double-elimination to be fair. The first 7 teams to sign up will be guaranteed slots; everyone else will be thrown into a lottery, with two lucky people getting the shot. This could be interesting if they think it through. Oh, and he didn't like the finish in the Elimination Chamber, so he's ordering that **Kane** grant **Chris Benoit** a rematch. Both men have the night off, though. That's nice.

- **Booker T** and **Goldust** v. **Triple H** and **Christian**. Oh, joy, another tag match in which Hunter will get all the glory. Faces open up to start, with both heels bailing. Booker tosses Christian back in and chops away at him for two. Goldust gets a butt butt and sliding punch, but Hunter USES THE KNEE on a cheapshot and Goldust is your freak-in-peril. See how it works? Christian with a reverse DDT for two. HHH hits a kneesmash and MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER for two. Booker blocks the Pedigree attempt with an axe kick, false tag to Booker. Christian uses a beltshot to get Hunter two. Christian in, and a snap suplex gets two. Unprettier is shoved off, powerslam connects, real hot tag to Booker. Kneedrop on Christian gets two. Scissors kick and Spinaroonie, but HHH cuts him off with a knee to the face. HHH gets Shattered Dreams from Goldust while **Eric Bischoff**, on the outside, harasses **Terri**. Goldust heads out to protest, while HHH and Christian score with a Con-Chair-To on Booker, but Goldust dives back in to save. Christian tries a second chairshot, but Booker ducks and HHH takes it, getting rolled up by Goldust (!) for the pin (!! ) cleanly (!!!) at 8:43. So Trips not only takes a Shattered Dreams, he agrees to do the job? I guess **Stephanie** will be feeling \_his\_ oats tonight. Oh, TAG. \*3/4

- Meanwhile, **3 Live Kru** sign up for the tournament and look over the list of people they can meet. They put their name against **La Resistance**, figuring they'll flee at the first sign of conflict. Nyuk nyuk. **Shawn Michaels** passes by, and we find out it's time for his announcement. Well, it will be after this commercial break. Let's hope we don't miss it, you know? He might get to the ring too soon.

- Oh, thank heaven, he timed it just right. I was worried there for a second. So **Shawn Michaels** takes the mic and proclaims that he's been missing for a while from the ring. That's it? Oh, wait, there's more. He says he wants to get back in the ring, but not just for anyone. He has one specific opponent in mind, and he's offering an invitation to that man to join him at WrestleMania. Wow, we're thinking down the road, aren't we? But before we can learn who that is, HBK's music starts up again, and... another HBK comes out? A midget? No, wait, a young version? Ah, I get it... it's **Michael Shane** imitating his uncle.

Well, that's nothing new. He calls him an old man (no comment) and accuses him of hogging the spotlight long after his time was up. I love shoot comments that aren't meant to be shoot comments. HBK tells him to back off, and that he needs to pay his dues like everyone else. Shane says he learned from HBK to start big, and he's gonna start with HBK. Well, if they continue this, I can't imagine either man going over -- HBK is too big a name to feed to someone who doesn't have main event potential, and to have Shane lose his first match would be idiotic. Maybe if Shane gets some work before then it'll be better.

- Elsewhere, **Steve Austin** closes the list and draws the two names, but he doesn't tell us who they are. He then publishes the brackets, which can be seen (as they stood before tonight's matches) [here](#). And with that, he declares the tournament starts... RIGHT NOW!

- First Round: **3 Live Kru** v. **La Resistance**. Hopefully they didn't hear those comments in the back. Big brawl to start (what else is new), and both Frenchmen bump like maniacs. **Killings** with his usual nothing offense, and **Dogg** hits the funky punches. Shaking kneedrop misses, and **Dupree** gets the Prancing Elbow for two. **Grenier** dropkicks Dogg, who enters face-in-peril mode. Snapmare and ground sleeper by Grenier, but Dogg makes the ropes. Dupree gets an atomic drop for two. Right. Shinbreaker gets two. Grenier with a swinging neckbreaker for two. Dupree misses a clothesline, Dogg gets a Thesz Press, hot tag Killings. Punches fly all over the place, and the Kru Kutter gets two before Grenier saves. Dogg gets a piledriver reversed by Grenier, but tries to roll through for the sunset flip. Killings clotheslines Grenier over for two in a move the Rockers did a lot. I like it. Dupree returns and suplexes Dogg over the top, and shenanigans involving the flag get the pin for Grenier at 7:25. Perfectly Acceptable Wrestling. \*\*1/4 The Kru do a 3-on-2 chase-off, and a black guy and a Mexican chasing after two French immigrants is just about the weirdest idea I've ever had to wrap my head around in the WWE.

- First Round: **New Blood** v. **Chris Nowinski and Rodney Mack**. Oh dear. Not even **Teddy Long**, master and ruler of playas everywhere, can save this one. **Conway** opens up a can of whoop-ass on both men, with Mack only half-heartedly selling. He bails, so **Maven** dives in on him. Back in, Nowinski uses the FACEMASK OF DOOM to headbutt Conway down. Maven hits the DROPKICK OF DOOM to stop Nowinski, and the two go into a Tough Enough sequence that fails to interest me. Mack tosses Maven into the corner and works him over, but Maven with some punches to fire back. Conway in, and Nowinski bounces like a pinball for him. Nowinski takes the double-decker belly-to-belly that they introduced at Unforgiven, then the high-low dropkick finishes at 4:45. Nothing going on here. 1/4\*

- First Round: **Dudley Boyz** v. **Right to Censor**. I just realized, we're gonna have all tag matches tonight. Stop me before I get BattleBowl flashbacks. Anyway, short and sweet match here, as the Dudleyz run through their usual set before **Henry** cheapshots **Bubba** to take over before tables are called upon. **Morley** punches away and gets his whip into kneeslash into Russian legsweep combo for two. Moral High Ground (formerly the Money Shot) misses, hot tag **D-Von**. Punching goes on for a while until 3D finishes

Morley at 4:11. Strictly warmup exercises for the Dudleyz. 3/4\*

- And now, **Evolution** is out and talking about how awesome they are. Blah blah blah-UH, and **Eric Bischoff** tells whoever it is to prepare for their funeral. And here they come...

- First Round: **Randy Orton and Batista** v. **Hurricane and Molly Holly**. Man, someone's channelling **Chyna**. Although if **Molly** starts dressing in a black shiny outfit and shooting fireworks from a handheld cannon, I may have to shoot my TV screen. Hurricane opens fire to start, with Orton taking an Overcastle (Buff Blockbuster) for two. Batista enters and no-sells a Hurri-clothesline, then hits one of his own to make him superhero-in-peril. WHAZZUPWIDAT? Orton with Play of the Day for two, and a Flatliner for two. Batista hits the MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER for two. Orton tries a figure-four, but no dice as Hurricane kicks him away. Orton gets a back body drop, then a kneedrop for two. He's learning from the masters, all right. Orton actually has the gall to try KICK WHAM PEDIGREE, but Hurricane fights out of it and gets the Shining Wizard. Hot tag Molly, and you know things are backwards when the hot tag is to Molly. Orton sells a few slaps, then Molly gets a monkey flip for two. She goes up top, but the Molly Go Round is ducked. Batista in, and the SIT OUT POWERBOMB OF SEVERE HORROR gets the pin at 7:06. Not bad at all, really. \*\*1/2 Evolution beats down the faces, but **Goldust** and **Booker T** save, end of show.

The Bottom Line:

Well, they went with putting new guys in the spotlight -- and HHH -- and it seems to be a bit of a mixed bag. Some people are clearly not ready for prime time, but if the tag tournament spawns some good storylines, I'm all for it. And hey, Benoit getting a rematch is A-OK with me.

Still, if SmackDown doesn't do better than this, I'll be really angry.

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Tuesday, November 18, 2003, 02:15 PM  
Birmingham, AL

My cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, Chris, it's Shawn. I was wondering if you could help me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I've been looking for someone, and I wonder if maybe he wandered off the roster to pay you a visit. Know anything about it?"

"Who are you looking for?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know him. He gets around. In fact, I never know where he is from one week to the next."

*He's talking about me.* "Shawn, this is Andy inside Jericho this week. Is this what you wanted to know?"

"Yeah... why didn't you let us know? I was so worried about you. Lindsay's been thinking you left or you went to Hell. She's scared stiff."

"Shawn, don't use 'stiff' and 'Hell' in the same thought. Too many memories."

"Um... okay, I think I understand. Look, I... I just needed to know where you were, that's all. You wanna talk any?"

"Actually... I was kinda hoping to be alone this week. I mean, you're better now that you don't have me holding you back."

There was a pause. "I think we'd better talk. All of us."

"Shawn, there's nothing to talk about. I'm away from the case, and you two can handle things on your own. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that you think you're somehow a liability. You need to stop thinking that right now."

"Why? Because it'll make me feel better?"

"No... because it's wrong. Andy, you... you're a good person, and you've done a lot of good. Everyone will have setbacks. We're fighting a demon, for cryin out loud! This problem won't go away."

"Problem. It's not a problem. At least, it's not one that can't be solved."

"What are you going on about?"

"Shawn, don't you get it? Look at what's happened since I came over here. No, wait, let's just focus on what's happened in the last few weeks. I couldn't save Kathleen from herself. I couldn't save Nora from Darren. And I couldn't save Christian from his anger. What good have I done?"

"How about this: Christian knows that something's wrong now. Your fire -- your defense of Nora -- I just talked to him. He wants to know if I know anything."

"You... you didn't tell him, did you?"

"The truth? No. He wouldn't believe it yet. But I'm telling you right now, he's working on the side of good. That's what we need -- more people willing to take up the cause in life. Saints come in all forms."

"Well, good for him. He can't undo what's been done."

"Andy, how often do I have to tell you -- Darren is responsible. You're not. You fought as well as you could. Don't you understand free will?"

"Yeah, of course I do. But don't YOU understand that we were charged with a mission, and I'm not succeeding in that mission?"

"Andy... there are lots of people who don't do anything to help the world. But Heaven is full of those people, because they helped others. Making one person better can make the world better. You don't have to be Nelson Mandela or Mother Theresa, you know."

"No, I just have to be more than I am. I can't even say I'm only human, because I'm not."

"Andy... it's an expression. I don't expect you or anyone to be perfect. Only one guy was perfect, and they killed Him for setting a good example. Do what you can, Andy. Do what you can. No one's asking for more."

"I am. God is. I can't go back to him and have to tell him I failed. I don't want to have to switch assignments because Vince died and went to Hell."

"Neither do I. I'm hoping some day I'll forget this conversation ever happened, and I'll be attending Vince's rebirth. It would be the greatest thing I could do. But today's

not that day. Now's not that time. And look -- we all fail. You know how many assignments Greg's been a part of? He tells me he doesn't do better than 50/50."

"Doesn't that bother him?"

"No! Andy, we're fighting a losing battle. It's a miracle when we win."

"It's not enough of a miracle. It means nothing... look, suppose Vince beats his demons. Suppose that somehow, some way, we fight the thing out and Vince comes to his senses. Then what? Then I still got decades of doing this. I'm beginning to see why Kathleen wanted out. This isn't fun."

"Andy... it's not meant to be fun. Your reward is coming soon, I can only assure you. Would you rather not exist at all? Because I can tell you right now, neither God nor Satan will allow you to be on the sidelines. That's just not how this battle is fought."

"I'm on them now."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Andy, you're in a better position now than you've ever been."

"Wh... why?"

"Jericho's a locker room leader, even outside the locker room. People talk to him for advice... I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet."

"Oh, damn, that's right... Benoit said he was hoping to talk to the guy... I'll never get out, will I?"

"Do you want out? Do you really want to toss away your duty? Cuz I'm telling you, that's what she did. That's how Kathleen lost."

"Okay, fine, fine, sure. Fine. Look, what can I do? What's... what's the procedure?"

"Just... if people call you, talk to them. Tell them what you think is right. You're not perfect, but... a lot of people see you as a shining example. You... he... Jericho's not one to play politics. He refused to change who he was when it meant a push. And that's why he was given the Highlight Reel. So he could be on TV while nowhere near the main event. Don't you see? You're admired and respected."

"And forgotten."

"What?"

"You think the WWE fans care about him? He... I... the guy hasn't been on TV for three months. I just checked my charts. I won't be back until summer. If then. That's a long time to do nothing. Austin was a no one in his time out. Benoit was a nothing. Edge? Edge who?"

"No, Chris... that's not important. And I guarantee you that if you were to make a special appearance at some time, you'd be remembered. I don't know when it would be, but I know it would be huge. But you're getting off topic. The point isn't what he could be. The point is what he is. You're an advisor. I guarantee you, Christian will call you at least once to talk to you about this. I guarantee you, Trish will see how you're doing. Benoit wants to speak to you. Don't you see... you aren't forgotten."

"Well... no. He's not forgotten."

"Weren't you listening, Andy? I was afraid we lost you. I was afraid we were down to three people. Andy, Lindsay was crying for an hour solid -- all the way to Hidalgo. She was... oh man... you have no idea."

"Oh dear... I... I didn't know. But... why did this happen?"

"Why did what happen?"

"Why was I put aside? I know I asked for time to become a better person, but... I didn't think it would be taken seriously."

"Well, apparently it was."

"Unbelievable. I never would have guessed I meant that much to people. I... Shawn, I don't know what my family's been like. I don't know how my friends felt. I never saw them. I was just plucked out of my existence and into someone else's. Adam's, I think, but that's not important. The thing is... it didn't seem like anyone missed me. But I miss them. I miss my old life. I just wish I could... go back."

"You can't. You can't go back to being a college student any more than I can go back to being one of the Rockers. That's in the past. Life moves on, and it's a damn good thing it does. I wouldn't want to be stuck in 1990 forever."

"Shawn, this isn't funny."

"I'm serious, man. You think I want to be in one year all the time? I might as well be a computer game character, whose life is affected by the flick of a switch on a console. You should be thankful you can move on -- and YOU can decide to move on. Would you want your entire existence dictated by an outside force you never see?"

"Isn't it? I mean--"

"No! Not at all!"

"Hear me out, Shawn. Who decides who I am from week to week? Not me. Who decides when I need Recovery? I don't. What is it that controls how effective I am? Some other guy."

"Andy... look... we're all affected by the decisions of others. We're all subject to God's Eternal Plan -- even the devils. They just don't know it. So listen to me -- you gotta be willing to take what's been given to you and say, well, what's the best thing to do? Lemme try this -- you ever play poker?"

"I... don't gamble."

"But you know the game, right?"

"Yeah, who doesn't?"

"Well, anyway -- your hand is your life. It's what God gives you. Now, some deals you're gonna get a full house. It's easy then. Sometimes, you'll get a jack high. The trick there is to cut your losses. But then there'll be times when you get something in between -- and that's where you gotta think. Right now, you're in between. You're in a position where you might be the best at the table -- people listen to you. Or, someone out there, someone with a more constant voice, will outdraw you. You never know. But what you do know is that you have this hand. You gotta decide what to do with it."

"I think the analogy breaks down. I mean, I could be bluffed out."

"That happens all the time. Andy, I bluffed out Vince all the time way back then. I claimed I could jump to WCW, and he believed it. Truth is, I never wanted to go. I never wanted to be a part of their locker room. But Vince didn't know that, and I got money out of him for it, while staying where I wanted to be. See, you can do that too!"

"How? How can I--"

"Well... remember when we talked to Sting? You told him things would be better. You told him he would get respect. You had the lower hand and he knew it. But guess what -- you talked him into it."

"You don't think Sting will get respect then?"

"Me? I don't know. I don't know Vince. He's not in the mood to talk about it,

either. He's... well, that's not important. The point is, you -- we all have the capability to play our cards right. And sometimes, you just don't know. What seems like a failure at first can become a great play down the line. Life sometimes turns negatives into positives."

"Not for us it doesn't. We deal at too fundamental a level."

"You sure about that? Ask yourself: do you think you'd have lasted this long with Lindsay if you two went at it from the get go? If she didn't have the knowledge of almost dying in her mind? I see -- I saw -- the passion you two have. It's a wonderful thing, but... it could also be dangerous. Just be grateful it didn't go that far."

"No... it only led to Lita cheating on her boyfriend. That's a great thing, isn't it?"

"Andy... don't think so short-sightedly. Amy and Matt are bonding even more over it. Matt forgave her. It's all over. It's in the past. Heck, right now Matt's been keeping a vigil over Amy to make sure she gets healthy. That's dedication."

"That's what he's supposed to do."

"No, what he was supposed to do -- according to everyone I talked to -- he was supposed to dump her. Kick her to the curb. But he didn't. He hasn't. He's better than that. You never know how you'll react until the time comes. But he knows his love is strong. Don't you see?"

"He's all messed up. He lost a brother... that's what keeps them together. Compared to... to that... one indiscretion means nothing."

"You've got it all backwards. Andy, why are you fighting me? I'm trying to help you."

"Why are you helping me?"

"Because you're important to us. You're important to me, and to Lindsay. You know what? I don't forget who I worked with. I don't forget who I see on a regular basis. You better believe Lindsay doesn't. Think about it. You mean something. You can't just rip yourself out of the equation and not expect someone's equilibrium to be thrown. Doesn't that make sense?"

"I... I don't know. I just feel like... like I can't trust you or... anyone."

"Slow down. What do you mean?"

"I pushed Lindsay away, remember? I don't feel as much for her as I used to. Or anyone. It's like I... I'm numb. Something's missing. And I don't know what it'll take."

"Time."

"Why?"

"No, I mean, that's all. Time is what it'll take. You need distance. It's gonna be a little easier for you because... well, you won't be yourself all the time. But... but that won't change things. The fact is, this will never leave you. You may get back to a normal existence, but you'll never forget. The trick is -- are you gonna let this bog you down? Are you gonna say, this happened, I got abused, poor me, pity me, I'm not going to do anything because of it? Or are you gonna get up and fight? Lemme give you a short answer -- we fight on this side of the battle."

"I just wonder sometimes, Shawn. I wonder... what do I do? What do I... how do I do it? What's the point to being an Angel if you can't get through to those who'd harm you? If I can't protect me, who can I protect?"

"Andy... do you think your life is judged by your worst act? Do you think one failure wipes out 100 successes? I'm here to tell you it's the opposite. One success can

wipe out 100 failures. If you're constantly trying -- failure is shrugged off. You know what? We're trying. That counts."

"It won't count for Vince."

"You never know. He might get around to fighting this on his own. He might... you know, I've never been a part of this before, so I don't know. But the fact is, he can be reclaimed. I just feel it. There's gotta be a way. And if he isn't... look at who has been. Success is a funny thing. It can fly under the radar."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"Hurricane. He... he has forgotten all about the pain of Jeff's death. It's not that it doesn't affect him, but... he took the words you said at that funeral to heart. He remembers the star he was. And he has dedicated himself to keeping the memory alive. Or didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"His logo. The left side. The one stick is now a J. JH."

"I... really? I never saw that."

"Most people didn't. But it's his way. He tells me he prays every night for Jeff's acceptance into Heaven. Wherever Jeff is now -- whoever he's working for -- those prayers strengthen him. Don't you see... you did a great thing and you thought it was a nothing."

"Yeah... then he went and screwed Amy."

"For cryin' out loud, Andy, focus! Life isn't hell! Life is the battlefield. You gotta take your victories. And now, I'm telling you, you're in the best position you've ever been in. You have the opportunity to change lives. You are, this week, right now, one of the most charismatic and influential people in the WWE. If you can't do something positive now, maybe you should pack it in. But I'm telling you... don't. Don't pack it in. Because you never know when it'll come around to being right."

"Shawn... what can Jericho do?"

"Listen to Christian. Listen to Trish. Be their guide. Be their... their conscience. You can do that. You essentially are right now, every week, for someone else. Well, now, you're gonna be that way for many people. I'm sorry, but if you were looking for a week off, you lost."

"Dammit. I was afraid of that. So... I'm supposed to be... but... ugh. I'm sorry, Shawn. I just don't know if I can handle it."

"Sure you can. I've seen it. You wouldn't be here if you couldn't handle it. You wouldn't have been Nora if you couldn't handle... what happened. You couldn't have been Hurricane unless you were going to let him cope with Jeff's death. God knows the future - - you don't. There hasn't been a single week where you haven't made an impact. Don't you see that?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah..."

"No. No I don't, Shawn. I don't see myself doing anything important."

"You're not thinking back far enough, are you? Remember the joy you felt as Stacy? I saw it in your eyes. Wasn't that important?"

"But... but I didn't... he did."

"Someone had to say yes. Besides, you got her involved. You got Storm involved. Now Christian's involved. That's three people -- three -- that we have working on helping

Nora. That's impressive. That's a good thing. But it's not just you. Booker T's in on it. Lindsay did that. In fact, all the women are concerned to some extent. Everyone knows Nora needs help, and they all want to help. And that's because you didn't sit back and say, well, Nora looks funny and that's bad. You said, hey, Nora is hurting and I'm getting to the bottom of it. Do you get it now?"

"...kinda. It just seems... I did that? That can't be."

"One person can do a lot. Don't be so surprised. Say, when are visiting hours over there?"

"Um... I don't think there are any. I think it's just... wait, why?"

"Oh, I just thought you might want to see me in person, ya know?"

"Thanks... I guess you can come. I'm just... I don't know anymore."

"Andy, you're fighting your preconceptions. That's good. You have to realize that you're not worthless. You have to realize all the things done to you -- you didn't deserve them, but you can handle them. You can fight them. And you'll be better for it."

"Thanks... um... I'm hungry. I'm gonna go to the cafeteria for some food. You've been a big help, really. I'm sorry I can't do more."

"No... you've done a lot. And I know you'll do a lot again. Just keep the faith, man. God bless you. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks. Goodbye."

I hung up. *What is the measure of a man? Is it what he does or what he doesn't do? Is it how he tries or how he succeeds? Maybe the world is wrong. Maybe I need to fix things up. I have to let go of my earthly notions.*

*I also have to let go of my pain. Life goes on. Even after death.*

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Wednesday, November 19, 2003, 04:03 PM  
Birmingham, AL

"Mr. Irvine, you have visitors."

*Huh? Who would want to see me? "One second." Must be Shawn and Lindsay. I wonder who she is. This is gonna be so weird -- dating someone whose face I can't find in a crowd, whose voice won't be music to my ears... where are those crutches? Man, why couldn't I have found someone to love before I died? I guess that would've been too much to ask. "I'm on my way." Now, lemme see, balance the leg, hop, crutch, hop, crutch... screw it, I'll get in bed. "Okay, send them in."*

I was overwhelmed by a deluge of visitors. It seemed the entire roster was waiting for me, even if it was only a handful. My smile, which had been missing all week, returned. "Guys... this is... wow."

"No need to thank us, Chris. We all miss you. Survivor Series just didn't seem right without you." Benoit's smile showed me he meant every word he said. "We need you back fast. I wish you could be ready by WrestleMania."

"Yeah, me too... but it doesn't look like I will be. This... this is serious, you know."

"Yeah -- it's just a shame we can't all be healthy at once, man. You know, when I came over here, the place -- I mean, they miss you. They miss someone who isn't afraid

to speak out. People here just... whatever, man. That's not important. We're all here."

"Well, not all of you..." I scanned the room. *He's not here.* "Where's the Nose?"

There was laughter. "Oh, Hunter?" Lance asked. "He's off at Stamford with his family. You know how they are... such a close bunch."

I heard someone say the word "screw" in between coughs. Everyone turned to face the source. At this point I heard Christian's voice more clearly. "Oh come on, we're all thinking the same thing."

"Puh-lease." I rolled my eyes. "Last thing I need to think about is those two... ew." I shuddered for added effect. "All right, guys... party on. I guess this room is big enough for the bunch of us. Hey, I'd invite you guys to dinner, but I don't think I have the guest passes."

"It's all right," Trish said. She reached into her cleavage (*Yikes, even to a hospital she dresses like a Diva*) and pulled out a few extras. "You'd be surprised what a little Stratusfying can do."

Everyone laughed. "Trish... you little fox!" Gail was particularly speechless.

"Okay, guys... uh... you know, dinner isn't for an hour, so if you all wanna talk... go ahead."

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5:33 PM

We were all gathered in the dinner hall. Shawn was seated next to me at the head of the table. I made a show of tucking my napkin into my collar and pretending to be nouveau riche at an expensive restaurant. They all loved it.

Gail and Nora were opposite Shawn and on the other side of me. Gail ate heartily, but Nora had a vacant look in her eye. *If I don't find out now, there's nothing I can do.*

"Nora? Are you okay?"

"Yeah -- it's just... I guess I miss him."

"Miss who?"

"Mikey."

"Mikey?"

"Yeah," Shawn said. "You know, the guy who used to be Crash Holly."

"Elroy? Dude, he's doing just fine with that gig in Nashville. You could probably visit him at Stevie's place anyway, right?"

She shot me a dirty look, then ran off from the table. Shawn turned to face me, half shocked and half confused. Gail went to talk to Nora, and I could hear her say "He doesn't know" over and over. Trish walked over to me and put her chair next to mine. My eyes went up and down the table at everyone looking at Nora or me.

"What... was it something I... I said?"

"Chris... didn't you hear?"

"Hear what? I don't use the Net until Saturday."

"Oh... then you don't know."

"Know? What? Trish, what's the..."

"Chris," Shawn interrupted, "he's... he died."

"What? Him? B... but... how? He wasn't a druggie or a... roider... he was just... he

was Crash. He was..."

Trish grabbed my arm. "It was a couple nights ago. We just found out this morning. Steven -- he and Mikey were splitting for rent -- he got home from the Survivor Series and... and just found him. They... they don't know how."

"Oh... oh dear." I grabbed my crutches and hobbled over to Gail and Nora. "Nora... I'm sorry... I didn't know."

She looked up at me through her tears. "No... I understand... he was such a... he was the guy I started with here. I... so much shit going on right now. I'm sorry, I... I shouldn't have said that. I'm... I..." she buried her head on Gail's shoulder.

"Gail... should we leave her alone?"

"No... no, you wouldn't understand. She's got a lot more than this going on. She..." Nora grabbed her arms and stared at her, her blue tear-stained eyes pleading with Gail to stop. "No, Nora... people need to know."

"Gail, please... don't tell them... they'll think I'm... it's all I have."

"Nora, stop it. You gotta let this out. Chris is here to help. He has to know."

"No! You promised me! You said you wouldn't tell anyone!"

"Nora, it's too late for that. I'm in trouble here if I don't tell. I have to do something."

Nora slowly relaxed, almost conceding rather than consenting. "Fine," she finally said. "Tell him. Go ahead and tell him I'm a slut." She walked off.

"Nora, your food..."

"I'm not hungry."

She left the room. By now everyone was looking at us. They heard crying from the outside. Gail turned to the dinner party. "It's all right -- he didn't do anything." She turned back to me. "Chris, it's not you. And Nora's not telling the truth when she says she's a slut. She... well..."

"What? She's what? Is she sleeping around? Is she... oh no..."

"What?"

"Gail... tell me... is she being molested?"

"What makes you think that?"

"What else could it be that would make her think she's a slut when she isn't? If it isn't consensual, and she doesn't want you to tell..."

Gail lowered her head, then reached into her pocket. I saw her pull a compact out. I gasped as she opened it. She looked at me. "What?"

"Oh... I thought it was something else, sorry." *I thought it was that glasses case.*

"Oh, okay." She got out a huge cotton swab and began to rub her eyes. Makeup came off, and I got a close look at her left eye. There was a bruise.

"Gail? What happened to you? And what about her? What's going on?"

"It's all related. Look, while she's outside, I wanna tell everyone. C'mon." We headed back to the table. Gail stood behind me and began to recount the whole story of how it began, what Darren did, and how it affected her and Nora. I saw eyes bulge wide. Stacy and Trish seemed ready to break down. Benoit buried his head in his hands in shame. Christian's eyes burned with a fire that could only be quenched by revenge. I tried to remain calm -- *I've not only heard this before, I've lived it* -- but then I heard something I didn't know.

"He's getting worse. He... last week I prevented him from entering. That's why

Molly was tossed around the way she was -- because Darren had to get to Nora."

"I fucking knew it. Fuck!" Christian shouted. "I'm gonna kill him. I swear I'm--"

"Wait," I said. "We can stop this."

"No, you don't understand, there's more," Gail said slowly. "Yesterday... while everyone was out at the tapings... he wanted to come in. He wanted me to leave. I stopped him. I told him no. But... but he just got madder. He slapped me -- that's how I got this. He tossed me out of the room and closed the door before I knew -- before I could react. I tried to get back in, but he threw the deadbolt. My card was no use. I kept trying to knock the deadbolt out... I heard her scream... I..." she had to sit down. She buried her head in my chest. I tried my best to calm her down, petting her hair as if she were a frightened puppy. I looked at Benoit. Even though Jericho didn't tell him, I did. *I told you so.*

We were all silent. Shawn coughed and pointed with his pinky as he did so. I turned my head slowly, just in time to see the door close. Nora had re-entered. She looked around the table. "I'm sorry, guys. I guess she told you how I'm... I'm sleeping for the title."

We all stared at her. "That's not what she said at all," Lance finally said.

"What does she know? She wasn't there. None of you were. You... look, it's my fault, okay? I did this. I brought this on myself. If I hadn't been so... so smitten with him back then. If I'd just told him to back off. I deserve it. I'm sorry. I'm terrible."

"Nora, no!" I found myself almost on autopilot, as though the words were both mine and not mine, but a plea from a higher source. "Listen to yourself. Can you honestly say you perpetrated the act? The man is sick! He's a predator! And... and you didn't do anything! This isn't the Middle East where women have to dress in black to avoid tempting men. This is America. You have a right to live a normal life, and lemme tell you, this is not normal. He... he doesn't deserve to be within 100 feet of you. He doesn't deserve to be in this company! Guys," I said, turning to the group though still half out of control, "we gotta stop him. We gotta tell Mr. McMahon. He has to know that we won't tolerate this kind of garbage. You got me? You got it?"

There was no response. "Guys? Don't you think that? Anyone? Shawn?"

Shawn merely shook his head. "I don't know if it would do any good. Regal's this close with Triple H. If HHH likes him, he stays. It's that simple."

"It can't be that simple. This is... this is a crime we're talking about, a felony! Vince will have to fire him!"

Shawn looked me straight in the eye. "And what has happened recently to make you think Vince will act in a way that benefits everyone?" *There's a second message there.* I felt a shiver over my body. Shawn turned to the rest. "If I know him... right now he'd... he'd just make this an angle. And he'd make Molly turn heel and fall in love with Regal. You know how he treats women. We gotta go over his head. We gotta go around him."

I sat and thought. "There's nothing I can do. I'm stuck here for another month. I'm sorry, guys. I'm worthless." Then something hit me in the back of my mind. "Wait... wait, that's it! Guys, quick, huddle up."

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08:45 PM

Gail, Nora, and Shawn were the last to leave. They helped me back to my room. As I sat down on the bed, I looked at all of them. "Thanks, guys. I guess I can't do everything alone, can I?"

Nora smiled. "No... thank you. I hope this works. I hope you guys aren't... setting me up. I'm so scared."

"Relax. It's gonna work. It has to."

Gail chimed in, "Yeah... it has to. That's just it, though. It needs to. What if we don't get everything in order? What if... what if the cops don't show up? What if... what if..."

"Relax. It'll all be good in the end. I know it sounds crazy, but... we gotta show we can do something. I'm not letting this maniac ruin any more lives. He's already hurt a bunch of people. It stops now."

Nora reached over and hugged me -- the first outward sign of affection I'd seen from her in ages. "Thank you, Chris. I believe in you." She turned around and faced Gail. "Thank you too. You've been such a help." They hugged. She hugged Shawn too. "You guys have... I hope you're right. I don't know why, but... I can trust you. All of you. It's like you radiate this... oh, it'll sound stupid."

"No, no," Gail said. "Go on."

"Well, you... you all seem to have this aura. Like you're my guardian angels or something. Like, somehow, all this was meant to come out. I don't know why I sense it, but... you know, a couple weeks ago... when you first took me to see the doctor... I felt like I was being guided by a spirit of some sort. And now I feel it in you. It's so corny, isn't it? I mean, guardian angels, spirits guiding people from beyond... no one believes in that stuff, do they?"

Shawn took Nora's hand. "Of course we do. That's what religion is. That's what I believe. I should take you to my church sometime -- you may need the guidance. I know a few other wrestlers I meet up with during the holidays. It might do you good."

Shawn walked off with Nora through the door for a while. "Where'd they go?" I asked.

Gail smiled. "Oh, he'll be back. He just wanted to give me a few minutes with you alone." She sat down next to me and put her arms around me. "You scared me, Andy. I thought you were gone. I thought you gave up."

I slowly raised my hand up her arm and to the side of her face. I looked her in the eyes, trying to avoid the bruise with my sight. "He did this to you?" Lindsay nodded. "I swear on my own grave that I will do everything in my power to stop him."

"Andy... do you still love me?" I was dumbfounded. *What kind of question is that?* "Andy, I... I can't imagine how hard it must be for you to trust anyone... you've been so hard on yourself. I just want you to know I still love you. And I want you to know... if you do to anything to yourself... I will join you. If you can't stay alive for you, do it for me."

"Lindsay, I'm confused. You're not saying you'd let yourself go to Hell because of me, are you?"

"Andy... look, I may have been exaggerating, but the fact is... I thought I lost you. And it hurt. It hurt a lot more than actually losing anyone else. I wanted to skip the whole week. I wanted to walk away. Gail wasn't on RAW because I was a wreck. It isn't until

Shawn called and said he found you that... that I could go on. Andy, you scared me. This was like with Terry. I... you're alive. And you're here. Thank God."

We kissed. She moved her hands around my back. "Hey, wait... Lindsay, not now. I'm touched... I guess... but... I don't wanna be like Terry." I smiled.

"I know." She gave me one last kiss, then slowly moved her hand down my arm, ending so we were holding hands. "See you Monday. I hope you'll be ready."

She waved and walked out the door. *Oh, you damn better believe I will be.*

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Thursday, November 20, 2003, 08:00 PM

Birmingham, AL

As I sat up in bed to get a better view of the TV screen, there was a knock on the door. "Come in," I said. Dr. Andrews, whose face I had become familiar with over the last week, entered the room. "Oh, hi, Doc. Anything I can do for you?"

"No, Mr. Irvine. I'm just here to watch with you. See, a lot of the staff think it's kinda weird that I associate with Vince's employees, since they tend to have bad memories of his dealings with George Zahorian. But really, it's a great honor to be considered the name of choice by the WWE community."

"Oh, great. Well, when this happened, you know, you'd done such great work with Hunter that I thought I'd come here and make sure everything was in order. I mean, when he and Kev returned, they were able to move like they never had before." *Namely, like Tyrannosauruses.*

"Well, thank you, Mr. Irvine. I must say, though, compared to their injuries, yours should be something you won't have as much of a lingering effect from. You should be able to return to your normal self a lot faster."

"Thanks, Doc. Tell me, what got you started in wrestling?"

"Well, basically, it began around the time Austin broke his neck. Vince was absolutely scared that he'd lose his primary asset, and he saw that at the time I was the primary neck surgeon in my field. He asked me what course of action to take, and I advised him that eventually surgery would be necessary. Now, I give Steve all sorts of credit -- he was able to tough it out very well for as long as he did. Much like Kurt, he was going through a lot of pain. However, the time came for him to go under the knife, and he came here for the operation. Everything went well, and after Vince saw Austin back at his old form, I got most of his business."

"You think he'll switch now? I mean, the miracle Dr. Jho performed on Kurt..."

"Dr. Jho's procedure only works in rare cases. I've studied it, and it's an incredibly risky thing. Not even I have the malpractice coverage to attempt that."

"Yeah, but I guess it's the patient's decision, right?"

"Well, Kurt figured he was near the end of the line -- which I honestly don't understand, but there ya go. So he went to someone who promised a miracle cure. Sometimes, they happen, you know."

"So you don't think other people should get that procedure."

"Well," he said, clearly thinking of the right way to phrase this, "it's not quite that. You see, I think you can rest assured that there's some professional jealousy involved

here. Dr. Jho was able to restore Kurt Angle to full health, and about 10 times faster than I could've. I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me. But hey... I guess it's all right in the end. Anyway, we're missing a good match here."

I checked. Rob Van Dam was putting the finishing touches on a victory over Chavo Guerrero. "I guess we are."

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08:45 PM

The show had been an average one so far. Paul Heyman was coming out with Team Japan, who were still undefeated. "Hey, Doc," I said, musing out loud, "How much influence do you think Paul has on SmackDown?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's one of a dozen or so advisors. Basically, while Vince is off camera, the inmates are helping run the asylum, and Stephanie and Paul have a good rapport. So I imagine she listens to him, but the buck stops with her, you know?"

"Yeah, I know... just wondering because, you know, Vince is very much a Wonderbread booker, if you get me."

"How so?"

"Well, look who's out there right now. Tajiri and Ultimo -- two great guys, sure, and Asai and I go way back -- are both Japanese. Vince usually wouldn't give them a second thought."

"Are you saying he's racist?"

"I don't think it's intentional. I don't think he thinks in terms of slurs. I just think he has this image of what white America wants, and he wants to give it to them. I don't think he expected Ultimo to get over with the crowd given the time to work."

"Why is that?"

"I guess he has in his mind a certain..." *Image? Mandate? No, that's not good.* "...style that he expects from everyone. I spent a couple months teaching Yoshi here what it was the fans wanted. It's really come through. I don't think he understands it, mind you, but I think he knows what to do now."

"Ah, I see. Well, good for... wait, who are those guys?"

"I don't know. I've never seen them before. Just a couple of luchas, I guess. Why, what did Paul say they were?"

"Los Max... something. I sure don't recognize them. It'll be interesting to see what they're capable of."

"I'm sure their style will fit well with the Japanese team's. But I'm as curious as you are."

We watched as these two newcomers -- called Los Maximos by Cole -- spent the next 15 minutes doing tornado tag style wrestling that wowed the crowd. Sure, they lost, but it's safe to say they kept their jobs, too. Asai seemed like he was back at home in Toryumon with all the flying going around. Tajiri, oddly enough, was having the hardest time adjusting to the style. When it was all over, Cole declared that it was like nothing he'd seen before.

*Oh, c'mon, the cruisers in WCW did that all the time. On the other hand, if the Spanish announcing team needs an opening, I'm sure these guys will fill in just fine.*

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09:25 PM

I hushed Dr. Andrews. "Doc, I was warned this was coming. It's gonna be great, according to the boys in the back." John Cena had walked into Hulk Hogan's dressing room.

"Can I help you, brother?"

"Yo, the Hollywood legend, I gotta tell it to you straight,  
The way we got rid of Sable on Sunday was great.  
Now we got ourselves a six-man, with Haas and the Shel  
And Eddie Guerrero, who beat you up well."

"Yeah, yeah he did."

"But that's ok, Hogan, cuz when the dust clears  
We'll give them a Texas beating they'll remember for years.  
It was fun on Sunday, and our team proved to be a hit.  
We got Sable fired, and we got to show the world her--"

"Hey, hey, whoa, brother, hold on there.

Well you know something, Cena, I think we got common ground.  
We like to take our opponents, and we'll track 'em like bloodhounds.  
Gonna make them run away from the pythons we got,  
and with Angle in our corner, amigo, they're really on the spot.  
Eddie thinks he's a man for beating me? I'll make him a child.  
I'll boot him, and drop the leg -- I'll make Hulkamania run wild.  
And for Shelton Benjamin and that dude Charlie Haas,  
They'll never get the win over their former Team Angle boss.  
So Beaumont, Texas has to know, boys -- whatcha gonna do  
When the Hulkster, Angle, and C-Dawg run wild on you?"

Cena smiled. "Not bad, old timer."

Dr. Andrews looked at me. "Did I just hear what I think I heard?"

"I'm afraid you did. And it was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Well, it was certainly funny. I mean, I wouldn't want him doing that all the time, but for a one-time basis, I liked it. Then again, even when he's rapping, it sounds like a typical Hogan promo."

We both laughed. *Like Ivory said, an old dog can learn new tricks. Hogan looks like he's never had this much fun.*

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10:03 PM

Unfortunately, Hogan's prediction didn't come true. The World's Greatest Tag Team got the win on Kurt after Hogan and Eddie went to the back. *Strange. I would've picked today for Hogan to get the favor returned. I guess that'll be next week or something.* Cena was his usual charmer until he landed funny on a fallaway slam. Shelton covered for it, but it was clear Cena rang his own bell. "It doesn't look serious," Andrews diagnosed -- even though it was nothing more than a perfunctory evaluation.

"Hey, thanks for being here, Doc. If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know."

"Well, actually, Mr. Irvine, I overheard your friends talking yesterday. I have a few tips, if you don't mind."

"Sure. Any little bit helps."

"Okay -- first, make sure Nora still has some of the notes. I have no idea if she saved them all, but she needs to save next week's. It will be critical evidence. Second, make sure she presents any previous notes she saved to the police. Have Gail go with her when the group reaches Utah. Gail's testimony might be enough to go with the physical evidence and allow you to get a warrant -- which would really make the whole thing unnecessary. Actually, she should probably file charges in Texas -- they tend to be the hardest on criminals, you know?"

"Yeah, I know, but... this isn't about getting revenge, Doc. This is about ending the pain."

"Well, what he's done is reprehensible. He should be punished. You know this."

"Yeah, true... I'll have to think about whether it's a smart idea. I'll call up Gail and Nora and advise them of this. I just hope I can catch them over the weekend. Thanks, Doc."

"Anything I can do to help." He got up and tapped my restraint. "Rest well, Mr. Irvine."

"Oh, please... call me Chris."

"Sorry. It's not my policy. I don't want to play favorites." With that, he left the room. I began dialing up Shawn's cel phone, hoping I could reach him. *Texas. He'd be in Texas right now, I'm sure.*

"Hello?"

"Shawn?"

"Yeah."

"It's Y2J."

"Oh, hi, Chris -- one second, lemme get somewhere where I can take this call... okay, Andy, I'm free. What is it?"

"I just talked to Dr. Andrews. He heard our talk yesterday. He says it would be wise to file the charges in Texas. The assault on Gail should stick, even if the rape doesn't."

"Okay... good idea. But we couldn't get him anyway, could we?"

"Well, if Nora saved the letters -- I know I did -- if she saved all the notes, we got those too. The notes can be the smoking guns, especially that threat he sent."

"Got it. I'll discuss the notes with Nora and Gail tomorrow. They got pulled off the house shows this weekend. Gail's -- well, Lindsay's -- staying with me."

"Shawn, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"If he's convicted of the rape... in Texas... that's not good, is it?"

"Well, why wouldn't it be?"

"Come on, Shawn, you're the one who's lived there all his life. You know what the judicial system is like down there."

"Well, Andy... society has its ways, and God has His. If they give him the chair, that's their business. I wouldn't... but I'm not the DA. So... I guess it's out of our hands. The only thing I can do is pray for leniency. Ultimately, though... it's Nora's call. If she wants him to die, the state will pursue the death penalty."

"Does she?"

"I don't think she's thought that far ahead. I hope she doesn't. But in her state -- I'm not sure she can think clearly anymore. It's... it's hard, Andy. Just let her think. Let her recover."

"I kinda wish we could yank her out. You know, that Recovery would do her so much good."

"Not really. The body and mind would go insane separated from the soul. I'm not saying right away -- we've never tried it before. The Recovery's only supposed to be used for souls that don't belong in the body -- that are extra. Like you."

"How long would someone survive without a soul? Are we... wait a second."

"What?"

"Vince doesn't have a soul, does he?"

"I think he does. Well, he used to. I don't know... maybe that's why people who are possessed act the way they do. I guess there's a difference between a lost soul and no soul."

"So is it too late?"

"I hope not, Andy. I don't think it is. If we can get the demon out, and keep Vince alive, we can save him. It's a tall task. But God will find a way."

*I really hope so.*

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Sunday, November 23, 2003, 01:35 PM  
Birmingham, AL

It was a lonely weekend. While a bunch of people came in and visited me, asking for autographs and the like, it just wasn't the same. They were admirers, sure, but they weren't friends -- at least, they weren't my friends.

I had spent most of the time thinking the plan through. *I need to be someone important next week. There's 8 or 9 people who trust me to get this done. I can't let them down by turning out to be... oh, say, Tommy Dreamer. Not that he's a bad guy, but he wouldn't do anything. I hope my prayers are answered, anyway.*

With nothing left to do on a soggy Sunday afternoon, I closed my eyes and recessed in my thoughts.

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*How did I get here? Oh, yeah, I remember now.* I walked forward. Chris was alone in the corner, half-awake. I began to limp toward him, dragging my leg every other step due to the heavy cast on it. He woke up and looked at me. "Oh, hello."

"Hi. Enjoying the time off?"

"Not really. How much can you enjoy having a week of your existence taken from you?"

"Hey -- at least you can't do anything wrong. And you'll remember everything anyway."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, sorry you have to drag that ugly cast around. Believe me, it wasn't my idea to rip my calf muscle."

"I can imagine. I saw the match. It looked awful. You normally are good at hiding pain, but this..."

"You don't know the half of it. I could barely walk. I felt it go and all I could think of was the pain. If Randy and Kev hadn't been there to bail me out, the whole thing could've been a disaster. I'm just glad I was able to avoid further damage."

"Yeah, but... it really seemed like they didn't know what to do."

"Eh. Randy's a nice kid, but he's too green to be able to call it like that. Kev -- well, Kev doesn't like booking on the fly like that, because he's at his best when he's in a rhythm. Still, he did an awesome job of holding it together. Really, that's all I can ask for."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"You all right, junior? Something's on your mind, isn't it? What's happened?"

"Well, I... the other day, a bunch of people came over to pay you a visit, and... well, something got out. It was pretty bad."

"What's wrong?"

"Molly... she's... I can't even think you'd imagine what it could be."

"Care to tell me? Look, we all know she's been acting strange ever since getting the title. I can see her on TV -- her heart isn't in it as much as it once was. What's wrong?"

"Chris, she... it's Darren."

"Huh? Are they dating? Did he dump her?"

"Worse... he... he's hurting her."

"Wha... what? He's... how?"

"As long as she gives him what he wants, she gets to move up the ladder. But if she refuses or does a bad job, then he makes her lose matches or get stiffed."

"What does he want?"

"Her."

"Wait... he's forcing her to... to let him have sex with her?"

"More than you realize. He's... Chris, you're never gonna believe this, and I understand that, but... he's preying on her. He's taking advantage of her. He's..."

"Okay, okay... I know what you mean. Wow. That's... that's awful. But what can I do about it? Why are you telling me?"

"Because I -- or, rather, you -- set the events in motion to stop it. Hopefully. I want you to know this so that when you get credit for it, you're not trying to say it wasn't your idea. Chris, you're seen as a locker room leader and as a role model. I want you to

know that."

"Well, I figured that much out. But come on, kid. So what if I am? I'm not in the locker room, and I got more important things to worry about."

"Like?"

"Like the fact that I have never seen my family since coming here. I call her every day, but... it's been so hard. My boy... he's two months old, and... I've never gotten to meet him. This hurts me. It hurts me more than my leg does. Can you appreciate what it's like not to be around family?"

"More than you realize. Chris, I... I don't know what to do. I can't exactly ask you to take my place right now. And I don't think it would do any good, anyway. The problem is... well, that's life."

"I know it's life. I know it's... I just miss her. I guess we all have our own crosses to bear, eh?"

"Crosses? You're religious?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm well aware of all the Heaven and Hell stuff. Why do you think HHH doesn't bother me? Why do you think the politics backstage are everyone else's problem and not mine? I'm cool. I'm doing just fine with what I have. Wrestling isn't life -- no matter what anyone says. God is life. Anyway, I should let you get back to being me."

I smiled. "You seem awfully cool with having someone take over your body."

He smiled back. "You would be, too, if you knew it was just another week being alone. I'm not missing anything."

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*He sure isn't. I just kinda wish I could be capable of doing something here. I know I did the right thing when I was with all those visitors. But... something just seems weird. Well, hopefully it'll be another uneventful day. I don't want Chris to regret the timing.*

Any hopes of having an uneventful day were soon dashed, though. The door opened, and in walked a beautiful woman. Her blond hair and blue eyes were perfectly placed around her light skin of her face and neck. Her outfit seemed to glow, and was enhanced whenever she smiled. She carried a little rocker with her, and although all I could see at first were blankets, I knew what -- or, rather, who -- else was there. I could hardly contain my excitement.

"Hi, honey... thank you for coming. This is a wonderful surprise."

"Oh, Chris, you know I said as soon as we could get out of the house we'd come see you. Well, here we are." She leaned over and kissed me. Even though it was Chris and not me she was in love with, I felt a calming force emanating through her lips.

"Teddy, I want you to meet someone," she said as she turned to the rocker. "This is your daddy."

I looked inside at a tiny baby, eight weeks old. The kid was asleep, sucking his thumb. *I doubt he could acknowledge me anyway. Not that it matters -- I've never felt more attached to a stranger than I do now.* "Hey there, junior. C'mon, wake up. Please?" The baby kept right on sleeping. "I guess there's time later. I just hope I can be a good father."

"Chris, I'm sure you'll do just fine. I wouldn't have wanted to share my family life

with you otherwise, would I?"

I smiled. "Thanks." I removed the restraints and attempted to get out of bed. "Hand me the crutches, would you, dear? I want to show you around."

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08:14 PM

We returned to my room, as I hopped over and sat down on the bed. Jessica -- Chris's wife -- sat down next to me. Together we stared in joy and wonder at little Teddy.

"Can you believe it?" I finally asked after ten minutes. "We did this. We brought him into the world. This is wonderful."

"Yeah... so, what do you think of him?"

"He's beautiful. He's... wow. I've never wanted to come back faster than I do now."

"Why?"

"Because I want to live. You don't know how hard it's been, being away from everyone and just focusing on getting better. After a while, you just begin to wonder what your motivation is. It's like a personal hell. But now... now I feel stronger, because I see what I'm fighting for. It's to make his life better. It's to give him a happy and loving home."

She was silent. We both were. I just felt myself embraced by a sign of love -- true love -- even if it wasn't mine. I almost wondered if these two were united. *I don't remember seeing Chris incomplete in there, but then again, was I really looking for it?*

"Chris," she said, finally. "Are we alone?"

"We can be." I got up and, with the help of the crutches, hopped over to the door. I pushed a button, then threw the lock. "There we go. That'll tell them not to disturb me right now. Not that they haven't before. And if there's an emergency, they can always unlock it anyway." I made my way back to the bed. "So, why do you want to be alone?"

She moved in on me and kissed me, setting me on my back on the bed. "Because I miss you." *Ahhhhh, this is why. I hope Chris doesn't get jealous...*

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Monday, November 24, 2003, 07:35 AM  
Salt Lake City, UT

The radio station woke me up to the sounds of Chopin. I slowly rolled out of bed and looked around. *Well, I'm not Jericho anymore, that's for sure. I'm back on the road. Not only that, but apparently I'm all by myself.* I checked the other bed. Sure enough, no one was in there.

I looked at the bedside table. The glasses had migrated back to my side of the bed. *Hopefully, Shawn will be expecting me this time.* I tried to walk over to the mirror, but felt pain in both my knees. I saw knee braces on the other bed. I worked my way over there and put them on.

I was finally able to walk around. I double-checked the mirror. *I wonder if God let*

*me be someone important. One glance revealed that my prayers had been answered.*

*Oh, hell yeah! I'm not just any important guy -- I'm THE important guy. Let's hear it for ol' Stone Cold Steve Austin!*

## SEVENTEENTH WEEK

Monday, November 24, 2003, 12:45 PM  
Salt Lake City, UT

I hobbled down the stairs and past the lobby. *I can't believe I'm this immobile right now. I thought my neck was the biggest problem. Dammit, no wonder he's drunk all the time.* I sat down in the big chair by the entrance as the rest of the people filed by to the buses. I thought of putting my glasses on, but I couldn't hope to hide behind them. *Austin doesn't wear glasses. He wears... actually, my vision's pretty good as it is. I guess that's a requirement.*

"Steve? Are you there?"

I whipped my head around, then instantly regretted turning that quickly from the pain in my upper neck. As soon as I stopped wincing, I saw Nora headed my way. She grabbed me around the chest and gave me a quick hug. "Thank you," she said.

"Hey, don't thank me yet, girl. All I did was talk to Jericho. I ain't sure the plan's gonna work. Hell, I'm still having a hard time believing it all."

"Steve, you have to. Please. Just... just wait and see. I don't want you to come to conclusions."

"Well, that's awful nice for you to be concerned about, but why the sudden change of heart?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean? Last few months you been moping around acting like you wanna go and kill yourself, now you seem like you wanna take on the world. Sit down, girl. You've changed quite a bit, you know that? Now I ain't sayin' that's bad -- in fact, this is the Nora Greenwald I know and love right here -- but what's the difference?"

She looked around, as if to make sure no one was listening in on us. "To be honest, Steve... I don't feel guilty anymore. I don't feel like I... like it's my fault. I guess when everyone knew, when everyone rallied to my side... I could just feel a weight being lifted off of me. It was wonderful. It was... wow. I can't understand it. I guess after you hear it from enough people, you... you believe it."

"Well, that's wonderful, Nora." I moved in to return the hug. However, she squirmed a little and moved away.

"Sorry... I may feel better, but... I'm not gonna be the same. You're just gonna have to deal with... I guess I am too. It's gonna take a long time."

I took a deep breath. "I know what you mean."

"How? This never happened to you!"

"Nora, wait..." *Okay, quick, think... Austin's past... oh, duh.* "Nora, I've been on the other side of the trust issue. You think it's easy? I walk on thin ice of my own doing every time I go home. Debra... she may forgive, bless her heart, but she don't forget. I don't want her to forget. And that means, every time I get upset at home, she's scared of me. And she should be. She can trust me -- I know she will -- but it's gonna take forever. Hell, been 18 months and it still hasn't happened. So I know you're gonna need space, girl -- but if you wanna talk about your troubles, just come to ol' Stone Cold."

She looked at me. "You mean it?"

"Hey... this dog can't fight no more. Well... maybe a little. But he's all bark, and

no bite. Please... I want you to trust someone."

"Well, Steve... don't take this the wrong way, but... I have people I can trust. I have Gail, my... my roommate. I never thought I could trust her, but... I feel a kinship to her now. We're both getting screwed." She chuckled. "And I have Shawn. He took me to his church the other day and introduced me to another wrestler who had a bad past."

"Really? Who?"

"You don't know him. Thing is, the guy went through a lot in his life -- bad father, ugly childhood, you know -- but he was there for me. He saw I was all right. And if I talk to him and Shawn... and of course, the doctor..." She wavered. "Time will heal the scars on my body. I just hope my mind and my soul can heal, too."

"I know you went to the church, but... are you spiritual?"

"Yeah... I was. I hope I will be. But during this whole thing, I... I kinda fell out a little. I was like, 'How could this happen? How could God let me suffer?' I just didn't know. But maybe I had to fall down to get up. In a way, I still don't know why it happened, but I know I've been blaming the wrong people."

"Who did you blame? God?"

"Myself mainly. Like I didn't fight enough. But... when you hear from enough people that you're all right, and they're racing to help you, and they're willing to fight for you... you know, Christian said he wanted to kill him. That meant a ton. He was willing to do something that bad. He was that angry. I just kinda hope I can make people feel that. I'm so confused."

I heard a car horn go off outside. I looked up. Shawn was standing half in his door, glasses on and staring at me. "Oh, sorry, girl, I gotta go. Chin up, ok?"

"Yeah, thanks."

I took off to the car, carrying my luggage behind me. Shawn helped me put it in the trunk. "I hope you didn't say anything stupid to her."

"Relax, Shawn. I had it covered. I called Jericho and asked him about Nora. Then I just told him that as far as anyone knew, he called me. It's all covered."

Shawn thought a while. "All right, I guess so. Sorry, man... I got a bit of a shock when I woke up this morning. There were two sets of glasses in my room. I didn't expect... well, I guess it just didn't hit me."

"What do you mean?"

"Look for yourself inside."

*O...kay...* I made my way over to the front passenger side. "No, no," said Shawn. "Sorry, but you're outranked in my car."

"What? By who?"

As I spoke, a smaller man stuck his head out the window. "By family," said Michael Shane. "Move it, Andy. I got shotgun."

I simply shook my head. *Man, Shawn gets to room with Lindsay this week. Lucky bastard.*

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02:55 PM

"Steve, I'm glad you could be here for this conversation. You see, I wanted to talk

to you about a possible direction we're going with your character, and since you do have creative control, it was important to have you in on it."

"Well, thanks, Vince, but you know there ain't much I'm against as long as I can keep kickin' ass."

"I know, Steve. See, we want to do something special for WrestleMania. We want to provide the people with a match that celebrates twenty years of the greatest sports entertainment extravaganza of all time."

"Well, that's just fine, Vince, but where do I come in?"

"Well, we want to take you off the air for a while. You see--"

"Now, hold on, Vince, hold on. Why would you want ol' Stone Cold to take a back seat? I still get the best results."

"You see, the two general manager thing isn't really working out, so starting next week, Eric will be on his own. We think the interplay between Eric and Stephanie is a lot better, and quite frankly... you don't want to be thought of as a joke. I would've thought this is what you wanted."

"Okay, Vince, I'm listenin'. But what do I do for the next few months, and how does this all fit in with WrestleMania?"

"Steve, it's simple. At WrestleMania, we are having a Showcase of the Immortals Match. Basically, we're going to get a ton of the biggest names we've ever produced, and some of the biggest names in wrestling history, and we're going to have them all together. I don't have the exact details yet, but I do know I want you to be a part of it."

"So, what, you want me in an old-timers match?"

"Steve, the fact remains that with your knees and your neck... you can't go every day. You've told me the road is hell on you. I'm giving you three months' rest and the chance to be on the biggest stage of the game. Isn't this what you want?"

"Yeah, you're right. Tell ya what, Vince -- I'll do it. But I got something I gotta do this week, so how about we make next week the send-off for Stone Cold?"

"Hey, you're on the air this week. You can tell the fans yourself that you're taking time off to prepare for WrestleMania. I'm sure they'll understand."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks, Vince. I think this'll work out well for the both of us."

"I'm sure it will."

"Actually, Vince, there's somethin' I wanna tell ya. Um... it seems that Nora... Molly... she's been getting some rough treatment mixin' it up with the guys. A couple of 'em are under the impression they have to roughhouse with her. Now, I don't wanna see her hurt, so is there somethin' we can do here?"

"Steve... she made her decision to face the men. I was told she wanted this. She's lucky we're keeping the women's title on her all this time. It would be well within my right to take it from her. So I suggest you stick to your business and let me handle the affairs of the WWE. You got that?"

"Fine, Vince. If you say so."

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05:44 PM

As I walked around backstage planning the last-second details of my part of

RAW, I heard a series of shouts from near the entranceway. I headed in that direction to discover Lance Storm, irate and having to be restrained. Opposite him was a much younger kid, decked out in a bright yellow costume. The two sides were having words. I stormed between them.

"Hey, now, just wait a goddamn minute here! What the hell is going on here?"

"This punk," Lance sputtered out, "he wasn't playing ball out there."

"Hey, I'm here to get a job," the recently-labelled punk yelled back. "I'm here to work. What's your reason?"

"I'm here because I have a job. You should consider yourself lucky you were allowed here."

"And you should consider yourself lucky you got to face me instead of being sent home, you boring piece of..."

"Hey, hey, whoa, enough. Enough! Lance, I'll talk to you later. Son," I said, turning to the other guy, "I wanna talk to you right now. The rest of ya, get in the back and get ready for tonight."

The crowd dispersed. I took the young wrestler aside and spoke in a calm voice. "Now, kid..."

"Don't call me that."

"How old are you?"

"19."

"Then you're a kid. Listen... I know this is a big opportunity for ya. You probably got all your friends and your family out there, hoping for you to do well. But ya know what? You can't try to go into business for yourself. Now what exactly happened out there?"

"Nothing. That guy just didn't let me show off my talent."

"Kid, do you really think you're here to show off your talent? You're here to see if you're a company man. Hell, we all gotta kiss ass sometimes. We all gotta look at the lights. That's the way it is. You should know that."

"Not for me, it isn't. I'm my group's champion. I'm the best wrestler I've ever seen. That Storm guy? He couldn't keep up with me out there. He's yesterday. I'm tomorrow. For that matter, you're yesterday."

"Oh, come on, son. Treat me with a little respect. Don't ya know I could help you get a job with the WWE?"

"Fuck the WWE. I've got my own group, and we'll take you down. Just wait."

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe you will, but not with an attitude like that. Now listen... what's your name, anyway?"

"Jeff."

"Okay, Jeff. Pay attention. You wanna be something around here, you gotta know how to get along. I don't see that in you. In fact, your references ain't exactly the best, you know? They talk about you gettin' in fights and drinkin' and stuff. That's what got me in trouble, son."

"They're just jealous. They just want to keep me so I can take them to the top. Don't you see that? I'm better than them. I'm better than the WWE, too. You should be begging me for a job."

"Can it, kid. I hold the key to you gettin' hired around here. Now do you want my help or not?"

"I don't need your help. They all saw what I was capable of. They'll come knocking down my door."

"Not with an attitude like that, they won't. Now, are you gonna shape up? Do you really want to be a star? Or are you just gonna be one of those guys in a bar at age 40 talking about what you might have been able to do? I suggest you get your ass in line right now. You hear me?"

"Hear this, asshole!" He took a swing at me. I casually caught his fist and stared at him.

"Wrong answer, Jeff," I said with a deadly seriousness. "Now before I have you arrested, I suggest you take one of two options: shape up or ship out. You got me? Either way, take off that stupid outfit. You look like a goddamn Christmas tree ornament."

Jeff looked at me. I stared back. His eyes burned a bright green. Finally, after almost a full minute, he stormed off in the other direction. As he did, the fireworks for Heat went off. He walked into the locker room. I followed to watch.

He very forcefully packed his bags as the rest of the locker room looked at him with a condescending and wary glance. He turned around when he was done and flipped off everyone. Finally, he stormed out of the locker room. "You'll regret your decision, old-timer," he said before heading off into the night.

Lance walked up next to me. "What's with that kid? Most people would at least be deferential."

"I dunno, Lance. I guess he thinks he's wrestling's golden boy. C'mon, let's go watch Heat."

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Monday, November 24, 2003, 07:00 PM  
Salt Lake City, UT

The fireworks went off out in the arena. I stayed back, waiting for my cue. For whatever reason, the nervousness of Stone Cold realizing his career was almost over was catching up with me. I thought back. *It's only been four months for me. Four long, lonely months, with no one but a handful of people to sympathize with. I've been half-destroyed, used, abused, loved, hated, scared, scarred, and just about everything in between. I've lived more since I died than before it. But I wouldn't trade it in for my life at all.*

*But that's me. This is Austin. He's been living this personal hell for 13 years. He's been trying to get to the top, stay on top, get right, get bright, and everything in between. Now he's coming to grips with the fact that Vince McMahon thinks he'd be better off as a special attraction. I cannot imagine -- I cannot begin to imagine -- how hard it must be to face your retirement.*

"Steve? Can I ask you something?" It was Nora again. "Do you think our plan will work?"

"Shhhh!" I got close to her and whispered. "You wanna blow it? Darren might hear ya."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so stupid. I can't believe I... I'm sorry."

"Nora, wait... c'mon, what's the big deal? You were so happy this morning."

"Yeah, I know... I'm just nervous. I mean, if something goes wrong... then I... I..."

oh God..." she sat down and curled up into a ball. I squatted down as far as Austin's rickety knees would let me.

"Nora... c'mon... you can do this. We're all behind you. This ain't a setup. We're all honest people. Can't you trust Gail? Lance? Christian? Trish? Stacy? Me? Aren't we worth it?"

"I... yeah... I'm just scared. I... I don't want it to happen again. I'm sorry."

"Nora, girl, just... just relax. You got a match tonight. It's all right. You got a big deal. Just go out there tonight, and fire up the crowd, and make them want to be you. And if you can't do it for me... do it for Mikey, all right?"

She stared into my eyes as tears formed. "All right. I'll do it for Mikey. I guess."

"That's my girl. Now, c'mon... you got a big night tonight."

I went to help her up, but she refused. She stood up on her own and walked to the Diva locker room. I waited for my cue from Kevin Dunn. In the ring, Randy Orton was holding court with RNN, and Michael Shane was his guest. *Come on, Stone Cold... don't break down now.*

CRASH!!!

I waited eight bars while the arena went crazy before strolling out in my "F\*CK FEAR -- DRINK BEER" shirt. I sauntered into the ring, barely able to hear my own thoughts from the din of the crowd. I got into the ring. I got on each middle turnbuckle in turn and fired off the Stone Cold Bat-signal. I then turned around and found myself looking at Orton and Shane -- neither of whom seemed too happy about having their little interview bit interrupted.

"Well, Michael, look who we have here. Sit down, Steve... here, you can have my chair. Or better yet, you can stand over by the special OrTron 2200 we have especially for this occasion. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"What?"

"I said, wouldn't that..."

"What?"

"Steve, I'm trying to be nice. It's rude to..."

"What?" Orton got upset. Shane seemed more agitated that his moment in the spotlight was being taken from him. I just smiled at both of them. I continued. "Now, you done asking me questions?"

"What," yelled the crowd. *Here we go again.*

"You done quizzin' me? (WHAT?) You gonna let me talk now? (WHAT?) That's better. (WHAT?) As for you, kid... (WHAT?) ...you wanna make a name for yourself? (WHAT?) You think you can get to the top by being the Heartbreak Kid's little boy? (WHAT?) Is that what you think? (WHAT?)"

"I'll show you how good I am."

"Is that so? (WHAT?) Little Mikey Shane thinks he can be the next Shawn Michaels. (WHAT?) Well, lemme tell you somethin'. (WHAT?) I know Shawn Michaels. (WHAT?) Shawn Michaels is a good friend of mine. (WHAT?) And lemme tell you... (WHAT?) ...you are no Shawn Michaels. (WHAT?) The only thing you got in common with him is your DNA. (WHAT?) That and the whole routine, but that's just cuz you wanna copycat him. (WHAT?) Can't you make a name on your own, son? (WHAT?) Well? (WHAT?)"

"Gimme a chance."

I acted like I was thinking for a second. Then I smiled. "Is that all you want is a chance? (WHAT?) Well ol' Stone Cold sez tonight's your lucky night. (WHAT?) Because after tonight, you'll have had your chance to be a star. (WHAT?) But before I get to that, I wanna say somethin' to all of Stone Cold Steve Austin's fans."

A huge cheer went up -- along with a few hundred middle fingers. *Ah, my public.* "You see, ol' Stone Cold has to say somethin' he doesn't wanna say. (WHAT?) He has to say goodbye. (WHAT?) Yeah... ol' Stone Cold is takin' a little leave of absence from the WWE starting next week."

The crowd boomed. "No, no, no... you see, as much as I hate that low-down double-dealing sonofabitch Eric Bischoff, I gotta leave him in control. (WHAT?) You see, I'm gonna be in the gym for a few months. (WHAT?) I'll be training. (WHAT?) I'll be taking my vitamins. (WHAT?) Hell, I might even say a few prayers. (WHAT?) But mostly I'm hitting the weights, (WHAT?) doing the running, (WHAT?) push-ups, (WHAT?) pull-ups, (WHAT?) sit-ups, (WHAT?) eatin' right, (WHAT?) drinkin' health stuff, (WHAT?) cuttin' back to maybe three or four beers a day, (WHAT?) and all the other things Stone Cold needs to be back in ass-kicking shape (WHAT?) so that he can be ready to step into the ring at WrestleMania!"

The crowd went nuts. I could hear JR screaming his head off from 50 feet away. An "Austin" chant broke out. *They like me, don't they?* I turned to Orton and to Michael in turn. Even Orton smiled. "Well, Steve, as nice as it is that you'll be coming back -- I'd be lying if I said I hate to see ya go."

"Now, wait a damn minute, Randy, I ain't gone yet. You see, I promised Junior over here a shot at bein' a star, and I damn well plan to deliver. So you see, Shane, tonight, In This Very Ring..."

"Hang on, old man. You treat me with more respect than you have so far. Give the future of the WWE the respect he deserves." *This is too easy.* I flipped him off. The crowd cheered.

"You gonna let me finish now? Good. As I was sayin', tonight, In This Very Ring, you are gonna be a part of a big match. It'll be you, Christian, and Triple H... against Booker T, Goldust, and Chris Benoit! See, son, I ain't all that bad. I gave you some good teammates. Of course, the way you're acting, I think they might be happy just to let you take all the beatin. So say hi to the Rock for me over in the ICU, cuz that's where I expect you to be when Booker, Goldust, and Benoit get through with you. And that, son, is the bottom line... cuz Stone Cold said so!"

CRASH! *Hit the corners for a salute and head out of the ring.* As I walked to the back, I saw Shane's face on the TitanTron. The arrogance was gone, and fear had taken its place. Lindsay perfectly portrayed a young man thrust into an uncomfortable situation and realizing he was about to get a baptism by fire.

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07:19 PM

"You're bringin' out this thing again, Eric? Why?"

The shot pulled back to show a giant wheel with a cutout of Eric Bischoff's big grinning face in the middle. Eric was standing by the side of it, looking on with pride as I

stood confused.

"Well, you see, Stone Cold... now that you're leaving me in charge of RAW, I figure I can have a little fun. And part of that fun will be in this."

"The RAW Roulette Wheel?"

"Once, perhaps... but before then, it was bigger and tougher, and it was a brutal wheel. It was something we used in Halloween to set the toughest, most dangerous, most horrifying match we could think of. And now, with you out of the way, I figured I might bring it back for one special appearance."

"Eric... why bring anything from WCW in here? Don't ya know if it's WCW, it's gotta suck?"

"Oh, no... that's where you're wrong. You see, my ideas were good... but the execution failed. Well, not here, not now. You see, on this wheel will be 10 brutal, devastating matches that will push Kane and Chris Benoit to their limit at Armageddon. One of them will be their torture."

"What are they?"

"Oh, no, Steve... you'll have to find out like everyone else. Tune into RAW next week, and I'll reveal the matchups that will be on this Wheel of Death."

I stormed off. "Goodbye, Steve. We'll all miss you so much." Eric beamed as the camera went to the ring.

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07:25 PM

Having completed my first assignments for the day, I looked on as Gregory stood by the women's locker room door. Kevin Dunn gave him the cue as microphones were set up all around, including (apparently) one on the inside. He knocked on the door.

"Molly... Molly, are you ready?"

"I will be soon. Are you sure you don't want me to... you know..."

"Citizen Molly, we discussed this earlier. The Hurricane does not forget. He works alone."

"I know, but I got so many people asking if I would."

"My answer is the negative. You made your choice. You left the Hurricane. And now, you want to... this? WHAZZUPWIDAT?"

"But please... Crash told me he wanted to see it one last time, and now... well... I know it would mean so much to the family."

"Well... I didn't know that was why..."

"So... is it okay?"

"Very well. But just this once. Consider it a gift... from the Hurricane."

Gregory leaped off-screen as a "whoosh" sound effect played. We continued to listen to behind the door. "All right!" Nora shouted. "Thank you!" Then we heard a second "whoosh" sound effect as the door was about to open.

We went to commercial as the sketch stopped. The door opened. Nora exited, her brown hair about the only thing recognizable. She had completely changed costumes and attitude. She was back to the black and pink I remembered from years ago. She wore a bright tiara in her hair. She smiled a million-dollar smile. "How do I look, Steve?" she

asked.

"Like a hero," I replied. She giggled and walked off to the entrance, ready to make a one-night-only return to being the super-sidekick Mighty Molly.

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08:59 PM

I waited as the main event finished. In the ring, all six men were brawling. Triple H headed to the outside as Kane emerged from the back. Benoit saw him and gave chase. With those two out of the ring, Booker and Goldust took advantage. Booker clotheslined Christian out of the ring as the ref tried to get them to their corners. Goldust put Shane in the corner and had him set up for Shattered Dreams when HHH returned and hit him with the sledgehammer. With Goldust thus incapacitated, HHH got the ref to help Shane out of the corner. Shane went to the top rope and did Kevin Nash's framing before dropping the big elbow on Goldust. The ref counted three, and Michael Shane had snuck his first victory out from under my nose.

Before he could celebrate, though, the glass broke. I stormed out a second time for the night. This time there was no saluting or anything else. I just looked Michael straight in the eye. As we stared, I saw a smile come across Shane's face -- a smile I knew was Lindsay acknowledging how much fun it was to be working on-camera together.

"Well, good going, Michael. Looks like you've learned your lesson well from the master of being an asshole," I said, pointing to Triple H. "But I'm not lettin' my last night as an officer of the RAW brand end like this. So Triple H, since you just saw fit to screw Goldust there, I'm givin' him a little rematch against you at Armageddon! And that's the FINAL bottom line, cuz Stone Cold said so!"

"Wait!" Shane had the mic. "That may be well and good, but aren't you going to congratulate me on proving I am the next icon of the WWE?"

"You didn't prove crap to me, kid." I walked off. As I headed to the ropes, I felt a hand grab my arm. I knew it was Shane's. I looked up and smiled a big smile to the audience. *He's touching me. That's a physical provocation.* "You got five seconds to show regret for touchin' me, kid, or I'll make you show regret." I saw everyone else leave quietly.

"Come on, old-timer. Do your worst." He pulled me back to the center of the ring and slapped me across the face. I stared at him. He didn't change expression. I smiled and nodded. *I've been wanting to do this since I first saw Stone Cold as champion.*

I kicked Shane in the gut and turned around. I grabbed his head in my arm as I jumped into the air. I sat down while letting go of the head. I turned around as I got up, just in time to see Shane flying backwards three feet in the air. He landed semi-conscious by the ropes. I got down in his face and barked at him for a while. I then stood up and faced the timekeeper. *Somebody throw me a damn beer or two.*

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10:54 PM

We rode back in character. Nora was in the back seat with Shane, talking about their experiences of being young and famous. I was up front with Shawn, the latest, and hopefully last, note in my hand. "NG Wed 1930 yours DM," it read. I looked back at Nora, who seemed to be trying to lose herself in conversation.

"Shawn, I don't get it," I said quietly. "Nora's relieved this morning, nervous this afternoon, and enjoying herself tonight. Can't she hold one emotion for more than five seconds?"

"I don't know," Shawn replied. "Maybe she's scared of letting her guard down, so she's constantly changing emotions as a defense. Or maybe... nah, I dunno."

"What?"

"Well, maybe she actually can't stay level. Maybe she's overreacting. I mean, I talked to her earlier today and she seemed to take everything I said like it was deadly serious news. I think she doesn't know what's minor and what's major anymore."

"Whaddya mean by how she was acting?"

"Well... it's like this. She comes in, on the verge of tears. She wants the whole plan off. She says she'll just take her punishment, she can't trust anyone, she thinks she's not worth helping... anyway, I try to cheer her up, and somewhere along the line, she does this total 180. Like she goes back to being perky and cheerful and ready to take over the world. I can't figure it out myself."

"It's like she's a hill."

"What?"

"Oh, just a metaphor I have. See, most people are valleys. They have moments when they're really far up one emotion or really far up another, but you give them enough time and they'll return to the center -- cuz that's what they wanna do. But Nora -- well, something ain't right. Her equilibrium's at the top of a hill or something, so that when you push to get her out of her bad mood, it rolls down the other side all the way to good. You get what I'm saying?"

"Kinda... but... something bothers me."

"Yeah?"

"Why hasn't that happened to you?"

I thought for a while. "I don't know," I finally said. "I guess I'm just lucky. Or maybe it's because I don't have to live in fear every day of the week. Maybe it's because it was just once. Or maybe -- maybe God just hit me over the head and got me out of it. I dunno... but whatever it is, I want her to have the same thing."

Shawn kept looking forward as he drove. "Yeah... I know what you mean."

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Tuesday, November 25, 2003, 02:45 PM  
McCall, ID

"Wow... this place is huge."

We were walking through the fields of a little forsaken town just 30 miles north of Boise, where the night's event would take place. A lot of the RAW stars came along to participate in a WWE reunion for Thanksgiving. Although this pretty much ignored the fact that we met for Survivor Series 11 days prior, it was the thought that counted.

"Yeah -- this is my home," said Torrie Wilson, showing us around the premises. "Oh, watch your step -- Mom and Dad don't want to harvest mashed potatoes this fall."

As we stepped lightly over the crops, a thought occurred to me. I quickly turned to Shawn. "Wait... ain't Torrie's parents dead?"

"What? What made you think that?"

"Well, I mean, her dad remarried and died soon after he... well... I mean they..." Shawn began to look at me like an entire segment of my brain was missing. "What? Didn't he... I remem... um... well..." *Andy, you're about to say that you saw her father marry Dawn Marie, aren't you? Think about what you really saw.* "...uh, never mind."

Shawn smirked. "Don't worry about it. It happens to all of us after a while. You don't know how often I find myself talking to Paul Levesque about what HHH did. It's an easy mistake."

"Um... thanks. Y'know, I just feel kinda awkward renting out this huge barn for the big dinner tomorrow night. Even if it is better than a hotel... I mean, it sorta ruins everyone's plans. What if Darren gets cold feet? I mean, we gotta co-ordinate this with the local authorities, don't we? I'd hate to think what Nora's up to right now."

"Andy," he snapped at me, turning me to face him and gritting his teeth so no one could read his lips, "listen. You've done what you can. Let God handle the rest. Got it?"

I lowered my eyes, avoiding looking into his. I sighed. "I guess so."

"All right, good. C'mon... let's go."

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03:23 PM

We all watched as vignettes for SmackDown were being filmed in the dining room. Kidman and Torrie were enjoying their dinner together when Torrie began to choke back tears. Kidman turned to her in concern.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"Oh... I'm just thinking of Dad. It's the first Thanksgiving here... without him."

"I'm sorry... I miss him too. I just wish he could see what you've done. You're so wonderful."

"Oh, thank you, honey." They kissed. Off-camera, a gagging noise was heard. "Who's that?" Torrie would get her answer when Dawn Marie walked into the shot.

"Hey there, you two. Enjoying a family dinner without me?"

Torrie looked up, disgusted. "You don't belong here! You're not family!"

"Of course I am, Torrie baby. I'm your stepmom, remember? Now, how about letting me sit in on this?"

Torrie got up and was ready to smack Dawn when Kidman grabbed her arm. "Not today, please... let's just be civil. It's only Thanksgiving once."

Torrie stopped and took a deep breath. "Sure, you're right. I'm sorry... mom. Come join us." Torrie smiled the most forced smile one could imagine as she began to serve Dawn.

As they all sat down, the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," Kidman said. He got up and walked offstage. After a few seconds of extremely awkward silence between Dawn and Torrie, Kidman returned, shouting, "What are you doing here? I know you're not family!"

Jamie Noble and Nidia were following him. "We knew we could find you here. Tonight, I want you to put that US Title of yours on the line against me! I beat you last week, and I'll beat you this week!"

"Jamie, I'm at dinner with my... family. Can't this wait?"

"Gimme an answer, dammit!"

Torrie got up. "Jamie, please, leave us alone. We'll see about it tonight."

Nidia stepped in her way. "What are you going to do about it."

"You have three seconds to leave before I call the cops."

"Well," Jamie said, "might as well give you a reason!" With that, Jamie attacked Kidman. The two brawled in the middle of the "feast". Meanwhile, Nidia and Dawn Marie teamed up to knock down Torrie and rip her dress off. Jamie left with both women, saying, "I guess we'll see you tonight, huh? Oh, and Torrie, you look as good as I remember... hahaha!"

"Cut! That's a wrap, people, good job!"

Torrie and Kidman got up and helped brush the food off of each other. We sat back and applauded. *Well, there's the obligatory Thanksgiving stripping and food fight out of the way.*

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11:55 PM  
Rajahwwf.com

Hey Raj, I just got back from the event at the BSU Arena in Boise. Big house -- well over 10000 in attendance tonight. The crowd was AMPED, too. Lemme tell you about it.

Dark Match:

- A couple guys I didn't know went at it. One guy was announced as being from Boise, so he played face. The other guy won, though.

- Bull Buchanan d. Jeff (?). The other guy was announced as being from Denver. Nothing match, and the jobber didn't seem to be playing ball either. Bull won with a springboard lariat.

Velocity:

- Paul London d. Don Morgan. WHOA! If they let this match air unedited, it's the reason to watch Velocity by itself! This Morgan guy is unreal, I wonder if WWE wants him. London won with the London Bridge.

- Zach Gowan d. Aaron Stevens. Nothing match. Gowan's pretty much wasted his 15 minutes -- a lot of "break his leg" chants which was not nice. Zach won with the Sharpshooter, which is insane to see live. Crowd popped bigtime for it.

- Test d. Mike Rapada. A decent punch-kick match. Test won with the boot.

Tazz and Matthews came down to call the action. Some chick sang the National Anthem.

SmackDown!:

- Brock Lesnar, Matt Hardy v1.0 (Matt Fact: Matt is thankful for potatoes) and Shannon Moore defeated Nick Dinsmore, Ron Simmons, and Bradshaw. Crowd was into it, chanting "APA" and "Lesnar sucks" a lot. Dinsmore took all the pain in this match. Bradshaw looked like he wanted to kill Moore -- is he still in the doghouse cuz of that mist thing? Hardy pinned Simmons with the Twist of Fate.

- Stephanie comes out, and I the crowd actually LIKES her. I'm scared too. She proposes that there will be a four-man tournament for the WWE Title shot at the Royal Rumble, and it'll begin tonight. Eddie Guerrero faces RVD and Hulk Hogan faces Rhyno. Winners go at it in two weeks. Sounds good to me.

- John Cena's out. He raps about Thanksgiving and how cool it is, then issues an open challenge. Jose Maximo (or is it Joel?) comes out and accepts. Decent squash, with Cena winning with the F-U. The Other Guy Maximo tries to attack after the match. Then -- and this was weird -- this girl ran into the ring and threw herself at Cena! I doubt it'll make TV, cuz security was all over her. Cena looked like he wanted nothing to do with her too!

- They showed "Earlier Today" footage from the Wilson farm in McCall (just north of here). Torrie and Billy Kidman were enjoying dinner when Dawn Marie invites herself. Some bad acting here, but it served the purpose. Noble and Nidia crash the party, and yep, we have a food fight. Torrie gets stripped, because she's Torrie. So that's a match tonight.

- Eddie Guerrero d. Rob Van Dam. This was great, but I think they've done better. Good LONG match, too. RVD had it won, but the ref was out. So Eddie gets something out of his car and hits RVD with it, then frog splashes him for the win. Eddie gets to main event in two weeks -- works for me.

- Kurt Angle is shown watching the tournament. Some indy guy asks him what he thinks of the idea, and he says he wants Eddie in the ring. He then talks about Thanksgiving being an American holiday. Man, I miss the heel Angle.

- Billy Kidman was out next with Torrie, while Jamie Noble had Nidia. Kidman was dressed as a Pilgrim, while Torrie made me want to poke her hontas lol. Anyway, good cruiser match here. Kidman seems to be stalled just outside the big time. He won this with a SSP, then Billy Gunn came out and attacked as Nidia cheered him on. They need to get Gunn/Kidman out of the way.

- Team Japan vs. World's Greatest Tag Team was next. Before the match, Matt Hardy and Shannon Moore returned to do commentary with Tazz and Matthews. MICHAEL COLE WAS THE REFEREE, and he got a good reaction. Outstanding match. No real

face-in-peril stuff, either -- just tons of back-and-forth goodness. Tajiri's leg was totally owned by Haas during the match, and the Kick was nothing near the end. About 30 near falls in this one. Match went the full 20 and was a draw, getting booed out of the building. Everyone demanded five more minutes. Heyman had to take the mic and tell the crowd that next week, he'd give WGTT a rematch. Crowd loved it.

- Hulk Hogan d. Rhyno in the main event. Bad match, but it's Hogan so who cares? Rhyno is insanely over as a heel. He absolutely beat the crap out of Hogan in this one. Hogan appeared to have his sell on, too. Finish came when Rhyno got the Gore, but went up top. He tried for a FROG SPLASH, but Hogan moved out of the way and did his routine. Hogan celebrated for like 10 minutes at the end as Eddie came out.

End of show.

Awesome, awesome night. I loved it. Everyone had a great time. I can't wait to see how it comes out on TV.

Biggest Pops:

1. Hogan
2. Angle
3. RVD
4. Eddie
5. The girl who charged Cena

Biggest Heat:

1. Rhyno
2. Lesnar
3. The finish to the tag title match
4. WGTT
5. Eddie again

Thanks a lot!

--Jason Warren

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Wednesday, November 26, 2003, 03:17 PM  
McCall, ID

"Attention, people, I have a few announcements."

We all looked on as Vince McMahon decided to give a speech.

"First of all, I want to thank Torrie and her family for providing us with this wonderful location for a cross-promotional dinner. We have received very good reviews from the internet fanbase and from the casual fan. In addition, the buyrate came back from Survivor Series, and despite what I thought was a less-than-perfect performance, we got over half a million buys -- which is an outstanding showing! At this rate, one million

WrestleMania buys seems a natural -- and with it, a huge bonus for all of you.

Now, I have great news for all of you. I've decided that tomorrow, we'll all head down together to Las Vegas! As you RAW people know, we have a show there on Friday, so we can do some practice during the day. However, as a special bonus from me to you, I've decided to open my wallet and... well, give a small something to all of you. You will find \$500 in spending money waiting for you back at the hotel, compliments of the WWE profit fund. It's the least I could do.

Furthermore, I want to let you all know that... well, I discussed this with some of you before making this announcement. A lot of old faces will be hanging out backstage in the next few months. We're recruiting some of the bigger names in the WWE's and NWA's history to get together for a match at WrestleMania. See, WrestleMania has always been the Showcase of the Immortals, and this year I want to do that literally. Now, there will be a lot of advertising based around this match... before you all grumble, understand that it's by design. Consider the names that we've already had confirmed in that match. The Rock has said he'll do it. Ric Flair wants to come back for one last time. Stone Cold Steve Austin will be in the match. Doesn't that right there deserve some press? But rest assured, it will not be the main event. We still have plans to have that be one of the two title matches.

Now -- a lot of you will not be on the WrestleMania card. I hope you understand that. We will do our best to get as many people as possible on one of the next three shows, if not two. But WrestleMania -- well, we have a very good idea what we will do with that. We have 8 titles right now in the WWE, and at least 6 of them will be defended. We want to make this night epic, and... well... you'll see. Only about half the card is set in stone right now -- and that's the Showcase, the two world title matches, and a special match on either side. There's still four matches -- four title matches -- we have yet to decide on. We might expand the card if there's demand, but we mainly want to focus on quality instead of quantity. Only the most popular, the most talented -- in short, the best -- will be invited.

Don't despair, though; the Armageddon card has shaped up very nicely, from what I hear, and a lot of you have been allowed prime air time through the tag tournament while we heal up. Over on SmackDown!, the success of yesterday's show makes me think that No Way Out will also go very well, as will our top feuds. I expect all of you to give 110% every night, and there is a chance you will be on the WrestleMania card in one of those matches. Good luck.

Now, as it's Thanksgiving... I just want to say thank you for making my company the best in the business. Twenty years ago, when I took over for my father, we were another back alley organization. However, under my leadership, we stand today a recognizable icon and the undisputed king of our business. But I couldn't get there without the hard work, the dedication, and the nightly effort I got out of each and every one of you. You helped make it possible for me to put the WWE on top of the world. We would not be here if it weren't for the whole company working together. I thank you for allowing my two decades of hard work in this organization to reach a successful payoff. So, I suggest everyone raise their glass -- c'mon, everyone -- and give a toast. To World Wrestling Entertainment and to twenty years of continued success! To the WWE!"

"To the WWE!" we all shouted as we drank up.

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05:46 PM  
Boise, ID

I met with Sgt. Garrett Allen of the Boise Police Department in my hotel room. Before we arrived in Boise, I had worked it out so that my hotel room was connected through a door to Nora and Gail's. Each room had a door that they could open, close, or lock at will. I had asked Nora to keep hers wide open.

We walked into her room. Police began searching for appropriate locations to set up their monitoring devices. Sgt. Allen kept looking at me suspiciously. "You know, Mr. Austin, the evidence you all presented to me yesterday may have been enough to convince a judge, but I'm not sure it's going to happen. For your sake, you'd better hope he shows up tonight, or we're not going to be in a good mood."

"Look, sir, this is a very difficult thing to pull off, I know, but... well, there's about 10 of us who believe this is happening and wanna put a stop to it. Now, when everything's set up, y'all can wait in my room and enter through the connecting door we got. Miss Greenwald said she would keep the door on her end open."

"Mr. Austin, that's good, but even if the door is closed, we have devices that'll help fix the situation. Anyway, just make sure everyone leaves it to us. It's our job to prevent things like this from happening."

"Thank you, sir. You're very good to do this."

"Thank you for reporting this." Sgt. Allen turned to Nora. "You're a brave woman for going through with this. I want to assure you that there's no way on earth you will be harmed. It was great thinking of you to save all his notes -- it established the pattern we needed to get the permit to do this."

"Thank you... sir..." Nora seemed tense.

"Miss, you have nothing to worry about. We will not let this happen."

"I hope not."

"Sir, she's very nervous. Maybe it would be best if we just waited for the right time."

"Now is the time, though, Mr. Austin."

"No, wait," Nora interrupted. "Don't... don't hurt him. It's my fault."

"Nora, what the hell are you talking about? He's the sonofabitch who's--"

"Mr. Austin, please. It's our concern now. Miss Greenwald, we have obtained a warrant in the state of Texas for his arrest. He is to be extradited there for trial. Miss Kim's testimony, coupled with the notes, was enough to obtain a warrant. This is simply the most convenient time to do it."

"B-b-b... but why have him... why?"

"Because, Miss Greenwald, all we can get him on right now is assaulting Miss Kim. That's a bad thing, but he'd be out in a few years. If we can catch him in the act of doing this, then combine it with your testimony of his previous acts, that's first-degree rape -- he's going to jail and never coming out. Isn't that what you want?"

"I don't know... I don't want to ruin his life. I don't like the thought of getting even."

"Nora," I said, staring directly into her blue-gray eyes, "you're not getting even."

You're getting safe. Please, believe it."

She took a pair of deep breaths. "All right... I believe."

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06:22 PM

There was a knock on my door. I got up and let Torrie in. "I heard that you're gonna do a stakeout in here... this is fun. Can I see?"

"Ma'am, we would like for as few people as possible to be involved in this. Please leave the room before 7 PM," Sgt. Allen stated from behind the monitor set-up before looking up. "Oh, excuse me, Ms. Wilson. It's an honor to have you here."

I turned to Torrie. "You're pretty popular, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Not every day a small girl makes a national magazine. But that's not why I wanted to talk to you. Can we speak in private?"

"Sure." I grabbed my hotel card and stepped outside the room. "What's wrong, Torrie?"

"It's Amy. I saw her after you guys left. She was in the bathroom, throwing up. Steve, I'm scared."

"Why? Maybe it was just something she ate. The flu bug's been going around, too -- I mean, Cena could barely touch his food. She's just sick."

"You don't have the flu for two weeks. I think she's purging herself!"

"Purging herself?"

"Yeah -- I don't wanna say it, but... think about it. Constantly running out and all that -- I think it's a ploy. She's... she hasn't held food down for weeks now. Steve, I think she might be in the early stages of an eating disorder!"

This thought had never crossed my mind. *I just thought she was sick. This... wow.* "Torrie, if she's bulimic, don't you think the rest of the WWE would notice?"

"No, I don't... they don't know what to look for. I do. I had it. Steve, all throughout high school I did that sort of thing. I was a wreck. I'm lucky to be here. I lost four years of my life constantly trying to lose weight, all because some no-name talent agent told me I was 10 pounds too fat. I don't know whether Vince told her she had put on weight during her rehab or what, but... she's losing it. I'm scared."

"Well..." *Come on, Andy, think.* "Well, why come to me? Talk to her!"

"I can't. I don't see her more than a few days. I've only heard reports about it, and today... this was the first time I saw it in person. She won't listen to me. She doesn't think I know enough. Steve, you gotta get through to her."

"All right, Torrie, all right. I'll do what I can. I... I think you're a little off-base about this, but I'll make sure she sees a doctor about this. Happy?"

"Steve, please... don't blow this off. Please?"

"All right. I'll help her out. Now, c'mon. A pretty thing like you deserves to be with her people -- not us. I'm sure Kidman's waiting for you."

Torrie blushed. "Well, I did say we would spend a romantic night together."

"TMI, Torrie. Too much info." I shuddered.

"C'mon, Steve... you know I'm not shy. I showed it all before, right?"

"Yeah, but... I'd rather think 'bout me and Debra than you and Billy."

She laughed. "Okay, fine. I'll see you tomorrow, Steve. Thank you."  
"No problem."

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07:27 PM

Gail entered my room. Sgt. Allen was listening and watching the monitor. I stood with Cpl. Nick Robinson by the connecting door, ready to bust in and help make the arrest. Gail tapped me on the shoulder.

"Where's everyone else?" she whispered.

"Just us... there's nothing they can do. Now all we have is to wait and pray."

*God, do you think you can spare me a miracle tonight?*

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07:33 PM

There was a knock on Nora's door. Cpl. Robinson and Sgt. Allen told us to be quiet. Gail and I walked over to where we could see the monitor. We watched as Nora slowly, hesitantly, made her way to the door while the knock was heard again, this time more forceful.

Nora opened the door. Darren was standing on the other side, looking rather impatient. He walked in and closed the door behind him. "What took you so damn long? Do you want people to think we're having an affair?"

"I'm sorry. I just... you know I don't want to do this."

"And you know you have no choice. Now, get to it."

Nora slowly backed away from Darren. "Darren, I suggest you leave now. People are talking about me. They are pitying me. I don't want to do this... I don't want their pity anymore."

"Nora, it's too late. Do you think Vince McMahon will care if people pity you? You're nothing to him. You're a fat-arsed half-hearted Diva who's only in the WWE as a favor to me. No one will miss you among all the slender women. You think that dyke roommate of yours cares?"

"Let me at him," hissed Gail. I put my hand on her shoulder and held her back. She turned to me in anger. "How dare he..."

Meanwhile, Nora was hiding on the side of the bed as Darren approached. He held the condom package up. "Oh no. She doesn't care at all. Why do you think she sets you up for me each week? Why do you think she isn't here to help you? No one is here to help you. You're like a mouse, and I'm the cat. And tonight, missy, just like whenever I want, I will toy with you before crushing you."

I turned to Sgt. Allen. *Isn't that enough?* He held his hand up and gave off a "wait for it..." body signal. Darren was almost done digging his grave.

Nora was near tears. "Dammit, what do you want? Why do you do this?"

"Why?" Darren seemed to laugh as he spoke, although his back was to the camera. "It's simple. Because you let me. Every week, I come in here, have my way with

you, and leave. You must want it to happen because you never stop it. Sure, you say no, but you don't mean it. You can't mean it. You want to keep that title, so you let me do you. That's why I don't take no for an answer, Nora. And that's why I'm not doing now, either. Now get up."

Nora slowly stood up. Darren approached her and grabbed her wrist. Even through the grain of the surveillance camera, I could see the tears in her eyes. *Be brave, Nora. Be brave.* Darren grabbed her shirt and began to pull it up over her head. Nora screamed, but Darren simply hissed at her, "Quiet!" Darren pulled the shirt all the way off, then jerked her bra cups off of her chest and over her head, exposing her.

"NOW!"

Sgt. Allen gave the signal, and Cpl. Robinson swung the door open. He charged into the room and shouted, "STOP RIGHT THERE!" Darren shoved Nora to the bed and turned around in surprise. I looked at Sgt. Allen, who was busy following his mate into the room. Gail got up to join them, but I stopped her.

"Let them do this."

Darren yelled at Cpl. Robinson, "What the bloody hell is this? What are you doing here?" Sgt. Allen approached him and tried to put handcuffs on him, but Darren resisted. He clubbed Sgt. Allen over the head with his forearm, using his carny background to try to escape. He kicked Sgt. Allen square in the ribs as a helpless Nora watched.

"Oh, no," shrieked Gail. "What now?"

Darren turned around and set his sights on Cpl. Robinson, who by now was charging him. Darren stepped aside and sent Cpl. Robinson crashing into Sgt. Allen. He turned his attention to Nora. "Now, my princess," he said. "I'm going to make them watch!"

Just then, we heard two "clicks" of a gun in the background. Sgt. Allen and Cpl. Robinson had recovered and were pointing their weapons at Darren. He slowly backed away from Nora and stood up. His eyes darted around the room, searching for a weapon. He could find none.

As Cpl. Robinson kept the gun pointed at Darren's face, Sgt. Allen walked behind him with the handcuffs.

"Darren Matthews, you are under arrest for attempted rape, for resisting arrest, for sexual assault, and for assaulting a police officer. You have the right to remain silent. If you choose to waive that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you at no expense. Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?"

With that, the police officers left the room. Gail and I walked in. Nora was sitting up on the bed, her shirt in front of her bare top. She was crying, but something told me it was tears of relief and of joy. Gail sat down next to her as I looked on from the doorway. Nora hugged Gail.

"Thank you," she said in between sobs. "Thank you so much."

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10:44 PM

Sgt. Allen and Cpl. Robinson returned to my room to get their A/V surveillance equipment. They were somber as they packed up, seemingly unaware of the magnitude of what they had done.

"Guys, I just wanna say, we all thank you so much for helping to rid us of that scumball."

"You're welcome, Mr. Austin. Just doing our job."

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11:13 PM

All the Divas had gathered in Nora and Gail's room to comfort their champion. Meanwhile, a few of the guys were in my room, trying to fathom what had just occurred.

"I don't believe it," HHH finally said, breaking the silence. "I thought I knew him. I thought I... understood him. He always seemed like a nice guy. How could he do this?"

"I don't know," I replied. "But he did. And... for so long, we didn't see it."

"God... this just ruins everything. I feel so horrible. I called him my friend. I still do... I guess... it just hasn't sunk in."

"He seemed like a nice guy," Kidman added. "I didn't see him that often, but he was always there to smile and to talk to you, see how you were doing. I noticed he really liked Torrie too... I think I know why."

"Now, wait a second," said Benoit. "I... don't you guys believe in innocent until proven guilty?"

"Chris, he's guilty," I stated, almost indignantly. "I saw him start pulling her clothes off. I saw him attack the cops. He bragged about it to her. Do you wanna see the tape?"

"Easy, Steve," said Shawn. "We're all a little upset right now. It's gonna take a while for us to understand what's happening. Look -- I don't like this any more than you do. But this is the best thing to happen to him. He's gonna have to face up to his... his mistakes. No, that's too light a word. To his evils. Yeah, and if he doesn't? He's gonna regret it."

HHH chuckled. "I wonder if he'll understand Nora's position better on the other side."

We all looked at him. "That's not funny," Michael Shane finally said. "That really isn't."

"Yeah... I guess... sorry. I'm just... I don't get it."

Kidman sat down beside HHH. "It's a bit of a shock, I know. Look, I had friends back in Allentown get arrested all the time. I didn't believe they could do the things they were accused of, but... you know, they did it. I couldn't ignore the facts. And, seriously, I had to think of if I wanted to be around those types of people. Hunter, you're lucky. You're in a situation where you can say, I don't need that guy. I don't want him around me."

"But... that's not it. I like him. I... I want him to get better. I don't want him to spend his life in jail. This isn't the Darren Matthews I know."

"But it's the one that exists! Don't you get it? Your so-called friend lied to you. He

presented a face that made himself seem like a likeable person. He is a predator. He is worse than a murderer! He doesn't deserve to live!"

"Billy, calm yourself down!" Michael Shane was now standing right next to him, as the biggest and most experienced veterans watched two young "vanilla midgets" stand off. "Everyone deserves to live. I don't know if he can be reclaimed, but sometimes people turn their lives around. Sometimes, it takes hitting bottom to start climbing. Don't kick him when he's down. Feel sorry for him that he... he deluded himself into thinking he could do this to another person."

Kidman stared at his shoes, seemingly trying to justify his anger. "It's... no. I can't. I can't feel anything but rage. I... I'm ashamed to have known him. I'm ashamed to be associated with him. You know, right now I'm ashamed to be a man, knowing that men can do this! God dammit! This is crap! We all should be ashamed we let him do this! How could we? How?"

We heard a knock on the door. I walked over and opened it. Torrie and Trish entered. "Is something wrong, ladies?" I asked.

"Well... we just were kinda hoping you'd keep it down a little. Nora doesn't need to hear you guys getting mad."

Kidman stared at Trish as if she'd lost her mind. "But... how can we... I am mad! I can't believe he would do this! I..."

Torrie walked up and silenced him by putting her finger to his lips. "Billy, dear... it's okay. It's over. I don't love you less for being a man."

Kidman stood still for twenty of the longest seconds I could imagine. I finally spoke up. "C'mon, guys, she's right. Let's just forget he ever existed. We gotta get some sleep. Tomorrow's our holiday. The show goes on."

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01:53 AM

I heard a knock on my door. I left Shawn and Shane and got up to answer. An irate Vince was on the other side of it.

"What the hell happened here? Why were the cops telling me one of my men had been arrested? Dammit, Steve, I count on you to help keep things in order around here!"

I tried to quiet him. "Vince, calm down. People are trying to sleep."

"I don't get it, Steve. How could you let things break down to the point that this happens? What went on? It better be good!"

Shawn was standing behind me at the door. Vince saw him. "And you, too, Shawn... you and your holier-than-thou shit can sit on it! I bet you called the cops in over some minor dispute! That's exactly the kind of crap you would pull. Now one of my most trusted men is spending the night in prison! I don't want this kind of bad press, do you hear me?"

"Well, get this, Vince -- it's too late for that. Right now, Darren is sitting in jail because he was caught on videotape trying to rape Nora. He's in jail because he punched a police officer. He's going to be taken to trial for repeatedly raping Nora, and guess what, Vince -- I think he did."

Vince's face curled up in a furious sneer. "You take her word over his? You

believe her? You believe a Diva? You know they're here to cash in on their genetics! They don't have a single sincere bone in their body! How can you possibly believe that? She probably just wanted to keep the title and was threatening to get Darren arrested on trumped-up charges. Yeah, that's it. I should do something about this!"

"Vince, stop it right now! Darren did it! I watched him do it on police surveillance!" I was ready to turn Austin vs. McMahon from a storyline to a reality. "Not all your women are whores, Vince! In fact, none of them are! They're great people! And right now, Nora needs your support and your comfort, not your stupid blanket accusations!"

"Shut up right now, Steve! You... you of all people. Since when did you give a crap about a woman's feelings?"

"Since I saw my wife cry and realized it's because of me, dammit!"

"Come on... you didn't like that? You don't like feeling power? That's what being alive is all about! That's what Nora was trying to do! She wanted to fuck with Darren's life. Well, she conned you, and she probably did something to convince some two-bit rent-a-cop in this nothing town to go along with it! I cannot believe these charges will stand! They cannot! I won't let them! Darren's gonna be out of that prison by tomorrow morning, and by Monday Nora's gonna be looking for work. I will not let some bitch ruin my company! I AM VINCE MCMAHON! I..."

"DADDY, STOP!"

We all looked into the hall. Stephanie was standing there, in shock and in tears. "Daddy, please... you're wrong here... Nora... it happened. I saw it happen. I saw him rip her shirt off. I heard her scream... you can't know what it's like, Daddy... what if Paul did it to me? Would you feel I was some bitch? Would you, Daddy?"

She cried some more. She ran into Vince's arms. We looked him in the eyes as his rage began to melt to understanding, then to sorrow. "I'm sorry, Steph honey. I'm so sorry... I... I don't know what came over me. I love you, sweetie. You're Daddy's little princess. You're right... I..."

He slowly turned to us. "What should I do?"

I looked at Shawn, who nodded his approval of having me speak my mind. "Fire him. The minute this gets out, he'll be blackballed anyway. You think anyone wants to touch him after this? He has ruined his career. Hell, he may even have ruined his life. Make a statement that you don't trust these kinds of people and fire the sonofabitch right now."

I heard the door open behind me. I turned around. Nora had walked into the room. She was trembling, but seemed able to hold herself. She approached Vince. "I'm sorry, Mr. McMahon... I should've just let it happen."

Vince remained expressionless as Nora sat down on the floor and held her head in her hands. Stephanie walked in past us and comforted her while looking at her father. Suddenly, I saw Vince smile. It was a smile I had never seen before from Mr. McMahon - it wasn't haughty, arrogant, self-proud, or vindictive. It seemed genuinely caring.

"Nora... do you want to take time off?"

"No... I can't do that to you."

"Well, understand... I want to make this up to you. I want to help you. I'm sorry I said those things... all of you, I'm sorry. I don't know why I did. I just assumed... well... I began to believe my own portrayal of women. I don't want to do that anymore. I promise,

I will make the WWE believe in women as wrestlers. No more going halfway on this -- if they're in the women's division, I will focus on their wrestling acumen. I'll even tell Lawler to back off. It's what they... no, it's what YOU deserve. I'm sorry."

Nora looked up slowly. "Thank you," she said. Stephanie helped her up, and the two of them returned to her room. Vince began to walk away. I put on the glasses as he did so. The demon stood there, hunched over and sneering, appearing almost weaker. It saw me and flipped me off.

*Damn right. We win.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Thursday, November 27, 2003, 12:45 PM  
On the road to Las Vegas, NV

Shawn had pulled over to fill up the car. I was barely awake, and Michael next to me was using me for a pillow. He smiled, then got an idea. As the tank filled, he returned to the car and grabbed the lamp.

"Guys," he said, "you've done more than enough. You've earned the weekend off."

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Friday, November 28, 2003  
Recovery

*I put it off yesterday. I gotta tell her today. I gotta let her know I did this. It's not fair for her to think of me as something I'm not. I might as well tell her.*

*But if I do, she's gonna be mad. I'm telling her I let her down. Mission or not, this is personal. How can I work with her after I tell her? She won't want me to.*

*Will she? Is this a big deal to her? Hasn't she told me about this before? Come on, Andy, try to remember. What has she told you? What did she say about this? What would she have done?*

*That's not important. What's important is what I would do -- what I did. I gotta let her know. I hope she's not mad.*

*Oh, who am I kidding? She's gonna be furious. She's gonna hate me. Kathleen hated Greg over this, didn't she? Wasn't this something that bothered her? Or am I projecting?*

*Wait, who cares about Kathleen? She's gone. My worry's not with her anymore. It's with Lindsay. I have to tell her. It doesn't matter how mad she gets; she has a right to know. She has to know. So I have to tell her.*

*Then why am I trying to put this off? Spit it out, Andy, SPIT IT OUT!*

"Lindsay?"

"Hm?"

I rolled over onto my side to face her. "I have something important to tell you."

She sat up and placed her head in her lap. "What is it?"

"I... I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"While I... While I was Jericho... his wife came to visit. I couldn't say no. I should have. I should've stopped and let the real Chris take over. But... but I didn't. I..."

Lindsay smiled and laughed. "Andy... what's the problem?"

"You... you're not upset?"

"Over what? That you were a faithful husband to a faithful wife?"

*Is she ignorant or just stupid?* "Lindsay, I cheated on you. You told me how in love with me you were. You still feel that way. And I just went ahead with someone else. And if that wasn't bad enough, it was another man's wife! Isn't that a big deal?"

"Andy, who were you?"

"Jericho."

"And who was she?"

"His wife."

"Exactly." I stared blankly at her. "Andy, I understand right now why you're hung up over sex. You were unmarried, you've been violated -- you have every reason to think it's a problem. But you gotta understand -- what you and she did was natural, and was wonderful."

"It... it was?"

"Yeah."

"So you're... not mad?"

"Andy, how could I be? When I was Terri, how do you think I handled being with Dustin? She loves him, and he loves her, and they're a family. That's a good thing."

"Yeah, but... well..."

"Andy, it's not cheating. When you are someone, you are that person entirely. If that means making love to their spouse, then that's what you do. But that doesn't mean you think any less of me." I didn't respond. "Does it?"

"No, no. That's why I feel so guilty. I feel like I did something bad. It didn't bother me while I was Jericho because -- well, because all that love I have for you... it felt like you were there. It was like I was looking at her smile, her eyes, her body... and it was yours. What was that?"

"Andy... the same thing happened to me when I was Terri Runnels. I was thinking of you while feeling him. I had to. That's why I was so concerned the next day when you fooled around with me -- I was worried I had made her cheat."

"I'm confused."

"Look, it's like this -- remember how you felt when Andrew proposed to Stacy? Remember that feeling of sheer joy, even though it wasn't you? That's because their feelings are your feelings. Stacy's free will was dormant, but her emotions weren't. Am I making any sense?"

"A little... keep going."

"Okay. So when the person you are is in love with someone, you feel that love. When you become someone, you BECOME them. You get their love, their pain, their happiness, their failures, their strengths, their weaknesses -- the whole package. It's how you handle them that makes you better or worse."

"Then why did I start thinking of you? Does that mean Chris thought of you? Is this how marriages break up?"

"Whoa, slow down! You didn't call her by my name, did you?"

"I don't think I did. She didn't get mad or anything."

"Then you didn't. You probably projected me onto her because you felt guilty. I'm telling you it's okay. Andy... when you're out there, and you're someone, don't even think of who I am. We are in character almost all the time. When we're here, we can be ourselves. When we're alone or only with Shawn, we can be ourselves. But out there... you gotta pretend I don't exist."

I was stunned. *How can I do that? You do exist. You're always there. You see how I act. You react to it. I can't just ignore someone. It's not right to them. It's not right to you. You're my love -- my mentor -- my inspiration -- and you want me to forget you?*

"B... but I..."

"Andy, stop. Listen. Did you do theater when you were alive?"

"A little."

"Okay, good. When you were onstage, did you call anyone by their real name or pretend they were themselves?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, that's how it goes here. Some of us are actors and actresses -- only we're that way every time someone is watching us. If we have to be a character 24 hours a day, so be it. That's why we switch up every week -- if we didn't, we would lose our identity."

I smiled. "Is that always bad? You telling me you wouldn't want to be one person for the rest of your stay on Earth?"

"Well, I have thought about it. But... we couldn't do any good that way. We'd be doing a disservice to Vince. Besides, once I get to Heaven, I'll be me for the rest of eternity. Still... it would be nice to wake up one Monday morning and know exactly who I am and what I have to do with my life."

We both smiled. I leaned in and took her head, bringing her lips to mine. I felt her head squirm a little. "No, Andy," she said. "Not now. I wanna make sure you're doing this for the right reasons."

"Huh?"

"Andy... give me my head back." I did so. She tried to balance it on her shoulders. "Andy, are you doing this because you love me, or because you feel you owe me?"

"Of course I love you."

"Yes, but do you feel you need to prove it to me?"

I thought for a long time before replying. "No... I guess I feel I need to prove it to myself. I need to know I'm still attracted to you -- happy with you -- in love with you. I'm worried I ruined my own feelings."

She moved herself next to me and placed her arms around me. "I believe you do. Otherwise, why would this bother you so much? Andy, you'll have to trust me when I say I forgive you. I would have done the same thing you did."

"Then why do I still feel bad?"

"You probably were hoping it would be with me, weren't you?"

"Well... yeah."

"Andy, sex is just another thing married people do, like raising children. Someday -- I'm sure of it -- we'll be given the roles of husband and wife. But until then... I'm just fine with being with you here."

"You are?"

"Yeah." She set me back on my back and crawled on top of me. She gave me her

head, and I brought it forward and kissed her. I set her head to the side and stared into her eyes as her hands caressed my face. "Believe me now?"

"Thank you." I spent the rest of the day in her arms.

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Sunday, November 30, 2003

I woke up alone. The room was white -- either that, or there wasn't a room. It was almost a repeat of when I died, only there was no bed present. I looked around and saw nothing and no one. I slowly got up.

As I did, I noticed I was dressed differently. My T-shirt was gone, replaced with a bright, red, almost military-style button-down shirt. On my shoulders were black epaulets, each one decorated with a pair of wings. I had on white pants, but they were a strong white -- as if bleached by supernatural means. My shoes and socks were gone, but I had sandals on instead. *What kind of uniform is this?*

"You're up."

I turned around. Lindsay was standing behind me, dressed almost exactly as I was. She had re-taped her head to her body. At first glance, we seemed to be twins. Then I noticed her epaulets -- each one had three red stripes on them by the angel's wings.

"Yeah, I'm up," I replied. "Where am I?"

"We're in Heaven."

"Isn't it a little early for that? I coulda sworn I still had a few years left on my assignment."

She laughed. "No, silly -- you're not in permanently. This is a ceremony. We're getting a reward today!"

"We... we are?"

"Yeah! Didn't you hear? Oh, of course you didn't. They just told me. You see, Scott Hall -- he's out of rehab now. He's clean, and he's re-dedicating himself. He's back! We saved him!"

"We did? Wait, we did? Didn't he save himself?"

"Okay, technically, no we didn't -- but he accepted his salvation, and we sent him down the right path. That's a big deal, and a high honor for a Fallen Angel. It's the accomplishment of a goal. Congratulations, Andy."

*Wait, this is all so fast.* "Lindsay... don't... don't we all do this?"

"Well, sure. But there's more joy in Heaven over the saving of one sinner than over all of us Fallen Angels put together. That's why it's such a big deal."

"But this happens every day, doesn't it?"

"Well, sort of. You see, there's so many of us that every day someone gets a reward. But each individual will only be so honored a handful of times -- once a year, IF he's good. And since you've only been here four months, you're good. Anyway, we gotta fix you up."

"How? I'm perfectly dressed, aren't I?"

"Your head, Andy. We can't have you meeting Him looking like that, can we?"

"Who? Who am I meeting?"

"You'll know."

She led me to a row of chairs. In most of them, people dressed just like I was were seated. Behind each person was an angel -- a real angel -- applying makeup, fixing hair, plugging holes in the chest, and performing any of a number of cosmetic changes based on the individual's death.

"Hey, mate. I'll take ya." I turned and saw an empty chair with an angel behind it. I nervously sat down and let him go to work. He continued to talk to me in a Cockney voice that was at once humorous and calming. "So, bud, this be your first one, right?"

"Yeah... how'd you know?"

"The boards on yer shoulders told me. They ain't got no marks on 'em. You can tell by readin' the marks just 'ow many everyone's got. Like that chap over there. See 'im?" I looked. His epaulet had three pairs of crossed lines. "Now, each cross means ten. So I reckon 'e's got 'imself 30 honors -- and goin' fer number 31 'ere."

*Wait a minute. Three crossed lines -- three X's -- thirty. Thirty... three X's... XXX... three times ten... of course!* "So they use Roman numerals?"

"Y'know, I never thought o' that, but you're right. I guess 'ey do. Huh -- can't believe I ain't noticed 'at before. Anyway, 'old still -- this won't 'urt much if you don't squirm."

He produced a pink block, about the size of a bullet. I shuddered. "Sir, I... I'm sorry, I got bad memories of that."

"I know... that's why it's this shape 'ere. Relax -- you won't feel a thing."

I tried to relax. I felt the angel place his hand on my forehead. He pushed hard for a few seconds, then let go. "There, see now, mate? All good as new, I say."

I looked in a mirror. I sure looked like I did when I was alive. The blood stains, the exit wound, the messed up hair -- everything was back to normal. "Thank you, sir. You're too kind."

"Ah, don't mention it. All in a day's work, it is. Now, you got yo'self an award to go get. Good goin', champ. 'Ope to see you back soon!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Lindsay and I stood at the back of a procession line. People all around were watching. Surprisingly, I recognized most of them -- or at least, I felt like I should have recognized most of them. Some were in the same uniform I had. Others were in the pure white of sainthood. But about half of them looked very familiar.

"Lindsay... why do I feel I should know these people?"

"They heard you would be here. They came to see the reward. Same with me. See? Those are my grandparents up there." She pointed to the balcony and waved. I followed her line of sight to a couple in the front row of the balcony. They waved back and blew kisses.

"Oh... now it makes sense. So what's the holdup?"

"We're waiting for Him to show up."

"Him? Him Who?"

"You'll see, Andy. He bestows the awards personally on everyone."

"Must take Him forever."

"Andy, time means nothing in Heaven. It's a convenience for when the Fallen Angels visit. These might as well be happening at the same time. We could be up here for

hours and not miss a second."

"A 30-hour day?"

"Possibly."

"Wouldn't that make us ti... oh, wait... fatigue's for the body."

"Now you're catching on."

Suddenly, we were interrupted by a white light. I tried to look at it, shielding my eyes from the glare. The light stopped, and a Man stood at the center of the auditorium. Everyone in attendance rose as He entered, and genuflected upon His presence. I even found myself genuflecting from a reflex.

"Come forward, My children," He said. I slowly walked toward Him, aware of everyone else looking at us. I tried to get a better look at the Man in the middle. He was of average height, wearing the same white robe the saints wore, but somehow it seemed tailor-made for Him. He had dirty brown hair and a short beard and mustache. He appeared to be wearing a headband with something sticking out of it. Even over the robe, He had on epaulets -- but each one had the symbol for infinity on it. I looked closely at His hands -- each one with a hole in it.

*Of course. Him.*

I knelt before Him as He spoke. "My son, My daughter, today we honor you for your success in bringing a lost sheep back to the fold. It is written in Scripture that there shall be greater joy over one sinner who repents than for 99 who need not repent. Your efforts in causing this repentance are to be rewarded." He turned to the audience. "Please, be seated." They were.

"Andy and Lindsay, My children, I hereby recognize your efforts in returning Scott Hall to My presence. Through good times and bad, you persevered in bringing the lost back to My light. You are the prophets through whom I choose to do My good works and spread My Good News. May you continue to shine as an example of how to better serve others. And know that I am with you always, until the end of time. Amen."

As the crowd replied, "Amen," I felt Him place His hands on my shoulders. A strange glow seemed to surround me. I thought for a second I was going to be consumed by it. I couldn't see anything but a bright white. I noticed the glow seemed to emanate from His hands. Then, just as quickly as it arrived, the glow left -- but I could still feel its residual effects, as though it were a transfer of emotion and energy. I stared at Him as He smiled and offered His hand to me. I shook it, feeling like I was experiencing the greatest honor I ever would.

A second glow came from beside me. I turned and looked in time to see Him placing His hands on Lindsay's shoulders. She was surrounded by a bright light. Her eyes were transfixed, focused on His. He smiled as He removed His hands. She remained staring at Him, then shook His hand, just as I had done.

"Rise, My children, and be acknowledged," He said. We both stood as a thunderous applause rained down from the rafters. I was on the verge of tears. I looked to Lindsay, but she was smiling and crying. We hugged each other and Him. Slowly, we both walked to the back. There was another bright light from behind us -- but when I turned around, He was gone.

I looked at my shoulders. The epaulet had changed. There was now a single red stripe on each one. Lindsay's, too, had changed. Now each one bore the symbol IV -- four. I smiled at her as she smiled back. It didn't matter that the whole thing seemed

largely ceremonial -- the sense of accomplishment made me feel I could conquer Satan single-handedly.

As we headed to the gates, a shrill trumpet blast caught our attention. An angel approached on a stallion, heading to St. Peter. He dismounted and approached. St. Peter bowed to him, and the other angel returned the bow.

"What is this?" I whispered to Lindsay.

She merely shrugged. "I've never seen it before."

The angel entered the gates and rushed towards us. We both stepped aside, but he stopped. "Kind strangers, have you seen the Most High? I need Him to complete my rescue."

We looked at each other. Lindsay replied. "He was just here -- He just rewarded us... I don't know where He went after that."

"I must congratulate you, then."

"Are you... in a hurry... sir...?"

"Oh, forgive me. Not anymore. They can't get me here. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gabriel. My duty in this ongoing struggle is to battle the demons and keep them from destroying the souls of the just."

"Hey, kinda like we do," I blurted out. I quickly covered my mouth. *That was awfully presumptive of me.*

Gabriel smiled. "After a fashion. You work with those who have yet to die. Sometimes, saints and angels fall into the clutches of Satan and his minions as well. This is where I come in."

"Do you save them?"

"I try to. It depends on the strength of the person's faith and the magnitude of their works. Only the best can go through Hell and survive. You noticed that a few weeks ago, right?"

I tried to maintain my composure as my thoughts wandered to Kathleen. Lindsay took up the slack, saying, "Well, actually, we lost one of our friends over Vacation."

"Oh... oh dear... I'm terribly sorry. I didn't pick up on them."

I look at him. I felt betrayed. "Why not? Why couldn't you do something?"

"Please, it's not that easy. We know when someone is captured -- they send out a distress signal when they get melted. But not all signals are the same. Depending on how righteous the person was, they can send out a strong signal or a weak one or none at all. I can only pick up on the strongest ones. But enough talking -- I should report to His Throne. You can come with me if you want."

I turned to Lindsay. "Why not? Might as well see what's going on."

"I was thinking the same thing. Okay, let's go."

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We all stood in a bright room, decorated in gold. The Man who had blessed us was seated upon a majestic throne in the center. Gabriel approached him as we followed. There were about a dozen others of us, dressed in the red and white of the Fallen Angels. We all looked on.

"Lord Jesus, I bring these souls to you to be reclaimed from there transformation."

Gabriel reached into his bag and produced a box. Upon first sight, all of the Fallen

Angels' eyes went wide, mine included. I recognized the box -- it was the same one the demons used to capture those who were frozen.

Gabriel opened the box and pressed a button in the back. Instantly, two dark objects spun out of it, growing to almost ten times their size. They came to a rest on the ground, flat and long. I looked closer and saw the image of a person on each one. I nearly fainted upon recognizing that these people -- whoever they were -- had been turned to stone, then melted down and made into demon food. They must have been seconds away from being eaten and destroyed.

Jesus approached the two... *bars -- people -- whatever they were...*, laying His hands upon each one's "forehead". As he did so, the bright white light consumed each one. "Be healed, for your faith has saved you," He said. When the light left, two men were in its place.

I smiled and breathed a strong sigh of relief. I turned to Lindsay and hugged her with all my might. She returned the favor, squeezing with a joy I never felt another person feel for me. Both of us knew that the souls had been not just saved, but restored -- as did everyone else, as a cheer went up from our section.

The two men slowly got up and looked around. Even though the demons had stripped them, they were in the white robes of the saints. One smiled and thanked Jesus profusely for saving him. The other seemed confused. "How did I get here?" he said.

"Relax, My child. You have been saved. Your life is no longer forfeit to Satan. Rejoice."

\*\*\*\*\*

We were back in Recovery. We were dressed the way we had been on death. Lindsay's head was back in her arm. The hole in my head had been restored.

"That was... wonderful."

She smiled. "Yeah, I know. I needed to see that."

"Why?"

"Well, to be honest, Andy, there have been times when I was nervous that we were alone in this fight. I'd never seen a demon defeated, and I don't know what we'd do now that he knows of us. But guess what -- we have nothing to worry about!"

"If we think we don't. Did you see what happened to them?"

"Did you see what Jesus did to them?"

"Yeah, true... I guess the one guy was a human, not yet dead. The other... I don't know... must've been a saint or angel. But... how does that apply to us?"

"Andy... it means we can win. Gabriel -- he's on our side here. He and the rest of the saints and angels -- they'll help us out if we ask them to. Vince isn't dead. He's not a lost cause. After all this time, when I saw the demon, I thought it was over -- but now... I realize we can win!"

I hugged her. "I guess tomorrow we go back to fighting."

"Yeah," she said, smiling as she lay down to rest, "that we do. But you know something? I'll be ready to go for him stronger than ever."

*Me too.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Monday, December 1, 2003, 04:59 AM  
Sacramento, CA

I woke up with a start. My stomach was violently churning. I dove out of bed and looked around for the bathroom as I felt something rise in my throat. I turned on the lightswitch and headed straight for the toilet, not even bothering to look in the mirror. I bent over and let it all out.

As I did, I heard a voice behind me. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah... I'm fine... sort of." I didn't even bother to see who was behind me. I just kept getting whatever was bothering me out of my system.

"You want some water?"

"Yeah... I guess so..." I felt very weak and very tired from regurgitating. I flushed the toilet and slowly lay down on the bathroom floor. I tried to regain my strength, but had none to regain. I could only turn my head and see my reflection in the porcelain of the bathtub.

"Here you go," the other voice said. I looked up. Ivory was handing me a glass. I slowly pulled myself up into a sitting position and took the glass. "I'm sorry you're so sick. Maybe you should see a doctor."

"Yeah... I'll try to do that. I'm just so... I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

"Okay. If you need me, just let me know." She walked out of the bathroom and left me sitting there. I slowly drank the water, trying to make sure it wouldn't just reverse course on me.

*Well, at least now I'll know for sure why it is Lita's been sick so long. I just wish I didn't have to be Lita to know.*

**TO BE CONTINUED**