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ABSTRACT

Chasing Destiny tells the story of Lyric Angel de la Cruz. She is the only daughter of five-time world heavyweight champion and three-time tag team champion Manuel de la Cruz and the oldest granddaughter of Julio de la Cruz, a legend in the wrestling world. For as long as Lyric can remember, her life has been surrounded by wrestling, and she wants to be involved with the business. But unlike her family that came before her. Lyric wants to create her own way in the business, however, when she tells Manuel her career path, he is furious that she would want to do something that he sees as trivial—beneath her and the de la Cruz name. She dedicates her life in the wrestling world to prove her father wrong, that she doesn't need to rely on in-ring skills or even the de la Cruz name to become successful in the world she grew up loving.

Chasing Destiny: A Novella

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Language and Literature

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Art

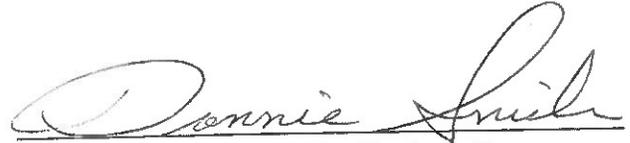
By

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Kassandra Kim, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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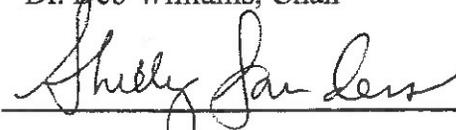
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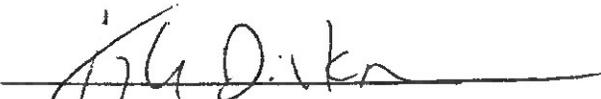
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To my mother,
Thank you for believing in me and my dreams.

For my father.
Thank you for pushing me to be the best I could be.

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INTRODUCTION:

FINDING WHO I AM

I grew up for a long while thinking that I was not talented in writing. I read books upon books as a child and fell in love with so many different worlds that when the opportunity arose for me to write something in sixth grade for a Halloween writing contest in my orchestra class, I jumped on it. I didn't expect much. In fact, I never had the thought that I would be a writer when I grew up, but I wanted to see what would happen. I didn't end up winning, and the only comments I heard were negative from my peers, like "this is terrible," or "you shouldn't do this again," or even "you don't have talent in writing so don't bother." One of those comments came from someone I considered one of my best friends at the time. It crushed me, and I never wrote creatively again, only writing for essays and the TAKS Tests.

I became interested in writing again when I began learning about journalism in my junior year of high school. It wasn't creative writing, but now I see that it was a step back towards writing creatively. This was also around that time when I started getting back into video games. I grew up playing games on the Nintendo64, Nintendo GameCube, and PlayStation 2 up until middle school, when I didn't have the time to play anymore. The passion for games was lying dormant, and all it took was hearing about *Batman Arkham City*, a game developed by Rocksteady Studios and published by Warner

Bros. Interactive Entertainment in 2011, to get me interested again. I found a playthrough of the game online and was back in the gaming world, even without having a console.

I started casually watching video game playthroughs after that, mostly focusing on games that I knew would have a good story or that an actor that I knew was in it. It wasn't until I watched a playthrough of *The Last of Us*, a game that I would normally stay away from, with zombies and horror elements, that I was reminded why I loved games so much as a child. I was hesitant at first because I was never into the genre I perceived the game to be, but a good friend of mine highly encouraged me to watch it, knowing I'd love the story, and she was right. My experience watching video games pushed me to do something I never thought I would ever do again. Write.

In my senior year of high school, I was talking with a friend, telling them about an idea for a story I had that branched from *inFAMOUS: Second Son*, a PlayStation 4 game. He immediately told me to write that story out and post it online. I was hesitant, but I wrote the story out and asked him to read it before I posted it. One look from him after he finished was all I needed to post it. The rest, as they say, is history.

After only a few days, my one-shot fanfiction had received a handful of positive reviews and a few favorites on fanfiction.net. I followed up the story with a twelve-chapter sequel and just continued writing. I felt like I made it big in the fandom world after I got an idea for a story inspired by my favorite anime, *Ghost Hunt*. After staying awake writing and doing minor edits until almost three in the morning, I posted my first *Ghost Hunt* fanfiction and went to sleep happy that I was just able to get a story out. I was not expecting to continually receive email notifications with people favoriting,

following, or leaving comments like “this is amazing!” and “please write a series!” for almost a week and a half after posting.

I spent a year and a half writing stories for the fandom until my grandmother unexpectedly passed away in 2016. After that it was, and still is, hard for me to get back into the series that I started writing. But as my fanfiction writing slowed down, my original storytelling started picking up in the form of script writing.

I never thought I would ever write scripts, let alone actually want to pursue writing as a career, but after trying my hand at writing a short script in Prof. Al Haley’s Narrative for Film and New Media class in the fall of 2015, I fell in love with it. I learned that I had an eye for seeing stories that could be and slowly developed a desire to create more. I’ve only written three completed short film scripts, but I’ve been lucky enough to see one be turned into reality and premiered at the 2019 ACU FilmFest. Seeing it on a theatre screen was enough for me, but for the audience to choose my story that dealt with a heavy topic like an abusive relationship as their favorite of the night, I was floored.

Script writing had become my focus for a number of years, but I’m glad that I’ve had the opportunity to branch out from that and explore more longer-form writings, like this novella. This work presented me with numerous challenges, but in the end, it is one that I am thrilled to have completed. Finishing this novella has given me a new outlook on what my future beyond college might look like and has given me the desire to publish stories for a living alongside whatever media-related job God has in store for me.

Finding Faith in Secular Things

I grew up in the church, a proud Southern Baptist, going to every event I could, getting saved and baptized when I was seven, and listening to Southern Gospel Music for

most of my childhood. I was never really kept from reading things or watching things on TV, unless it had witchcraft, which was a big “no” in my house. I didn’t read *Harry Potter* like everyone else was seemingly doing. But I found my own books to read and enjoyed them immensely. My favorite adolescent authors were James Patterson, Rick Riordan, Meg Cabot, and Lauren Kate. My genre was science fiction/fantasy, young adult novels, and those are the books I still gravitate towards today.

I didn’t read much “Christian fiction” growing up, except for a series I found randomly at Family Christian Store when I was in fourth or fifth grade. My world has always been filled with secular writings, but those writings never made me stray from my faith. Even after writing a secular novel that has no overt connection to Christianity, my faith can be seen sprinkled in the text.

In *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Madeleine L’Engle said that “There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred” (42). I find that to be true in every aspect of reading literature. As I found my voice as a writer outside of Christian literature, I could see that my faith was still present. That God was, and is, still working in my writings. In her article, *Beauty and the Creative Impulse*, Luci Shaw writes:

God made us human beings in his image; we participate in creative intelligence, giftedness, originality. We each have the faculty of imagination deep within us, waiting, like a seed, to be watered and fertilized. Imagination gives us pictures by which to see things the way they can be, or the way they are, underneath. (90)

Our talents in writing stem from God and His desire for us to be able to create as well. Granted, we’re not creating things on a massive scale like God did, but we create things to fill our world with more beauty as time goes on because as Shaw writes, “Beauty is the

business of the artist, the one who creates in the image of the Creator. But it is also the delight of every ordinary human being, because we are all created, in God's image, to create" (92).

Once people hear that a young female Christian has written a novel about professional wrestling, many might scratch their heads and ask, "Why?" The simple answer is that I grew up watching wrestling. There are many professional wrestlers who are devout Christians and worship God through the passion that He gave them, entertaining thousands of people through telling a story in the wrestling ring. It's the same thing that I want to do, tell stories that capture people's attention, no matter their background. Being a Christian, I find, opens my own eyes to the potential stories that are out there waiting to be written. Chad Walsh in his article *The Advantages of the Christian Faith for a Writer*, talks about why having a faith in God opens you up as a writer:

What advantages are there for writers in being a Christian? I am speaking now of advantages to them as writers, not as people. In the first place, Christianity gives writers whereon to stand, an ordering of their own personal lives that makes intellectual and emotional sense. It also gives them a perspective on their work as a writer. They can honestly see themselves as a kind of earthly assistant to God, carrying on the delegated work of creation, making the fullness of creation fuller.
(169)

God gives us the ability to look through our world and ask questions, but most importantly, He gives us the ability to think through these questions and write them from knowing that whatever God has put before us will be what we are meant to communicate with the world. The characters we make as storytellers don't make us gods, but it gives us

a sense of creating life. I believe that when I get an idea for a character or a scene that will become the starting point for a project, it's not just my mind going off on a random daydream, but it's a thought that God put there. That is how this project came into being. Lyric came into existence because I believe God placed her into my head and did not let up on her until I figured out her story and how to tell it.

My imagination is always running in some aspect or another. Whether it's writing a story based on original characters, writing fanfiction, or writing a screenplay, my imagination is always going, always thinking about what's next. As Shaw said in her article,

We who believe we bear God's image must realize that that image includes the capacity to imagine and create, because God is himself an imaginative Creator.

Though we cannot produce something out of nothing, as God did, we can combine the elements and form available to us in striking and original ways that arise out of the unique human ability (designed and built into us by God) to imagine, to see pictures in our heads. (94)

I know that I was designed to have an active imagination, thinking about the next story I should tell. God designed me, in His image, to have these wild and out-there ideas. To see things that could be possible just from a character.

In the short amount of time that I have been writing, I've learned that my best stories come from the idea of a single character and asking what their story is. I allow myself to imagine, to turn my logical thoughts off, and just see where the road takes me. William Brown in *The Ethos of the Cosmos* says that "imagination multiplies our moral options by forming 'all manner of incompatible schemes and allowing us to know what

we are missing.’ In short, imagination drives the self outward into awareness and knowledge of others and, in turn, to self-knowledge” (21).

Imagination is a gift. It is our ability to create scenarios, situations, and worlds, and ask the question, “how does it all work?” Why do humans have this ability to imagine things? Is it learned or do we naturally have this ability? Janine Langan in *The Christian Imagination* states that “[i]maging is an act of hope, a challenge of fate, an effort to take matters in hand and to accept our unique role as human beings, ‘in the world but not of it’” (65). It is fascinating that we as humans have this ability. Just by using our mind’s eye, we can see things that are not right in front of us, thinking up situations and scenarios that then translate to a written text or a painting and allow others to see into our minds. The only explanation I see from this is that God has gifted us this ability—our being is born with such a tool to create and explore the world that we live in, or even other worlds that are out of our own reach. Langan ends her article by saying, “The highest role of human imagination is humble cooperation with the modeling of our own face by God Himself. Thank heavens, education of the Christian imagination is, first and foremost, in His hands” (79).

We are not limited to how we use our imagination either. The imaginations of people like George Lucas, Gene Roddenberry, and Hironobu Sakaguchi have allowed us to travel to different worlds and to live through the characters. These creators have had a major impact on my own imagination and have allowed me to think about life from different perspectives. But the only way I know that I was able to finish this novella was because I decided to be obedient to the idea that God granted me over a year ago. L’Engle writes in her book that obedience is key to an artist:

Obedience is an unpopular word nowadays, but the artist must be obedient to the work, whether it be a symphony, a painting, or a story for a small child. I believe that each work of art, whether it is a work of great genius or something very small, comes to the artist and says, 'Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me.' And the artist either says, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord,' and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses. (8)

I could have easily let this story go after writing it as a short story for class and go through with my original plan of writing a feature-length screenplay for my thesis. But God had other plans, plans that I was obedient to listening to and working the best I could to make this a reality. Though the plot is not specifically Christian, I know it's a story that God wants to be told and shared with the world. He's put a passion on my heart to create and share stories of women's empowerment that encourage future generations that women can dream and do anything they set their minds to. It's a feeling I've had for years, and it has culminated in this story about Lyric that coincides with the Diva's Revolution in WWE turning into the Women's Evolution.

Professional Wrestling: It's Not Fake

In late 2007 I started watching *Monday Night RAW* with my dad. After hearing that my family were huge fans of WWE in the 90s, when it was called WWF, I was curious about why they stopped watching and why I was never introduced to it. In 1996, just a few months after I was born, my family moved to Japan. At the time, it was difficult to get WWE programming, so my family just stopped watching. Even after moving back to the States a few years later, they didn't pick back up watching.

I was not introduced to wrestling until sister's wedding in August 2007. My brother-in-law bought all his groomsmen WWE championship children's replica belts. I asked what those were and was immediately intrigued about the whole idea of wrestling. I spent the next seven years watching *Monday Night RAW*, *Smackdown!*, *ECW*, and *NXT* whenever they aired. When people asked why I watched wrestling, I told them it was because I enjoyed the stories that were being told. Professional wrestling became my soap opera. The best explanation of wrestling is in AJ Mendez Brook's memoir, *Crazy is My Superpower- How I Triumphed by Breaking Bones, Breaking Hearts, and Breaking the Rules*: "[professional w]restling requires a suspension of disbelief like any other scripted television show. It is planned and choreographed. It is a dance between two people skilled enough to appear like they are killing each other, while taking every precaution to keep the other safe" (141). I admired that these men and women could perform amazing maneuvers and tell a story through a match. I was hooked the moment I started watching.

In 2014 I stopped watching simply because I was in college and did not have access to cable TV, but I kept up with the storylines until my favorite female wrestler, AJ Lee, retired in April 2015. I had spent enough time away from the product that I didn't know many wrestlers on the roster or didn't care much anymore about them. It wasn't until much later that I realized the only person who kept me watching and paying attention for so long was AJ. After she left, I didn't feel a connection to anyone that made me want to continue watching.

In her memoir, AJ talks about the time she realized the treatment of women needed to change, both the ways the company and others in the locker room viewed

women in WWE: “While everyone was concerned about being appealing to our male fanbase, it seemed they were neglecting their fellow females. I realized that was who we as women should be targeting. They made up almost half of our fan base but didn’t have someone they could see themselves in” (200).

As a young female watching the product, I was bombarded with these female wrestlers, called “Divas” at the time, who were tall, thin, busty, but not skilled in in-ring competition save for one or two of them. There was a time before I started watching that it wasn’t like that, a time that AJ describes for her readers:

There was a glorious golden age for women in wrestling over a decade back, when the roster had plenty of talented, well-rounded athletes, who were just as physically imposing as their male counterparts. But over time the major companies had repackaged the concept of a female wrestler. Now the majority were amazing to look at but not so amazing inside the ring. (137-138)

I enjoyed watching wrestling and wanted to cheer on the women, but I didn’t see someone I could relate to, until the third season of *NXT* when AJ was on.

AJ did not look like a model, didn’t have an athletic build, was not super tall, did not wear much makeup, and didn’t wear high heels or skintight dresses when she wasn’t competing. Instead, she wore knee-high converse sneakers, graphic tees from video games, comic books, or anime shows, minimal makeup, and talked exponentially about growing up a tomboy, and loving watching WWE, playing video games, and reading comic books. She was like me, and I cheered for her during the entire length of her career. AJ became the most successful Diva of her era. But it wasn’t easy for her. She had to fight the gender norms that were built into the WWE Diva mold. She was knocked

down and held back multiple times during her time in WWE's developmental program, but she got back up and kept fighting. AJ knew she had "to get [her] foot in the door and to one day make an indelible mark, [she] was going to have to bring something else—something undeniable—to the table" (137).

Even when the producers of *NXT* asked her to be "sexier" for the male audience, AJ refused. She said, "[h]alf our audience is women. I think they want someone to represent them, someone they can get behind" (201). Growing up, I looked towards AJ for inspiration to be comfortable with myself. As she gained popularity for being herself, I also started growing into loving and accepting myself for who I was and what I liked.

I know that eventually I would have found myself, but it was thanks to watching wrestling and being able to connect with someone I admired that encouraged me to become comfortable with who I am. After she retired in 2015, I didn't really have a motive to start watching again or to pay close attention to the product, but I didn't stay away from WWE for very long.

In 2016, I discovered that a few of my friends also enjoyed watching WWE. We would talk about it sporadically, but one friend in particular wanted to have watch parties for the pay-per-view events. Lance Bleakney reached out and gathered as many as he could for SummerSlam 2016. Even though, I did not end up joining this event, the conversation of wrestling began to interest me once again.

The first pay-per-view I watched was the Royal Rumble in January 2017, which took place in my hometown of San Antonio. I knew that my siblings were there, and I wasn't able to attend because of classes, but I invited a few friends over, and we watched the Rumble. After that, I only watched the pay-per-views with the group. It was great

being around others and yelling at the screen when someone did a cool move. I was rediscovering my love for professional wrestling, but with my busy college life, I still didn't pay close attention to the weekly shows.

In October 2018, after years of not having a gaming console or watching WWE, I bought WWE 2K19. I was enjoying wrestling again and wanted to relive my middle school experience of playing WWE games, though a lot had changed in them since I played on my PS2. The new 2K games feature a mode called Career Mode where the player creates a wrestler and follows them through their career leading up to their first WrestleMania. The story in 2K19 was fun to play through, but one wrestler stood out, taking me by surprise. His name is Finn Bálor.

When the character first meets him, Finn is sitting in the locker room wearing a red leather jacket and red wrestling trunks. The game gives the player the option to talk to Finn, who becomes a friend of the character and offers his help if needed. Finn teams up with the character in a tag team match to help take down a wrestler named Bray Wyatt and save the character's friend, who has been brainwashed by Wyatt. In order to do this, Finn "calls upon" his demon side and encourages the player to also find the part of themselves that lets them reach to the darkest corner of their minds to fight a little stronger than usual. This match introduced me to The Demon Finn Bálor.

Finn had large teeth painted onto his chest and lower jaw, his face was covered in black paint, and an eye was painted on his back. At first, I was taken aback by the look. I had not seen a wrestler use this extensive amount of body paint for years, nor look like this. I gave my character the same type of body paint to match, making the entrance with my character and Finn look really cool. The mechanics of my character changed, and I

noticed that Finn's had as well. I assumed that The Demon was just a character made for the game, but I looked up Finn Bálor on YouTube and discovered, to my surprise, that The Demon was real.

I learned that Finn uses The Demon for big pay-per-views and major matches, and I spent hours watching clips of these matches with The Demon, as well as his matches without the paint. I became fascinated with how his style changed depending on whether he presented himself as Finn or as The Demon. As Finn, he used more aerial maneuvers and constantly moved to keep his opponent on their toes. But when he appeared as The Demon, Finn became more aggressive, the matches moved at a faster pace.

Finn's style of wrestling caught my attention, but so did his character. He was always smiling, and presented a positive attitude that could turn serious in an instant. I found myself fascinated by many aspects of Finn and his character, and paid more attention to his performances on *Monday Night RAW*. Whenever Finn had a match, I made sure that either I was watching or that I watched the match as soon as I could. I bought merchandise and paid close attention to his storylines. As I watched *RAW*, waiting to see if he had a match, I started paying more attention to the rest of the roster, more specifically the women.



Figure 1 Meeting Finn Bálor in July of 2019

When I had stopped watching wrestling in 2015, the women were getting less and less airtime. By 2018, however, their airtime had increased along with getting better

storylines. Seeing the women thrive gave me hope that the company's views of females had improved, which helped me decide where I wanted Lyric's story to go when I first started writing the short story. The assignment for Dr. Sanders' class came at the same time that I returned to watching WWE, making the foundations for this story come about in a way I did not foresee until I started writing.

I'm not currently keeping up as much with *RAW* or *Smackdown* since starting my thesis, especially this past summer, but I watch *NXT* every week when as I can, especially since Finn has moved back to the brand. Even so, there will always be a piece of me that loves and respects wrestling and what professional wrestlers do on a daily basis. They put themselves through more than fans know.

When people ask me why I enjoy watching professional wrestling because "wrestling is fake," I just laugh and tell them that it's not fake. It is very real. It's real to everyone who wrestles and to everyone who watches. We watch to enjoy the stories. We watch to cheer on our favorites and boo to our hearts' content for the "heels." AJ says in her memoir that even after retiring from in-ring competition, she still hears the "wrestling is fake" comment, and provides the same response every time:

[W]hen anyone asks me if wrestling is real, I let them know that dislocating both my kneecaps, dislocating my elbow, breaking my foot, getting over seven concussions, displacing my hips, sciatica, shooting my tooth through my face, and the arthritis in my cervical spine certainly felt real. (142)

The storylines may be scripted, the match outcomes predetermined, and the moves practiced and practiced, but that doesn't make it any more fake than MMA or martial arts, and those that are trained in those fighting methods can hurt or even kill. Wrestling

is no different. If one is not careful, a wrong move can permanently hurt or kill a competitor. However, wrestlers go out and entertain crowds in the ring every day all over the world, even with these dangers. They do it because they love it, and we watch it because we love it just as much as they do. And no amount of “fake” comments will keep us from enjoying what we love.

Chasing Destiny: Discovering Lyric’s Story

The idea for Lyric originally began as a short story in Dr. Shelly Sanders’ Fiction Workshop in fall 2018. I just needed to write a short story for a class assignment, but I had no idea what to write about until the day the assignment was due. As I walked from the student parking lot across the street from the campus library, on my way to work, I noticed the dreary weather. A spark happened, and I wrote the opening line of “Heavy, grey clouds were looming in the distance.” The second line of that first draft— “The wind strong enough to knock a seven-foot tall, 300-plus-pound wrestler from his feet”— gave me the framing of the main character at least being a fan of professional wrestling. Slowly, the assignment turned into the first version of Lyric’s journey.

Expanding the short story into this thesis has not been easy. I have suffered writer’s block, mental health blocks, and physical points of exhaustion that have kept me from writing. I was often tempted to scrap it all and write something I was familiar with, but Lilly Singh’s *How to Be a BAWSE: A Guide to Conquering Life* helped me keep writing. In one chapter she focuses on commitment, saying, “[w]hen you make a commitment, there is no asterisk at the bottom stating that the decision is valid until obstacles are present. Your commitment isn’t a coupon with fine print” (82). Her words pushed me to think about the project and realize that I made a commitment to finish. The

moment I started writing this story was the moment I committed to seeing it through to the end. I found myself going back to this book for words of inspiration when writing was difficult, which is one of the reasons why Singh wrote her book.

In *How to Be a BAWSE*, Singh talks about how to live life not just by surviving, but by conquering it. It isn't a self-help or how-to book that explain her own steps to success, instead she wrote a book that would encourage readers in day-to-day situations, not just jobs. Singh says, "You have to seek out situations that make you uncomfortable and then throw yourself into them . . . push yourself to do things that will help you reach your goal" (23). I realized that this thesis project was something out of my comfort zone. I had never written an original piece with original characters that was this long. I wrote a fanfiction that was twenty chapters long during the spring semester of my freshman year, but this was different. This thesis would prove to myself that I could write, that I could create something from scratch that I could be proud of.

As Singh wrote, "You'll never truly know if you can accomplish something or be great at something if you don't commit" (85). And I was committed to seeing this thesis through, even with all the road bumps and obstacles keeping me from finishing on the timeline I had in my head. I learned the hard way that "commitment is on a battlefield, and sleep and sickness are charging toward it holding spears" (82), but no matter what I went through, I know that it helped the story mean that much more to me in the end. On the days I didn't feel like writing, I watched old wrestling matches on the WWE Network or played 2K19. Even when I felt like I wasn't making any progress towards completing this thesis, I still was. I kept my mind focused on the world that captivated me so many years ago and pushed myself to finish, even if it took longer than expected.

I'm glad that I received this opportunity to expand upon and explore Lyric's world. Lyric is a character that has wiggled her way into my brain, and I believe it would be a crime to keep her all to myself. Her story is one that I strongly feel needs to be told. There are not many fictional books written about wrestling. Many of the books in the category of "professional wrestling" are biographies or autobiographies by or about wrestlers. The market in this field is barren, and I believe there needs to be more out there, especially since professional wrestling seems to be entering a resurgence with a new company, All Elite Wrestling airing on TV, and Netflix's GLOW being a hit. The need for more content is there, especially content with powerful women who are recreating new wrestling norms and breaking barriers.

I've enjoyed discovering and creating Lyric's story and hope that this isn't the last time I visit her world. She has taught me quite a lot about myself as a writer and as a wrestling fan in general. All the knowledge I have gained about the business I've been watching since 2007 has paid off. Through all the ups and downs that my life and my writing has gone through, I'm very happy to think that this is just the beginning of my journey as a writer and with Lyric.

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CHAPTER I

I'm not very athletic, but I know how to throw a few punches and take a bump in the ring when I have to. I'm not super tall or overly muscular. In fact, I'm quite average in both of those aspects. My jet-black hair is pin straight, and I've been told that my eyes remind someone of the one time they burnt dark chocolate while trying to melt it in the microwave. Needless to say, I don't have "the look" of what a professional female wrestler is supposed to look like, but that's ok with me, because today isn't about my looks or how well I can fight inside the squared circle. Today isn't about how well I can sell getting punched in the face or how well I can execute a finishing maneuver on someone. That's not my job.

I'm here because of my ability to stir up a crowd with excitement and passion or make them want to boo me out of the building with just a few words. It takes talent to make it in this business with just mic skills, but I've learned from the best.

The guys in charge haven't given me any sort of direction for my character yet, but I'm ecstatic to see what challenges lie ahead. Am I going to be someone that the audience loves? Or am I going to be the kind of person that the audience loves to hate with a burning passion? Not knowing the direction until a few hours before the show goes live on air is giving me a newfound rush of excitement, combined with a bundle of nerves, admittedly something I haven't felt in a long time.

As I arrived to the Toyota Center arena that day, heavy, gray clouds were looming in the distance. The wind felt strong enough to knock the biggest wrestler on the roster—

a seven-foot tall, 300-plus-pound guy named Kong—off his feet. Well, at least knock him prone. Typical weather for Houston in June. The air outside the arena felt ominous, but the weather could not make me feel down. No matter what happened tonight in that arena, whether the crowd decided to cheer me or boo me, I'm on top of the world.

I walked around the backstage area while I waited for my meeting with Jonathan Haynes, the CEO of New World Wrestling Federation, or NWWF for short. Mr. Haynes was persistent that I arrived to the arena quite early so I could have time to prepare for my new role. A few of the superstars and crew who knew me from the developmental roster stopped me in my perusing, congratulating me on making it to the main roster and just generally catching up. I always felt comfortable hanging around with the wrestling talent backstage, and knowing that I never had to face any of them in the ring made it easier for me to be friendly with them behind the scenes.

I checked the time on my phone and saw a message from Mr. Haynes.

The board and I are ready for you Lyric. Meet us in room 1012 at 1:30.

If you have trouble finding us, ask a stagehand.

I had thirty minutes to get to the room, so I decided to test my luck and find the room myself. At one point I walked passed what I assumed was the male talent locker room, not only because of the stench of old socks and the unsettling combination of AXE and Old Spice, but I also saw someone exit the room as I was just a few feet away, someone I hadn't seen in over a year, whose name made my blood boil and my heart ache.

His dirty blonde hair was pulled into a small man bun, a few strands strategically framing his face. Another superstar walked out with him as they both laughed about something. I took a deep breath and walked quickly past them. As I did, I made the

mistake of glancing in his direction. His ocean blue eyes met mine for a brief second. His mouth opened, but I looked forward and continued walking, not allowing myself to listen.

I couldn't waste time talking to him. There's so much I would want to say, and I'd likely slap his face. Not exactly how I would want my first day to go, especially before a meeting that would dictate the direction of my career on this show.

After a few moments I had to stop. Looking around my surroundings, I noticed that I spent the last five minutes walking aimlessly. I was lost.

A stagehand saw me looking around.

"Need help finding anything?"

"Oh, no. I'm good. Thanks, though!" I said as I walked off in search of the meeting room again. I shook my head, a little disappointed in myself. I knew *he* was on the main roster, that he was on this show. I guess I just wasn't prepared to see him again.

I found the meeting room and knocked on the door right at 1:30.

"Miss Lyric, come in, come in," Mr. Haynes said, meeting me at the threshold. His dark green eyes were shining more than usual, making me hopeful of some good news to come out of this meeting. Mr. Haynes loved this company with a passion, taking it over from his father when he was only 37 years old. He was now well in his 50s, but still had the excitement of running the company as if it was his first week.

I sat down across from the three other men in the room who were much older than Mr. Haynes. Seeing them made my once quiet stomach churn in unease as my left leg started to bounce quietly. It took everything in my willpower to keep a professional presence and sit straight for this meeting, not letting on that their presence made me

uneasy. Hopefully the lunch I had before I got to the arena wouldn't make an appearance after this was all over.

The gentleman in the middle spoke first.

“Miss de la Cruz, it's a pleasure to meet you. We've heard quite good things about you from both William Ross and my son over there.”

My eyes grew wide a little bit. This was the guy who'd discovered my grandfather in Laredo and made the de la Cruz name mean something in the professional wrestling world. This was the guy who catapulted my father into the stratosphere of superstardom when my uncle was forced to retire at a young age—the Richard Haynes.

“The board and I are interested in seeing what you will bring to Monday Nite Fury,” he continued. “Now, we understand that your current ring name doesn't use the de la Cruz family name at all. While we do respect the decision by many of our talent to not use their legal names, I am curious as to why someone who had a name so precious and beloved by the fans would decide not to use it.”

I glanced over at Mr. Haynes, who gave me a slight nod. I turned and looked at each of the board members, took a breath and began to speak. “While I do appreciate all that you have done for my family in the past, Mr. Haynes, I didn't want to use the name simply because I didn't want to be handed everything. There's a long legacy with my family, and it would be an honor to use it *if* I was a wrestler. But I'm not. I wanted to make a legacy for myself. Without the name.”

The men in front of me nodded as I spoke.

“Respectable, no doubt,” Richard Haynes said, “but would you be opposed to us mentioning that your father . . .”

“I’m sorry, but with all due respect, Mr. Haynes,” I interrupted, “while I love my family, my father and grandfather have not been speaking to me for the past eight years. I’d rather not have any mention of me being related to Manuel or Julio de la Cruz for the time being.”

He nodded, sighing. “Understood. Well, shall we get down to business, then?”
The two other men, as well as the younger Mr. Haynes, nodded.

Richard looked me square in the eye. “From this moment forward, nothing of this meeting is to be spoken to anyone. We want the announcement of why you’re on the show to be a surprise, as many of the dirt sheets and blogs are speculating a reunion between you and Mr. Henry.”

I held back rolling my eyes at that as I chuckled to myself. If those dirt sheets knew anything, then they would know there’s no chance of a “reunion” between us. Of any kind.

“That was the original plan,” Mr. Haynes spoke up, “but I think what we have building for you is even better. While you and Matt had fantastic chemistry, both William and I see you as a star. Our goal now that you’re here is to make you into that.”

I felt myself sit a little straighter as Mr. Haynes spoke. “So, what’s the plan?”

~ ~ ~

I left that meeting feeling ready to go. Everything was in place, and I couldn’t wait for the show to start and get out there to speak to the fans for the first on the main show. I had time to kill before having to go get my hair and makeup done by the Glam Team, so I continued to walk around the backstage area and introduced myself to the veterans that I didn’t know and said hello to the ones that I had worked with in the past.

A few of them knew the work I had done, both in the independents as well as on the developmental roster and expressed interest in having me be their manager. I was the manager of the longest reigning champion on the developmental roster and was the manager of many long-reigning and multiple time champions in my indie days. They wanted that same success, and I couldn't blame them. Everyone wants to be the best champion in history, but I just smiled and told them "maybe." For now, I wasn't looking for someone to manage. I had a few other things on my mind.

After walking around for what felt like an eternity in those stark white brick hallways, I made my way to the arena floor. The stage was in the final stages of assembly and lighting tests. The tech guys were working on sound checks, making sure all the mics worked and that there weren't any problems with the music system. I looked towards the center point of the arena and saw the ring. The turnbuckle covers showing the NWWF logo were the final pieces being added.

I walked down to the ring, saying hello to the workers assembling it. Once they were done and left, I climbed inside the ring and looked around the arena. Thousands of empty seats surrounded me as the bright lights were focused on the ring. I had never been in an arena this big on this side of the barricade before. When I was younger, I either sat in the crowd with my mother and brother yelling my little lungs out or backstage with my father admiring the work that was put into making something like this happen weekly. That feeling of awe I felt when I was a little kid was still present and strong.

I saw why my father, uncle, and grandpapa all enjoyed this business and being in the ring, but now I *knew* why. Being able to entertain people was in our blood. That was something they made sure I knew from a young age.

And I had learned it the hard way.

CHAPTER II

It was my eighth birthday, and I was sad. Papá wasn't home. I hadn't seen Papá in a few weeks, but I knew he was living his dreams. Mamá missed him, too, when he was on the road, but she stayed strong and made sure that my big brother, Diego, and I knew Papá loved us and was working to make our lives better for the future.

Mamá had just put dinner on the table when there was a knock at the door. She patted me on the head and went to see who was there. I looked across the table at Diego. He just shrugged his shoulders before digging into the food. I looked down at my plate and felt my stomach grumble at the heavenly smell that the moussaka made. I was about to take a bite when we heard a shout from the front room.

“ΑΗΗΗ!!! λατρεία μου!”

My head popped up. Diego and I looked at each other and grinned. “PAPÁ!!!” We scrambled to the front room where our parents were and saw them hugging. Papá looked up and beamed, “*Mis tesoros!*”

I ran to him as he let go of Mamá and knelt on the floor. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he lifted me up and started spinning around. I squealed and began laughing. Today was now perfect. I didn't need anything else for my birthday. I just wanted him home to celebrate.

Papá put me down on the ground. Once I was on my feet, Diego rushed at him and latched onto Papá's left hip. He chuckled as he hugged Diego back. I hugged him on his right side, and Papá chuckled again.

“Those two sure didn’t miss you, Manny,” Mamá said.

“And I’m sure you didn’t either, *mi amour*,” Papá said.

She chuckled. “Alright, dinner is on the table. Lyric’s favorite is on the menu tonight.”

“Hmm, let me guess . . . Tamales!”

I laughed. “No, Papá! It’s moussaka! Just like *giagiá* used to make.”

“Well, your mother does make the best Greek food I’ve ever had,” Papá said as he sat down.

After we all were happily stuffed, Mamá brought out a homemade tres leches cake and set it on the table. Thick strawberry slices adorned the top rim of the white cake as eight sky blue candles were evenly spread around the rim of strawberries. Papá and Diego stood up and were next to Mamá as she lit the candles. After they sang “Las Mañantias,” I leaned in and blew out the candles.

“¡Feliz cumpleaños!” they exclaimed. Papá and Diego sat back down as Mamá started cutting the cake. Once we all had a slice and Mamá sat down, Papá cleared his throat. “This Monday, *Fury* is going to be in Corpus. I already asked for tickets for all of you, front row.”

Mamá placed her hand on Papá’s. “Love, it’s a school night.”

Papá patted her hand. “I know, *Cariño*, but this night is special, and I want *mi familia* there.” Papá looked at Diego and me, smiling, “I’m in the main event to challenge for the NWWF Heavyweight Championship.”

I got excited. This would be the first time I would get to see Papá work in person! I looked over at Diego. His reaction surprised me. Diego was two years older and had

been to at least three other events. I was expecting him to be somewhat excited that Papá was getting a title shot. Instead, he had a half-hearted smile while telling Papá congrats. His eyes told a different story.

Papá was home the rest of the week, driving Diego and me to school and picking us up. At times he let us watch him train in the garage that he had set up a ring in. My excitement for Monday kept growing. I had a feeling that Diego was getting less and less excited about it. But he didn't let Papá know.

Monday finally arrived and the family packed into the car. I was in my booster seat and could not be more excited to see Papá wrestle in person. As my legs swung, I asked him question after question about if he was going to do a particular move or if he had a strategy to beat the champion in record time. Mamá and Papá just laughed as he answered my questions, not giving me answers.

As we got closer to the arena, I begged him to take us backstage before the show started.

“Don't you want to be at ringside and watch all the matches?”

“But I wanna meet everyone, Papá!”

He chuckled. “Once we get there, I'll take you backstage, *mi princesa*.”

I cheered and started dancing in my car seat. My parents chuckled while Diego rolled his eyes. I glanced over at him and patted his hand. He looked at me with a glare, but I just smiled hoping that would brighten his mood up a little. His mouth slightly turned up, so I knew that he at least was feeling ok, even if he didn't want to show it.

Once we got to the arena, I was glued to Papá's hip. I had only watched a few episodes of Monday Nite Fury recently since my parents wanted to make sure that it was

something I had *wanted* to watch and didn't feel like I *needed* to, simply because Papá was on TV. After the first episode, I was hooked. The drama. The glitz. The characters. The costumes. All of it was enchanting, and I couldn't get enough. And none of it disappointed in real life either.

Mamá and Diego stayed towards the front of backstage area while Papá took me around and introduced me to everyone, including the general manager of the show. I looked up at him and smiled. He extended his hand to me and I shook it.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lyric," the man said.

"Nice to meet you too! Although, you seem different from how you are on TV . . ."

The man chuckled. "Well, the TV version of me is supposed to be mean and not very nice to people. Your father being one of them."

Papá chuckled. "But behind the scenes, Mr. Haynes here really does care for all of us and makes sure that everyone is performing at their best and happiest. No matter the storyline."

"Storyline?"

Mr. Haynes chuckled. "I see she's new to everything still, Manny."

"She is, Jon. But she'll get there. After all, in ten years this one may be knocking on the door just waiting to get in and become champ. The first ever female de la Cruz wrestler in NWWF."

Papá patted my head as he said this. I couldn't help but smile. Only after an hour of being here, I could tell I want to be around this forever.

We talked with Mr. Haynes for a few more minutes before he had to leave, so Papá and I continued walking around. At one point I got thirsty, so we went to this area that Papá called catering, and I got a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

“Don’t tell your mom I got you that.”

I made a motion of zipping and locking my lips with a key and threw it behind me, making Papá laugh. I had just taken a sip when a woman approached us.

“Ah, Manny! Who is this cutie?”

I turned and saw a tall woman. Her hair was a long chocolate brown color with golden streaks and was very curly. Her eyes were a dark brown with hints of green and gold. She was wearing a short red dress with a very low neckline and black heels. She carried herself with so much confidence that I was immediately drawn to her.

Papá stood up and shook the woman’s hand, “Nice to see you, as always, Stella.” He looked at me and smiled. “This right here is *mi princesa*, Lyric.”

I stood and shook the woman’s hand. She knelt down to my eye level and smiled. “Hi there, Lyric. I’m Stella. Your father has told everyone so much about you and your brother. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too! I remember seeing you on TV two weeks ago.”

“Oh,” Stella chuckled. “That wasn’t my best moment, I’d have to say.” She scratched her cheek with her left index finger. Her nails were blood red, matching the dress she was wearing. “There are some promos and interviews that should honestly never see the light of day again. That is one of them.”

“It wasn’t that bad, Stella,” Papá said.

“I was tripping over my words every time I spoke. I would say that’s pretty bad.”

“It could have been worse.”

Stella shrugged. “True, but it wasn’t my brightest moment either.” She looked back at me and smiled. “Always take your time with your words, little Lyric. Words have power. And how you deliver them determines how people look at you. Be confident and no matter how you feel, others will see you for what you’re letting them see you as.”

I nodded.

“Good.” Stella stood back up and patted my head. “I’ll see ya around, little Lyric. Gotta go finish getting ready for the show.”

She waved bye to Papá and me and left the catering area. I watched her as she left and saw how she carried herself.

“Lyric, *mija*, it’s time to get you back.”

My head hung a little as he took my hand as we made our way back to where we left Mamá and Diego. They were talking with Mr. Haynes. Papá and I joined them as Mr. Haynes excused himself. Papá hugged Mamá and Diego before sending us off to find our seats. We were front row on the right side of the ring, so we saw everything.

The show started off good, but I didn’t pay much attention until I noticed a familiar red dress walk down the ramp with a tall guy. She had her hand wrapped around the guy’s elbow and smirked as they walked. I heard the announcer say her name was Stellar Stella Marie. She stood on the opposite side of the ring, so I watched what she did the entire match. Stella stayed at ringside and cheered her wrestler on, occasionally yelling at the ref or at her wrestler, warning him about a move. At one point, her wrestler had the ref distracted, so she slapped the opposing guy as he leaned against the ropes. Stella did this and other things throughout the match. The crowd booed her like crazy. By

the end of the match, Stella got into a verbal fight with the other guy, allowing her guy to take advantage and perform a surprise finisher to get the pinfall. Stella made eye contact with me and winked before she got into the ring to celebrate with her wrestler.

A few more matches followed until finally it was the last part of the show. The entrance music of Liam Lopez, the current NWWF World Heavyweight Champion, started playing as he walked down the ramp. He grabbed a mic and cleared his throat.

“Six months ago, I became your champion.” The crowd booed. “In those six months, I have *made* this title relevant again. For far too long this title had been held by nameless men who couldn’t personify what this company is or needs. Now it does. You’re welcome.” He smirked as the crowd let out a loud boo. I had to cover my ears for a minute. The booing was so loud.

“Now, I’ve fought every challenger that has stepped up and each one has met the same fate. Lying on their back as my hand is raised in victory after the sweet sounds of them tapping out. I have gone undefeated since winning this title. No one can defeat me!”

Suddenly Papá’s music played. The crowd cheered loudly as he got into the ring.

“Look, Liam, you may have had Lady Luck on your side since you cheated your way to the title, but you haven’t beaten everyone in that locker room. Must I remind you that the last time you lost a match, you tapped out to me.”

“Oh please. Manuel, you’re not all that. In fact, you’re not worth the time I’m wasting right now talking to you. Besides, that man you beat six months ago is no longer here. I’m a changed man. I’m the champion.”

“Is that so?” Papá smirked. “Well, I’m not convinced. I still see the conniving low-life that will do anything to get a win like using a steel chair behind the ref’s back that I managed to make tap out six months ago.”

Liam scoffed. “Low-life? The only low-life I see is you and all these... *Texans*. Seriously, how do you all live here? It’s disgusting.” That earned another round of booming boos from the crowd.

“Disgusting? Only disgusting thing here is seeing that title on your shoulder. And I think it’s time I take it back.”

“Ha! I’d like to see you try.”

“How ‘bout right now? I think this crowd in Corpus has heard you run your mouth long enough, and I’ll gladly shut you up.”

“You want a match with me. Tonight?” Liam got right in Papá’s face and smiled an evil grin. “Alright. But it won’t be for the title.”

The crowd booed.

“Oh, like he deserves it?”

The crowd chanted “Yes” repetitively. Papá shrugged his shoulders as he pointed at the crowd. A few seconds later, Mr. Haynes’ music played. He came out and stood at the top of the entrance ramp.

“Liam, Manuel, you both look ready for a fight. So, I’m going to make this official. Liam, you will go one-on-one with Manuel right now.” Mr. Haynes turned to walk backstage, but he stopped and turned back to Papá and Liam. “Oh, and Liam. That title *WILL* be on the line. Get me a ref out here!”

A ref ran into the ring as Liam and Papá went to opposite corners of the ring. The ref took the title from Liam and held it over his head as the ring announcer introduced both Papá and Liam. The ref handed off the belt to a stagehand before checking Papá and Liam's wrists and ankles. He stood in the center of the ring and signaled the match to start.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

It started off with a lock up. The match was slow at first, but after five minutes, Papá got the speed of it going quicker. At times Liam blocked Papá's moves or strikes, but that didn't faze Papá. Finally, Liam was lying on his back and breathing heavily. Papá was in an opposite corner and watched Liam slowly get up. He grabbed Liam and lifted him on top his shoulders. Papá lifted Liam's body up off his shoulders and hit Liam in the face with his left knee. Papá rolled Liam over and went for the cover. The ref's hand hit the matt, counting the pin.

One!

Two!

Three!

Ding! Ding! Ding!

“Here's your winner and *NEW* NWWF World Heavyweight Champion, Manuel de la Cruz!”

I was jumping up and down at my ringside seat, ecstatic that my Papá just won the world title for the third time. I looked at Mamá. She was crying. Diego had a small smile, but his eyes told a different story. He was happy, but also sad? I couldn't tell for sure.

Papá jumped down from the ring and hugged my mom, then my brother, and then me. He waved and high fived a few people as he made his way to the back. Mamá motioned for us to grab our things and made our way to the back area as the fans started making their way out of the arena.

Papá stood in front of a white backdrop and smiled as a photographer was taking photos. The photographer had him hold his newly won title in several different ways before he let Papá go change.

Mamá, Diego, and I waited outside the locker room for Papá to finish changing so we could go home when I heard heel clicks walking towards us. I looked up and saw it was Stella Marie. She was smiling as she extended her hand to Mamá.

“Tell your husband congratulations for me,” Stella said.

“I will Stella,” Mamá said.

“But also make sure to tell him that my man, Jason LaFonsetta, will be coming for that title very soon and to not get too comfortable with it.” Stella smiles at Mamá before turning and walking away. She looks at me as she passes and winks. I smiled and tried to wink back. Stella chuckled left.

Papá came out of the locker room a few seconds later and we headed to the car. Mamá told him what Stella said and he laughed. He leaned over and said something in Mamá’s ear, making her laugh. I looked at Diego and nudged him with my elbow.

“You ok, *hermano*?” I whispered.

Diego nodded. “I just hopped that after Tio Luis retired, maybe Papá would too.”

“But Tio retired two years ago.”

“I know. I just want him home.”

I nodded. “I do too, Di. But Papá’s living his dream.”

“But at what cost?”

“What do you mean?”

Diego sighed. “He’s missing all the big events in our lives, and for what? A little more money? Making sure we’re good? I’m sure we can live off what *abuelito* made during his time, no problem.”

“You know Papá would never take money from *abuelito*.”

“Maybe he should though...”

“¿*De qué están hablando ustedes dos?*” Papá asked. I didn’t realize we made it to the car until Papá spoke.

“*Nada importante,*” Diego said. He got into the car and didn’t speak the rest of the way home. I wanted to ask him more, but once Diego stops talking, you couldn’t get more out of him until he decides to.

When we got home, I changed into light blue and black checkered printed pajamas that had little brown poodles printed on them. As I was climbing into bed, Papá knocked on the door and walked in.

“Congrats Papá,” I said through a big yawn.

“Thank you, *mija,*” he said as he started tucking me into bed. “Now get some sleep. I’ll see you and your brother off to school before I head back on the road.”

“Do you have to?” I said, pouting.

Papá nods as he strokes my hair. “I’m the champion now, Lyric. Papá wants to be a fighting champion and make all of you proud.”

“I’m already proud of you, Papá.”

He chuckles. “I know, mija. I know. Now get some rest.”

Papá leaned down and kissed my forehead. I snuggle into my fuzzy sky-blue blanket, clutching onto my stuffed puppy and slowly drifted off as Papá turned the lights off.

I dreamed I was older, standing ringside during a match. I was yelling and cheering on the man in the ring. When the opposing guy was lying close to the edge of the apron, my man distracted the ref. I saw an opportunity and punched him. The crowd booed me. I got a thrill of excitement that I could get them to react like that.

The match ended with my man winning. I ran to the timekeeper’s area, where the belt was being held during the match, and I yanked it away from the ring announcer. I rushed into the ring and handed my man the belt, lifting his right arm up in victory as his left held the NWWF Heavyweight Championship. The crowd booed us, but we looked at one another and smiled. We left the ring and walked up the ramp. I looked up at the giant screen at the top of the rampway. It was showing replays of different moments from the match, and I saw one that showed me getting involved in the match.

Halfway up, we turned around and faced the audience. He held the title up with his left arm as his right snaked around my waist and pulled me into his side. I placed my right arm around him as we both looked out at the audience and the former champion in the ring. We both laughed as I started mocking the other guy. The crowd seemed to boo us even louder than before, sending a rush of excitement through me. Who knew it would be this much fun to be a bad guy?

CHAPTER III

“Training starts in five, mija!”

I slowly pulled the faded, pastel blue blanket closer to my body as I groaned. I didn't want to do this. Papá knew that I didn't want to be a wrestler like him or Tío Luis. But since I lost a bet to Diego last week, I had to start training at least until he graduated in June. Knowing Papá's dream of both his kids continuing the de la Cruz legacy, I knew he would have me continue training long after Diego graduated.

This would be a long ten months.

As I reflected on my unfortunate circumstances, I felt the blanket slowly lift around my feet. Then in an instant I was blinded by sunlight. I yelled as I grabbed my pillow, throwing it over my face. I heard Diego chuckling at my pain. “Warn a girl next time, Di.”

“Wouldn't have to if you got up on time, Ly.”

I lifted the pillow off my face and looked Diego straight in the eye.

“Papá just called up the stairs like a minute ago.”

“It was like twenty.”

I rolled my eyes as I glanced over at the alarm clock on my bedside table. Papá had said last night he wanted to start right at nine a.m. The clock showed a starkly bright red 9:15 a.m.

“Crap . . .” I said as I quickly got out of bed and scrambled. Diego laughed at my manic state as he left the room.

“See ya in the ring, *hermana!*”

I pulled on black workout leggings, a black sports bra, and a loose black Fall Out Boy shirt before pulling my hair into a ponytail. I grabbed a pair of old, black wrestling boots Papá gave me last night and hurried to the detached garage, where a full size 20x20 foot ring was set up.

Papá and tío built the ring in 2002 just after we moved into the massive five-bedroom house that sits near Little Bay in Rockport, Texas. They’ve used the ring to train the next generation of wrestlers in the surrounding area, including Diego when he turned 14. Papá started traveling less in 2004 after Diego got onto the wrestling team at school. Papá was determined to train him up to be the next legendary de la Cruz. He hadn’t had other students since.

As I entered the garage, Papá was leaning on the white ropes of the ring. His eyes sparkled as he watched me walk towards it. I sat down on a bench set up a few feet away with a huff as I placed the boots on the ground and started to put them on.

“You’re late, *mija.*”

“I know, Papá. I’m sorry.”

“Seeing as it’s your first day, I will let the tardiness slide. But just this once.”

I nod as I started lacing up the boots. “Papá, you know I’m only doing this because . . .”

“Because you lost a bet with your brother. I know, *mija.*”

“But I only lost because he predicted the triple threat match correctly. Our predictions for The All-American Bash pay-per-view were tied until the main event.”

“A loss is still a loss, *mija.*”

“I know,” I mumbled.

“Besides, you might find you like it and decide to follow in our footsteps.”

“Papá . . .”

“Mija,” Papá said as he waved his hand, most likely to silence me and my unwillingness to wrestle, “it’s in your blood. Once you get in here and start learning the art, you’re going to love it. You have the potential to carry the family legacy in the female division. They need a de la Cruz in the NWWF. And the first step in doing that is getting in this ring and learning. Trust me. Now, let’s try a side headlock sequence with your brother.”

I looked at my brother. He was sitting in the ring finishing his leg stretches before standing and starting to stretch his abdomen and arms. I didn’t want to argue with Papá again. I could see the way his eyes sparkled when we went to Diego’s amateur wrestling matches. The pride he held for his son was obvious to anyone who just glanced his way. Diego made captain as a sophomore, had become a national champion the past three years, and was headed into the independent circuit as soon as he graduated in June. Papá was ecstatic to say the least. I want him to have that same look in his eyes when he talked about me. I just don’t want *that* life.

But as I thought about it, knowing the basics of in-ring work would pay off in the future. If I knew the basics and how to put together a move set, it would benefit me and whoever I would be managing in the future. Knowing as much as I could about being in the ring would help me be the best manager. And if this is only until Diego graduates, why not help prepare the both of us for our futures? I finished lacing up the black training boots and climbed into the ring.

“Alright, Papá, I’ll give it a go. Besides,” I glanced over at Diego, “I’m sure Diego asked for this because he wants some sort of challenge.”

Diego chuckled. “Now that’s a thought. My little sister giving me a challenge.”

I glared at Diego as Papá clapped his hands together. “Ah, friendly sibling competition. A healthy start to your training, Lyric. Now, watch me and your brother. I expect you to be able to follow exactly what I’m doing.”

I nodded as Papá and Diego started a simple sequence, a lock up into Papá putting Diego into a side headlock, followed by Diego pushing Papá away and to the ropes. After a few more times, Papá had me replace him and run the sequence repetitively before having Diego and I switch spots.

Papá had me run the ropes after that to get a feeling of how to run in the ring as well as how to bounce off the ropes while running. For the first week, Papá ran practice like this every day: run the ropes, simple sequences, run the ropes again, lift weights, work out specific muscle groups for two hours, rinse and repeat. Slowly the training changed as the weeks went on.

By the last week of school, we were running practice matches every day to get Diego ready for his upcoming debut with a local independent promotion. They were thrilled to have a de la Cruz on their roster and were planning on giving Diego a big debut match against their top guy. I couldn’t be more excited for him, especially since this match is in three weeks.

We were lying in the ring after running a practice match. I could tell there was something on his mind during practice. It was showing on his face more prominently right now.

“What’s on your mind, Di?”

He chuckled. “How’d ya know?”

I rolled over on my stomach. “Simple. I’m your sister.”

Diego shrugged as he continued to look at the ceiling. “What should my ring name be?”

I was not expecting that. “Your ring name? I would have thought you’d have that figured out by now. Haven’t the promoters already been blasting your image across social media?”

“My face and the de la Cruz name, yes. But not my first name.”

I laid back on the mat. “Why not just use your name? Papá and abuelo did.”

“Tío didn’t. And I don’t want to use my name. Can you imagine an arena full of people chanting Diego? It just opens too many *Go, Diego, Go* jokes. I’ve had enough of that in high school, thanks.”

I nodded. “Well, why not use a name that’ll have meaning? The crowd may not know it, but you would. Makes it that much more special.”

Diego was silent for a minute. “Have you thought of yours yet?”

“Mine?”

“Yeah. Even if you miraculously decide to become a competitor, you’re gonna need a name no matter what you end up doing.”

“Haven’t really thought about it. Just figured that I would use my name.”

“Lyric is easier to chant.”

I rolled my eyes. “As if people will be chanting my name. If I do my job right, they’ll be more focused on the guys in the ring.”

Diego chuckled. “Even managers gain a fanbase. All depends on your character and how you interact with the fans. Stella had quite the following before she retired.”

“Yeah, I remember. A lot of people cried when she left.”

We were silent after that. Diego most likely thinking about a name, while I was also starting to think about a name. I knew I wanted to be in the business, but did I really want to be known to the world as Lyric de la Cruz?

“Antonio.”

“Huh?” I looked over at Diego.

“Antonio. The masculine version of Antonia.”

“Abuela’s name?”

Diego nodded. “What better way to keep her fire alive than by using it as the inspiration for my name? She was the one who talked me down and encouraged me to follow my dream by asking Papá to train me.”

I reached out and grabbed his right hand, giving it a squeeze. “I think she would be honored and very proud, Diego.”

We stayed in the ring for a few more moments before we decided to head into the house to shower and get ready for his graduation.

~ ~ ~

I stood backstage with Diego as Papá and Mamá were talking with the promotion’s manager down the hall. Diego was dressed in his ring gear, black wrestling boots, black knee pads, black trunks with a thick blue stripe down both sides, a black elbow pad on his right arm, and a long black armband that went from his wrist to just above his elbow on his left arm. He was jumping up and down, trying to make it look like

he was just getting his heart pumping to get ready for the burst of adrenaline his system was going to get once the bell rang. But I knew my brother better than that. He only ever jumped in place like this when he was nervous.

“Take a breath, Di. Your nerves are making me anxious.”

Diego glanced over at me with his dark brown eyes. “I’m not nervous.”

“You’re jumping.”

“Heart rate.”

I roll my eyes. “As if you need to jump in place to get the blood pumping. You’ve competed in hundreds of amateur competitions on different stages in front of hundreds of people. What’s one indie show compared to all that?”

Diego stopped and turned to look straight at me. “The pressure. The expectations.”

“All the same, Di,” I told him as I placed my hands on his shoulders. “No matter what happens out there tonight, this is only the beginning. Think back to your first competition. No one expected much from your first match, yet you beat your opponent in record time. You have everything you need to be successful, just don’t overthink it. Take it one move at a time and enjoy it. You only get one debut match, so make it memorable.”

Diego smiled a little and pulled me into a hug. “Thanks, Ly. You know, you’re going to make a great manager one day.”

I smiled up at my big brother as we pulled away from the hug. I reached up to ruffle his curly brown hair. “I know.”

“*¡Mis hijos!* It’s almost time,” Papá said as he and Mamá approached us. He released Mamá’s hand and placed both hands on Diego’s shoulders. “Ready, *hijo?*”

“Ready, Papá.”

“Just remember that your father and I are so very proud of you,” Mamá said as she placed a gentle hand on Diego’s right arm. “You’re going to steal the show.”

“Thanks, Mamá. I’ll make you all proud.”

I walked to stand behind Mamá giving Diego two thumbs up and the biggest smile I could manage. Soon the stage manager was calling for Diego to make his way to the ramp area as his match was up soon. After a few hugs and more encouraging words, Diego followed the stage manager to his spot.

Papá, Mamá, and I watched the match from the backstage area. Papá didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Tonight, was all about Diego.

~ ~ ~

I walked into the massive house after school, tossing my keys into the bowl on the table in the entrance way and headed into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator to grab an energy drink.

“Welcome home, *η κόρη*. How was school?”

I turned to see my mother sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. Her reading glasses sitting on the end of her nose as her green eyes looked up at me. Her wavy black hair was pulled into a messy bun, secured by a random pen.

“Good,” I said as I closed the refrigerator door. “All the teachers decided to give the biggest tests before finals this week, but nothing I can’t handle.”

Mamá smiled at that. “My lovely Lyric, always on top of her classes. Do you know what rank you’re graduating at?”

I scratched my head as I tried to remember my ranking. “Unofficially, I’m third overall in the class. Though with finals, it can change to either second or fourth.”

“Still top five. Just like your *παλιά μητέρα*.”

“You’re not old, Mamá,” I said as I sat down next to her. We talked for a little bit when Papá walked in.

“You’re late for practice, Lyric.”

“I not going to practice today, Papá. I’ve made plans weeks ago to see *Iron Man 2* with Kat, Eliza, and Mira tonight.”

“All your homework done?”

“Been done since Monday.”

“What time is the movie?”

“7:20.”

“You have a few hours still. Get upstairs and changed. I’ll see you in the ring in ten.” Papá turned around and walked out. I sighed heavily as my head hit the table with a soft thud.

“I don’t wanna do this anymore, Mamá. Can’t you talk to him again?”

Mamá softly rubbed circles on my back. “I tried, *η μικρή μου άνθιση*, but he has his heart set. Just a few more weeks, alright?”

I nod slightly. I took another deep breath and stood up. I went upstairs and changed quickly before heading to the garage.

~ ~ ~

“I can’t believe he’s *still* making you wrestle,” Kat said.

“Have you tried just *not* going to practice?” Eliza asked.

“Guys,” Mira spoke up, “y’all don’t know Mr. M. Once he has his mind set, you either do what he asks or else.”

“He sounds awful, to be honest, Ly,” Eliza said as she twirled a strand of her long blonde hair. “I mean, honestly, what kind of father wouldn’t want his daughter to be happy?”

“Mine,” I said finally. “Ever since Diego got on this long losing streak, he’s been putting more and more pressure on me. It’s like I’m his last hope for glory.”

“He’s a legend!” Mira said. “Second generation competitor, second longest reigning heavyweight champ in history, won the most tag titles in company history. He’s guaranteed to be in the Hall of Fame in like five years, max.”

“He’s proud of what he’s done, yes. But he’d be even *more* proud to be the father of the next great wrestling star,” I said.

The four of us sat in silence, eating our ice cream at Sonic at a round table. After a moment, Kat hummed. “You think he’s putting the same pressure his own father put on him onto you and Diego? It sounds like wrestling is all he knows.”

“It’s because it is. He’s wanting to open an official wrestling school once I graduate. One that’s not run in our garage but in a gym or another building somewhere in town.”

My friends glanced at one another before looking back at me.

Mira leaned closer to me and placed a hand on top of mine. “Tomorrow you need to just say no. I know its practical suicide considering who your father is, but you have to stand up now.”

“We’re less than three weeks away from graduating, Ly,” Eliza said. “You’re the only one in the top 10 of the class that hasn’t applied to college. It’s now or never.”

I sigh heavily. “I know, I know. I’m just glad that my dad hasn’t asked about college yet. Mamá has, but she’s cool with my dream. It’s just Papá.”

“Well,” Eliza said, “either way, your dad needs to stop being so overbearing. It’s your life, not his. He can go and push his dreams on his new students.”

“At least they’ll share the same goal of being a wrestler like him,” Kat said.

I chuckled. “Yeah. I’m sure there’s plenty of people in Rockport just dying to learn how to wrestle from my father. He’ll be fine.”

~ ~ ~

I walked into the detached garage and saw Papá leaning on the ropes, looking over the place with wandering eyes. “Hey, Papá. Can I talk to you?”

He looked over at me and smiled. “Ah, *mija*, you’re early . . .” He paused when he noticed what I was wearing. “Interesting choice of ring gear today, *mija*.”

I looked down and saw my light wash jean shorts, a loose yellow Paramore shirt, and a pair of Converse on my feet. I looked back up at Papá. “Ah. About that, Papá. I’m not gonna be training anymore. I’m done.”

He chuckled. “This again, Lyric? What have I told you before? There’s no real future with being a manager. You’ll be looked over constantly, taken advantage of at every possible opportunity by anyone and everyone . . .”

“I’m not going to be taken advantage of. You and Mamá have taught me how to protect myself and stand up for what I believe in.” I took a breath to steady myself. “And that’s what I’m doing right now. I can’t see myself being a full-time wrestler. No matter how much you think I have talent or that I can make it just because I’m a de la Cruz isn’t going to change my mind. I want to be a manager. That’s the only thing I want to do. I don’t even want to go to college!”

Papá was silent for a moment. “You didn’t apply to any universities?”

“No.”

“Lyric...”

“I’m done with this dance, Papá. No matter what you’ve said, nothing has changed my mind.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Papá . . .”

“I am not going to let you waste your life trying to do something that will get you nothing. You either become a wrestler or you go to college. I did not put off opening my wrestling school just so you can pursue this . . . this . . . nonsense.”

I glared at my father.

“Why?” I asked, my voice going hard.

“Excuse me?”

I almost scoffed at him. “You gave all this support to Diego, who is practically lost in a sea of men in the Indies, not getting noticed by anyone. Let alone NWWF! You put so much pressure on him that once he started on this losing streak, he stopped calling, stopped visiting. Why won’t you support *my* dream? I’ll have a better chance of doing

something with my life outside of the independent circuit if I become a manager, and I'll be happy in the process!"

Papá was fuming. "No daughter of mine will end up being arm candy for a selfish, self-absorbed imbecile to flaunt around wearing practically nothing and acting like a brainless ditz! You are either wrestling or going to college. That. Is. FINAL."

My eyes narrowed. I had just about enough of my father. "My mind is made up, Papá. You can't change it."

Papá stood up straight. "Fine. Struggle if that's what you want, but you will not be living in this house if you pursue this nonsense."

"What?"

"You heard me, Lyric." My father exited the ring and walked to the doors of the garage. Before opening them, he looked over his shoulder at me. "You graduate in three weeks. If you still want to pursue this, you have until then to find another place to live."

And with that he walked out.

CHAPTER IV

I'm not sure how long I stood there for. Time just seemed to stop when my *father* said those words. Was he seriously going to kick his own daughter out of the house? I'm sure if Diego decided to pursue another job, he'd support him. Why is it me that he's throwing a tantrum on? Just because I'm not carrying on a fantasy that Papá has been holding onto for years, it doesn't give him the right to do this.

In that last stand against him, I could tell I had become the letdown of the family name. But for what? Simply because he didn't like the whole manager thing? What's his deal with that anyway?

Eventually I made my way outside and just walked. My legs carried me away from the house and towards the short pier on the edge of my family's property. I sat on the end of the pier, my right leg tucked into my chest as the left slowly kicked, just barely skimming the water. The reds and oranges of the setting sun reflected off the water and pulled me away from my thoughts for a while. My phone vibrated a few times, but I paid no attention to it.

As the sun grew closer to the skyline, I saw lights from across the bay turn on. I imagined what some of those houses across the way must be doing. Families settling in for dinner, joking and enjoying each other's company. It'd been some time since my family did that.

“Lyric.”

I turned to see my mother walking down the pier towards me, but I turned back to the bay. I heard my mother sigh as she sat next to me. I glanced over at her. Her long black hair was pulled up into a bun, a few grey strands starting to show. Her still bright green eyes looked out over the bay, as a small smile graced her face making the faint smile lines and crow's feet show.

“Lyric, *i kóri mou*, what happened?”

I stayed silent. My eyes looked down at the bay, watching our reflections shimmer as the water moved. As I took in our reflections, I saw just how similar we really are. We had been mistaken for sisters many times before. I always thought it was weird, but looking at us in this moment, I couldn't help but agree.

I saw Mamá look at me in our reflection, her eyes as kind as ever. She placed a hand on top of mine. “Lyric?”

I looked up at her and instantly broke down. She pulled me into her arms and held me as I sobbed. We rocked a bit as she hummed my favorite lullaby. No matter how old I get, “The Child Wants to Dance” always brought me some peace. After a few moments I calmed down. Mamá held my face in her hands as she wiped my tears. “Talk to me, my little blossom.”

I nodded as she held me close. “Papá . . . he's . . . he's not happy. He said . . . if I don't go to college or wrestle then . . . I can't go back.”

Mamá started to stroke my hair. “He's upset, my sweet. Manuel wants a family lineage just like your *pappoús*.”

“Doesn't Papá know how much stress he's putting on Diego and me? I feel trapped. Like I can't be who I want to be . . .”

“He wants what’s best for you.”

“I know that Mamá, but I can’t . . .”

“I know, my sweet. I know.”

“Do you know what he said?”

“Not exactly. When your father entered the house, he was quite upset. Didn’t want to talk.”

“He basically threw me out. Said if I still want to try and be a manager, then I have until I graduate to find a place to live.”

Mamá’s hand stilled as she mumbled, “*aftón ton gamiméno ilíthio.*”

My head popped off her shoulder. “Mother.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry, Lyric. But your father can be an idiot sometimes. And that decision is one of the most idiotic things he’s done.”

I placed my head back on her shoulder. “So, what should I do?”

“Follow your dreams, *ti glykiá kóri mou*. Bloom into the woman you are meant to be. And if that means going against your father to do that. I’ll support you. No matter what.”

I glanced up at Mamá hesitantly. “You sure?”

She laughed a little. “I have stood up to your father and his little temper tantrums for the past twenty-one years. Some even bigger than the one that he’s on right now. I think I’ll be able to handle him. He’ll come around eventually. But until then,” Mamá took my face into her hands once more and looked into my eyes, “I will support you in any way I can.” She was quiet for a moment before she wiggled her eyebrows at me. “I do make quite a bit from my Grecian romance novels, after all.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mother . . .”

She chuckled as she let her hands drop back down to the pier. We looked over the bay as the sun finished its path and the moon glimmered in the water. Mamá stood up.

“We should head home. I’ll talk with your father and get him to calm down a little.”

I nodded as I stood up. We started walking back to the house. After a few moments, Mamá put her arm around me. “I’ve got some mint dark chocolate ice cream we can gorge out on.”

“Dessert before dinner?”

“I think today calls for dessert *for* dinner.”

I smiled at her before looking ahead. “Hey, Mamá?”

“Hm?”

“Why does Papá hate the manager role so much?”

She sighed deeply as her arm circled on me tighter. “It’s a long story, my sweet. I’ll tell you another time.”

~ ~ ~

Papá didn’t let up on his decision. I didn’t let up on mine. Two weeks later, I graduated from high school. The day after, I moved into an apartment just off Corpus Christi Bay. Mamá helped me move in and stayed with me for a few days. We explored my new town as I got my feet under me. I started working at a café near the complex to make some money as I looked around for promotions to work with.

It took about a month before I found a promotion looking for new talent that was located just outside of Corpus. They were setting up a signup day at a local high school

located on the other side of town. I got off work late and was afraid that I would miss the small time window the promotion was going to be there. I parked and quickly bolted inside, following the signs to the gym. There was a woman sitting at a long brown table with two piles of packets on either side of her. Her blonde hair was cut into a short bob as her thick black rimmed glasses hung low on her nose. I skidded to a stop in front of the table, practically gasping for air. She looked up at me, arching her eyebrows for a moment. Her facial expression was blank, almost bored looking. I smiled at her, though a little awkwardly.

“Hi, I’m here to sign up for the promotion.”

The woman handed me a packet from the left pile and a pen. She pointed to a few chairs behind me and went back to the packet she was reading. I turned and sat on the uncomfortable blue plastic chair and looked down at the stark, white packet in my hands. General information like age, height, weight, hometown was on the top. Those were easy to fill in.

Date of Birth: November 7, 1992

Age: 18

Height: 5’ 6”

Weight: 130 lbs.

Hometown: Rockport, TX

Two blank spots were staring at me, though, as if taunting me. Challenging me to either take that step I’ve been wanting to or wuss out and go against everything I was going to work for before I even began my career.

Legal Name:

Ring Name:

I knew the legal name was for logistical reasons. I did want to get paid after all, but I hadn't put much thought into what I wanted to be known as. I've tossed a few ideas around, but nothing sounded right. Nothing had that wow factor that would catch your attention like I wanted. So, I filled in the blank that I could fill in.

Legal Name: Lyric Angel de la Cruz

The white space hovering over that simple black line next to "Ring Name" glared right at me. I felt nervous. This would be a name I would have to stay with my whole career in the Indy circuit. There was a strong chance I'd be able to change it if I made it to the NWWF, but there was no guarantee that I would ever end up there. This name I choose needs to be one I'm willing to stay with for at least ten years, if not my entire career.

I wanted to give a nod to my heritage, but not just the Hispanic side. Sure, I'm a proud Latina, but I'm also proud of my Grecian heritage. Mamá has been my rock, my number one supporter, throughout my entire life, but especially recently, and I want to honor her and that side of my family somehow. I looked down at the paper once again and in that moment the perfect name came to me. All the little nicknames she's called me ran through my mind, but one stood out in particular.

το μικρό μου άνθος.

My little blossom.

She'd always call me that when she knew I was down or not having a good day. Knowing she has always believed I'd blossom helped me get through so much. And I knew the perfect name.

Ring Name: Thalia Alvarado

I smiled at it. Thalia just felt right. A nod to both sides of my heritage but a name that I could build my own legacy on. One that I could be proud of. After a few more moments of filling out the packet, I gave it back to the woman sitting behind the table. The woman looked over the information with a bored look, but she sat up a little straighter as her eyes widened a little after she saw my last name. She looked slightly confused as she continued going through the packet. As she got to the second page, she slowly looked up at me.

“A manager, huh? No desire to be a competitor?”

“None.”

“At all?”

“Nope.”

She shrugged and with a nod the woman placed a mark on the packet and pointed towards the makeshift ring that was set up in the high school’s gym. “Our promoter is through there. Let him know your intentions, and he’ll decide what to do with you.”

I nodded and headed inside the school gym.

CHAPTER V

I walked in and was immediately greeted by the sound of a body slamming onto the canvas. A tall, slender man was standing just outside ring, watching the two men inside. His hair was dark, almost black and had a slight curl to it. One of the men in the ring pinned the other, and the tall man outside started to clap. As I approached, I could hear him talking to the two in the ring.

"Yer both said dat yer jist started seriously trainin', yeah?"

"Yes, sir," one guy said. The other one echoed, though rather softly and quite out of breath.

His voice sounded familiar. It took a moment for me to connect the accent I was hearing to someone that I had watched in NWWF a few years ago. An iconic Irish accent that anyone who was a fan of the NWWF, or independent wrestling for that matter, would recognize.

"Ya show promise, fellas," the Irishman said. "However, I'm sorry to say dis, but I'm not runnin' a promoshun dat'll focus much on de basics an' trainin'. You'll need ter fend a school an' start from there. But reach out in a few years, an' I'll gladly sign yer both up."

The men nodded and exited the ring. The tall Irish man turned around and made eye contact with me. From his voice I had a feeling I knew who he was, but after seeing his face and striking blue eyes that couldn't belong to anyone else, there was no way to deny who was standing right in front of me.

Aidan Quinn.

Arguably the most charismatic wrestler to ever be in NWWF, even beating a few of my father's records during his five years with the company. He had to retire in 2008 due to a neck injury he sustained in his last ladder match. He won and retained the title, but sadly had to relinquish it a week later because of the irreparable damage to his neck. Who would have thought that two years later I'd be trying to join his promotion?

I must have been staring and not notice because Aidan cleared his throat.

“Lookin’ for me, lass?”

I felt myself blink a few times before my brain turned back on. It's not every day you meet someone that revolutionized the company your family used to work for and that you hope to one day change. Aidan came into the company in my father's final years, so I never had the opportunity to interact with him face to face. I shook my head to clear the small cobwebs that started to form before looking at Aidan and smiling.

“I am, my name is Lyric and I'm looking to become a member of your promotion.”

He shook my hand and nodded. “Great! Well, why don't yer step into de rin' ter warm up an' de next person dat walks in . . .”

“Actually, um, I'm not looking to be a wrestler.”

His right eyebrow arched. “Not a wrestler? So, what is it dat you're interested in, lass?”

“Managing,” I said with as much confidence as I could muster.

“Managin', 'uh. Not many enter de business ter be a manager. Usually dat's a steppin' stone ter in-rin' competition.”

“I know, but let’s just say I’m not like most people.”

He nodded. I saw his eyes searching my face for a moment.

“You look familiar. ’Av we met before?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Hmm . . .” He stood there thinking for a moment. “What ye say yisser name wus, lass?”

“Lyric.”

“Full name, lass.”

I felt a lump in my throat. I don’t want him to give me a job just because of who I’m related to. But he’d find out sooner or later because of that damn form.

I took a breath. “Lyric de la Cruz.”

Aidan extended his hand. “Nice ter meet yer, Miss Lyric. I’m Desmond Lynch.”

I shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Lynch.”

“Desmond, please. I’m not dat old. Plus, if you’re on our roster, you’re family.”

“Am I on the roster?”

“Depends. ’av yer ever managed someone before, Lyric?”

“Not officially.”

Desmond looked at his watch. “Our time ’ere tonite is almost up, so I doubt there’ll be more comin’.” He looked back at me. “I’ll be gettin’ de whole roster together dis weekend ter mingle an’ git ter know each other before they start beatin’ de crahp out of each other. I’ll be ’avin’ two of me vets dat are leavin’ soon ’av wan final ‘match’ dat night. I’d like ter see you manage wan of dem. Soun’ good?”

“Yes, of course.”

Desmond pulled a notepad out of his jacket pocket and a pen, scribbled something down, and handed me the paper before leaving.

“See ya dis weekend, Miss Lyric.”

I looked down at the yellow paper and saw two names and numbers. I guess Desmond wants me to contact them before this weekend. I put the paper in my bag and left the gym, crafting what I was going to say to both men specifically. This will be my first test as a manager. Who wants me at ringside?

~ ~ ~

I sat in my car just outside of Desmond’s house. I thought he would have to have a big place in order to host a roster of at least 20 people, but I wasn’t expecting a practical mansion in the middle of nowhere in Texas next to a small lake. I was so sure I had the wrong house until I saw Desmond walk out his front door with a stunning woman, who at first glance I knew was his wife that still works with NWWF. They were welcoming someone at their car that arrived a moment before I did. The guy was just a few inches taller than Desmond. His hair was a medium brown that was quite curly. He must have said something incredibly funny because I saw Desmond clutching at his stomach, almost doubling over with laughter as his wife was laughing just as hard.

As the curly haired guy started to walk inside, I decided to get out of my car and approach the house. I grabbed my small duffle bag that had some clothes and makeup to change into the manager character I created over the week and locked my car. Once I turned around, it didn’t take long for Desmond to notice me. He smiled and extended his hand as I got closer.

“Ah, Miss Lyric. Welcome to Lynch Estate.”

I shook his hand. “Thank you for the invitation. You two have a beautiful place.”

“Thank you,” Desmond’s wife said. She had a subtle Hispanic accent. “We’ve worked quite hard to get this property looking this good. We’re lucky that Des is good with landscaping.”

Desmond chuckled. “Only de best for de best wife.” He kissed her cheek. “Lyric, I’m sure you know who the Mrs. is.”

I nod. “Of course. The first female to ever be a commentator for NWWF, and my personal favorite. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Lynch.”

She extended her well-manicured hand to me. “Call me Samanta, Lyric. Now that you’re a member of this roster, you’re family.” She leaned in a bit closer and lowered her voice. “Plus, us Latinas have to stick together.” She pulled away and winked.

“Shall we head inside den?” Desmond asked. Samanta and I agreed, and I followed them inside.

~ ~ ~

After the last member of the roster arrived, Desmond and Samanta welcomed us into the family and to the Deep South Independent Wrestling roster. They had us introduce ourselves to the group, and once the last guy went, we all headed outside to the lake behind their house. The area was set up with two grills, lit Tiki torches, and decorated for a mid-summer party. Just off to the side of everything was a ring surrounded by black padding. The ring ropes were a sky blue and the ring skirt was a darker blue with the DSIW logo. None of the others seemed to pay it any attention.

As I was getting a drink, someone came up behind me and placed their hands over my eyes. Confused, I tried to elbow whoever it was behind me. All I heard was chuckling

and could feel the hands slightly move as the perp dodged my attacks. It wasn't until I heard Desmond call out "Spencer" and felt the hands slightly lift that I was able to escape. In a swift motion, I placed my cup down and grabbed the guy's left arm, twisting it to where I was now behind him and had his arm in a hammerlock.

"Alright, alright! I give!"

I released the hold and the guy turned around. He had a goofy smile on his face as he apologized. "Didn't expect to be put into a hammerlock so soon," he chuckled before extending his hand. "The name's Spencer Daniels."

I accepted the handshake. "Lyric. And next time you do that, it won't be a hammerlock that you'll find yourself in."

Spencer laughed, and we talked for a bit. It didn't take me long to connect him to the guy that Desmond and Samanta had been talking to when I arrived. He is quite the comedian. I couldn't help but laugh at every joke. If professional wrestling doesn't work out for him, I'm sure Spencer would make a great stand-up comedian.

As the day passed, I met almost everyone save for a few that ended up leaving early. I was the only person there that had no interest in competing in the ring, and one of only three other females, not including Samanta. There was no doubt a lot of testosterone in this promotion, but that's just how the business is right now, unfortunately. As the evening approached, Desmond shot me and the two guys a text:

Match starts in 30. Go get ready.

I looked up and saw Samanta walking towards me.

"I'll show you to the bathroom where you can get glammed up."

As we walked to the house, she asked me how excited I was for this match.

“I mean, it’ll be fun. I haven’t had the opportunity to be someone’s manager in front of a crowd before, so I’m sure there’ll be nerves and whatnot. I’m just glad that your husband is willing to give me a chance.”

Samanta nodded. “I think he saw the fire in your eyes that he saw in your father.”

I stopped. “So, he did give me the job because of my family . . .” My heart felt like it was slowly breaking. Would I ever be able to escape the family name and just get opportunities because of me? I felt an arm wrap around my shoulders.

“Lyric, hun, Des would have given you this opportunity even if you weren’t a de la Cruz. He just would have been more hesitant. Des especially wouldn’t have let you do this today if he wasn’t confident in your abilities and knowledge. I honestly think he sees himself in you a little.”

My eyebrows arched. “How?”

“It’s not common knowledge over here, but back over in Ireland, his father worked the Independents over there for years before leaving it all behind to start a family. His family is well-known and well-respected. One reason he didn’t change his ring name until he moved to the states is because of his father and wanting to make him proud.”

“Wow . . . so he’s a second gen . . .”

“And proud of it.” Samanta stood in front of me and placed her hands on my shoulders, making me look her in the eye. “He knows you have potential. You have that something we’ve been looking for to bring this promotion to new audiences. And it’s not because of your family. You have a passion for this. I saw it earlier when you were talking with a few of the new guys. And I see it in your eyes now. You have potential to be big, and we want to give you a place to launch your career off. That starts tonight.”

I felt tears pricking at my eyes. I couldn't say anything but thank you to Samanta. We hugged, and she showed me to the guest bathroom. It had incredible lighting that was perfect for reapplying my makeup. I kept it simple, applying a peach colored lip gloss and adding a small wing to my eyeliner. I changed into a red halter top shirt that had an alligator scale pattern to it and paired it with black short shorts. My black hair was left down as I placed a flower crown on my head. The crown was made of fake yellow hellebores, baby's breath, and red roses on a green vine with fake leaves. After making sure the small silver thumb ring that my mother gave me was placed on my right hand, I looked in the mirror, took a deep breath and headed for the door.

Samanta greeted me just down the hall and told me it was time. I handed her my bag as she walked me over to where the guy I was working with that day was. He introduced himself as Terry Puletua, but he was better known as Terry Tsunami. I googled him earlier in the week, and the last name of "Tsunami" made complete sense.

He was on the smallish side of guys in the business. I was only a few inches shorter than him. Granted, I'm a five-foot-eight-inch, eighteen-year-old in flats, but wrestlers tend to be a solid seven inches taller than me on average. He was barely pushing six feet. But it made sense with his preferred style of wrestling.

Terry is what we would call a "high-flyer." His fighting style consists of kicks, quick jabs, but, most importantly, he uses the ring ropes and turnbuckles to his advantage and flies. His chosen finisher move, dubbed "Tidal Wave," is a prime example of his skills. Once Terry gets his opponent unmoving on the mat, he climbs to the top turnbuckle and jumps forward while also leaning backwards midair, tucking his legs behind him, completing a 360 flip and landing on his opponent.

No one has kicked out since he started using it three years ago.

We talked for a few minutes, discussing how my character should act and if I should get involved at all. By the time Desmond came to let us know it was time, we had a whole game plan. The only time I should get involved is *if* he distracts the ref while his opponent, The Mammoth, is anywhere near me, and I have full range on what I could do to him as long as I let go of him before the ref turns back around. Terry was a babyface in the promotion, but his character tends to have heelish characteristics show up every so often in a match. This would be his one heel move.

“You two ready?” Desmond asked.

“We are,” both Terry and I said.

Desmond made his way outside and entered the ring to announce The Mammoth first. I saw him walk to the ring from the other door and immediately tried to figure out what I could do to him if Terry gave me the cue. The guy was massive but not super tall. He would have to be on the mat or outside the ring and on the ground for me to do anything substantial.

Once The Mammoth got into the ring, Desmond introduced Terry and me.

“And his opponent,” Desmond started. Terry looked at me and winked before opening the door and letting me head out first. “Accompanied by Thalia Alvarado, from Asau, Samoa weighing in at 185 pounds, Terry Tsunami!”

The roster went wild as we walked to the ring. I high-fived some people as we reached the ring. Terry entered as I stayed on the outside. The match was going well. Terry was fighting off The Mammoth quite well. I did my job of keeping our fellow roster members engaged, helping push them to cheer for Terry when he was down.

Finally, Terry managed to get Mammoth outside the ring and pulled the ref his direction to complain about something. This was my chance with a very small window. I rushed at The Mammoth who was lying face first on the ground. He slowly lifted his head, and that was the moment I chose to strike. I hit him on his back to jolt him a bit before quickly wrapping my right leg around his neck and hooked my left leg to my right ankle. I pushed my body up from the ground and extended my right hand behind me to grab my left leg, pulling it closer to me a bit to create pressure around The Mammoth's neck, but not enough to completely choke him out. I held that for a few seconds before releasing him and backing away as fast as possible. The guys around me ate it up and cheered as I backed away. I looked at the ring and saw that Terry had just stopped talking to the ref as I backed away, and I couldn't help but smirk a little.

Our plan worked.

Terry managed to get The Mammoth back inside the ring where they fought for a few more minutes before Terry landed his signature Tidal Wave shooting star press and got the victory. I joined him inside the ring as the ref raised Terry's right hand in the air. I stood next to him and held his left hand up. Our audience went wild. Terry hugged me before he grabbed my hand and raised it above my head. I felt a surge of pride in the fact that I had been able to get through a match and be a character the audience could get behind. Not bad for my first time.

As Terry and I climbed onto opposing turnbuckles to celebrate with the crowd, I saw someone that had the lightest olive skin I've ever seen standing in my direct line of sight. I looked at him and saw light green eyes with the right obscured by a curly black strand of hair. I only looked at him for a second, but I could swear I saw him wink at me

before he turned and walked towards the house. I shook that off and waved at a few people before Terry and I left the ring.

Desmond and Samanta walked over to us as we approached the house and congratulated Terry on his big win.

“And you, Lyric,” Desmond said as he looked at me, a sparkle of pride in his eyes. “I knew you had something special about you. It’s not everyday someone can lock in a figure-four necklock on a guy twice their size. That was impressive.”

“Thank you,” I said. I felt a little heat coming to my face after that complement. “I know it’s not often a manager actually locks in a submission move or anything like that.”

“And that’s what will set you apart,” Samanta spoke. “You’re unlike anyone out there, which is a welcomed breath of fresh air. You’re gonna go far, I can feel it.”

Both Desmond and Terry nodded at Samanta’s statement. I couldn’t help but want to cry a bit. I guess a tear escaped as Samanta gave me a hug, patting me on the back of my head.

So this is what it feels like. To be a part of a family that supports you.

No matter what.

CHAPTER VI

After that big party at Desmond's house, it took about a week before he contacted everyone again. The planning and practicing for our first show was scheduled for Tuesday night, and we were all expected to be there. He wanted to use that first night to see everyone wrestle and figure out what characters, storylines, and potential divisions we had going for us for the first few months.

Tuesday was the night Desmond wanted me to choose my partner.

Every member of the roster would show what they had to offer in both in-ring skill and character performance. From there, Desmond would talk with them and find the perfect sport for them, either in the tag team division or in the singles division. I honestly didn't have high hopes for many characters to have that "wow factor." At least not now.

I know that seems harsh, but after meeting and talking with almost everyone before the match with Terry, I could tell that only two of them had any sort of idea for the character they were wanting to portray. Many wanted to scrap their old characters and try something new. The only guy I talked to who had a solid idea of what he wanted to do was Spencer. But after getting to know him, I felt sure the character I had in mind would not mesh well with his character.

But there was one guy I hadn't talked to that had me intrigued, the olive-skinned man with the lightest green eyes I'd ever seen. It was like he'd stepped out of a model shoot. I tried finding him after everyone went inside, but he'd left. I figured that he arrived as I was getting ready since that was the first time I saw him, but it made me

curious as to why if he got there late that he left so fast. I asked Desmond and Samanta, but neither of them knew why he left so fast. Desmond did tell me that he had just moved to Texas from California and moved into an apartment in Corpus that day, explaining the tardiness to the party.

I'm not sure why I'd kept thinking about him. Maybe it was his looks or the mystery behind who he was, his story. Either way, I was going to keep an eye out for him.

~ ~ ~

I arrived at the high school gym where auditions were first held, our training area as well as the home of the first few DSIW shows. Desmond was working on getting his own building to have both a training area and performance area, but he hadn't found the *perfect* place yet. So, here we were in a high school gym.

I parked and got out of my car, but as I started walking towards the gym, a red truck drove right past me almost hitting me. I yelled at the car as it sped down the next row of parking spaces, rolled my eyes, and walked inside. I guess I was more upset about almost dying than I thought because when I walked in the building, Desmond took one look at me as asked, "Somethin' botherin' ya, lass?"

"Uh?" I looked at him. Desmond raised his eyebrows as if to ask the question again. "Oh, no. Not at all." I quickly started to put my hair up in a ponytail and tried to walk past him.

"Lyric..." I paused and looked at Desmond. "Somethin' is botherin' you. I can tell. You 'av de seem look me wife does whaen she's pissed about somethin'."

I took a deep breath, turning to face him as I spoke. “Some jerk face almost hit me with their truck as I was walking in. Just another reason why I hate those things. It’s like people who own massive cars need all the extra space to fit their oversized egos.”

The front door opened, and I glanced over to see who it was, ready to ask if they were driving that truck and lay into them for almost hitting me. I hadn’t expected to see the mystery olive-skinned man walking in. I saw Desmond smile as he walked over to the man.

“Giovanni, glad you could be ’ere on time today.”

“Still not going to let me live that down, huh Desmond . . .” Giovanni said. He had a hint of an Italian accent peeking through. “Well, you can rest assured that DSIW is my top priority. Saved up enough to not worry about work for a while.”

“Gran’,” Desmond said, “den you can ’elp de others when oi can’t.”

“Putting me in teacher mode, already?”

“You’ve got more years than anyone ’ere roight now. I’m expectin’ you ter be a leader for de first few shows, alright Gi?”

Giannino nodded and gave a fake salute. “Understood boss.”

Desmond nodded before turning to me. “Gi, I’d loike yer ter meet our next star, Miss Lyric.” Desmond placed a hand on my shoulder, smiling as he introduced me.

“Lyric, dis is Giovanni De La Fontaine. Oi met ’im in 2003 at an indie show jist before oi signed wi’ NWWF.”

I looked at Giannino and extended a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

He looked up and down at me for what felt like a little too long before his eyes landed back on my face and took my hand to shake it. “So you’re the little girl that

walked in front of my truck. You should be more careful before someone hurts that pretty face of yours.”

I froze. Had he just accused *me* of getting in front of his truck in the *parking lot*?

Giovanni’s snarky look made my blood boil. I only just met him and I hated him.

“Uhhh, I’m sorry,” I chuckled, “but *you’re* the one who almost hit *ME* with your truck,” I ripped my hand from his. “Look where you’re going before speeding *through* a parking lot next time.” I turned and walked towards the gym.

“See ya in there, sweetness!”

I didn’t look back, but I did send Giovanni a message with a simple flick of the wrist and an extended finger. His chuckle had me seeing red.

~ ~ ~

Desmond sat down next to me but said nothing as I silently fumed about my encounter. Samanta walked in just before we were scheduled to start and with just one look, she knew something was up but didn’t pry. She just gave me a soft pat on my shoulder and said, “We’ll talk later.”

We spent the next few hours watching member after member of the roster square up with one another and trying out different characters. Desmond and Samanta would ask if anyone had piqued my interest to manage yet. I had thoughts on characters and gave them a few ideas as to where to improve on. If I saw that there was a potential tag team, I told them. Everyone was working hard, and I could not be more excited to see every member of this roster grow, but none of them felt right.

Giovanni made his way out next. It took everything in me not to lunge at him or even just to hold back an eye roll. He carried himself as egotistically as he was acting

earlier. I didn't want to pay him any attention and tried to get out of watching him perform, but Desmond was one step ahead of me.

“In dis business, you're gonna 'av to work wi' people dat rub you de wrong way. Just de nature av things, Lyric. But, I promise dat Giovanni is a nice guy. He just 'as some . . .”

“Bad behavior with women?” I asked.

“No,” Samanta spoke up. “More like, he's too much of a charmer and tends to go overboard.”

I rolled my eyes. “Having that kind of reputation will harm him sooner rather than later.”

“I've told him,” Samanta said, “but he can be quite stubborn. Kind of like the man who helped train him.” Samanta glanced over at her husband.

“Don't luk at me. I've tol 'im since he started on dis character dat it'll come aff wrong.”

“What's his character?”

“The Italian heartthrob, Alessandro Pavoni,” Samanta said. “It's a good character, but he needs to reel in the charm a bit.”

As Samanta told me more about the character, Giovanni's opponent approached the ring. He had long blond hair that reached just past his shoulders. He wore dark blue and black wrestling tights, which contrasted with Giovanni's white and red trunks. Desmond walked over to the ring to talk to the two men to see what they were wanting to do. The three talked for a moment before the blond guy went outside the ring and walked a few feet away as Desmond walked back over to his seat.

“They're gonna work a promo den de match.”

I looked back to the ring and could've sworn Giovanni winked at me before grabbing a mic placed at the edge of the ring. I looked away from the ring, crossing my arms and waited for this to be over with. As Giovanni stood in the center of the ring, a gleam of something crossed his eyes as he looked over his “audience” of Desmond, Samanta, and myself. He smirked as he lifted the mic.

“There are some who are destined for greatness. Others, destined to bow down to greatness. And there are those in the smallest percent that are not even worthy to share a ring with greatness, let alone breathe the same air. I am destined for greatness. Everyone else in that locker room, well, they're bound to bow down. Everyone except Adam Cage.” Giovanni's looked disgusted as he spoke the blond guy's name. “Adam will *never* be able to match me in life, let alone this ring.”

“Really?” Adam spoke into his own mic as he approached. “You? Destined for greatness? Ha! ‘Oh, look at me, I'm Alessandro Pavoni and I'm hot.’ Dude,” Adam entered the ring and got into Giovanni's face, “no one likes you. You're talentless in this ring, and, I'm told, in other places, too.”

Giovanni gasps. “I'll have you know . . .”

“Can it. You talk too much, but you don't ever say anything. Sure there's a brain in there?” Adam goes to poke Giovanni in the head, but he swats the hand away. The two glare at each other for a moment. Giovanni smirks and turns away from Adam.

“You know, Adam,” He turns back and throws a forearm right into Adam's face. The two men brawl for a moment before they separate. They have one more stare-down before starting the match.

It was a back-and-forth match with each man having moments where it seemed he would win. In the end, Giovanni pulled out a chair from under the ring and was about to hit Adam with it, but Desmond stopped them.

“Dat’s enough,” he said as he stood. “I tink we ’av our main rivalry, right ladies?” Desmond looked at Samanta and me. Samanta nodded as she stood and walked towards the ring with Desmond. I stayed behind for a moment before joining them. Both guys were impressive, and the match was entertaining, but I was still pissed at Giovanni. No match would change that.

Samanta pulled me over and introduced me to Adam.

“That match looked really great,” I told him as I extended my hand.

“Thanks,” he breathed heavily. “Working with Gio in the past I think helped this match out. He’s a strong worker, and, if you couldn’t tell, we’ve got quite the chemistry in the ring.” I noticed a hint of a Canadian accent peeked out as he spoke.

“So, should I call you Adam or . . .”

He chuckled. “Name’s Owen. Owen Adams.”

We talked for a minute before Desmond and Giovanni walked over. Giovanni had this smug grin on his face as he looked at me. I felt my skin crawl.

“So, after talkin’ wi’ Giovanni an’ Owen, Oi tink we ’av our first major storyline.”

“Pray tell, love,” Samanta said.

“If Lyric agrees ter dis, de storyline ’ill go loike so. We first ’av Thalia manage Adam Cage. They work together for a few weeks. Adam an’ Alessandro become number one contenders for de DSIW title. At dis match, Thalia turns on Adam, aligning wi’

Alessandro, becomin' a heel, costin' Adam de match. We'd enter a long rivalry between Adam an' Alessandro that'll go for a few months wi' Adam winnin' de title at de end."

Desmond turned to me and smiled. "How's dat sound?"

I looked between the three men and Samanta. I was unsure about working with Giovanni, but working with Owen first—

"Sounds good to me."

~ ~ ~

After preparing for a month, figuring out the rivalries and stories everyone would be telling, finalizing the match card, and heavily promoting the show with fliers around Corpus, Mathis, and surrounding towns, the first show of Deep South Independent Wrestling had arrived. Owen was in the main event, so I had the whole show to worry about if the fans would like me. Would they like seeing a manager in a less sexualized way? I hadn't agreed with my father on quite a few things about this job, but the way females dressed in general was one we shared. I wasn't an "escort." I wouldn't be eye-candy. Tonight was my only chance to make a difference with this role.

My worry must have been quite apparent, as Owen came over to me as I was pacing.

"Everything alright, Lyric?"

"Nervous."

Owen placed a hand on my shoulder. "You'll do great. You're not going to be out there for very long, but the moment you come out everyone is going to love you."

"Thanks Owen."

He gave my shoulder one last squeeze before heading off to finish warming up. I took a deep breath to calm myself then headed to the women's locker room to finish getting ready. There were only a handful of other females, excluding Samanta and myself, that were on the roster. Not many had shown up for the auditions, but Desmond was hoping that after this first show, there'd be more interest from other females to join the promotion.

I took my time getting ready since the doors to the show had just barely opened. There was a good hour and a half before Owen's match. I was going to appear around the ten-minute mark in the match. That's when Owen's opponent would try to gain an advantage, but I'd run out to stop it. Desmond thought it would be better for the audience to see Thalia and Adam join forces rather than already have us paired up before the match.

I decided to wear the same outfit from when I managed Terry Tsunami at the party, a red halter top shirt that had an alligator scale pattern to it and paired it with black short shorts. I straightened my hair, kept the makeup simple, and decided to ditch the flower crown.

As I was applying the peach lip gloss, Samanta came in.

"You ready for tonight?"

"Yes and no." My stomach was forming knot after knot. I hadn't expected this to be as nerve wracking as it was. Samanta pulled me into a hug.

"You'll do great, Lyric. We all believe in you. The crowd is going to love you. You're bringing a whole new dynamic to this show and will change the way people think about managers."

I tightened my arms around her and nodded. “Thank you Samanta. For everything.”

“Us Latinas have to stick together,” she said as she pulled away, “especially in this business. Kill ’em tonight.” Samanta winked and walked out of the locker room. I looked at the time on my watch—still had thirty minutes until Owen’s match. After making sure I looked good, I walked around the “backstage area,” which was just the hallways that were blocked off to fans. I pulled out my phone, plugged in some headphones and opened Spotify. The opening notes to “That’s What You Get” by Paramore calmed me down, and I started to center into Thalia’s mindset.

Before I knew it, it was time for my debut. I waited backstage for my cue. Adam Cage was facing Raffael Kistner. His tag team partner, Richard De Ven, accompanied him to ringside. Around the ten-minute mark in the match, Raffael threw Owen out of the ring and distracted the ref. Richard went to attack Adam, but as he was going for a hit I ran out. I jumped on Richard and threw a few punches at his back, distracting him from Adam. I squared up against Richard, practically taunting him. When he tried to throw a punch, I grabbed his wrist, dodging the attack, and managed to get him down on the ground. By this point, Adam rolled back into the ring, delivered a few jabs and a suplex to Raffael before positioning himself in a corner of the ring.

Adam placed both hands on the ropes next to him, looking like a bull ready to charge. As he was waiting for Raffael to get up, I turned my attention to Richard and set him up into the maneuver I’d used on The Mammoth at the summer party. As soon as I pulled back on my leg to give the extra pressure, Adam ran towards a dazed Raffael, ducked down and wrapped his arms around Raffael’s waist, pushing both down to the

mat. The crowd went crazy as he covered Raffael. I let go, and Richard collapsed to the ground as the ref counted. “1! 2! 3!”

The bell rang. I looked up to the ring, seeing the ref raise Adam’s hand in victory. He motioned with a nod for me to join him in the ring. As I stood next to him, I raised his other hand while the audience cheered. After a few moments of celebrating with the fans, we both headed back to the locker room area. Desmond was waiting backstage to do an interview for the promotion’s YouTube with the two of us. In a few words, the world was introduced to Thalia Alvarado, Adam Cage’s new manager.

In the shows that followed, DSIW continued to grow in popularity online, and ticket sales for the shows were skyrocketing. The crowd loved the dynamic between Adam Cage and Thalia Alvarado. Owen and I were becoming real good friends outside work. He was a joy to work with, but Giovanni on the other hand—

Every time Giovanni was near me, his flirted way too much. Samanta wasn’t kidding with him going overboard with the charm. Staying in character after a show can be great for some people, but this Alessandro character Giovanni was creating was getting old. Fast. I just hoped I didn’t end up killing him by the time I have to turn on Adam.

A few weeks before the championship match between Alessandro and Adam, Giovanni texted me: *Good evening Lyric. Since the championship match is coming up and we’re going to start working together more often, I wanted to extend my apologies for how my behavior. I want you to get to know the real me, not the amped up Alessandro.*

I was not been expecting that. But he did have a point. I'd rather not want to kill him for however long we ended up working together after that match: *what did you have in mind?*

It didn't take long to get a message back. *Dinner? You pick where. I'll pay.*

Well if he's paying, I know a perfect spot. I've been eyeing it since moving and haven't had the chance to try it. *Do you like seafood?*

CHAPTER VII

I stood outside my apartment building waiting for Giovanni to arrive. I wasn't that far from the restaurant and was not worrying about gas too much, but he insisted on driving. I checked the time. It was five minutes past when he said he'd pick me up. I was about to head back inside when a black Nissan pull up and the passenger window rolled down.

"Sorry 'bout the tardiness. I . . ."

I got into the car before he could finish. "Let's just get this over with."

Giovanni nodded as I buckled myself in. He pulled out of the parking lot, making our way to Landry's Seafood House. Giovanni had said he was paying, so why not choose one of the most expensive places in town? I honestly didn't think he'd agree, but I guess he was really wanting to make amends.

The tension between us was palpable in the car, but it got worse once we arrived. All I knew was that I wanted this to be over as quickly as possible, but Giovanni had other plans. As soon as we were seated, Giovanni spoke up.

"So, how's your day been?"

I stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"Just trying to be friendly."

"Why? Just because we're going to have to work together doesn't mean that we have to be best friends or actually like each other. It's just an act." I turned my attention to the menu in my hands.

I heard Giovanni sigh. “That’s what’s been troubling me.” I glanced over the top of the menu. Giovanni’s eyes met mine as he continued. “I don’t like doing this job haphazardly. It’s the only constant in my life, and it’s the only thing I really know how to do. I can’t imagine myself doing anything else. This industry is just as important to me as it is to you, I can tell. You care. I know if it was your show, we’d never be working together. It is all on me for that, I get it.” He fell silent for a moment. Giovanni wasn’t wrong, but I’d never thought I’d hear him say this. I couldn’t help but think that Desmond talked him into this.

“I do apologize for how I acted the first time I met you,” he said. “I saw you at the party and wanted to talk to you, but things just didn’t work out that way. I had to leave early. But there’s no excuse for me not driving carefully in that parking lot and almost running you over. Nor is there a reason why I was so snide towards you that night. It honestly wasn’t my best performance. I let Alessandro take over because as Giovanni, I didn’t know what to do.”

“Why now?” I put the menu down, my eyes glaring at him. “We’ve been co-workers for months. What makes this the time that you felt like you needed to do this?”

“First off, I’ve been trying to talk to you in person for the past two months but you kept ignoring me. So I figured the only way to get your attention was to text you when you were least expecting it. Secondly, I want to have a good working relationship with you. You’re smart and know way more about the ring and this business than most. The way you navigate through a match on any given night is honestly some of the best work I’ve seen outside the ring in years.”

“I had some training growing up.”

“It shows.” Giovanni sat back in his chair. “I think anyone would be lucky to work with someone like you. It’s wise of you to keep your last name from everyone, keep the wannabes and gold diggers off your back.”

I leaned towards him, lowering my voice. “How’d you find out?”

He chuckled. “I’ve been a fan my whole life. My parents bought all the NWWF pay-per-views when they aired, and once they hit video cassette. I was a baby when your parents first started, but I’ve watched those tapes back over and over until they wore out. You have a striking resemblance to your mother, so it wasn’t hard to connect the dots.” Giovanni took a sip of his wine. “Also, you appeared a few times as a child on screen with your father. You still have those striking green eyes.”

Mamá was right. Looking like her is a blessing and a curse. “Did you know who I was the first time you met me?”

Giovanni shrugged. “Not right away, but I knew there was something familiar about you.”

“That’s what Desmond said first time he met me.” Am I that similar to my father? Will I ever be able to escape him?

“But you’re different.” Giovanni’s statement pulled me from my thoughts. “It’s rare for a third-generation star to not wrestle or use the family name. You’re proving a point, aren’t you?”

I nod. “My father doesn’t approve of my career choice.”

Giovanni leaned forward, smirking. “Then let’s prove him wrong.”

~ ~ ~

Two weeks later, it was the match between Adam Cage and Alessandro Pavoni for the DSIW championship. It was also time for me to turn on Adam and join with Alessandro. I knew that the fans were going to take this as a betrayal. They loved Thalia, but I think they loved Thalia and Adam together more. I enjoyed being able to interact with them, but things changed all the time in this business. I'll still interact with them, just not in the normal way of the cheerful sidekick trying to get them to rally behind Adam. This time, I get to be a little villain. It surprised me how much I was looking forward to the heel change, even before Giovanni and I had that lunch. My father never was able to be a good heel. He could never convince the fans to hate him. Now it was my turn.

The match started off quickly with Alessandro attacking Adam as I was getting out of the ring. They fought hard for a few moments before Adam threw Alessandro out of the ring. I got in his face, trying to intimidate him, as part of the plan and moved just as Adam dove through the middle and top ropes to knock Alessandro to the ground. The crowd was loving the match.

Adam threw Alessandro back into the ring and looked at me. We did our signature fist bump before he started to climb onto the ring apron. I looked up to see that Alessandro had the ref distracted.

It was time.

I quickly pulled Adam back down. He looked at me confused, asking me what I was doing. I looked at him, a smirk slowly growing on my face. He turned back towards the ring, but I turned him back towards me and superkicked him just under his chin with my right leg. Adam stumbled backwards stunned. I grabbed him and threw him back into

the ring. The crowd started booing louder than I'd ever heard them. I ignored them as Alessandro took advantage of my turn and delivered another superkick to Adam, making him fall to the mat. Three seconds later the match ended. Alessandro was the first DSIW champion.

Just like my first appearance with Adam, I got into the ring and held up Alessandro's arm. The crowd got louder with booing. But in that moment, Thalia didn't care. I was free to take her character further than she'd ever been.

After we made our way backstage, Desmond pulled us to the side to record a promo. More specifically, to have Thalia cut a promo on Adam, why she turned on him. I had been thinking about what I was going to say all week, but nothing I prepared to say felt right. So, I decided to just wing it.

“Alessandro, congrats on winnin’ de championship tonight.”

“Cage gave quite the fight, but like I’ve said before, he can’t hold a candle to me in the ring.”

“Many in attendance tonight tink dat it’s cos of Thalia’s interference dat yer won instead of Adam Cage. What are your thoughts on dis?”

I stepped forward and grabbed the mic from Desmond. “What it means is that Adam Cage didn’t realize what he had before it was too late. You think I liked being all chipper and positive the whole time? No. I felt like my soul was dying. I was acting like some bubblegum pop princess rather than who I really am. Alessandro could see the real me. He saw that I wasn’t happy, but most importantly he saw my potential. Adam’s loss tonight was his own fault.” I shoved the mic back at Desmond and walked away with Alessandro on my heels.

~ ~ ~

In real life, Owen and I remained friends, but we enjoyed being bitter and angry at each other for the months that he was feuding with Giovanni. When the rivalry came to an end, I was banned from ringside for the final match. In a way it was a good thing because when Owen pinned Gio, I actually cried. I would have been able to keep my composure in front of the fans, but it was nice to not have to be Thalia for a night and just enjoy the match as a fan.

Once their rivalry ended, I stayed aligned with Gio throughout many different storylines, including trying to turn Alessandro and Thalia into good guys. But the crowd couldn't really get behind that turn, so after a month and a half of trying to be good guys, we decided to turn heel again.

After a year and a half with the company, Owen decided to leave and move to another state to join with another promotion. It was a sad time, but I knew he would be amazing wherever he went. Gio and I were starting to get tired of each other the longer we were together, but we managed to keep the Thalia/Alessandro team going. But on his two-year anniversary with DSIW, Gio announced that he was leaving as well. That meant only one thing for me: having to find a new partner. In the time I was with Gio, I wasn't paying much attention to the changes of the roster, so I had no idea where or whom I should be working with.

I loved what I was doing, but the longer I worked, the more I was losing steam. I had been going non-stop since joining DSIW. Helping promote shows, working shows, working a part-time job as a waitress, sitting in on training nights with the roster, helping with social media, I didn't notice how thin I was stretching myself. Samanta noticed it

when Owen left, when Gio had his last match with DSIW, she and Desmond stepped in. After the show, they had me sit in the gym as the ring and entrance areas were being taken down.

“You’ve been working hard, Lyric,” Samanta said. “A little too hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“When’s de last time yer slept?”

“Uh, like last night.”

“Longer than tree ’ours?”

“Maybe like two weeks ago?” I could see the worry on their faces. “I’m fine, guys. Honestly. I’ve had worse sleep schedules.”

Desmond and Samanta looked at each other before looking back at me. The worry was still there. “Look, Lyric, we love you here. You’ve been our workhorse since the beginning. You’ve not taken any breaks for two years straight. The human body can only take so much before it shuts down on you.”

“In dis business, it’s not only de wrestlers dat nade ter take care av their health, but everyone involved wi’ de show.”

“We’re asking you to take some time off. Don’t worry about DSIW for at least a month.”

“Get some sleep. Relax. Explore Corpus.”

I looked at the couple. Over the two years, they had become like my work parents. And if they were anything like my real parents, then they knew when I needed to slow down.

“One month? Fine.”

~ ~ ~

Taking a couple weeks off from my waitressing job, I decided to explore Corpus a bit. After living there for two years, I still didn't know much about my new home. I visited the big "tourist stops" like visit the USS Lexington, the museums and aquarium, the Selena museum and statue, and some of the gardens and parks. But after a week, I was restless. So I texted the group chat with Kat, Eliza, and Mira, asking them to come down from Rockport. It was June, so I doubted that any of them had classes. Kat responded first.

LYRIC! First off why has it taken you SO LONG to ask us to visit? And secondly, hell yes!

I couldn't help but laugh a bit. There's a reason why Kat and I have been friends since kindergarten. A few moments later Eliza responded.

SECOND THAT! We miss youuuuuuu!!! That apartment better be ready to house four girls!

I was getting ready to type my response when Mira chimed in.

When??? Because if I need to cancel going to that indy concert with Jack, I will. Because there is NO WAY I am missing out on this!

I paused for a second. Have I been so out of touch with my best friends that I didn't even know Mira had a boyfriend.

Now I feel like a terrible friend... I guess work has kept me way too busy. But y'all better be ready for an adventure! Can y'all stay a week?

Simultaneously, all three texted yes. I finally had something to look forward to that wasn't work related! The girls agreed that they'd arrive on the 17th and stay until the next

Sunday. I had two days to prepare for a whole week with them. But when Sunday arrived, and they knocked on my door, all plans went out the window. Most of the time we stayed on the beach and just had fun, though Mira did manage to drag us to a few of the gardens.

Before the week was over, we went made sure to do our traditional movie-then-Sonic night. While we were waiting for our ice cream, the girls decided to grill me on what I'd been doing the past two years.

“Spill the beans,” Kat said as she leaned uncomfortably close to me. “Are the guys cute?”

“Eh.”

“*EH?*” The three said in unison.

“What? I've been too busy working to really take notice of anyone. Besides, I'm only 20. I'm in *no* rush to get married or anything. I'm enjoying being a single woman and building my empire.”

“What about that guy you were working with. Owen was it?” Eliza asked.

“No,” Mira said. “His name was Adam, and he was a pushover. Alessandro is *way* better.”

“Don't let Jack hear you say that,” Kat snickered.

“I worked with both of them. And Owen is Adam's real name. Giovanni is Alessandro's. And ew. Owen has a wonderful girlfriend that I wouldn't be surprised if they got engaged or even eloped soon. As far as Gio is concerned, he was too much of a prick the first time I met him to even consider going after him. Plus, I try to make it a rule that I don't date the guys I work with.”

“Boo,” Kat said.

“You’re honestly no fun,” Eliza chimed in.

“I think it’s a good thing,” Mira said.

“Thank you, Mira.” I looked at my other two friends. “At least *someone* gets me.”

Kat looked me dead in the eye. “Take us to a show.”

“You know I would, but I can’t exactly be at the show in the crowd. People would notice. Plus, I kinda agreed with my bosses that I would take some time away from the company to recharge and refocus. Been working a little too hard lately.”

“Please,” The three of them said. It took me a minute, but it was hard to say no to them. I sighed as I pulled out my phone. I looked at the calendar to see when the next show is.

“Unless y’all wanna come back next month, there’s a show tonight.”

The trio beamed. I rolled my eyes at them while looking to see if there were any tickets left for tonight. But to their disappointment, there were no more tickets.

“Another sold out show.”

“Why you guys gotta be so popular?” Eliza asked.

I shrugged. “We’re just that good.”

“Can’t you get us tickets, Ly?” Kat asks.

“Maybe, but . . .”

“CALL!”

“I swear, if the trio stuff doesn’t back off . . .” They stayed silent as I called Samanta. To my surprise, Samanta said yes and gave us tickets. On one condition. I stayed as incognito as possible. I guess Thalia was that popular. The girls were a little too

excited to do a mini makeover. We stopped at a wig shop to find the cheapest wig that looked good on me, which ended up being a chin-length blond wig. A quick stop at the apartment to change, and we were on our way to the show. This would be my first time seen the show from the crowd as a fan. It was also Eliza and Mira's first time at a wrestling show, so Kat and I had quite the time watching them experience the spectacle that is live wrestling for the first time.

I took advantage of being there to scout who the next potential partner would be, but about half way through the show, I completely forgot about it. Being on this side of things really helped me appreciate what we as a promotion were doing, and I would have been happy to work with anyone at this point, including Spencer, whose character was starting to take a more serious turn—not quite heelish, but not babyface either.

After the show, I took the girls backstage to meet everyone. Desmond and Samanta were the last people I introduced to Kat, Eliza, and Mira.

“Quite an honor to meet de lasses dat Lyric can't stop blatherin' about,” Desmond said.

“Hey, if it wasn't for them, there are a lot of opportunities I wouldn't have even thought about that I would have missed. It was actually Eliza's suggestion to move to Corpus.” I said as Eliza shrugged, a big smile on her face. She was proud that I chose Corpus instead of Kat or Mira's suggestion of San Antonio.

“How was the show?” Samanta asked.

“It's different seeing it from the crowd perspective as a fan, rather than at ringside.”

“See anyone that ya might wanna manage when you get back?”

“Not quite,” I said as I scratched my head sheepishly. “I got a little caught up in the matches.”

Samanta chuckled. “We’ll have time to figure it out when you come back. No need to rush her back out there since Giovanni left. Besides the longer she’s away from the crowd, the better reception she’ll get.”

She was right. After my month off, I went back to practice nights. Desmond and Samanta entertained the idea of my managing Spencer, but no matter how good friends we were, our characters just did not mesh well. I took the next show off so that I could watch and see where the current storylines were going. Still, no one on the roster seemed that having a manager with them would improve their careers. I was slowly losing hope that I could stay with DSIW. I didn’t feel like I was ready to leave, but with how the roster was fleshing out, it felt like I was slowly losing my place and that I wouldn’t be needed anymore. Two weeks later, they showed up.

Desmond introduced the newest tag team, Jaxon and Carter Rose. Twins. They had dark eyes and dark hair, same haircut, same wrestling gear. The Roses had a trick they liked using if it looked like the other was losing in a match. They would switch mid match when the ref wasn’t looking, leaving the tired twin to rest as the fresh twin finished the match.

After seeing what they offered in the ring, Desmond thought it would be a good idea to have me manage them to get the twins some credibility coming into the promotion. I had no objections to the idea. The next show, I introduced the Rose Twins to the DSIW fans after the tag champions, Raffael Kistner & Richard De Ven, held an open challenge. The twins got the victory that night, and we went for a few months as

babyfaces. But once they challenged Kistner and De Ven for the tag titles, and won, the three of us decided to have some fun and become heels.

I had fun working with a tag team. It proved to be a different dynamic that was a challenge but also fun to figure out while out at ringside. After a year and a half, the twins wanted to tease a break up. Desmond loved the idea. I just asked them to not have me dangling in the middle as the “prize” once the rivalry was over. I wanted the choice to go with whichever twin I wanted to until they got back together. They agreed, but before the storyline could finish, Carter got injured and had to be sidelined for at least six months. That left me with working with Jaxon until Carter was cleared to compete again.

Jaxon and I had gotten along quite well since we met, so well that before I was working exclusively with him there were rumors that we were dating. They weren't true, but the longer I worked with Jaxson the more I thought that it wouldn't be so bad to date him if he wasn't gay. Only Carter and I knew that, and we guarded that secret.

By the beginning of 2015, Carter was back in action, and the Rose twins were running rampant on the tag team division. But the longer I was with them, the more I wanted to move. I hadn't thought that I would still be in Texas by the time I was turning 23. I love my state, but there aren't many opportunities for a female manager to join with promotions in general. The few promotions I was in brief contact with didn't want a manager. They wanted to turn me into a wrestler after being a manager. After telling them I wasn't interested, I never heard from them again. I knew life would be tough. I didn't expect it to be like this. Deciding that staying with work at a promotion that valued me instead of no job would be best, I stopped looking at other promotions and focused fully on DSIW.

On August 15th, which was also my birthday, DSIW had a major cross-promotional match with a promotion from Houston. They sent their top singles competitor and top tag team to compete in matches with our top guys. We didn't know who they were sending, and they didn't know who we were choosing, so it would be blind matchups.

Before the twins' match, Desmond came up to me. "So, I may or may not have had some connections come out, and a few scouts may or may not be out der."

"You didn't."

He shrugged. "Don't tell anyone though. 'Tis a secret."

"Does Samanta know?"

"Nope. She'd have killed me to do that tonight. But what better time to have scouts den when promotion pride is on de line?"

"Fair point."

"Now, go out der and show 'em what managers can do."

I nodded and made my way to the men's locker room. I was about to knock on the door when I heard a familiar laugh down the hallway. I followed the sound and was shocked to find my brother chatting with who I assumed was another wrestler from his promotion. "Diego?"

He turned and greeted me with the biggest smile. "Well, if it isn't the little woman that could."

I couldn't help but run at him, giving him the biggest hug ever. It had been close to five years since I'd last seen him.

"Happy birthday, lil sis."

“You remembered,” I joked.

“I forget *one* time, and this is what I get?”

“Yeah.”

We laughed as we hugged again. I heard the other guy clear his throat.

“Oh, yeah. Almost forgot.” Diego turned towards his tag partner. “Lyric, this is Nic Everett. We’ve been tagging together for the past two years now. Nic, this is my little sister.”

Nic extended a hand. I shook it as I took in what he looked like. He was a few inches taller than Diego, had short light brown hair and greyish eyes. “Nice to meet you. Diego talks about you a lot.”

“Oh?”

Diego beams. “Of course. No matter what Papá thinks, I’ll always support ya. You’re my little sister. Nothing is going to change that.”

I smiled at my brother. “I’ll always be there for you too. Except tonight.”

“You managing our opponents?”

I shrug. “Maybe. Either way, y’all are leaving here with another match added to your loss column.” I patted my brother on the shoulder before walking off. “Good luck out there.”

The match ended up being the main event. The Rose Twins with Thalia Alvarado as their manager vs Antonio de la Cruz and Nic Everett. The match was fairly back and forth, with both teams trying to gain enough momentum to win. The crowd was almost an even split between fans of DSIW and the other promotion.

Late into the match, I got physical with my brother. It was something we wanted to do ever since we were kids. He got in my face, gloating over the fact that his team was winning. Jaxon was in the ring and in perfect line of distracting the ref. I gave him a signal, and he pulled the ref aside as Carter went to take care of Nic. I looked at my brother and pushed him. He stumbled back, chuckling a little. Diego looked at me, but before he could say anything, I slapped him as hard as I could. Diego rubbed his cheek, looked back at me and started to lunge. I decided to superkick him, earning boos from his fans and cheers from mine. I couldn't help but wonder what the reaction would have been if the crowd knew he was my brother. In the end, the Rose Twins got the victory after using the switch. Both teams got standing ovations from the crowd for the match, one of the best I had ever been involved in and was happy that I got to share it with my brother.

After the match, the twins and I made our way backstage. Desmond came up to the three of us. There was a guy around his mid to late 50s with him. "Hey boys, can we speak to Lyric privately please." The twins nodded and headed off to get showers.

"Miss Lyric," The older guy extended his hand. Dressed in a black business suit, the man was bald with a thick, but tightly groomed beard. "My name is William Ross. I'm the general manager for FTU, the developmental brand for NWWF."

My eyes grew wide, and I quickly shook his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ross."

He chuckled. "The pleasure is mine. You're the reason why I'm here tonight."

"Me?"

“Yes. Desmond here has told me all about a young manager who is making waves in the promotion, so I wanted to see her for myself. You didn’t disappoint. I would like to extend a contract offer to work in our developmental roster on FTU as a manager.”

It was a no brainer. This may be my only chance. Who knows when Desmond could get someone else to come out and watch people on the roster perform. Especially the general manager of the biggest developmental territory in North America. If you could excel in FTU, it was certain that you’d make it to the main roster and be a star.

I looked at Desmond, who was trying to hide his emotions. He gave a nod, signaling his blessing; I looked back at Mr. Ross, smiling. “I accept.”

CHAPTER VIII

After negotiating with Mr. Ross about my contract for a month, we settled on the terms as well as when I was expected to be in Tampa for training. My moving date was set for the fourth of December, giving me two days to arrive at my new apartment before my first day. Mr. Ross guaranteed that FTU would be covering my rent for the first few months of my contract, easing some financial worries I had about this move.

Announcing my last date with DSIW to the roster was emotional for everyone. I had become a pillar with the show in the past five years. What was to be even more emotional was the crowd's reaction. They may have hated Thalia for the majority of my time there, but fans always appreciate what the performers give them night after night. Desmond thought it would be best to keep my last date secret from the fans. It made the night that much more special.

November 21st came, and though I was ready to move on, I was nervous to leave. I had only ever worked at DSIW. It was rare for any talent to work only at one promotion before heading to the main company. But I guessed working with a former employee had its benefits. It still didn't make me feel remotely ready. As I was getting ready for the night, Samanta came and talked to me. She always knew when I was feeling nervous.

“Butterflies again?”

I nodded as I looked at myself in the mirror. My hair had grown even longer over the years, my clothing had changed to darker colors as I continually worked heel. I had changed into a new me and developed an edgier Thalia in the process. Knowing it was

my last night shouldn't have made me as nervous as I was. But here we were—same feeling I had that first night five years ago.

Samanta leaned against the counter, her arms crossed. She looked me in the eyes. “They’ve loved you here. They’ll love you no matter where you go. You’ll have fans following your move and even past that. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Besides, you might be seeing a familiar face from time.” She said with a smile.

“It’ll be nice to see you once a month at pay-per-views, that’s for sure.” I grabbed my highlight brush and continued with my makeup.

Samanta was quiet for a moment. “I might be stepping down from my commentator role on *Monday Nite Fury* soon.”

My hand paused as I was finishing my eyeshadow. I glanced over at her. “Do you know when?”

She shrugged. “Not yet. I love being a commentator, but traveling every week to a new city or even a country for a couple of weeks is starting to wear me out. Desmond and I have been married for eight years now. We’re ready to start a family, but with me working on *Fury* every week and then coming back home to help run DSIW, we’ve not been able to.”

“Y’all would make some of the cutest kids.”

Samanta chuckled. “So I’ve been told. Our parents are practically counting the days until we have our first kid.” She smiled, her eyes had a faraway look as she continued. “Truth be told, I’m also counting.”

“So, are you going to be leaving completely or just stepping down to do commentary on FTU?”

“That’s what I’m figuring out. The current team is incredible, but I don’t think they need a third person on there. If I did end up moving, it would have to be because one of the commentators on FTU decided to leave or move to the Fury team.”

“Personally, I’d like to see you every week. Keep some sort of normalcy after the move.”

“Lyric, don’t worry. You’re smart. You’re talented. You have a mind that no one else has for this business. I’ve enjoyed seeing you grow into the performer you are, and from the bottom of my heart, I know that others will appreciate you. Just not as much as we do here.” Samanta winked. I couldn’t help but laugh, but I knew that no matter what I’ll always have a family to come back to.

We continued with some small talk before Samanta had to go meet up with her husband. I waited in the locker room, trying to control my nerves, before I had to head to the backstage area. But as I walked towards Jaxon and Carter, my emotions swirled once again. I did everything in my power not to cry. The twins placed a gentle hand on my shoulders, giving me a comforting smile. It had been an honor to work with them, leading them to tag team championships on three separate occasions. Tonight would be the last time I would walk out to the ring with them as they defended the titles.

I pulled myself together, waiting for the twins’ entrance music to start playing, getting set in Thalia’s mindset. I stayed focused throughout the match, getting plenty of heat from the fans as I played with them, making them boo the twins as they won. I joined them in the ring for our usual post-match gloating, but as I was about to leave the ring I noticed that the twins stayed back. I turned to ask them what they were doing when Desmond’s music started playing. The crowd erupted in cheers. Desmond and Samanta

walked out, mics in hand, with the entire roster on their heels. The couple approached the ring, asking me stand between them.

Desmond held the mic up, quieting the audience. “Tanks so much for bein’ ’ere tonight. As some of yer may know, Thalia Alvarado ’as signed wi’ NWWF and’ll be appearin’ on de FTU brand in de near future.”

Samanta put her arm around me as she spoke next. “But sadly, tonight is her last night with us.”

I knew the crowd would react, but I wasn’t expecting a collective sadness from them. A few started chanting “Please don’t go!” No matter how much I didn’t want to, I couldn’t help but start crying a little. Samanta’s arm around me tightened as Desmond handed me his mic. I took a deep breath to calm myself before talking.

“I just want to say “thank you.” Thank you, Desmond, for taking a chance on me. Samanta, thank you for all the advice over the years. Having you two as mentors has changed me so much, but not as much as having you as friends.” I looked behind me at the twins, who were failing at holding back their tears. “Jaxon and Carter, I have loved working with y’all the past few years, seeing you two grow into the competitors you are. I’m proud of everything that we’ve accomplished together. You are the future of tag team wrestling, don’t forget that.” I looked towards the entrance, towards the roster I had grown to love so much. “Thank you to the fantastic locker room. I’m so honored to be friends with each and every one of you. You’ve made my time here some of the best times of my life. I wish I could have worked with more of you, but keep pushing through, and I might just see you sooner than you think. And finally,” I turned towards the audience, “thank you to the best fans in the world! I would not be who I am without y’all.

You accepted an 18-year-old girl who was just trying to live out her dream. Now y'all get to see her five years later take one step closer to her goal. Thank you." I bowed as I finished. The crowd started chanting "Thank you, Thalia!" and soon the entire roster was chanting along. Samanta tapped my shoulder and pointed towards the entrance way.

That's when I saw Kat, Eliza, Mira, and my brother standing at the front of the group. My composure broke once again. The four of them made their way to the ring and gathered around in a hug. They pulled away after a few seconds, and I saw Desmond holding a massive bouquet of flowers. I could barely hold it in my arms. I thanked the crowd again and made my way out of the ring. At the top of the entrance way, I bowed to the crowd once more, gaining more chants of thank yous and left the gym for the last time.

Desmond and Samanta invited everyone back to their house for a big send-off party. I wasn't leaving officially for two weeks, but having this time to get one final goodbye to everyone and just have some fun away from work was something I needed. An hour after we all arrived at the Lynch home, Samanta and Desmond gathered everyone in the front room. I stood in between them as Desmond and Samanta, both with a hand on my shoulders.

Desmond cleared his throat. "Tonight, we celebrate de time we 'ad wi' Lyric as she prepares ter move on ter de big leagues. She's done quite a lot for us here an' we all know she'll continue ter change de status quo."

"Lyric, we're gonna miss you, but we're excited to see the change you're about to bring to the world. We're proud of you, but there's someone else who I would argue is even more proud of you."

As Samanta said that, I noticed the group shuffle a little as Diego walked forward. He was beaming as he moved to the side. I couldn't help but cry as I saw Mamá standing there, holding Diego's hand. I ran, causing Mamá to stumble back a little as I wrapped my arms around her, giving her the biggest hug I could muster. Since moving to Corpus, I hadn't been back home. Mamá visited when she could, but never could make it for a show. Mamá held my face in her hands as she smiled.

“I am so proud of you, my little blossom.”

I buried my face in her neck, tears continuing to fall. Her familiar scent of fresh herbs and her favorite perfume, White Diamonds, soothed me. I was home. “I missed you, Mamá.”

“Not as much as I missed you.”

After another moment, I introduced Mamá to Desmond and Samanta. We mingled for a bit longer before Diego walked over holding a big white box and set it down on a table. Everyone was still around gathered around as Diego removed the lid and took out a big white cake with red and black icing trim. On the top, it said “Thank You Lyric” with the DSIW logo and my first promotional photo. It was weird looking at it five years later, but I appreciated the sentiment. After one a.m., Mamá and I decided to leave. She was going to stay with me after my non-stop insistence to stay in my spare bedroom.

Over the next few days, Mamá helped me pack up a little bit in between the exploring we did around town before she headed home. I had quite a bit of packing left to do after she left, but Kat and Diego offered to help me pack, making the process go quicker. Kat, Eliza, and Mira accompanied me on the road trip to my new home. It was so much easier making the move with friends. We hit Florida two days later, and they

stayed an extra day to help unpack, making sure I was set before they went back home, driving the U-Haul back to Texas. I looked around my apartment—the next chapter had begun.

~ ~ ~

The drive to the training center had only been five minutes, but I sat frozen in my car. The knots in my stomach tightened, making it a little hard to breath. But something that Desmond told me the first time I felt like this came to mind.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and slowly released. After repeating the breathing exercise a few times, I calmed down a little, catching the middle of “Get Higher” by Palaye Royale. Kat had always been into indie bands, particularly indie rock bands, so it didn’t take her long to introduce me to them as she was helping me pack. Hearing this song reminded me of her and everyone I left behind. It also reminded me why I was here.

I was signed to FTU because of my hard work. I was getting a chance to chase a dream with people who cared for me cheering me on back home. I’d make them proud. No matter what.

Taking one final deep breath, I turned my car off and walked with my head held high. The next few weeks were going to be rough—learning how to deliver promos in the NWWF style, learning the rhythm and routine of FTU shows, but most importantly learning how to work with whoever Mr. Ross and the showrunners decided to pair me with. The moment I entered the training center, Mr. Ross was there to greet me.

“Welcome to your first day, Miss Lyric.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ross. And thank you again for this opportunity.”

He led me into the center, showing me around, making sure to point out the places I will be spending most of my time during the week. After the tour, we went to a meeting room where a few people sat at an oblong table. Mr. Ross introduced me to them, but all I got was that they were the writers and two of the showrunners for FTU.

“So, Miss de la Cruz,” one of them said as I sat down.

“Lyric, please. Or Ms. Alvarado,” I said before he could continue. Some of them exchange confused looks to each other. “I’d rather not be addressed by my last name. Personal reasons.”

The man I interrupted nodded. “Miss Lyric, all of us in this room know what you’ve achieved the past few years, as well as the reputation you’ve managed to garner while working at just one promotion. We have a few ideas for your debut, but we think that there’s one wrestler that we just signed who would greatly benefit from having someone of your caliber and knowledge in his corner.”

The only other woman in the room, who I believe Mr. Ross had said was a showrunner, stood up and handed me a folder: “FTU recently signed indie darling, Nathan Matthews, better known as Matt Henry.”

I looked in the folder and saw a picture of a rather attractive blond man with ocean blue eyes. I had heard the name before from Diego, but I never looked him up. It was hard to decide if that was a good or bad decision.

The woman continued talking. “Mr. Henry has shown incredible talent, but he does lack in verbal confrontations.”

“So, he’s not a talker,” I said with piqued interest.

“Correct,” the woman continued. “We figured if we teamed him up with you, he would have more time to develop that skill while learning from someone who excels at it.”

“Plus,” Mr. Ross spoke up, “giving him a manager would allow him to grow his character in a new direction. Mr. Henry has told us that the character he portrayed in the indies was becoming stale and unexciting to him. He mostly played the good-looking babyface.”

“Really?” I asked. “He has the look of someone who would be better as a heel.”

“That’s our plan,” the first man spoke. “We want to set him up to be this big hero only to immediately turn him against the fans. You’ve had a few successful heel runs, correct?”

I chuckled. “I did some of my best work as a bad guy. I could give him a few pointers.”

“Before we get too ahead of ourselves,” Mr. Ross interjected, “it would be important to see if you and Mr. Henry have some sort of connection. He should be arriving just after lunch for a meeting in this room. I’d like for you to be there, Miss Lyric.”

~ ~ ~

After my meeting with the writers and showrunners, I left to go grab some lunch at a nearby cafe. I flipped through the folder the showrunner gave me, learning everything I could about my potential partner.

Matt Henry was athletic, able to perform aerial moves as well as some of the harder-hitting moves. He was labeled as a submission specialist, with his finishing move

being the muta lock. I pulled out my phone and looked up some of his past matches on YouTube. Almost every match had him winning via submission with the muta lock. I paid close attention to how he made the move different. Normally for this move, the one applying the submission would cross his opponent's legs behind his own and bend backwards, locking his hands around his opponent just below their jaw. Most that perform this would keep their feet flat on the ground, but he didn't. He arched his back to the point where he ended up on his toes, creating more pressure on his opponent's back and neck. Every time, the opponent tapped out in seconds.

He was talented, no doubt about it. I headed back to the training center, thinking about how I would adapt my work outside to complement his skills inside the ring. There could be something there. I would just have to work with him to find it.

I checked the time as I walked into the meeting room. I was a few minutes early. Taking the seat I was in earlier so that my back was towards the door, I sat down and looked up a few more things about Matt and what he had done before signing. I must've gotten lost in my research because I didn't notice the door open. However, my trance was broken when my phone was snatched from my hands. I turned in my chair, ready to reprimand the person who took my phone but froze the moment I saw blue eyes staring right at me. His eyes traveled to my phone, a small smile forming as he noticed what I was watching.

"Mr. Ross, I think I have a fan." Matt looked back at me, winking as he placed the phone back on the table. My eyes followed him as he sat across from me.

I sat up, composing myself before looking at Matt with a bored look. “Don’t flatter yourself,” I said. Matt continued to look at me as Mr. Ross stood beside me. I turned my attention to Mr. Ross. “So, how are we doing this?”

“I’ve told Mr. Henry about creative’s idea for his debut.”

“I think it’s perfect,” Matt said. “It’ll be fun to explore my devious side.”

I looked at him. “Believe me, it is. Being able to be as nasty as you can has been quite a thrill for me, personally.”

Matt leaned forward. “Oh, believe me, I’ve seen your work. I would love to see how devious you can get.”

I copied his body language. “Hope you can keep up.”

~ ~ ~

One month later, we were set to make our debut on the first episode of the new year. The weeks leading up to Matt’s match, FTU ran video packages promoting his debut. They decided to keep my association with him secret until that night.

Matt and I stood backstage, waiting for his match. He would go out there and wrestle like the crowd was expecting. I’d come out from the crowd close to the end of the match and distract the ref as Matt took advantage to low-blow his opponent, causing the crowd to boo. I wasn’t sure how we would get a reaction from the crowd like that, but once we learned that Matt was facing Issac Phillips, one of the best guys on the roster, I knew we had it in the bag. Before the match began, I planted myself in the crowd. In order to keep my appearance a secret, I wore the chin length blond wig I had and acted like a Matt Henry fangirl. I made a sign that read “Matt’s #1 Fan!” and screamed as loud as I could when he made his entrance to keep the façade.

The match went as expected. Towards the end, Matt jumped onto the top rope and delivered a springboard clothesline, knocking himself and Issac onto the mat. My cue. I jumped the barricade and climbed onto the ring apron, calling for the ref's attention. The ref did his job and tried to get me down, allowing Matt and Issac to get back to their feet. Once I saw Matt go for the low blow and Issac drop to his knees, I got down from the ring apron and moved towards the bottom of the entrance ramp. The crowd was loud with displeasure as Matt locked in the muta lock. Issac tapped out a few seconds later. The ref lifted Matt's hand in the air.

As the ref turned towards Issac to check on him, Matt left the ring and joined me on the ramp, hugging me. I smiled the biggest that I could before turning my gaze to the ring. My eyes went cold as I looked towards Issac. He was slowly starting to stand up. I turned back to Matt and just pointed towards the ring. He ran back into the ring, beating down Issac once again. The crowd was booing loudly, jeering Matt. I slowly made my way towards the ring. Matt stood over Issac as I joined him. Slowly, I took my wig off, my black hair tumbling freely down. I could tell many of them recognized me as I heard some gasps and a few cheers. I stared coldly at the crowd before looking at Matt. He tilted his head towards Issac before taking a few steps back. I quickly wrapped my leg around Issac's neck and applied my now signature figure four headscissor move. I held it for a few seconds as I felt Issac's hand trying to grab at my leg before tapping.

I let go of my foot, releasing the hold and Issac collapsed on the mat, coughing. Matt walked over to me, I grabbed his left arm and raised our hands as we stood over Issac. FTU got their first taste of Matt Henry and Thalia Alvarado.

~ ~ ~

Within three months of our debut, Matt had become the FTU champion. The youngest competitor they had win the title. He was quite proud of that. Over the months of working together, we quickly realized that there was something between us. Not Matt and Thalia, but Nathan and Lyric. I was treading on dangerous territory, but the longer I was with Nathan, the more I wanted to be with him. I made a promise to myself that I would not date anyone I worked with, but there was just something I felt when I was with Nathan that made me want to break that promise.

And I did. Five months after our first meeting, Nathan and I became a real couple. We kept that part of our lives private from the fans. They only knew Thalia and Matt as partners, nothing more. I would be lying if I said there weren't times I wanted to break character and let the world know about us, but we managed to keep it professional in front of fans.

Nathan had held the title for just over a year when Mr. Ross and the creative team decided it was time to send him up to the main roster. I was excited because I expected to be going with him. Over the past year, Thalia and Matt had practically become a package deal. Wherever Matt went, Thalia was right there with him. But he had other plans.

In what would be his last match with FTU, it was a match for his championship against an up-and-comer in FTU that debuted three months prior. Matt was on the verge of winning when the other competitor used my presence at ringside to his advantage, taunting both of us. He tried to sweet talk me when he had Matt down or smack talk Matt, using everything he knew to get Matt worked up.

And it worked. Matt's jealousy got the better of him, allowing his opponent to take advantage and get him locked into a submission maneuver. Matt tapped out quickly. I got into the ring as soon as I could to check on him, but I didn't expect Matt to push me away when I knelt beside him. I managed to stay on my knees but looked at him confused as he stood up.

"What was that?" I asked as I stood up.

Matt looked at me, fuming. "You cost me my match!"

"Me? I did nothing! You were the one getting distracted the entire match! You never let your focus slip. That's not like you."

"You know what's not like me? Letting some wannabe ride my coattails." He got in my face. His breath was hot as his eyes stared straight into my soul, making me feel uneasy. I tried to back away, but he followed as he spoke. "You would have failed within the first two months if it wasn't for me, Sweetness. I made your job easy. All you had to do was stand there and look pretty."

I was shocked. Was this Matt talking? Or Nathan? Had he thought like this the entire time? I felt myself start to shake as he continued his verbal assault.

"You thought once I got my call up that you would come with me? HA! Think again, Sweet Cheeks. We're through." He started to back away. The smile on his face made my stomach turn sour as he yelled, "I never need you. I never even loved you."

He turned around and exited the ring, the crowd booing him as he walked up the ramp leaving me in the ring. I sank to my knees, heartbroken. For the first time, I let the crowd see Lyric as I cried.

CHAPTER IX

After Nathan left, I felt confused. Heartbroken. I texted him, asking if what he said that night was true or if was just to split Matt from Thalia. I didn't think when he said we were through that *we* were through. But he never texted back. He never called to explain himself. That hurt more than him walking out.

I asked Mr. Ross for a month off. There wasn't anything I could do now that I didn't have someone to manage. I didn't want to throw myself into another partnership just yet. Mr. Ross understood, and I went home for the first time in over a year.

I called Kat, asking if I could stay with her for the month. She ecstatically agreed. Though when I arrived, I didn't expect to see my brother answer her door in nothing but baggy black sweatpants. "Diego?"

He scratched his head. "Hey, sis. Uh, what're you doing here?"

"I have a month off, didn't want to stay with our parents."

"Pops still hasn't talked to you?"

"I think that answer should be obvious, Di." He nodded. "So, you gonna let me in or are you gonna leave you baby sister out on the street because you're too embarrassed," I said with a satisfied smirk.

He moved out of the doorway, letting me walk inside. I dropped my bag close to the door and plopped down on her couch. "Is Kat home?"

"She had to run an errand, but will be back in like an hour."

"So, she left you here, all alone, in her condo."

“Yeah.” He disappeared down the hallway for a few seconds. He came back wearing a black Palaye Royale shirt. My suspicions grew.

“Something you wanna tell me?”

“Nope!” Diego said as he sat down next to me, grabbing the PS4 controller from the coffee table to continue his game. I decided to grill Kat later about this as I watched my brother play *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*. He was always the gamer out of the two of us, but he was also the one who was scared of everything. I watched him and the game carefully, seeing what spooked him, though he tried to hide it. I’d enjoyed pranking him when we were kids, but as we grew, the times we were together doing nothing became fewer. Diego was my best friend for so long that just sitting like this reminded me of those simpler times.

After a few minutes of watching my brother trying to not scream or jump, I decided to be a little nostalgic. I got up from the couch and went to the kitchen, grabbing a glass of water. I silently walked back to the living room and watched the game. I was good at guessing when jump scares would happen in movies, and horror games had the same mindset. I waited until the perfect moment before crouching behind the couch. I waited a few seconds then jumped and yelled in Diego’s ear, finally getting that satisfying scream. Diego jumped off the couch. I fell onto the floor, laughing, as Diego glared at me.

“*Pendejo . . .*”

“Alright *miedoso*.”

“Am not . . .”

“So that was my sister that just screamed, then?”

Diego glared at me and started to chase me around the apartment. I was slightly quicker than him, so I was able to avoid him. We were at a standstill at the kitchen island, Diego on one side and me on the other, waiting to see who would move first.

“What the hell is going on?”

We looked to see Kat standing with paper bags full of groceries, confused.

“Hey Kat!” I waved before locking eyes with my brother again.

“Your best friend is *un poco de mierda*,” Diego sneered as he looked me up and down.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, *deje de ser tan pendejo*.”

“I am not a fool!”

Diego and I squared up to one another, glaring at each other.

“Enough!” Kat said as she walked in. “Jeez . . . I feel sorry for Helena.”

“Mamá practically encouraged this,” Diego said with a shrug.

“Better than those stupid drills father had us do.”

“They were necessary, Ly. Besides,” Diego walked over and put his arm around me, “your skills benefited from our physical matches just as much as our verbal ones.”

“Yeah, ‘cuz I beat you every time.”

“Did not.”

I patted Diego on the shoulder. “Whatever lets you sleep at night.” I lifted his arm from me and walked over to Kat asking her if she needed any help.

“I’ve got a few more bags in the car.”

We left Diego in the kitchen to grab them.

“So, Kat. Funny thing happened when I got here. Diego answered the door. Without a shirt on.” I stared at her, trying to see if her body language would give anything away. She was avoiding eye contact. “Why’s my brother here while you’re out?”

“Oh. Well when he’s not traveling, Diego stays here sometimes. Since your father stopped talking to you and all . . .”

“Kat, it’s been six years.”

“Oh, has it?”

“Kat.”

She sheepishly looked away as she grabbed a few bags from her car.

“When did y’all start dating?”

She looked at me, shock apparent in her eyes as she tried to laugh it off. “What? No. That’s . . . ha . . . That’s not . . .”

“Kat.” I placed my hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye. “I’ve known you for how long?”

“Since we were six.”

“You think after seventeen years I wouldn’t pick up on things like this?”

Kat sighed. “I guess so. I guess it’s been about two years since we made it official.”

“And you didn’t tell me because?”

“I grew up with you guys. I honestly didn’t think it would last this long. I mean he’s on the road for a good part of the year. I just figured it would be fun, ya know?”

“And?” I leaned against the car, arms crossed.

“And it has been. I found out that he’s really cool. And nice. And a gentleman. And is someone that I’ve been looking for in my life.”

“Wow. Who would have thunk it? My best friend and brother actually ended up together.” I looked around, jokingly. “Am I in a bad romcom?”

“Shut up,” Kat laughed. “But seriously. Diego’s been the best thing that I could have asked for. For all the idiotic things that he did when we were kids, he’s turned into a fine man. Your parents should be proud.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“And I know they’re proud of you.”

“Mamá is. I doubt father will ever be.”

“Don’t count him out just yet, Ly. He’ll come around. Eventually.”

Kat’s optimism gave me some hope. I smiled at her before grabbing a few grocery bags. “Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

~ ~ ~

The month I spent with Kat, and the short time my brother was there before heading off, were desperately needed. I felt recharged, but when I arrived back in Tampa the unease of my career returned. I talked with many different members of FTU’s roster, but no one seemed like their career would benefit from having a manager. The more I talked with them, the more I saw my dreams slowly fading. I was scared to think what I would do if I left the business. This was all I ever wanted. In a moment of desperation, I asked for time in the ring to speak my mind. Mr. Ross granted my time on the May 17th show. That was three weeks away. This was my only chance to show that I’m more than

just a pretty face for some superstar to drape on their arm. I was determined to cut the best promo of the year. This was do or die.

I stood in the middle of the ring, nervous but determined. I wasn't Lyric in this moment. I was Thalia. I had to stay in character the entire time. The feel of the mat under my shoes grounded me, but that indescribable energy in the air brought clarity to my mind. The familiar atmosphere of the arena changed from one of excitement to anticipation, the fans waiting with bated breath for what I was going to say. A few random chants started, reminding me that they were supportive, that they knew what I was there for. I smiled a little before raising the mic.

"A few weeks ago, I was betrayed. Abandoned by my partner. Someone I considered a friend. Someone I would have done anything for. I'd proved that to him week in and week out. I was the one that convinced general manager William Ross to give him a title match. I was the one that made him into the youngest and longest reigning FTU Champion! If it wasn't for me, Matt would still be here working his way up the ladder." I looked around the crowd as I started to pace. "Matt Henry got cocky. He thought he didn't need me anymore and tossed me aside like stale cake. The moment Matt learned he was going to NWWF, he decided to turn his back on me. He believed that he could be the one superstar to debut on the main roster still as undefeated. Oh, was he wrong."

The crowd was eating it up as I felt my anger grow. This was good. "He lost his title, left FTU angry, and debuted in an overhyped match that he lost in thirty seconds! You see what happens when you get rid of the brains behind the operation, you lose in

glorious fashion.” I looked at the camera head on. “Hey Matt, how’s the main roster treating you?” The crowd oohed at that. They knew he’d been floundering.

“Now I’m not out here to complain. In fact, I would like to thank Matt for leaving. If I was still paired with him, I wouldn’t be here with all of you.” I shrugged, “and besides, he was getting a little boring, right?” The crowd erupted in cheers. I looked towards the camera one more time, a smile on my face, full of confidence in myself once more. “So Matt, thank you for leaving me behind. Now I get to do things that will *really* cause a scene here. After all, FTU is my house. I’m not done here, not by a long shot.”

~ ~ ~

I did a few live shows working with different people, walking out with them and managing them, but there wasn’t one superstar that I connected with as well as I had with Nathan. That feeling of losing my dreams started coming back.

In early June, Mr. Ross was ill and asked me if I could run the show for the night as the acting general manager. I wasn’t scheduled to be on the show, so if this was a way to keep my name in everyone’s minds then I would gladly do it. I didn’t feel prepared to take this on, but I don’t stay away from a challenge. I embraced it.

Apparently, that night went well because I became the assistant general manager of FTU the next week. Mr. Ross had me handle mostly the females when they got out of line, but every once in a while, he had me put a male wrestler back in check. I couldn’t physically touch them, but one look or putting them into a match straightened them out.

I enjoyed working as the assistant general manager, and apparently the universe liked me in a position of power too. After just over a year of working as Nathan’s

manager and almost a full year being the assistant general manager of FTU, I had found success with the fans. I had found something that meant more to me than the world.

A few weeks shy of completing one year as the assistant general manager, Mr. Haynes called me into his office at the training center. I knocked on his door, hearing a muted “come in” a few seconds later. I opened the door to see Mr. Haynes behind his desk. He looked almost exactly like he did when I met him so many years ago. Just with a few more gray hairs. “Miss Lyric, a pleasure to see you again.”

“It’s been a few years, Mr. Haynes. I’m surprised that you recognized me.”

“You may look like your mother, but you have the passion for this company just like your father. But family isn’t why I asked you here.” He motioned for me to sit. I did, albeit hesitantly. I had the feeling I was called to the principal's office.

“Is there anything wrong, Mr. Hayes?”

“No, no. You have been nothing but outstanding since joining with NWWF. We truly are lucky to have you. I asked you here because we don’t see you staying in FTU for much longer.”

“Oh.”

“We want to bring you to the main roster. Specifically, we want you on Monday Nite Fury. As of now, there are two options that our writers have thought of to bring you onboard. You can become Mr. Henry’s manager again. We’re getting him ready to turn face rather soon, giving you two a different dynamic to try out and using it as a time to reconcile what he did in FTU—a fresh start, as it were, for both of you.”

“I’d rather . . .”

Mr. Haynes put his hand up. “I did say there were two options. The current general manager is getting ready to leave after two years. You’ve been doing a fantastic job of being the Assistant GM to William the past year. I’d think you would be an ideal candidate to become the next GM of Monday Nite Fury.”

“Oh. Um.” I felt my heart pounding.

“Ultimately, I want you to make the choice. It’s your career. You can even say no to moving up right now.”

Work with a superstar that I knew and worked well with, or build on something that I’ve slowly come to love doing but with more power.

It was an easy choice.

“You know, at any time you can switch to your real name. We can rebrand your character. Make you someone completely different than you were in FTU,” Mr. Haynes suggested.

I made it this far in my career with the fans simply with who I was, not because of the name. By now everyone who had access to internet knew that my last name was de la Cruz, but no one cared. They only cared about Thalia and her story, not Lyric and my real-life drama.

“Thank you, Mr. Haynes, but I’d rather stick with Thalia Alvarado. People know that name. They trust that name. If I decided to start using my real name, I know there’ll be people out there that would use it against me and the company. I’d rather not start any controversies before actually debuting on the main roster, if that’s alright with you.”

Mr. Haynes grinned before standing up and extending his hand. “Alright. Welcome to Monday Nite Fury, Miss Alvarado.”

CHAPTER X

I looked in the mirror at the makeup station and marveled at what the Glam Team had done. My hair was pulled into a high ponytail, practically resting on the upper crown of my head. My lips were blood red; the small winged black eyeliner was crisp. The bronze and gold eyeshadow were smoked out beyond what I could do, bringing out the darker shade of my green eyes. After I was done in the makeup chair, it wasn't rare for me to not recognize myself at first glance. The Glam Team was just that good.

I thanked them before walking towards the Gorilla Position, where wrestlers waited before they headed to the ring. This was also where the executive producers, Mr. Haynes, and the lead writer sat while Fury was on air. When I got there, Mr. Haynes gave me one final rundown of my segment. I wasn't needed until five minutes before the show went live, so I decided to wait nearby. Distracted by my phone, I didn't hear what was going on around me until I heard a very familiar voice in my ear.

"I tink yer better pay attention to yer surroundings, lass."

I turned to see Desmond and Samanta. I jumped from my chair and hugged them both.

"It's so good to see you guys! I've missed y'all."

"We've missed you, too, Lyric," Samanta said with a glowing smile. "Figured we come see you since Fury's in Corpus."

"I alwus that ye'd be perfect in a management role, Lyric."

"Because of how involved I was with DSIW?"

Desmond nodded. “Ya have a vision for storytellin’. Helps quite a bit as a GM.”

“I was only the assistant. Mr. Ross still had the final word on everything.”

“I’d argue that some of the best matches were the ones you put together,”

Samanta shrugged. “It was fun seeing that side of you in person for a bit.”

“I noticed you left a few weeks ago. Is it because—”

“We’re expecting,” Samanta and Desmond said, beaming. I tried not to scream in excitement as I hugged them again. My work parents were having a child!

As I talked with them about the pregnancy, I heard from behind me, “LY!!!!” I turned to see Kat, Eliza, and Mira running full force at me. I ran towards them, meeting in a group hug. Over their shoulders, I noticed Diego and Mamá approach. I broke away from my friends to hug Diego then Mamá.

“Welcome home, my sweet,” Mamá said.

“Thanks, Mamá. Is Papá here?”

“He’s talking with Jonathan. There’s someone he’s been training recently that he thinks the company should look at.”

“More excitement for his students than his own children,” I said under my breath.

Mamá hugged me. “I will *always* be your biggest fan.”

I nod. “Thanks, Mamá.” I glance at the clock to see that there’s ten minutes before the show is set to start. “I gotta go, now. It’s almost time.”

Mamá gave me one last hug. “Good luck love.”

I watched the group walk off and immediately felt sad. My father hadn’t come around to see that I didn’t need to be a wrestler to be successful. That I could break out,

make my own legacy. I wasn't expecting a miracle, but there was a part of me that wanted it to happen before I went out there tonight.

I walked to the Gorilla Position, waiting for the show to start. Mr. Haynes came over and talked to me one last time before he went to address the audience. My introduction would be opening the whole show. There was some pressure, but I was ready. I had prepared my whole life for this moment. I looked at my reflection one last time.

Hair perfect. Makeup perfect. Big silver hoop earrings that hung almost down to the shoulders. Perfect. I checked to make sure I had two necessary accessories on. The black and silver Panerai Luminor Due watch that I bought the day after Mr. Haynes talked to me was secured on my right wrist, while a silver charm bracelet that my mother gifted me on my eighteenth birthday dangled gently on the left wrist. I eyed the black blazer jacket with a red V-neck, short sleeve, button-up dress shirt and black skinny leather pants paired with black knee-high boots the wardrobe department put me in. Perfect. I was Thalia.

My dreams may have changed, but so have I. No matter what happened, I wanted to be the best worker that had ever graced the business. And once the first note of my music hit, I'd prove it to everyone. I was ready to do it with my own name. Because this is my life. My story. I'm building this legacy all on my own. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

~ ~ ~

Mr. Haynes stood in the middle of the ring. “Hello, Corpus Christi! And welcome to Monday Nite Fury!” The crowd cheered. “The past few weeks, there has been something missing. Something to make this show better than before.”

He paused for a second. “Or rather *someone*. Monday Nite Fury needs someone to run it. Someone that will understand what you, the fans, want, while also keeping the talent in the back working hard to earn their title shots. Someone to push them above and beyond. We’ve looked and looked to find the perfect person. And I think we found ‘em. Ladies and gentlemen, your *NEW* General Manager of Monday Nite Fury . . .”

Mr. Haynes pointed towards the entrance ramp. A second passed before my music hit. The fans that watched FTU recognized the music instantly, cheering loudly. I made my way out and earned more cheers. I beamed as I walked to the ring. Mr. Haynes held the ropes open for me, handing me a mic. I looked over the crowd, taking in the moment. I looked at the front row and saw Diego, Kat, Eliza, Mira, Desmond, Samanta, and Mamá, but I didn’t see my father.

I mentally kicked myself. Why had I expected to see him there? I turned my attention back to the crowd, regaining my composure.

“For those of you who don’t know who I am, my name is Thalia Alvarado. Take a moment to google the name later. Might learn a thing or two.” I looked at Mr. Haynes. “Thank you for that warm introduction, Mr. Haynes. I have big plans for this show and cannot wait to get started. In fact, for my first act as GM, I . . .”

Theme music started to play and out walked Blake Martel and Darin Sparks, a veteran tag team on the show. Blake raised the mic he was holding. “Miss Thalia, right?”

I nod. “Right,” Blake continued, “we can tell you exactly what needs to be done. The first thing you should do is give Darin and me our tag titles back.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes,” Darin said. “They were unceremoniously taken from us last week.”

“Hm. I see. Well . . .”

I was interrupted again. This time Matt Henry walked out with his partner, Jaydon Porter. “I’m sorry, but you tapped out, Darin.”

“I was trying to scratch my back,” Darin said. “I didn’t tap.”

“Right,” Jaydon said. “So, you also didn’t tap to Matt three weeks ago? Or is it just selective remembering.”

“That match . . . we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about how those thieves, Adrian Haywood and Kayson Day, are walking around that locker room with *our* titles.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “You lost. Back of the line. It’s time to let a new team take over.”

Blake laughed. “Ha! As if you two could *ever* be champs!”

The four started yelling at one another on the stage.

“Alright, that’s it!” I said, gaining their attention. “Martel, Sparks. You two want a rematch for those titles? You’re gonna have to earn it. So tonight, we’re gonna have a number one contender’s match for the tag team titles. Blake Martel and Darin Sparks against Matt Henry and Jaydon Porter.” The crowd cheered. I looked at the crowd and smiled, then turned back to the four men on the entrance ramp. “And that match . . . is next!”

I smiled as my music hit. I made my way out of the ring, taking my time to get to the back by high fiving people at ringside and along the ramp. Once I got backstage, I was surrounded by members of the roster, offering their congratulations and welcomes. Eventually, I made it to a room that was set aside for my office. I settled in and watched the show unfold from that room, keeping a close eye on every match as I started planning future shows that I'll propose to the creative team.

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At the end of the night, there was a knock at my door. I was reading some papers that Mr. Haynes sent me during the show.

“Come in.” I looked up and saw Nathan walk in. “Good job tonight,” I said as I looked back at the papers.

“Is this a good time?”

“Depends,” I said as my attention stayed on the papers in my hands. “What are you here for?”

“To talk.”

I took a breath to steady my heart. I wanted to talk, but not now. My hands flipped the page I was looking at as I spoke. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“Lyric.”

My eyes glanced up to him. It had been over a year since I had seen or heard anything from Nathan. I took another breath, keeping my emotions in check as I placed the papers down on the desk. I laced my fingers together, resting them on the table.

“Nathan, you had a year, *a year*, to talk. And yet, all I got was a year of silence.”

“I know, I just . . .”

“Let me make this crystal clear,” I said as I stood up. I looked straight into Nathan’s eyes. “I am your boss now. I do not want to deal with any personal baggage while I am in this position. Let’s keep this strictly professional. Understood?”

“I guess I’ll get going then.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Henry,” I said as I sat down.

“Night.”

Once the door closed, I let out the breath I didn’t know I was holding. I knew I would have to deal with him at some point, I just wished it hadn’t been the first night on the job. I focused back on the papers and finished reading them before gathering my stuff and heading out. Outside my door were my family and friends, waiting for me. Seeing them front row for my debut was special. I walked over, joining them and falling into the conversation. As we headed towards the exit, Mamá pulled me back.

“You did great, little blossom.”

“I just,” I sighed, looking down, feeling defeated. I hated that I got my hopes up. I should have known that he would have found something that he valued more than his own daughter’s debut on the brand that gave this family so much.

Mamá noticed my mood change. She hugged me, patting me on the head.

“Everything will work out in the end. Deep down, I know he’s impressed with everything you’ve done. He just won’t admit it out loud. It’s his stubbornness kicking in.”

“I’m tired, Mamá.”

Mamá smiled at me sadly as she took my hand. We walked to the parking lot, Mamá trying to make small talk and cheer me up. As we approached the lot, I saw two men near a familiar looking car. The one on the left gave the other a handshake and

turned to walk away. I noticed that it was Mr. Haynes. The other man had salt-and-pepper hair, but the way he stood couldn't be anyone else. We made eye contact. I felt myself freeze in place. The only thing that escaped my mouth in that moment was a breathless whisper.

“Papá . . .”