

There's Only One Way Down from the Top Turnbuckle

Carrie Ann balanced herself on the nightstand, the fake crystal lamp in between her legs, her toes curled around opposite edges of the peeling furniture. She raised her body up and slowly brought it down, just before the yellowed lampshade kissed the back of her thighs. She did this one hundred times. It was once hard work; now it was muscle memory. And a way to exercise her superstitions. 100 squats from any perch she could find. 100 drops onto the mattress. One bowl of oatmeal. One head of iceberg lettuce. She'd gotten through everything except the oatmeal and lettuce. Room service didn't exist at the Best Western Canton Inn, but she'd given the round woman at the front desk \$30 to run to the nearest grocery store to get her two food items. That was over an hour ago and Carrie Ann was about to walk over to the front desk and put a little fear into the round woman, but she had to get dressed for her match and if she didn't start an hour prior to leaving, she would feel rushed and inevitably, forget part of the routine. She had rehearsed with the new girl – *god what was her real name?* – and eventually the new girl got it.

The new girls were all the same. Big hair, big curves, plastic personality. They were made from the same mold in the same factory. They all blended together in Carrie Ann's mind. She was sure that the fans felt the same way. Whether the new girls were blonde or brunette or ginger, it didn't matter. They offered a sameness that was dangerous for the sport. Carrie Ann was the first to admit that she was rough around the edges when she started out. She didn't want to put the time in, whether that be in the planning or rehearsals or the gym, but she took a couple of hard knocks from the veterans – the real women of the sport – and learned quickly that if she wanted to be more than a stepping stone or easy match for someone making a comeback, she had to put the work in. She had to learn. There was no other way.

That was more than twenty years ago and there were more downs than ups in her career, but she still had a career. She wasn't working in stadiums or arenas anymore; trying to hold onto those memories was the fastest way to finish off your career. She caught herself saying to one of the new girls, "you think this is a big crowd, you should've been at -" and she stopped before completing the sentence. The truth is, she could've concluded that thought with fifty different examples. This traveling circuit wasn't terrible. You worked in front of a few thousand people every night. Most of the events were held in towns that time forgot, but people showed up to be entertained. Carrie Ann could always deliver that. She had to pay her own way, but every now and then, someone got called up from the traveling circuit. She figured that if she bided her time and kept putting on a good show, she'd be back to the world that embraced her for over a decade.

It didn't hurt that she held the belt. Her name was still known in all the circles and she knew that a lot of the fans were there to see her. The young girls thought otherwise, but none of them would have careers. They'd try their hands at this for a while, realize they couldn't hack it, then try to get into movies or some other form of entertainment. They weren't going to make it. They didn't have what it took. Carrie Ann thought of helping some of them out, thought about giving them the type of advice that only came from years of failure, and decided that she needed to keep everything to herself. Nobody helped her along the way. A sport like this doesn't need a motherly figure. Besides, if she ever tried to be nice, she'd get stomped all over.

Carrie Ann counted down her final ten squats, then leapt off the nightstand. The lamp rattled and swirled until it settled back down. Her landings weren't what they used to be. In her prime, she could land on the mat and not make a sound. She could build a pyramid out of wine glasses and land right next to it and none of them would move. Nowadays, she landed on her heels. That's why she needed to ice her legs after every match. Especially her shins. She always

waited till she got back to her room or car, wherever she was sleeping for the night. She tried to shrug it off, telling herself that she'd land on her toes during the match.

The hot water wasn't working in the bathroom and she'd already called twice about it and got the same response. "We'll send someone." She figured there wasn't anyone to send and that the person in the front was trained to fool customers with politeness. Carrie Ann understood. Her work was also an illusion. She washed her face with cold water and tapped it dry with the brittle hand towel. Her face would have to calm down before she applied her makeup. Carrie Ann took her duffle bag out from underneath the bed. She checked quick to make sure her suitcase was still in the closet. It was and it still had the TSA approved lock keeping the contents safe. She removed her outfit and laid it out on the bed. Denim stretch pants with slits cut throughout. Neon pink bikini top. Skin tight wife beater that always came off halfway through the match. Two neon pink armbands with frills. Neon pink knee-high boots. It's a look that took three years to perfect. She had a few false starts; it wasn't easy to balance aesthetics with durability, but after enduring enough matches in uncomfortable clothes, she figured it out. The outfit was simple and sexy. Even at forty-three, she still looked great in the form fitting clothes. The fans expected her to look great. They also expected her to put on a great show and that was never a problem. Carrie Ann was a professional and none of the girls she worked with understood this. They thought they could get by on good looks or athleticism or having one great move. They were wrong and Carrie Ann didn't mind. She was fine with paying her dues once more. She'd run through all of these girls on the traveling circuit until the stadiums and arenas were ready for her again.

She dressed quickly. The heater in the room sputtered out heat every few minutes and it wasn't going to do any better than that. It was January in Texas and Carrie Ann forgot how cold it could get. It didn't matter that it would be cold during the match. She moved around so much

and with adrenaline pumping through her veins, she wouldn't feel the cold. Carrie Ann went to the bathroom and laid out her makeup kit. The neon pink color she used under her eyes for years had been discontinued and the new pink was a shade darker than her bikini top and boots, but the lights over the ring on the travel circuit were never that good. She decided that when she got called up again, she would find a bikini top and boots that matched the new pink eyeliner and mascara; not only that, she would buy the new pink makeup by the box load. She didn't want to ever run out. Carrie Ann finished with her left eye and a soft knock interrupted her. She didn't like to be seen in costume prior to the start of the match, but it was probably just that round woman from the front desk finally delivering her oatmeal and iceberg lettuce.

Carrie Ann checked herself in the mirror. Shaving the sides of her head and dyeing her hair black was the smartest thing she did; fans still knew who she was, but she had a new edge to her that was a promise for exciting things to come. She had a few lines on the side of her mouth, but no bags under her eyes. In the ring, she still looked twenty-three. Once she got called back up, she could do this for the next thirty years. This wasn't a phase. It was a career.

"Be right there," she called from the bathroom.

She was ready to answer the door, but the round woman had made her wait and Carrie Ann had no problem reciprocating the favor. When she finally opened the door, she was surprised it wasn't the round woman. It was Angel Dust. Hair so blonde it was white and skin so tan it was leather. She had a real name and Carrie Ann couldn't remember it. Angel Dust smiled without showing her blinding white teeth. She wasn't dressed for their match yet. That's why she'd never make it. She had no sense of professionalism.

"Hey Corinthian, can I come in?" said Angel Dust. She entered the room before Carrie Ann could respond. "It'll only be a minute or so."

“I was just getting ready for our match,” said Carrie Ann.

Angel Dust settled onto the bed.

“Eddie talked to you, right? I just wanted to make sure because he said he did or was going to and I figured we could go through the changes here instead of backstage, you know,” said Angel Dust.

Eddie Cotherman managed all the talent on the travel circuit. He wasn't qualified to sell used lawn mowers, but through family connections had earned weekly paychecks for thirty years by mismanaging careers. Talking to him was as enjoyable as amputating your own arm with a spoon. Eddie was also famous for making important decisions without notifying anyone that would be affected.

“He hasn't said a thing to me,” said Carrie Ann.

“He said you would say that! But anyway, I'm sure you know that I'm now winning the belt from you tonight and I had an idea of how we could change the ending of the match. You have a minute?” said Angel Dust.

“He said that?” said Carrie Ann.

“Yeah. You do know that Paul Hopkins from Wrestling International is here tonight, right? Apparently he's a big flea market guy too. Two birds with one stone. Never seen that happen actually, but it had to because it's a saying. No one would just say that. I know the plan was that after I threw you out of the ring and then you clotheslined me out of the ring and dragged me back in that you would do the Elbow Rake and pin me but I really think that instead of you clotheslining me out of the ring I could duck it and do a drop kick or something outside the ring and then I could pull you back into the ring and 360 suplex you. Nobody gets up after that,” said Angel Dust. “By the way, can I see the belt? I think if I hold it for the first time in the

ring I might cry and a champion shouldn't cry. Or should they? I guess I could but I can't really talk when I cry and I'll have to say *something* after the match and I want people to understand me. Do you understand me?"

"Did you say Paul Hopkins is going to be at the match?" said Carrie Ann.

"Yeah! Eddie said that word has gotten to Paul through Eddie about me and that he thinks I have what it takes. What it takes! But it wouldn't be good for me to have what it takes and lose to you tonight. You've had the belt for awhile now anyway. And Eddie said that probably after I'm the champion and get called up that they'll let you have it anyway. Or if like Snap or Hellion get it that you can probably win it back in just a couple of months. Don't all champs lose now and again and then win it back and what makes them winners is that they win it back after losing?" said Angel Dust.

"Paul Hopkins?" said Carrie Ann.

"I said yeah!" said Angel Dust.

"Where is Eddie?" said Carrie Ann, not waiting for a response before picking up her cell phone and dialing him. He didn't pick up. He never did.

"Probably already there. It doesn't matter. So can I see the belt?" said Angel Dust.

"Eddie keeps it for me. I don't feel safe traveling with it. I'm sure you understand," said Carrie Ann.

"Yeah of course. I'll just see him before the match. But you're cool with how I thought about changing our match? I think it'll work amazingly well," said Angel Dust.

"I agree 100%," said Carrie Ann.

“Good. The only other thing I was going to ask is that I was thinking about keeping my hair out tonight because I really like how it looks right now and I was hoping that you wouldn’t pull on it at all, so that won’t be a problem right?” said Angel Dust.

“I wouldn’t think about touching your hair. That’s never been my style,” said Carrie Ann. “If you don’t mind, I was just finishing my makeup.”

“I don’t mind,” said Angel Dust.

The young girl didn’t move.

“That was me asking you to leave,” said Carrie Ann.

“Oh yeah! I guess I should get ready too. I’m *so* excited,” said Angel Dust.

Carrie Ann didn’t bother saying goodbye. She tried Eddie once more and he didn’t pick up. She texted him too, but that went ignored. She couldn’t let any of this interfere with her ritual. Her right eye needed makeup. So she went to the bathroom and expertly matched the makeup she applied to her left eye to her right eye. She greased her comb and ran it through her hair. Carrie Ann wasn’t ready for her final look. She opened up the closet and took out the suitcase and laid it on the bed. She spun the combination on the lock and pulled it off. Waiting inside the suitcase, wrapped in a faux fur jacket, was the championship belt. She slid it out and held it in her hands. Carrie Ann loved the weight of it. She clipped it to her waist and stood in the mirror. Everything about her look was perfect.

A knock at the door took her out of the moment. She figured it was Angel Dust. The girl probably needed a ride to the flea market grounds. That would be too nice. That would be motherly. Carrie Ann would only drive herself.

“I’m still getting ready,” said Carrie Ann.

“It’s the stuff you wanted me to get,” said the voice. It was the round woman from the front desk. “I can leave it out here.”

“It’s too late. I don’t need it.”

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According to what Eddie had told them, the flea market in Canton – known as Canton Trade Days – was the biggest in the country. They’d be sure to attract a large crowd to the event, perhaps the biggest they’d seen in months. He had to tell them something, since they’d spent the last quarter of the year all over Florida and Georgia. Driving to Texas was a commitment that had to pay off in some way.

The ring was set up in a warehouse outfitted with bleachers. The wind kicked against the building, rattling the aluminum frame. The crowd, easily 1,200-1,500 in size, was quiet most of the night. They’d paid their \$8 admission and figured it was still cheaper than going to the movies. Besides, they spent their Friday shopping at the flea market anyway. They’d stay for a couple of matches and find their way back to the car. The few diehard fans would wait till the main event between “Lights Out” Donny Trucks and Halcon. What they didn’t realize is that the real main event would come five matches in. Luckily, a majority of the crowd had decided to stick it out till then.

Carrie Ann waited in the makeshift recovery room. Most of the wrestlers arrived right before they went on. There was no reason to hang out in the recovery room before or after a match, but Carrie Ann wanted to get a feel for the crowd. Their excitement ebbed and flowed with the action in the ring. Their lack of enthusiasm was understandable. These early matches were not very good. If Eddie understood anything about the sport, he would know to start with a

marquee matchup to hook the crowd; they'd be more forgiving during the lackluster matches. He didn't and the crowd suffered. Carrie Ann would ignite them.

Eddie snuck into the recovery room a few minutes before the fourth match was wrapping up. He dusted sunflower seed debris from the side of his mouth and looked at the floor and ceiling as he spoke to Carrie Ann.

"Yeah I meant to call you or stop in but I couldn't remember your room number," said Eddie.

"Have you ever been elbowed in the face before?" said Carrie Ann.

"That's what you barbarians do. Listen, let the girl win the belt. She's good. She's the best shot we got of getting someone to the next level," said Eddie.

"No, I -,"

"Don't kid yourself. You're old. Be happy you're still getting paychecks," said Eddie. "Let the girl win. You know nobody likes comebacks in this business. It's always the new thing."

"What do you know about any business?" said Carrie Ann.

"You brought the belt, right?" said Eddie.

Carrie Ann nodded.

"Good," said Eddie. "Listen, me and Hopkins are supposed to grab a bite at some place called Burger Bean or Bean & Burger. One of those names. I'm just saying that if you show up around the same time, you can say hello. I know you know each other from your old days. Don't sit with us or nothing, but say hello."

He left the recovery room and Carrie Ann listened to the sound of the crowd cheer. The fourth match was over. She was up next. Angel Dust came in through the back entrance with a

half-dozen of the new girls. None of them had ever shown up early or stayed late to watch a match. Angel Dust told them she was winning and she wanted them there to see her hold up the belt. They'd take videos and photos on their phones and post it everywhere. Nothing good had happened to any of them on this circuit and they could live vicariously through her. One of them waved to Carrie Ann and Carrie Ann faked a smile. The participants of the fourth match lumbered into the recovery room. Angel Dust took off her long coat to unveil her outfit: she was supposed to be a sexed-up version of Tinker Bell, but every element of her outfit looked like it was found in a discount bin at Party City. The announcer's inaudible voice boomed throughout the warehouse, followed by Angel Dust's saccharine pop music. She clapped for herself and entered the arena. The crowd showed nothing more than indifference. The other girls walked out to the bleachers and took seats close to Eddie. Maybe he'd been the one to ask them to come, make it look like he was involved in managing all of them – this was his way of proving to Paul Hopkins that he had what it took to work in the big leagues. If Paul Hopkins was the same man that Carrie Ann knew a dozen years ago, he wouldn't even notice Eddie. His eyes would be on the ring the entire time.

Carrie Ann leaned outside the recovery room to hear the announcer run through her introduction. "The six-foot beauty from the city of brotherly love, two-time Wrestling International Champion, the only champion to defend her title on five continents, the rope shaking, elbow raking, the one, the only, CORINTHIAN." Carrie Ann never tired of hearing her own introduction. Motley Crue's "Looks That Kill" blasted through the arena. She knew that most of the people in the audience weren't born when the song was released, but she didn't care because she loved it and it always generated excitement. Not only that, but she knew how to make an entrance. Even those in the audience that had never experienced such a spectacle before,

live or on television, knew the name Corinthian. No matter when she appeared on the bill, Carrie Ann knew that she was the main event. She strutted out to a sea of screaming voices. She carried the belt on her hip like a pistol and when she hopped up to the outside of the ring, she held it above her head. This raised the crowd's fervor to another level. She surveyed the crowd until she spotted Paul Hopkins. His look hadn't changed in fifty years. Dress slacks, polo shirt, and glasses that looked like two old television sets covering his eyes. His hair had thinned to being barely there and his midsection was a fruit basket protruding over his belt. Carrie Ann hopped off the ring and walked around, holding the belt high. The cheers followed her. She stopped in front of Paul Hopkins and handed him the belt.

"Hold this till I'm done," she said and his bottom lip folded underneath his top lip. He nodded and Carrie Ann threw her hands above her head. She ran toward the ring and slid underneath the bottom rope. She sprang back up to her feet. The crowd belonged to her. This is what the young girls never understood: win the crowd, win the match – even if you lose, you still win. The referee, Stan Eakins, brought the girls together. Carrie Ann gave Angel Dust a once over. She was twice this girl's age and it didn't matter; Carrie Ann was smarter and had more respect for the sport.

"You girls know this dance by now. No scratching. And if you get me, get me in the right leg. My left knee's been acting up," said Stan.

Angel Dust got in Carrie Ann's face, just like they'd rehearsed. The crowd was sold on their rivalry, even though they'd never wrestled against each other before.

"Remember, once we're out the -,"

"You know I've decided to change up some things in the beginning too. Just go with the flow. You're a pro. Now head tap me," said Carrie Ann.

Angel Dust was already lost, but did as Carrie Ann told her to do. A head tap was a soft head butt that, when done to a professional, could be sold as a monumental blow. Carrie Ann could sell anything. She flew backwards and covered her face with her hands. Angel Dust knew enough about wrestling to attack her opponent when she was stunned. She grabbed Carrie Ann and threw her against the opposite ropes. Carrie Ann played into it, bounced off the ropes, and took a clothesline across the chest. Her feet journeyed out in front of her and she came crashing down on the mat. Angel Dust wasn't smart enough to take a breather and include the crowd in her antics. She went for the quick pin instead. Stan slid down next to them and slapped the mat as he counted, "1...2..." and Carrie Ann kicked out just before Stan could say "3". Angel Dust believed that she was in control of things, that this would be a quick and easy victory for her. Carrie Ann got to her feet and stumbled back against the ropes. Angel Dust sprang herself off the opposite rope and ran full force at Carrie Ann. She was looking to clothesline the dizzy veteran, but Carrie Ann ducked at the last moment and hoisted Angel Dust over the ropes and out of the ring. The crowd was on fire. Carrie Ann looked in Eddie's direction. He was on his feet, mortified. The other girls were applauding, thinking that this was all part of the plan. Carrie Ann glanced at Angel Dust. The young girl was on her back; she was in real pain. Carrie Ann slowly climbed to the top turnbuckle. The crowd grew more ravenous with each step. She stood atop with her hands raised high. She slapped both of her elbows, letting everyone know that Angel Dust was about to get Elbow Raked. She caught Paul Hopkins's eyes as she prepared to leap. His eyebrows were raised slightly in disbelief. Angel Dust pulled herself up and stumbled forward. Carrie Ann brought wrath down upon her in the form of two elbows to the face. Angel Dust flailed backwards and fell to the floor. Carrie Ann had twisted her ankle, but she wouldn't let it slow her. This was her match. She dragged Angel Dust toward the ring and shoved her

underneath the ropes. She climbed into the ring and laid on top of her opponent. Stan knew this wasn't how the match was supposed to unfold, but he didn't want thousands of people chasing him out of Canton, Texas. He counted out Carrie Ann's victory slowly and when he shouted "3", Carrie Ann rested on one knee. She raised her right pointer finger. The crowd baptized her with applause.

This was her match.

She stood and looked for Paul Hopkins, but he was nowhere to be found. A stranger stood in his seat, holding the championship belt above his head, doing everything he could to prevent anyone else from touching it.