

Lost Monarch



INTERLUDE

Ryan's been stuck in this loop for so long it's starting to feel like the walls are closing in, but not in the way you'd think. More like they're folding in on themselves, collapsing inward, softening with every pass she makes, like she's spiraling, but too slow for it to be the kind of spiral that leaves a body in pieces. No, this is the kind of spiral where the pieces get stuck. They're lodged somewhere deep inside, jagged things cutting at her lungs with every breath. She lost to Selena Frost in that Iron Woman match. Lost. Not "almost won" or "didn't quite make it"—a clean, definitive loss. And everyone else? They were happy. Pleased, even. *Impressed*. They kept talking about how she pushed Frost to her limit, like that should've been some kind of badge

of honor. But Ryan? She couldn't care less about the fact that she made Frost sweat. She only cared that she *didn't make her quit*. The way that word hung in the air—*quit*—that was what she wanted. The broken surrender, the moment when it's just her and the opponent, the ring around them empty, echoing. And Frost? She didn't break. She wasn't supposed to get up. *Ryan* was supposed to stop her..

The praise doesn't heal the wound. It just scratches it deeper.

No, she wasn't interested in "almost." She never had been. Almost was the art of being good enough to make it hurt a little, but never enough to win. It was the purgatory of second-place finishes, and Ryan was well past it. She dealt with defeat like she dealt with everything else: as an injustice, a wrong that needed righting. Not an opportunity for reflection. She didn't need therapy; she needed *closure*. She didn't need a pill to make her feel better, didn't need a doctor to sprinkle her with prescribed fairy dust. Dr. Okafor didn't get it. He told her to talk. She tried. It was a waste of time. So she flushed the pills. The *TINK* of the blue capsules spinning down the drain was the most satisfaction she'd gotten in days. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe she was wrong, maybe she'd end up face down in a gutter with a mind full of half-finished thoughts. But at least she wouldn't be talking about it. Talking was just another way to get stuck. Talking was like putting your soul in a little glass box, keeping it safe from the rest of the world, preserving it like a butterfly under glass, but who needed that? Ryan had never been a collector of fragile things.

Then came Gavin Taylor. Again. Another rematch, another shot at "redemption." Redemption. It was a word that tasted like old, stale bread—hard to chew, harder to swallow. Beating Gavin again? Sure, she could do that. It wouldn't fix the gaping hole left by Frost, but it was something. A consolation prize, a momentary flash of something that felt like a victory, but wasn't. The crowd would cheer, and Gavin would nod solemnly, as if he knew that he, too, was trapped in this charade. A game they'd both played twice to find the stakes meaningful anymore. She wasn't getting closer to anything by beating Gavin again, and he probably knew that. But it didn't matter, because the loop would reset, and there they'd be at it *again*.

It was like they were both caught in a time loop of their own making, the past taunting them like a ghost at the edge of their peripheral vision. She could almost hear its whisper in her ear: *You're not going anywhere, Ryan. You never were.* Another match, another attempt at salvation, but salvation was never the point. Breaking the cycle was the point. But how? That's what she couldn't figure out. And right now, Gavin wasn't the problem. He was just another hurdle she had to clear, and she hated every step of it. She wasn't interested in winning matches. She was interested in breaking free.

But there was one thing she couldn't ignore—the shadow of Waylon Creek and William Heaven Jr., lurking like ghosts at the edges of her vision, pulling at the frayed ends of her mind. Creek. She owed him. She knew it, and he knew it. He wasn't going to forget that win she'd stolen at *Under Attack*. And yet, there was a part of her that wasn't ready to face him yet. Not when there was still too much to fix, too much unfinished business tied to the wreckage of the past few months. Too much tension tangled in her chest, too many things to unravel before the next round of fists and broken promises. One thing at a time.

Ryan didn't do distractions. She didn't do *"what comes next."* She did now. And now was Gavin. But Gavin wasn't the problem. Not really. Not when there was so much more happening beneath the surface. Her career was a mess, her mind even more so, but she couldn't let herself stop. Not now. Not when there was still a chance to fight back. The path? It was hazy. The destination? A blur. But Ryan? She was too deep into the loop to turn back. So, she'd fight. Fight until the darkness ate her whole, fight until there was nothing left to hold on to but the adrenaline, and the fury, and maybe—just maybe—the chance that she might break free.

But who was she kidding? She'd never break free. She'd never stop fighting.

Good Job, Kid!

Ryan leaned against the cold metal bumper of the Supreme Championship Wrestling production truck, the weight of the evening pressing into her ribs, suffocating like the air before a storm. The distant ambiance of the arena—cheers, noise, everything moving forward—felt miles away here, in this quiet corner of the parking lot. Here, the world had forgotten her. A single cigarette dangled from her fingers, the ember flaring faintly with each restless flick. The motion was almost automatic, a tick. Her stomach coiled with frustration, and the knot inside her seemed permanent, too tight to untangle. The cigarette was her only comfort tonight. Pills? Alcohol? She knew where that path led. Rehab *eight years ago* had been a lesson in survival. *This was different*. One cigarette. *Just one*. But even that felt like a betrayal.

Her mind circled back to the same sharp, bitter place—Selena Frost. The loss, raw and jagged, gnawed at her insides like a wound that wouldn't close. She'd pushed the former champion to her limit in that Iron Woman match. She should've been proud. Should've felt something like pride, but instead, all she could taste was the biting sting of Selena Frost's cold shoulder. Losing to anyone else might've been bearable, even if only just a little bit. But losing to Selena—the name, the reputation, the woman who'd coasted for years on being an opportunist, not that she wasn't good—felt like she wouldn't ever recover from it. She would never shake it off.

She inhaled deeply, the cigarette poised between her fingers, ready to light, when a voice cut through the silence.

"You know, you might've lost your first ever Fatal Fortune match," Franklin said, his tone calm, almost detached. He didn't offer her a comforting word, just a quiet observation. "But you proved something. You pushed Selena Frost—Thee *Selena Frost*—to her limit. Not everyone can say that."

Ryan didn't look at him. Her gaze stayed fixed on the faint red glow of the cigarette, though his words settled deep, pressing into her

chest harder than the weight of the thing she held between her fingers. It wasn't praise. It wasn't what she wanted to hear. It was... *something*. But it wasn't enough.

Franklin's eyes flicked to the cigarette in her hand, his gaze softening, not with pity, but with a quiet, knowing caution—as though he could see the path she was about to choose, the one she'd stumbled down too many times before. "You shouldn't be smoking," he said, his voice a quiet suggestion, the weight of the words deceptively light. "It's not you."

The words landed harder than she anticipated. *It's not you*. She didn't respond, not out loud anyway. What could she say? Maybe he was right. She *wasn't* that person anymore. At least, she *wasn't* supposed to be. But the truth of it stung in a way she couldn't quite explain.

Franklin turned, his silhouette swallowed by the darkness, vanishing as quickly as he had appeared, like a shadow that never quite existed. Ryan remained, frozen, staring at the cigarette now cradled between her fingers. The heat from the ember should have been enough to make her feel something, to drown out the coldness gnawing at her chest. But it wasn't. The sting of defeat lingered, and the taste of *Selena Frost* remained bitter, lodged in her throat like an iceberg she couldn't spit out.

*You should be better
than this.*

Without thinking, she flicked the cigarette away, watching it tumble across the asphalt like it was escaping her grasp, like everything was slipping from her. The ember hissed out on the ground, its small flame snuffed out in the dark.

An unfamiliar annoyance bloomed inside her—a prickle of frustration with herself, with Franklin, with the entire night. But in the stillness of the parking lot, with the world moving on around her, something shifted. Franklin hadn't been wrong. He wasn't trying to judge her, wasn't trying to lecture. He was just reminding her.

The cigarette wouldn't help her. Nothing external would. It was her, with the weight of her own defeat, the sting of failure. Maybe that was where the strength to move forward had always been hiding.

She looked up, the sky stretching above her in wide, silent emptiness, the stars indifferent, scattered like the last pieces of something broken. Tomorrow will come. And maybe, just maybe, she'd be ready for it.

That Part

"You didn't have to come all the way out here, you know."

"I know, but it's been months! I figured I'd better show up before you forget what I look like."

The café in Fells Point was alive with the quiet murmur of conversation and the clink of coffee cups. It was one of those places where time felt suspended, where you could sip your drink and listen to the world move around you, yet remain untouched by it. Sunlight spilled lazily through the windows, casting golden streaks across the brick walls, making everything look more beautiful than it had any right to be. But beneath the warmth, there was something sharp—an undercurrent of tension that clung to the corners of the room, lingering like smoke.

Ryan sat across from Andreas, fingers wrapped tightly around her coffee cup. The mug was warm, but it didn't soothe the chill that gnawed at her insides. Her pulse thrummed in her neck, a constant reminder of the pressure she'd been under—the kind that couldn't be shaken off, no matter how many matches she won, no matter how many victories she claimed. There was always something *more* to prove a hollow ache inside her that no win seemed to fill. And there was Andreas, calm as ever, watching her with those too-knowing eyes.

“So, I hear you've been busy,” Andreas said, leaning back in his chair, one eyebrow raised, the hint of something curious in his voice.

Ryan's smirk was automatic, but the fire in her eyes flickered briefly, a ghost of the confidence she was still trying to hold on to. “You could say that. ‘Under Attack’ was... a ride.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice, but not enough to hide the pride underneath. “Beating Chris Lawler, Waylon Creek, and Marie Jones in one match? That was next level.”

Andreas blinked. “All three?” His voice betrayed a little disbelief, though the thought brought a faint smile to his lips. “Damn, you really did that?”

Ryan chuckled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. “Yeah. Pulled it off in the last few minutes. I had to dig deep. Felt like I *had* to, you know? More for me than for anyone else.”

Andreas nodded slowly, his eyes shifting to the side as he processed it, then back to her with a touch of admiration. But the lightness in his expression faded when he continued, quieter now, like he knew there was more beneath the surface. “But I know that wasn't the end of it. What happened after?”

Ryan's smile faltered—just a fraction, but enough to be noticed. She leaned back, fingers tightening around her cup, and ran a hand through her hair, trying to steady herself. “That's when it got complicated. I got roped into *Fatal Fortunes*... and that's when I met Selena Frost.”

Her voice dropped on the last name, the distaste leaking through before she could stop it. “The Ice Queen herself. She's dangerous, Dre. Not the fun kind. The kind that gets under your skin, makes you second-guess everything. She doesn't see me as a competitor. She sees me as a stepping stone.”

Andreas leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he studied her face. He could tell something was off, but he didn't press her—not yet. “You're handling it, though, right? You've been through worse.”

Ryan shrugged, the edge of her lips coming into a very flat, forced smile. “I’ll handle it. I have to.” But the hesitation in her voice didn’t escape him.

He stared at her, his gaze a little more intense now, as if trying to see past the bravado. “You sure? How’s your head holding up through all this?”

Ryan froze, her fingers stilling on the coffee cup. The question hit too close to the mark. “What do you mean?” she asked, the words leaving her mouth too quickly.

Andreas didn’t flinch. He leaned in, voice quieter, more insistent. “Come on, Ryan. This kind of thing... it messes with you. You know that. I’m talking about therapy. Are you still going?”

Her stomach twisted at the mention of it. Therapy. She could feel the weight of the room pressing down on her. The silence between them thickened. “Yeah, I’m going,” she said, too quickly, a little too stiff. “It’s... fine. Just the usual stuff.” Her eyes darted to the side, a quick glance that didn’t quite meet his.

Andreas didn’t buy it. “Don’t dodge it, Ry. You know how important this is. You can’t just push it aside.”

Ryan bit her lip, staring at her cup. She wanted to say something—something that would make it all go away, make the ache in her chest disappear. But it wouldn’t. It never did. “I’m fine,” she exclaimed, exhaling slowly. The smile she gave him was hollow. “Anyway, enough about me. What’s up with Mia? Haven’t seen her in almost a month.”

Andreas stiffened. His eyes flickered away for a moment before returning to her. “Mia? Why the sudden interest?”

Ryan shrugged, trying to keep her voice light, but the weight of the question felt like lead in her chest. “Just... haven’t heard from her in a while. She’s been kind of quiet.”

There was a subtle shift in Andreas's expression—a tightening of his jaw, a flicker of something guarded in his eyes. "She's been dealing with some stuff. Nothing serious. Why do you care?"

Ryan felt the knot in her throat tighten. Her heart started to race. She could feel the words pushing their way up, urgent, raw. She didn't want to betray Mia's trust, but she couldn't ignore it anymore. Not after what she'd seen. "She showed up to the dressing room somewhat off and... with a black eye." The words left her mouth in a worried tone, but they hit the air between them with a heavy thud. "She didn't say much about it, but I think it came from her dad."

Andreas's face shifted instantly, disbelief giving way to concern. "Her *dad*?" His voice was quiet, careful. "Are you sure?"

Ryan nodded, her throat tight, every word dragging against her chest. "I don't know the details, but I know something's wrong. I think he hit her. I—I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help her."

Andreas exhaled sharply, his gaze flickering down to his coffee. The weight of her words settled over him like a cloud, and for a long moment, he didn't speak. The café, the noise, everything else faded into the background. Finally, he looked up at her, his voice softer than usual. "Well...we'll figure it out, Ry. We always do." He hesitated, then added, "But be careful. Mia's not the only one who might need help."

Ryan's chest was constricted by his words. She met his eyes, feeling the weight of his concern. For a second, it felt like the distance between them, the space they'd both been keeping carefully constructed, closed in—like maybe, just maybe, she wasn't as alone as she'd thought. But she wasn't sure what to do with that.

She nodded slowly, the motion barely perceptible, and turned her gaze back to the half-empty coffee cup in front of her. There was a long silence, both of them trapped in it, waiting for something they couldn't name. Something that was already slipping away.

