

How it started:



How it's going:



A6S 002.5 - WDJCD? (What *Did* Jason Cashe Do?)

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Arizona Bay.

A blissful oasis for some.

The *middle of fuckin' nowhere* to others.

And for our hero/anti-hero, it's the perfect balance of both; especially after a short yet still miserably uncomfortable flight from LAX back to Phoenix Sky Harbor International.

There was no twelve pounds of golden carry-on to warrant another ridiculous upcharge. There was no first notch in either the win column nor the draw column, now oh-and-two. There was only disappointment (in some ways), pain as far as her nervous system could reach, and another taste of that old drug known to all in the fight life as competitive competition for the second show straight.

By the time she had limped through the front door of the Paper Street Tattoo Company she had all but resigned herself to collapse. The hard floor wouldn't mind her presence for the foreseeable future, and after that powerbomb dangling from the title belt down to the mat, she was going to lie face down on her stomach regardless of wherever that ended up being.

Alas, Spirit Airlines doesn't take too kindly to passengers using the aisleways in such fashion, but they couldn't stop her now, those bastards. Her first few steps into the adobe clay-like structure and her travel bag barely made it through the threshold before being haphazardly dropped. Her keys? Well, they didn't make it to the hook she hangs them on. Her phone?

She didn't have a phone.

There she fell into a downward dog position, at first, looking up at the Cashe register, wondering why Jimmy Stars had to be such a bitch. The meetup Cashe obliged to post match could've taken her mind off of being cramped up for hours on end in coach, or at the very least, could have helped her forget about the throbbing in her twisted left knee. From there, she slid forward. Gravity would be her final opponent that night, and it would defeat her, too.

That sweet, sweet bliss. The release of tense muscles. The deep sigh of relief.

Welcome home.

...

...

...

*Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnngggg*

Before she had the time to realize that her eyes were closed, they were open again.

The morning's first kiss of sunlight had crept along the tile floor and had made it up to the tips of her silver hair.

*Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnngggg*

No, it was the **phone**.

More specifically, it was the landline that belonged to the Tattoo Parlor itself. Much in theme with the wild western motifs and decor, it too was a relic of a bygone era. Turn o' the (20th) century construction, complete with a rotary dial and a receiver still connected by a coiled wire.

*Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnngggg*

And of course she had it *connected*, she **had to have it connected**. The physical hammer and bell inside the phone base had one volume setting: hellacious agony.

Aurora pushed herself up from the tiles. She wiped a bit of drool off with her forearm and shuffled around the front desk as if she were infected with the T-virus.

*Bbbrrriiinngggg Bbbrrriiinnggg Bbbrrrii-*

She snatched the receiver up from the cradle.

“God damn it, Jimmy- I’m not really in the mood for round two right now... or ever!”

“Uhh... hello?”

“*Jimmy Stars?*”

“No ma’am.”

“Then who is... are you with *Community Reentry?*”

“No.”

“Then who are...” she blinked and shook out the cobwebs. “How did you get this number?”

“I, uhh, I’m looking for the uhm, the uhhh, Paper Street, uhh, tattoo parlor?”

“*Oh,*” Aurora pursed her lips, and blinked a few more times before reality came crashing in.

“*Ohhh! Yup, this IS the Paper Street Tattoo Company. Aurora speaking, how may I help y-*”

“Thee Aurora? Cool! I’d really like to schedule to come in and get some work done. What are your current rates?”

“Well, that depends on what type of work-”

But then reality set in **further**. As the customer rattles off what he undoubtedly thinks is the most brilliant idea in the history of tattoos in ultra-fine detail, his voice trails off until it’s indistinguishable from the background white noise a migraine provides.

Aurora realizes that she’s standing in a tattoo *parlor* with no tattoo *artists*.

This, of course, had its reason.

“...so what do you think?”

She hadn't been paying attention, at all.

“Hello?”

“I'm sorry, did you mention how you got this number?”

“Nevermind. I'll go someplace else.”

*Click.*

“Okkkayyy then,” Aurie sighed. She tossed the receiver back down onto the cradle attached to the base and shrugged. “I guess you *will* go someplace else then.”

But hey, no harm, no foul. At least now she could finish going to bed.

Aurora's *home* is a small studio apartment that takes up most of the second floor of the parlor building. With shuffling feet, she wandered around to pick up her travel bag, and her keyring. The only thing that stood in her way from her soft pillow top queen was an entire flight of stairs and a knee that preferred it not be bent.

With her quivering fingertips wrapped around the bannister, she sighed. *One step at a time, Aurie. One step at a time...*

*Bbbrrriiiinnngggg-*

“Fu-”

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Hours later, the front door of the Paper Street Tattoo parlor opens once again. This time, it's Jimmy Stars limping through the portal to this desert realm, cane in hand. In typical Jimmy fashion, he slams the door behind him.

"Aurora, you're not going to believe this but-"

She raises her head enough for him to catch a glimpse of her eyes... and the bags underneath of them. Her hair was still disheveled; her face still a mess. Upon second glance, he noticed that she wasn't reading one of her books. She wasn't even out of her ring gear yet.

"-what the hell is going on here? You look like shit." Stars shakes his head. He points a finger at her. "Don't tell me that you snuck past and celebrated with Dopey anyway-"

"Hi, Jimmy," Aurie responded, exasperation overtaking her otherwise bright voice. "Bye Jimmy. See you in three weeks Jimmy."

"Aurora~!"

"Adiós Señor Jaime- and don't slam my door on the way out unless you want to buy me a new one."

"Did you, or did you not-"

"No, Jimmy. As a matter of fact I **didn't**. After the bull you pulled last night I took the first flight back to Phoenix. Don't believe me? Check my ticket. I honestly don't care though."

"If you don't care then why mention it?"

"I just really like it when you're **wrong**." She smirks.

Jimmy scoffs and seats himself in one of the waiting area chairs.

"Hey, I might be wrong about a lot of things when it's all said and done sweetheart, but I actually came here to compliment yo-"

*Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnnggg*

"Hold that thought-" Aurie replies as she picks up the telephone receiver. "You have reached the Paper Street Tattoo Company. Sorry we're not available to take your call right now. At the sound of the tone, please record your message. Beeeep."

"Hey there, I'd like to get a tattoo pl-"

**Click.**

"Sorry about that." She says after hanging up. "You were saying?"

"What I said was:"

*Bbbrrrrriinnnggg*

"Excuse me-" She yanks the receiver up to her lips. "Hello, Paper Street. This is totally a recording speaking."

"Hahaha. No, it isn't! The call cut out- I think you might have hung up on me by accident."

"You're sooooo right! Haaa-" **Click.** "Sorry... **Continue...**"

Jimmy snarls. "What I *wanted* to say is that... while I *am* disappointed in the result last night, I witnessed what I can only say is a marked improvement in your performance."

"Oh? This is... *uhh... surprising? I think?*"

"It's not a congratulations. Hell, it's not 'well done', either. But what I'd like to do is possibly go over the match film and debrief with you a bit. If we can figure this out then at the Pay Per View we can get you over that hump... *Us*, over the hump I mean."

Aurora throws her arms up and shakes her head.

"...and this couldn't wait, like, I dunno, a day or two?"

"Ohh, *don't look at me*, sweetie. I **tried** to debrief you last night but you were more concerned with wanting to smoke dope with a man who literally choked your little ass out for the whole world to see."

"Well, good thing you had XWF security **escort** me to the trainers room or else God-only-knows if I *might* have **accidentally** enjoyed myself a little bit-"

“Sucking Cashe’s dick isn’t helping to build up our brand.”

“No. But building just a little bit of camaraderie up with the locker room might not be the worst ide-”

*Bbbrrriinnngggg Bbbrrriinnnggg*

“**SHUT UP!**” They both shout in unison.

“This has been **non-stop** since the **MOMENT** I got home-”

This time Aurora nearly rips the receiver off of the cord, she whips it up so fast.

“Hi. Paper Street here. **WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU CALLING ME?**”

“Yo, Jason Cashe said ya’ll do some bawmb azz tats yo. I gotta get me some of dat fresh fresh. Gotta up my rizz a hunnid.”

Once again, reality really liked barging in and parking its ass between Aurora’s shoulders.

“Wait... What did Jason Cashe do... *exactly?*”

Jimmy bursts out laughing.

“*What?*”

“**Here Aurie,**” he motions for her to come over as he pulls out his phone. “**Let me show you...**”

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“**I think you’re making a big mistake.**”

“...”

"You need to focus on your wrestling. On the **XWF**. On **Relentless**. You made a *commitment* to **us**. You made a *commitment* to **Stars of Combat**-"

"You came to Paper Street to recruit me. The parlor was here long before there was an 'us'."

"Hah. Okay, sure. Let's play that game, girlie. How the hell do you plan on taking on any clients? You can barely write your own name, let alone draw a stick figure."

"You forget that I was an artist before I was ever a fighter... a damn good one, too. I can do it again... I just gotta put my mind to-"

"Right. Mind-over-matter. Should be easy, hmm? Hell, If only I would have thought of that a few years ago; I could have mind-over-mattered the damn stroke away and I'd still be wrestling again, too... but if that were true, I wouldn't be needing you now would I?"

"..."

"**Trust me**, Aurora... if there's **anyone** on this planet who has *tried* it, *thought* of it, *fought* for it, it's me. But sometimes the dream... dies." He snaps his fingers. "As simple as that."

"...and then what? Just *give up on it... give up on everything like you did?*" she throws her arms up, "They already think I'm a quitter-"

"You **did** quit, Aurie. You ran from some of your problems, sure. But guess what? You ain't special. I think everyone runs from something, at least from time to time, in their own lives. It's natural. It's normal."

Jimmy pulls himself upright in the seat, fixing his posture to take a deep breath.

"I know I quit... on everything at first. I gave up on life itself, for a while, yeah-" Jimmy sighs, "I was done... wanted to die... didn't know why the clot didn't kill my scrawny ass and wished like hell that it did. Believe it or not, I hated the good lord above because I couldn't think of how he could be so cruel."

I felt like... that he kept me alive on purpose to punish me. Eventually I came around, sure. I fought my ass off to be able to walk again but knew whatever grim hope I had of returning to

the ring was long, long gone. I had achieved everything else that I could, so I was ready to end it all...

...that was, until somebody dear to me reminded me that because my dream was not mine to live out anymore did not mean that I couldn't help do something to guide others to help them live out theirs. A dream can die, sure. But there's always another way forward. Might not be the dream you had in mind, but it can be as fulfilling as the old one, if not more so."

"...so then help me, Jimmy..."

"...please..."

"I'm trying to, Aurora," he replied, "But you won't let me."

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## Present Day

I didn't keep much from my former life, but some things felt too important to let go of.

Other things the law said was too important to let go of. Such as old tax documents and paper trails from the previous Paper Street Tattoo Company, located (at the time) in Inwood, New York.

I had a thriving shop and a few employees back then. It's an entire story, not one that I wish to get into too much detail about right now. But from that previous life, in my desk drawer upstairs, was an old marbled notebook, like the ones that kids use in school, with all of the names and telephone numbers of every person who ever cashed a paycheck signed by me, ever.

Granted, most of this information was well over three years old by now. Most of it at least five, with the first few bits being almost a decade old.

With the rotary phone in my lap I started dialing, and dialing, and dialing (ugh). Most of the numbers that I spun through to call didn't answer.

Some had voicemail boxes that were full. Others, unidentified voicemails. I left my name and callback information, but, we'll see I guess. Some of the numbers I had scribbled down were simply flat-out wrong.

I can't blame some or even most from the old Paper Street for moving on. The pandemic did a real number on the inking industry the year before I went away. But the odds of *no one* answering any of my calls were like being stopped-by-every-red-light-on-the-way-home levels of unlucky.

Granted, there were a few that I'd rather not call... partly selfishly... partly because I believe that the sentiment wouldn't be well-received. But, to be honest, I really don't feel as though I have much of a choice here... something I've grown quite accustomed to these past few years if you'd care to believe it.

So there's this one number that I almost had memorized... to a woman, to a fantastic artist...

...and for one reason or another it was one of the last sets of numbers I was willing to try.

Well, here goes nothing:

Aurora's genuinely surprised to hear someone finally pick up on the other end and respond with a voice she recognizes.

"Hello?"

"Uhm, hiii, I uhh, I'm reaching... err trying to reach uh Amber uhh Caldwell, please."

"Speaking," She sighs. "Listen, if you're one of them telemarketers.. I'm *really* not interested."

"Look, if your car doesn't have an extended warranty by now, then..." Aurora replies, nervous that her voice might be recognizable too. "Actually I was wondering if there was any possibility at all if you know any tattoo artists available to help open up a new shop. I hear the pay is going to be incredible."

For a few moments, Aurora doesn't hear anything from the other side of the line and she worries she may have blown the one and only thing that's gone at least somewhat right today. But as she begins to accept it, she hears the sound of Amber moving around.

"Okay, who in the hell is this?"

"Amber... it's Auro-... It's **Maggie**," she replies with a gulp. "It's a long story but the short version is I'd like to find a qualified artist that can take on a full new workload like, yesterday. You... wouldn't happen to know anyone by chance in the Phoenix/Tucson area?"

"M-Maggie? What the— I haven't heard from you in *three years*..."

"Yeah. I guess it *has* been a while, hasn't it?" Aurora chuckles nervously. "I just got back from being in lockup. Spent two years in the hole, so. Uhm, sorry about that, I guess."

"I figured it was either that, or you were dead."

"Sounds about right. Not like I could blame you for thinking it either way."

"Yeah, okay... What did you want again?"

"I'm looking for an artist like anywhere in the midwest or on the west coast who can come to the new shop and help get it started back up. At this point, anything above a scratcher would do. Experience preferred but whatever."

"What, you don't know how to make a profile on LinkedIn and find what you're lookin' for.. Or do you want me to do that for ya too?"

"I honestly don't have the internet... or a phone," Aurie responds. "But what I really need, what I trust... is your recommendation. I've been out of the loop."

"Jesus H. Christ, no phone or internet? How in the hell do you expect to— No, nevermind. I don't care," She lets out another, louder sigh. "Listen, I don't know that I got anything for you or anyone that would drop what they got goin on to save your ass.... But how much money you talkin'?"

"I'm not exactly in a position to dictate price. Depends on the quality of the artist, I guess. But if they're good it's a blank check on top of whatever else they might want or need. Money's not the object here."

Amber scoffs. "Well isn't that nice?"

"You know... I'll end up losing a lot more by doing this than to nix the whole idea completely. All I want is to get some work done and to help as many people out as I can along the way. I'm not trying to flaunt anything here. I'm all but *broke* as it is now anyway... might as well spend it before I die, right?"

"..."

"Cool beans." Aurora grits her teeth. "Well, anyway, thanks for the help. It was nice catching up with you."

"I'll do it."

"Wait, what-?"

"I *said* I'll do it. I mean, you're over there offering up free money while I can barely keep a roof over my head. The way I see it, I ain't gotta like it but I sure as hell can't let it fall through my hands either."

"Okay, so... you're still out in New York, or?" she shakes her head. "Nevermind. Doesn't really matter. If you need me to fly you in, just tell me where from. I'll get you a first class ticket. Thank you for doing this."

"I just.. Don't thank me. Just get me from New York to wherever in the hell you're at, I'll do what you need and that's it. That's all you really want anyway so we ain't gotta act like it's anything more than that."

"That's... perfectly fine. I don't have to be involved, like at all. I'll sign the checks and keep the bills paid and that's it. You can have your business and I'll have mine."

*To be continued...*