



Beginnings

“Do you know why this is happening?”

Unable to withstand the blistering temperature of the fire, the windows gave way and splintered. Dense billowing plumes of obsidian smoke poured out of the fresh ruptures and carried soot into the night sky. The *woof* of the growing inferno swallowed more of the creekside cottage with each dying second.

“I asked you a question. I said, do you know why this is happening?”

What was left of the worn plastic siding melted like candle wax and took a new form in whistling molten puddles. Arthritic timbers creaked as the structure weakened, almost as if to plead with the creek for help. But the creek did nothing except continue on its laminar path, steadily sweeping over deposits of glossy pink feldspar.

“Pretending you can’t hear me isn’t gonna make me go away, son. You know exactly why this is happening.”

Of all the bad things he could have imagined coming to him as karmic justice for the night’s events, it was the consequence most unacceptable that had found its way to him. The quaint corpse of a cottage that he had found peace in was engulfed by an unholy blaze. He heard the creaking of scorching wood disintegrating into ash from the brush where he parked his truck some hundred yards away. The nearer he got to the scene, the more apparent reality was becoming, but his eyes didn’t fully believe it until he saw the dancing ribbons of flame wheedling their way through the roof.

Legion, ever the follower, shared his dismay. This tiny sliver of shelter in the Idaho woodslot had become home to him, too. Fried from the emotional ramifications he had stirred up, he took a seat next to the dog and gave him a gentle, fatherly rub of the head. Seymour had sparingly ever touched him. As he turned his head towards his owner, Legion’s watery eyes flickered fluidly in the light. It was a look that told him it was a welcome gesture.

It was surely arson. There was no other explanation. The home had no electricity, no gas lines, and there were no natural events that could produce a hellfire like this. As he watched support beams wither to cinders, he felt a piece of himself was burning along with it. This landing spot he’d found himself in was

the first place he felt comfortable in since Emma had left, and even when he was on the road for wrestling events, he quietly yearned for the floor and a sleeping bag against the comfort of a hotel bed.

"Still nothing to say? Come on, think, kid. I bet you can figure it out. You're a smart boy."

What led him to Wailing Creek was the calm of the confluence, but had it not been for the cover offered by the uninhabited husk that now sat ignited before his very eyes, he probably would've left. And had he done that, he'd never have met Maya. He never would have come to terms with allowing his marriage to dissolve. He most certainly never would have kissed a woman like Jade.

For all he knew, none of those events were net positives. Filaments of smoldering paper mat swept over by the flames freed themselves from the cast of ashen shingles and took up with a gentle breeze in droves. It looked like a colony of glowing saffron bats.

It had occurred to him that this was the penance he tried to pay earlier in the day, and that the transaction fell incomplete because there was something bigger lying in wait to balance matters should there be further infringements.

Seymour had never given any credence to the idea that there was a cosmic entity ready to mete out justice when the storehouses were full enough. And yet the rolling streams of sweat trickling down his forehead gave him something to think about. The longer he stood before the fire, the more possible it felt that a god figure hated him.

His only recourse was to watch as the cottage groaned and shifted. It was like it was calling out to him.

"Seymour."

Seymour.

"Seymour?"

Seymour had been brought to the game arcade for the first time in his life. He was now twelve years old. This was, per Len Murphy, described as a part of a birthday surprise. He looked around expressionless as he sat at the table across from his father, unable to ask him when he was going to be able to start playing the same games the other children roaming about were playing. That was because he was now at the mercy of his unrelenting and wholly inappropriate line of questioning.

Seymour took a moment to think it over. "I don't know," he swore. "I didn't say anything to mom."

"You didn't say anything to her about Stephanie?" Len cocked an eyebrow. "Interesting. Then how did she know so much about it?"

It had occurred to Seymour that their spending time together frequently in Buckhorn Bingo Halls might have tipped off the general public. It was probably a leading cause of his mother's rapidly accumulating mound of cigarette butts on the kitchen table. Seymour knew. He *was* a smart boy. But he was no rat.

"I don't know," he repeated his answer, his preteen voice cracking with thinly veiled emotion and surging hormones. "But it wasn't me."

Len Murphy placed his hands behind his head and looked off to the side, taking in the scene. This grilling was a test of Seymour's loyalty, and he was determined not to crack. What he really wanted to do was play air hockey with his dad, not submit himself to an unholy cross-examination concerning his veracity.

"I'm disappointed," said Len over the buzz and electric dings of victory bells. "I thought we had an understanding."

“We did,” urged Seymour, “that’s why I didn’t say anything. I promise.”

Len didn’t look back at him. He continued to take in his surroundings. “You know, every parent wants to be proud of their kid. You see your child the day they’re born, and it becomes your job to pass the things you’ve learned down to them. But nobody ever taught me a damn thing. Everything I know, I taught myself. I didn’t even finish high school, for Christ sake.”

Seymour set his eyes on the ruckles of his father’s face. It had aged prematurely at the hands of cigarettes, coffee, and the ensuing trouble sleeping caused by his vices. He could see hard evidence of a rugged life etched into his leather canvas. The furrowed gorges that began on his forehead migrated towards his cheeks and carved ravines into his jawline that had no place on a man barely into his forties.

“Grandpa taught you things, didn’t he?” innocently inquired Seymour.

“Your grandfather is an asshole, son.” The statement hit him like the claw-end of the hammer. Seymour knew his grandfather to be a sweet man. He also knew him from newspaper clippings cut out by his father to be something called an embezzler. “The point I’m making is this. In this world, you’ve only got your experiences to guide you. Now I’ve tried to share the things I’ve picked up with you, which is why I ask you these questions. Let me put it to you like this. Would you ever stab your friends in the back, assuming you had any?”

Seymour had to think about that for a moment. “No,” he answered.

“Exactly,” responded his father. “So then if we don’t do that to friends, it’s damn sure something we don’t do to family.”

Even at twelve years old, it registered to Seymour that he was being lectured on the virtues of loyalty by a man who was angry he’d been caught having an affair. Still, Seymour holstered up the same guns he’d already drawn.

“I understand. But I’m telling you, I didn’t say anything about...*that* woman.” The thought of saying her name made Seymour viscerally ill. Stephanie and her gray tooth utterly repulsed him.

Len took a deep breath in and exhaled it, shaking his head at his son. The message was clear that Seymour was not to be trusted. It gave him a sunken feeling in his guts. Then, his father reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a twenty dollar bill. He extended the banknote to his son.

“I’m gonna give it to you. But just know you didn’t earn it.” His father’s disappointment cut him deep. The instant nausea that struck him was enough to dissuade him from the temporal joys of playing games to win tickets. He reached out and took the money, but he didn’t feel good about it, and it set him up to feel sick every time he dropped a token into a slot.

And as Seymour looked into the flames, he found himself reliving this moment. It was a lynchpin memory for him. It established his warped sense of loyalty and balance. The accusations his father made that day followed him through the remainder of his childhood. There was a litany of instances he could name off hand where Len Murphy had cornered him and used the flaying knife or guilt to peel back his layers until he was exposed, insisting all the while that he hadn’t committed the offense until the time came it so frustrated him that he crumbled into a seizing fit of spastic crying on the floor.

After the events of the night, he didn’t have a good grip on the constitution of loyalty. In separate but equally confusing terms, he felt like he had committed acts of poor faith. But in having replicated his father’s legendary lechery by kissing Jade and then allowing a gentle tug of the shirt collar to lure him on top of her in the passenger seat, he knew this was something he deserved. It was a thought that blocked off the possibility of a sentimental tear.

As he and Legion watched the flames shimmy and roar in landslide victory, he momentarily had half a mind to retrieve the ever-haunting envelope from his truck and feed it to the fire, if for no other reason than because it didn't seem to matter as much now that the matter had been withdrawn.

And though that thought escaped him, there was one thought that had already taken root. He was going to find the person responsible for his burning piece of paradise.

Consequences come in all shapes and sizes. Some present themselves as rewards, but more commonly, a consequence is associated as a punishment — an event that has occurred as a result of wrongdoing.

I am not a blameless man. I have trespassed, committed acts that I knew to be harmful. The mistakes I've made are not happy little accidents. They have cost me in ways I cannot explain. I make no excuses for what I've done, what I am, what I have become, and what I will become. I have experienced loss. I have suffered in ways that haunt my thoughts and my dreams. And despite what you think of me, my track record says quite clearly that I have little issue accepting where I need to be held liable for my actions. A hefty fine that was issued after my post-match assault on Derek Adonis will tell you that I have no problem taking accountability, payable immediately.

There are those people who trespass *without* the presence of mind to consider how their actions might come to affect others. Some people are hard-wired to resist the dictates of the thing called conscience, but most people are just normal, everyday people making flippant moves to spite themselves. For example, The Enigma and I were barely underway in our battle before Chris Lawler stuck his nose into our business, planting me on the unforgiving ground with a robust spinebuster that drove the wind out of me.

Those are the consequences of *my* actions. For all I've shown you I'm willing to do to you, it was a natural reaction that you would *finally* show yourself to me. I have to say, it was a bold move. Especially since I know what I know.

Don't worry, Chris. That's not so much a threat as it is just a humble reminder. I hold no ill will towards you, in spite of your pitiable and misguided choice. This message isn't for you, anyway, though I'll say this. I want you to pay very close attention to the chain reaction you left in the queue. Because there's something I want...no, something I *need* you to see.

Be careful who you put in harm's way, Chris. Because Colleen, a carbon copy of the woman I put down in order to win the Television Title, now has the opportunity of her young career, and it's only because of *you* that I find myself itching to show you what could lie in store for you in your immediate future.

And that brings me to you, Colleen.

I express this as a professional courtesy. I see you for the talent you could be, and while I respect the potential, I feel compelled to tell you that any pain you're about to experience can't possibly be held against me. The slams that will be laid on extra thick, the stiff neck and diffuse muscle soreness you're about to feel are the result of another athlete's mistake. And so, if you're looking for somebody to blame for the consequences you happened on through no fault of your own, you need not look any further than Lawler.

But it can't be that easy, can it? It isn't a match between Chris and I, after all. There's body, heart, and soul entering the equation for this particular exhibition. Heading into the biggest wrestling event of the year, you find yourself at the doorstep of a potential milestone. In any other circumstance, that would be an enviable position.

Trouble is, you already know second hand that it isn't. Because if you're looking for a reference point, you can check in with your friend, *former* champion Aisling Reed. The belt that belongs to me now is mine because I took it from her. Go on, ask her, Colleen. Ask her which felt worse. Was it my left hand around her trachea, or was it coughing up a major single's championship after I let go?

She made her mistake the moment she errantly took hold of my championship belt. What happened to her, her incessant gagging and dramatic choking with Christopher Dumont at her side to lend his support while she flopped around on the mat, was on *her*. Just like the fact that Dumont's attempt at revenge found him in the same position his little girlfriend was in the week before. They got a full harvest of what they'd sewn.

Those are the repercussions of their choices, and they are the same ones that everyone who has tried to hand me a first defeat have suffered. Gone are the days that the gold was tainted by the stench of the playhouse. The title belt that can now be found in more meaningful company is changing more and more every single week, Colleen. The more time passes, the more tied it is to Waylon Creek, turning into a completely different entity the longer it stays in my possession. The Television Championship was once a nice little incentivized ticket to get into a wrestling ring week after week after week and get sharp elbows out to fight for a nice bonus and professional recognition.

Now, bent to my will, it means something else. It represents the hostile and surgical nature with which *I* approach a wrestling match. It represents the pain I'm willing to inflict on an opponent for the right to come back and do it again the following week. It signifies an inescapable hold that sounds the death knell for hopes and dreams. It represents a new level that one is going to have to ascend to in order to unseat me.

That's called power. A variable that most can't understand or account for. Look at what I've done with three months of time. Now, look to your friend. Then look at me. Ask yourself. Do you feel equal to this task? Or are you rather ready to thank Chris Lawler for what awaits you come Breakdown?

And let's not *just* blame Lawler. Let's also assume the whole situation as a call for you to wonder what your own actions might bring to your front door. You just never know what the long term ripple effect might bring to you, the *rest* of your friends, or your place of employment.

Consider it closely.