

Waiting to Burn

It's been a long time since gold sat on my shoulder—sixteen years, to be exact. That number hasn't left my head since Breakdown. Sixteen years since I last held a championship, since I felt that weight settle in and heard my name called without doubt trailing behind it. Sixteen years since anyone in this business looked at me and saw something more than a relic. And now, I'm SCW Television Champion.

My ribs still hurt. My knuckles are split. The bruises down my side haven't even started to fade. But I walked out of Breakdown with the belt. I stood tall. I did what they didn't think I could. And for a second, it felt like something. Something real. Something earned.

Then I went home.

I set the belt on the kitchen table like it was supposed to mean something. Sarah looked at it—said she was proud. She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. There was a quiet in her voice that said she wasn't sure if she was congratulating me or preparing for whatever damage this win might bring. She went upstairs early. The kids were already in bed. I stayed at that table for over an hour, just sitting there in the dark, staring at that belt like it might start answering questions I haven't had the nerve to ask.

Sixteen years.

You'd think after all that time, after everything I've clawed through to get here, this would feel like a victory. But it doesn't. The fire's still there, burning through the cracks. The weight on my chest hasn't lifted. The noise in my head hasn't quieted. All this title did was give me another reason to keep fighting.

But the world doesn't stop moving. Not for me. I've got places to be. Promises I made long before this belt came into the picture. The community center's expecting me, just like they always are. Only this time... it won't be the same when I walk through that door.

The minute I step through the front doors, I feel it. The shift.

It's not just another day at the center. The usual echoes of basketballs and sneakers on tile are there, sure, but so is something else. That edge of anticipation. A current in the air that wasn't there before. I take a few steps inside, and I can feel their eyes before I see them.

Then the cheers start.

It's not loud. Not all at once. But it spreads quick. A few claps turn into a chorus of shouts and whoops. A couple of the younger kids run up to me like they've just seen someone off a screen.

One of them—Rico, maybe eleven—shouts, “Yo! Lawler’s the champ now!” like he’s announcing it to the world. A couple others throw their hands up, mimicking ring intros. One kid’s got a cardboard belt wrapped around his waist. It’s taped together, lopsided, and says “TV Champ” in Sharpie.

And they’re looking at me like I’m the real deal.

Like I’m untouchable now.

I force a smile. Nod. Clap a few shoulders. Say what I’m supposed to say. “Appreciate it.” “Thanks, kid.” “Keep working hard.” All the right notes. But inside, I’m somewhere else. Because the moment feels off. Not wrong, just... too much. Like I’ve stepped into someone else’s version of this moment. Like the person they’re cheering for doesn’t exist—not really.

The belt’s over my shoulder, but it feels heavier now. Not because of the gold. Because of the way they look at it. Like it’s magic. Like it means I’m fixed. Like I’ve arrived.

But I know better.

I make my way toward the back hallway, past the main floor, trying to blend out of the spotlight. The crowd thins a bit, and that’s when I see Jerald.

He’s standing against the far wall, arms crossed, watching everything unfold with this unreadable look on his face. Not anger. Not pride. Just... stillness. Like he’s studying something. Measuring it and me.

I nod at him. He nods back. But he doesn’t move. Not until I do. “Big moment,” he says, as I approach.

I shrug. “Moment, yeah.”

He glances at the belt. “Looks good on you.”

I should say something. A thank you. A joke. But I don’t. Because he’s not just making conversation. He’s watching the way I wear it. The way I carry myself. Like he’s trying to learn something from it.

“You defended it yet?” he asks.

“Not yet.”

He nods again, slower this time. Then he pushes off the wall and walks away without another word.

There's no malice in it. No disrespect.

But something about the way he moves—it hits wrong. The way his shoulders are squared. The way his eyes stayed on the belt until the very last second.

He's not just looking up to me anymore.

He's *studying* me.

I stand there for a moment after Jerald walks off, his words still floating somewhere behind me. He didn't say much—but it was the way he looked at the title that stuck with me. The weight of it didn't faze him. He didn't see a belt. He saw something else. Something I'm not sure he's ready to want. “Chris.”

I turn. Victor's behind me—quiet, like always. Calm on the surface, but there's something in his eyes. That familiar weight that only shows up when he's about to say something that isn't small talk.

“You got a minute?”

“Yeah,” I say, already following him.

We walk past the gym and into the office. The lights flicker overhead. Same worn desk. Same window that overlooks the floor. He shuts the door behind us, and I know what's coming isn't going to be short.

He nods toward the belt slung over my shoulder. “Looks like the losing streak's over.”

I nod. “It is.”

He smiles—but it's not joy. It's respect. It's caution.

“First title since 2008,” he says.

I nod again.

He leans back against the desk. “I've been watching them. The kids. The way they look at you now.”

“They're proud,” I say.

“They are,” he replies. “And you've earned that.”

I wait for the rest, and he doesn't disappoint.

“But here’s the thing... it’s not just pride, Chris. It’s projection. They don’t just see you as a guy who finally got his. They see you as the blueprint. They’re not just clapping for you anymore—they’re trying to *be* you.”

I shift my weight a little. “They’ve always looked up to me.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But it’s different now. You’re not the guy clawing back from rock bottom anymore. You’re the guy who *made it*. The guy who’s winning. Holding gold. Walking different. Talking different. They see all of that, and they don’t just see glory. They see how you got it.”

I don’t respond. I don’t have to.

He presses on.

“I’m talking about Jerald. He doesn’t just admire you. He’s starting to move like you. Carry himself like you. That edge you’ve been walking around with? That chip on your shoulder? He’s wearing it too—and I don’t think he knows how to hold it the way you do.”

I stay quiet. Not because I disagree. Because I’m not sure what to say that doesn’t make it worse.

“You’ve been winning. That’s a good thing. You’ve earned it. But when they see you winning with fire in your eyes and steel in your voice... they think that’s the only way.”

I glance down at the belt for a second. The shine feels a little duller under this light.

Victor takes a breath, then nods toward the door.

“I’m not telling you to stop. I’m not saying this place doesn’t need you. I’m just saying—remember who’s watching. They think you’re invincible now. And that’s the part that scares me.”

He opens the door and steps out, leaving me with the silence I thought I’d left behind at
Breakdown.

But this one’s different.

Because this time, I’m not carrying failure.

I’m carrying influence.

I find Jerald back in the corner of the gym, lacing up his sneakers like he’s about to make a point out of somebody. The kids are scattered across the floor, dribbling balls, hitting bags, joking around—but Jerald’s laser-focused. Locked in. There’s tension in his shoulders, like he’s already in a fight that hasn’t started yet.

I walk over.

He notices me but doesn't look up. "You want to spar or something?"

I shake my head. "No, Jerald. I want to talk."

That gets his attention. He stands, arms loose at his sides, watching me like he's trying to figure out what kind of mood I'm in.

"I saw you earlier," I say. "After I came in. The way you were standing, the way you were watching... I just want to make sure we're straight."

"We're straight," he says. Quick. Too quick.

I nod. "Good. Because I need you to understand something."

I motion to the bench. He hesitates, then sits. I drop down beside him.

"This thing on my shoulder," I say, tapping the title, "it didn't fix anything. It didn't make me better. It didn't take away the fire—it just gave me a place to aim it. And even then, I have to keep it on a leash."

He looks at me, brows pinched. "You think I'm not controlling it?"

"I think you're learning," I say carefully. "And I think you're dangerous if you don't know the difference between using anger and letting it use you."

He scoffs. "That what Victor told you?"

"No. That's what life taught me. The hard way."

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, eyes narrowed at the floor like he's watching a memory.

"I just don't like feeling weak. I don't like people talking down to me like I'm nothing."

I nod. "Neither do I. But if you start swinging every time you feel small, you'll end up proving them right."

He doesn't say anything. But I can see it—the tight line in his jaw. The twitch in his knuckles.

I place a hand on his shoulder. "You've got something, Jerald. You've got the drive. The edge. But it's not about proving you're tough. It's about knowing when not to."

He doesn't nod. Doesn't argue either.

Just stands up, slow, and looks down at me with that same unreadable expression I saw earlier.

“I get it,” he says. “I do.”

But his voice is flat. Practiced.

And as he walks away, I feel it settle in my chest—that thing Victor warned me about.

He walks off, and I stay seated. Elbows on my knees, belt hanging from my shoulder like it weighs more now than it did during the match. I watch him cross the gym floor, nod to a couple kids, grab a pair of gloves from the rack like nothing happened.

But something did. I can feel it.

He heads to the heavy bag. The big one near the back—older, stitched together at the seams, the one that makes a sound when you hit it wrong.

He doesn’t warm up.

He just starts swinging.

Not fast. Not flashy. Just... hard. Repetitive. Rhythmic. Each punch landing with this thick, dull thud that cuts through the buzz of the gym like a hammer through drywall.

The bag swings wide. He doesn’t stop.

A younger kid—Elijah, maybe ten or eleven—gets too close, trying to grab his own gloves off the shelf nearby. Jerald doesn’t see him. Or maybe he does and just doesn’t care.

Elijah flinches back when the bag comes swinging around toward him. His hand jerks back. He stumbles slightly.

Jerald doesn’t apologize.

Doesn’t even look at him.

Just resets his feet and throws another shot—harder this time.

Elijah backs off. Quiet. Blends into the edge of the room like he knows not to make himself a target.

And I’m still sitting there.

Still watching.

And I feel that cold pit open up in my chest. The kind of realization that creeps in slow, then lands all at once.

I didn't teach him that.

But I might've shown him how.

I don't say anything to Jerald.

I don't pull him aside. Don't check on Elijah. I just sit there, jaw tight, watching that bag swing like a pendulum counting down to something I don't want to face. There's a thousand ways I could spin it. Say the kid's just amped up. Say he's young, hungry, trying to prove something. Say he's not me.

But the truth is—I recognized it.

That anger. That silence. That stare.

And now it's walking around in someone else's body like a reflection I didn't ask for.

By the time I get home, the house is quiet. Sarah's lights are off. The kids are probably already out. The belt's still where I left it on the table, and I don't bother moving it. I head downstairs, past the walls I've punched more than once, and sit at the old stool in the basement—same one I used before I won anything.

I pull out my phone. No script. No direction. No opponent yet. Just this voice in my head that won't let me rest. I set the phone up against the bag, hit record, and stare at my own eyes on the screen. They don't look like victory. They look like something waiting to burn.

"I thought it would feel different."

My voice cuts through the silence—quiet, but not calm. Measured. Tight.

"I thought winning this—" I glance over at the Television Title laying on the bench behind me,
"—would fix something."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees. The camera catches the shadows under my eyes, the bruises along my neck that haven't quite faded since Breakdown.

"But it didn't. Now I've got the title... and the fire? It's still there. Still under my skin. Still scratching behind my ribs like it's looking for a way out."

I take a slow breath.

"This week, it's fan choice. That's the gimmick. I don't know who I'm facing, but the crowd gets to play god and throw a name at me."

“Clyde Sutter.”

I say his name without flinching.

“The guy I took this title from. Maybe he wants to prove I got lucky. Maybe he wants to remind everyone that he was champion before I walked in and rewrote the story. And hell, maybe they want him to get his shot. Give the man a redemption arc.”

I shake my head once.

“But Clyde, if they call your name—just know you’re not getting the same version of me. Because I’m not chasing anymore.”

“Now I’m defending.”

A long pause.

“And I fight even harder when I’ve got something to lose.”

I shift in my seat. My back still hurts from the last war. My fists still ache.

“Maybe it’s Ryan LeCavalier. Former champion. Maybe they want to see what happens when a technician steps in with someone who doesn’t finesse... just finishes.”

I raise my eyes.

“Ryan, you’ve been to the top. You know the rhythm of this title. The highs, the lows, the target it paints on your back. But you haven’t felt the heat of someone who holds onto it like it’s all he’s got left.”

I drag a hand across my jaw, stare through the lens.

“And then there’s Adam Brock. The unknown. The X-factor. The one people whisper about like he’s chaos with boots on. Maybe they vote for you because they want unpredictability. They want a fight.”

I let the smallest smirk touch my lips.

“They’ll get one.”

The smile fades.

“See, it doesn’t matter which name gets pulled out of the crowd. I don’t prepare for opponents anymore. I prepare for war.”

I lean closer now. My voice lowers, darker.

“This title... it’s not just a symbol. It’s not a second chance. It’s the last one. And if you step in that ring with me thinking you’re just wrestling a man with a belt—then you don’t understand what I became the moment I won it.”

I pause. Let it simmer.

“I’m not fighting for pride. I’m not fighting for legacy. I’m fighting because the only time the noise in my head goes quiet...”

I tap the mat beside me.

“...is when I’m standing over the body of the last man who thought he could take this from me.”

I stare at the screen. My eyes don’t blink. My hands are still.

“So go ahead. Cast your vote. All you’re deciding... is who bleeds first.”

I hit stop.

And the fire’s still there.

The silence creeps back in, but it’s not the same as before. It’s tighter now. Like something holding its breath. I look at the belt. Sixteen years without it. One week with it. And already, it feels like the only thing keeping me from falling apart... is the very thing trying to pull me under.

I lean back against the wall. Close my eyes. The next one’s coming. Whoever it is... they won’t be ready. I don’t think I am, either.