

Peace Through the Ashes

I haven't moved.

Still standing there, a few feet from the bag. Knuckles sore. Shoulders tight. The muscles in my arms twitch like they haven't decided if they're done yet. But I haven't thrown another punch.

The silence feels heavier now that she's gone.

Or maybe it's just me. The door at the top of the stairs creaks. I don't look. I hear her bare feet on the wood before I hear her voice. Slow steps. One at a time. Like she's giving me a chance to pretend I didn't hear her coming.

I don't take it.

She stops near the bottom but doesn't come all the way down. Just stands there, looking at me from the shadows, the dim bulb overhead stretching her shadow across the floor between us.

"You didn't answer me," she says quietly. "Back there."

I stay facing the bag. "I know."

A beat.

"You know I don't ask just to ask."

I finally turn toward her. Her arms are folded, more to keep herself together than anything else. Her hair's pulled back. Eyes tired. Still wearing that oversized T-shirt she's had since college. The kind of detail that used to make me feel safe. Now I just feel seen.

"I'm not trying to shut you out," I say.

"I know," she replies. "But that's what you're doing."

I nod once, slow. "I just needed time."

"Time for what, Chris? To hit something until you're too tired to feel anything? To record another promo in the dark? To keep everyone at arm's length until there's nothing left but walls?"

Her voice doesn't rise, but it cuts sharper than anything I felt in the ring these past few weeks. I sit on the bench near the weight rack, elbows on my knees. I don't look at her when I answer.

“This match... it’s everything right now.”

“I know,” she says, and I hate how calmly she says it. “But it’s not everything.”

I don’t respond.

“I watch you, Chris. Not just in the ring. Not just in those promos you think I don’t see. Here. With the kids. With me. You’re not just angry anymore. You’re... slipping.”

I finally meet her eyes. There’s no anger in them. Just ache. Maybe fear.

“They’re watching you,” she says. “Emma. Benaiah. They hear the yelling. They see how late you come home. They don’t know what it means yet, but they will.”

That’s the first one that lands.

Deep.

“They’re going to remember the version of you they get right now,” she finishes. “Is this the one you want to give them?”

She doesn’t wait for my answer. Doesn’t storm off either. She just slowly turns and walks back up the stairs, the soft thump of her footsteps fading until the door closes with a quiet click. And I’m alone again. Except now... I’m not. Not really. Because every word she said is still here.

The door shuts behind her.

I sit there for a few seconds, just listening to the sound of my own breath. It’s shallow. Uneven. The heat in my chest isn’t fading—it’s rising. Curling up my throat, tightening in my jaw. My heart’s not racing, but everything under my skin feels like it wants to move, to lash, to swing.

Then my fist slams into the bench beside me. A crack runs through the wood, sharp and satisfying. Pain punches up my forearm, but it’s dull, distant—just another throb to stack on top of the rest. I don’t even look at it. What’s the point?

She’s right. She always is.

And I’m sick of it.

Sick of the truth sitting on my chest like it's some damn weight I'm supposed to carry without shifting. Like it's just expected now that I burn at both ends and never let it show. She talks like I've forgotten what matters. Like I'm lost.

But I know exactly where I am.

Down here. Underground. Surrounded by sweat-stained mats and frayed tape and steel plates with rust curling at the edges. This basement is more honest than anything upstairs. There's no pretending down here. No forced smiles. No half-assed questions I don't know how to answer. Here, I can be what they don't want me to be.

Angry. Ugly. Unfiltered.

Because the truth is, this rage? It's the only thing that feels real anymore. It's not confusion. It's not sadness. It's not some fragile emotion that needs fixing.

It's fuel.

I push up from the bench. The air down here is thick, like the walls are sweating with me. My shirt clings to my back. My hands are still trembling—not from weakness, but from restraint.

I cross the floor and grab the jump rope from the hook. The leather's warm in my hands. Familiar. My grip tightens like I'm choking it. I drag it with me to the middle of the room and start to swing.

One loop. Two. Then rhythm.

The rope cuts through the air with a snap. My boots kiss the mat with each rotation. Light. Controlled. My body falls into the pattern, but my mind doesn't. It's stuck.

Stuck on the way Jerald looks at me like I'm not in control anymore. Stuck on the way Victor doesn't say anything but watches like he's waiting for me to fall apart. Stuck on the way Sarah looked at me tonight—not with anger, but with that quiet dread like she's already preparing for what happens when I finally go too far.

They're all so sure they see the whole picture. They don't. They see a man who's unraveling. But I'm not unraveling. I'm tightening the coil.

Every swing of the rope drives my heart harder. Sweat starts to roll down my spine. My lungs burn. My legs ache. But I don't stop. I need the repetition. I need the sting. I need the fire to stay in motion or else it'll pour out of me the wrong way.

Because I know what's coming. Clyde Stutter and the SCW Television Championship Everyone wants me to act like it's a big moment. Like it's a gift. It's not a gift. It's an opportunity bought with blood.

I've earned this match with scars no one clapped for. With years of silence. With pain I never got to process because I was too busy dragging myself back into relevance. And now, they want to act like it's a redemption story. It's not. It's a reckoning. And I've got nothing left to hold back.

The rope slaps the mat again. And again. And again. My breath punches out of my chest in short, ragged bursts. The rhythm's still there, but it's starting to unravel. My legs are screaming. My arms are shaking. Sweat pours down the back of my neck and soaks through the front of my hoodie, but I keep going.

Because stopping means thinking. And I can't afford that right now. I jump. Swing. Land. Over and over. Every time the rope cracks against the floor, it's another echo of the last few months. Of the losses. The silence. The looks from people who stopped expecting anything. The ones who started calling me a relic with pity in their eyes.

Jump. Swing. Land.

Jerald's stare. Victor's silence. Sarah's words.

"They're going to remember the version of you they get right now."

Crack.

"Is this the one you want to give them?"

Crack.

I grit my teeth and swing harder, legs screaming for rest, hands soaked and raw. The rope bites the air like it's got something to prove too. I can't take it anymore. I let it go. The rope drops to the mat, coiled and twitching like it's still alive. My chest heaves. The silence rushes in like a wave. My heart's pounding against my ribs like it wants out.

I stand there for a second—then move. Fast. I strip off the soaked hoodie and toss it in the corner. Grab a clean one from the hook near the stairs. Pull it on. Slide my hands into the sleeves. The seams stretch around my forearms like they're resisting me. I don't care. I grab my keys, my phone.

I leave the light on in the basement. Let it burn.

The house is quiet upstairs. The bedroom door is shut. I don't knock. I don't speak. I close the front door behind me and step into the night like it's calling my name.

The air outside is cold—not brutal, but biting in all the places that matter. It cuts through the sweat still clinging to my back. My breath fogs up as I walk to the car. My hands shake as I slide into the seat and grip the wheel.

I need out. Away.

Not home. Not the center. Not anywhere with walls.

I turn the key.

The car hums to life, and I pull out of the driveway like I've got somewhere to be. Truth is—I don't. I just know I can't stay. Streetlights flash past as I push through the edge of the city. I barely notice the turns I'm taking. Industrial complexes blur by in my peripheral. Every red light feels like a test I don't have the patience for.

Eventually I find it. Somewhere quiet. Empty. An old road with cracked asphalt. Overgrown grass swallowing the edges. Power lines leaning into the sky like tired bones. One busted streetlamp still holding on, throwing a dim, orange glow across a wide stretch of gravel and dust. I park. Cut the engine.

The silence out here is different. It's not peaceful. It's waiting. Watching. I step out of the car. I walk in the woods for just a couple of minutes. Eventually, I find a nice, tall oak with a big trunk. I sit back against the tree, dirt soaking into the back of my jeans, the cold biting at my hands through the sleeves of this hoodie I've had since the days when I still believed hard work was enough.

I prop the phone up. The screen lights my face just enough to see the jawline. The shadows under my eyes. The weight behind them. I hit record, and I don't waste time.

“You ever feel like you're watching someone else live the life you bled for?”

I stare into the camera. No blinking. No pause. Just truth.

“Because that’s what it feels like, seeing Clyde Stutter walk around with a title I’ve spent a year dragging myself toward. One match, one night, one clean moment—and now the world’s supposed to look at him like he belongs there.”

I shake my head.

“No, that belt isn’t a reward. It’s not some prop you wear around until the next poster shoot. It’s a weight. A responsibility. A target painted across your chest in blood and expectation.”

I shift slightly, gravel crunching underneath me.

“And right now? You’re not built to carry it. You’ve held that belt for seven days. Seven. You haven’t been hunted. You haven’t been tested. You haven’t felt what it’s like to stand across from someone who doesn’t want your title for fame, or bragging rights...”

I lean in slightly.

“I want it because it’s the last thing holding me together.”

My voice doesn’t raise—but it hardens.

“I’ve lost matches. I’ve lost moments. I’ve lost time. And I’ve been told over and over again to be patient. To stay the course. That it’s coming. Well guess what? I’m done waiting. I’m not here to shake your hand. I’m not here to raise your stock. I’m not here to give you the match of your life. I’m here to drag you into something ugly. You don’t know what it’s like to carry failure in your lungs. To feel it in your bones. To see your kids look at you and wonder why the hell their dad keeps coming home with bruises and nothing to show for it.”

I slap my chest.

“I’ve carried that. And I’m still here. You want to talk about what it means to be a champion, Clyde? It means you wake up sore every morning and still show up when nobody’s watching. It means you fight through the weeks where no one calls your name, where nobody asks for your autograph, where your gear smells like sweat and regret—and you still step into that ring like the whole world owes you a receipt.”

I take a deep breath, then lower my voice to a growl.

“You don’t get to carry that title while I’m still breathing. You want to be the guy? You want to prove you’re more than a flash in the pan? Then you’d better bring more than a belt and a smirk to Breakdown. Because I’m not just coming to take what you’ve got...”

I pause.

“I’m coming to remind every single person watching what happens when they overlook a man who’s got nothing left to lose.”

My jaw clenches. My knuckles tighten.

“You held it for a week. That’s your legacy. I’ll take it from here.”

Chris lowers the phone for a second—but the fire won’t let him stop. And now he goes deeper—not louder, not flashier, just more dangerous. I start to lower the phone, but my hand won’t let go. Something’s still burning. So I bring it back up.

“I should be done. I should end this, keep it clean, move on. But that’s not where I’m at tonight.”

My voice drops. Not for effect—because it’s heavier now. It hurts to say what comes next.

“Because this match... this isn’t about the title anymore. This is about the fire I’ve been trying to live with. And the silence I’ve been forced to carry.”

I stare past the lens for a second, off into the dark behind it, before locking eyes again.

“You ever sit alone and wonder what it all cost you? How many pieces have you chipped away just to keep fighting? I have.”

I press my back harder into the tree. It creaks slightly under me. The bark’s rough through the hoodie. Feels real. Grounded.

“My wife’s worried about me. She won’t say it out loud, not always. But I see it in her eyes. My kids? They’re starting to feel it. They see the way I look when I walk through the door. They hear the silence. The weight. And I keep telling myself this is all for something. I keep telling myself that the pain is part of the climb.”

My jaw tightens. I rake a hand through my hair, let it drop.

“But now I’m at the top of this mountain—and you’re standing in front of the one thing that might make it worth it. That belt. That championship. That symbol. You’re the gatekeeper now, Clyde. That’s what it means to be champion. But you didn’t build this gate. You were handed the keys after someone else left it open.”

I shake my head slowly, bitter.

“I don’t need to kick it in. I’ll burn the whole fucking thing down.”

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, the phone catching just enough of my eyes under the hood. There’s no hate in them.

Just heat.

“You’re gonna walk into Breakdown thinking this is about a belt. But I’m bringing everything. My pain. My doubt. My failure. My history. My fucking name. I’m bringing every piece of me that had to die so I could sit here right now and still call myself a fighter.”

I pause. Let the wind speak for a second. And then—quietly, like a whisper meant to echo—

“You’re not just fighting a man. You’re fighting a storm.”

I stop the recording. And this time, I don’t lift the phone again. I just sit there. My back against the tree. Eyes on the dark. And let the silence settle around me like ash.

I slip the phone into my pocket. For a long while... I don’t move. The wind picks up again, colder this time. It whistles through the trees, tugs at my sleeves, stings the sweat that’s dried across the back of my neck. The ground beneath me is stiff. Unforgiving. My legs ache, but I don’t stand just yet. Because the thing is—saying it out loud doesn’t fix anything. It doesn’t make the fire go away. It just gives it shape.

I lean my head back against the tree and close my eyes for a beat. Not to rest. Just to breathe. Just to make sure I still can. I meant every word. Clyde’s not just standing between me and a title—he’s standing between me and the one thing that might shut everything else out. For a second. For a night. Peace.

But I know how this works. There’s no guarantee. No promises. There’s just the match. And what I’m willing to do to win it. I push myself up slowly, bones tight from the cold. Dirt clings to my jeans. I brush off what I can and start walking back toward the road, gravel crunching beneath each step. The night stretches out around me—quiet, still, like it’s waiting. Let it wait. Because I’m not done.

