

Marked

The diner isn't crowded. A single waitress leans against the counter, scrolling on her phone, and the hum of an ancient refrigerator fills the silence between clinks of silverware from the back.

The walls are yellowed with time, and one of the overhead lights flickers just enough to be noticeable but not enough to get fixed. It's the kind of place people go when they don't want to be found. Which is why I'm here.

I sit in the corner booth, hoodie up, ribs wrapped tight beneath the weight of my jacket. My body still aches from the impact of Dante's Devil Trigger and the drop of that second Inferno. Every breath feels like dragging glass across bone. The belt—the Television Championship—is next to me on the cracked vinyl seat, face-down. The gold doesn't shine under fluorescent lights. It just looks like weight. I haven't even wiped the blood off the strap yet. Some of it's mine. Some of it might not be.

The waitress, maybe twenty, maybe forty, it's hard to tell in this light, glances over with a practiced disinterest. She brought coffee twenty minutes ago, and I haven't touched it. The surface's gone still, the steam long since vanished. It mirrors my face when I glance into it: tired eyes, busted lip, a swelling bruise beneath my left cheekbone that's already turning purple and yellow at the edges.

Outside, a neon "OPEN" sign buzzes against the window. Its reflection pulses faintly in the glass, casting red light over my hands. I watch my own image shift and warp in the pane, like I'm not fully here. Like the version of me sitting in this booth is just one of many—some champion, some broken, some monster, some ghost.

A couple booths over, a man coughs into his menu. An elderly woman two stools down at the counter stirs her soup with slow, meditative circles. The smell of burnt bacon and cheap fryer grease hangs in the air like something sacred. Somewhere between the ticking clock on the far wall and the sound of ice clinking in a glass, my phone buzzes. Just once. A low hum against the fake wood tabletop.

I don't reach for it. Not yet. Because I know who it might be. Sarah. Victor. Jerald. And tonight, I'm not sure which name will hurt more.

I lean back, bones cracking beneath the movement, and exhale a breath I didn't realize I was holding. The silence isn't peaceful. It's suffocating. Like this place was built to trap noise in the walls and leave the people here alone with their thoughts. I wonder how many people sat in this booth before me, running from something they couldn't outrun. I wonder if any of them made it back home.

My hand finally moves, slow and reluctant, dragging the phone across the table. The screen lights up. One new text message. No name attached. Just a number I don't recognize. And three words: "You were watched."

I stare at it for a long time. The buzz of the neon, the flicker of the light above me, the distant sizzle of something on the grill—it all fades into the background. Everything else goes silent except for the sound of blood rushing in my ears.

I type nothing. I delete nothing. I just sit there, heart pounding like a drum against my bruised ribs, wondering how long he's been this close... and how much longer I have before the shadows stop watching and start moving. Because Jerald's not just following me anymore. He's keeping score.

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out the burner phone—the one I keep for calls that don't belong to either of my lives. Not the one with the messages. Not the one SCW has on file. This one's quieter. Dirtier. I scroll until I see Victor's name and press call. It only rings twice before his voice cuts through, clipped and cold. "Chris."

Even that one word carries friction. I feel it tighten in my chest. I press on anyway.

"It's him, Vic," I say, my voice low, already scraped raw. "It's Jerald. I saw him. Not maybe. Not possibly. I saw him last week—back row, hoodie up, just watching. I pulled the crowd cam. Froze the frame. I stared at it for twenty minutes. It's him."

There's no response at first. Just silence. But it's a pressure-cooker silence, thick with everything we haven't said in months.

When Victor finally speaks, it's not calm—it's an explosion behind a cage. "You should've called me the second you knew."

I bite the inside of my cheek, hard. "I needed to be sure."

"No, Chris. You needed to be right. There's a difference."

I swallow the words I want to throw back and press forward. "He left a message. After the match. In my locker room. Right where he knew I'd find it. And tonight... I got a text. No name. No number I recognize. Just three words: 'You were watched.'"

There's a pause. Then I hear movement on the other end—Victor pacing, probably running a hand through his hair like he always does when he's trying not to scream. "Jesus Christ," he mutters. "This is spiraling. This kid isn't leaving breadcrumbs—he's dragging you into something."

“No cops,” I say before he can offer the obvious. My voice spikes sharper than I mean, turning heads in the diner. I lower it quickly, trying to bury the panic bubbling in my throat. “If we push him, he vanishes. And if that happens, we lose any chance of pulling him back.”

Victor snaps, “Pulling him back to *what*, Chris? You think this is just a phase? You think he’s some lost puppy waiting for you to toss him a bone and say everything’s okay?”

I rub at my temple, the ache there growing hotter with every word. “I don’t know what he wants. But it’s not just obsession. It’s personal. I can still feel it... somewhere in him, there’s still a part that remembers who he was before all this.”

“Spare me the poetic excuses,” Victor spits. “He left a threat in your locker and a ghost message on your phone. That’s not someone crying for help. That’s someone sending a warning.”

I don’t speak. Not right away. The weight of what he’s saying digs in deeper than I want to admit. Then he says something that cuts even sharper. “You’re starting to sound like Sarah.”

Her name hits me like shrapnel. I shut my eyes, jaw tightening until my teeth ache. “Maybe she’s the only one left who still thinks there’s anything in me worth saving. Maybe Jerald is what happens when someone believes in me too much.”

Victor exhales slowly, but there’s no gentleness in it. Only exhaustion. “Just be careful. He’s not a kid anymore. And whether you want to admit it or not... you had a hand in building whatever he’s becoming.”

I don’t reply. Don’t say goodbye. I end the call and set the phone down on the table like it might burn through the surface. The silence that follows isn’t peaceful. It’s the kind that settles in after you’ve broken something that can’t be fixed.

The coffee’s still cold. The bruises still throb. And outside, the neon ‘OPEN’ sign continues to flicker like it’s daring me to hope someone else is still out there watching for the right reasons.

I leave the diner a few minutes later, the bell above the door jingling weakly behind me as I step into the cold night air. The city is quiet—damp with a lingering mist that clings to the sidewalk like breath on glass. Streetlights buzz overhead like dying stars, casting broken halos onto the wet pavement. I keep my hood up and my head down, not walking with purpose but with instinct, each footfall guided by something deeper than direction. My eyes scan everything—reflections in store windows, darkened alleyways, rearview mirrors of parked cars—any surface that might betray a presence in the shadows. I’m not looking for a fight. I’m looking for something far worse. I’m looking for a shadow. And I see too many.

I cut through a parking lot and come to a slow stop beside a bench near the edge of a city park. It’s empty, deserted, quiet enough to hear the faint rustle of tree branches above me. There’s no

one in sight. Not a single soul. But something draws my eyes downward. There, taped to the underside of the bench, is a folded piece of paper. It's crisp, twice-folded, clean. My pulse spikes as I tear it free. It isn't handwritten this time. It's printed. The font is sharp, deliberate. The ink fresh.

Still watching.

That's all it says. No signature. No demands. No threats. Just those two words. Just confirmation. It's not over. It's escalating. The message shakes faintly in my grip, the wind brushing against the edge of the page as if daring me to let it go. But I don't. I can't. I curl my fingers around it and slip it into my coat pocket—not because I want to keep it, but because throwing it away would feel like surrendering something I don't fully understand yet.

I sink onto the bench and sit in the quiet, the weight of it all pressing down on my chest like a slow, suffocating tide. Minutes pass—or maybe longer. Eventually, like a man about to walk through a door he has no business opening, I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone, and scroll through the contacts until I land on her name.

Sarah.

My thumb hovers for a moment, breath locked in my throat, then taps the call button before I can think better of it. It rings. Once. Twice. My heart drums against the inside of my ribs, each beat harder than the last. Then she answers.

“Chris?”

Her voice slices through me like glass—soft, familiar, but heavy with something else. Caution. Hope. Hurt. I don't respond. My lips part, but nothing comes. Just breath. Just silence. I can feel her waiting.

“Are you there?”

Still, nothing. My jaw tightens until it aches, every word I could say crashing against the inside of my mouth but never making it out. Then, her voice cracks.

“Chris... please. If you're going to call me, then say something. Anything.”

My eyes shut tight. My throat closes. I want to speak. I need to. But the words won't come. Not tonight. I hang up. The city keeps breathing around me. The streetlights stay on. The shadows still move. And somewhere out there, Jerald is watching. But so is she.

The diner fades behind me, neon lights bleeding into the night as I get up and continue to walk. My footsteps echo off cracked sidewalks, past shuttered gas stations and flickering streetlamps.

The city thins out until it's just me and the quiet hum of the world forgetting itself. Gravel crunches beneath my boots as I cross under an overpass and step into the opening of a stretch of train tracks.

They stretch out before me like twin scars carved into the earth—rusted, cold, endless. The air smells like iron and smoke, sharp and honest. I pull my hood back, letting the wind slap against my face. My breath leaves in visible clouds, but I barely notice. I keep walking until I find the place—somewhere between silence and surrender. A freight train passed through not long ago. I can feel the tremble still lingering in the rails.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. I hold the phone out in front of me, thumb hovering over the record button. The train tracks stretch behind me like veins through the dark. My knuckles are raw. My chest still burns where Dante drove his mark into my flesh last week. I let the silence settle in my gut for one more second. Then I press the button.

“You ever wonder what it feels like to get hit by a train?” My voice is low, frayed at the edges. Not calm—never calm anymore—but concentrated. There's a difference. “Not in the poetic sense. Not as some metaphor for heartbreak or failure. I mean *really* feel it. Steel. Speed. No time to run. No time to scream. Just... impact.” I glance down at the rails beneath me, one boot resting beside the track like I'm waiting to be tested. “I think about it. Maybe more than I should. Maybe because that's what it feels like every time I step into that ring. But the difference is... I *welcome* it.”

The wind picks up again, brushing my coat open slightly. I tighten my grip on the phone and raise it a little closer. My eyes haven't left the screen. I want them to see it—all of it. “Billy Heaven Jr., I know what you think this is. Your shot. Your breakout moment. The golden boy with a legacy name, ready to make the leap. You've probably imagined it already—lifting the title, crowd on their feet, cameras catching that perfect angle as your star is born.” I let the thought simmer, then shake my head, slow and deliberate. “But that's not what's going to happen. Not this week. Not against me. Because what you're walking into isn't some carefully staged production. It's not your legacy coronation. It's a goddamn derailment.”

I take a step back, letting the camera catch more of the empty tracks behind me—miles of darkness, nothing coming, nothing saving. “See, I don't care about your name. I don't care who your father was or what dreams you've sewn into your gear. I'm not impressed. I've seen kids like you come and go, thinking all they need is one good match and they'll have the world handed to them. But Breakdown isn't a platform. It's a proving ground. And I'm the man who breaks those who don't belong.”

I swipe sweat from my forehead with my sleeve, the sting still fresh from where Dante Slayton laid me out last week. I tilt the camera down just slightly and pull open the front of my coat to reveal the faint X still marked across my chest. It's faded, but not forgotten. “And Dante...” I

spit the name like a taste gone sour. “I didn’t forget you. I can still feel your boot pressing down on my throat. I can still feel that marker dragging across my skin like it was carving a promise.”

My jaw clenches. “You want a pound of flesh? You want to collect? Good. Because I’m done waiting. I’m done recovering. You took your shot. You made your mark. But all you did was remind me that this title doesn’t come without a fight—and neither does *I*.”

My hand trembles slightly as I tighten my grip on the phone. Not from fear. From restraint. From the effort it takes to not explode right here and now. “Billy, let me make something real clear for you—you’re not just fighting a champion. You’re fighting a man who’s been bled dry and still refuses to die. A man who’s watched his world burn and built a throne from the ashes. I didn’t win this title with a handshake and a smile. I won it dragging myself through the dirt with no one left in my corner. I *earned* this. And now I’ve got to defend it—against you. A kid who thinks this is destiny. Against Dante, who wants to come back for revenge. But they’re both wrong. You don’t *take* from me. You *don’t* get your storybook ending. You don’t even get a clean loss.”

I lower the phone slightly, eyes narrowing. “You get a message. One carved into your bones. One screamed into your ears every time you try to sleep. That Chris Lawler wasn’t the end of your dream. I was the reality you weren’t ready for.”

A train wails somewhere in the distance. I glance that way and crack my neck, feeling something loosen inside me as the sound fades. I raise the camera one last time, the light catching in my eyes now. No fire. Just cold. Just certainty. “So come on, Billy. Lace up your boots. Say your prayers. Bring your bloodline and your best smile. And when I pin you to the mat and remind you what this really is, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Don’t say you weren’t told. Say thank you. Say *thank you* for surviving me.”

The silence doesn’t last. Somewhere behind me, I hear it—low at first, like the whisper of thunder rolling up from underneath the earth. The tracks beneath my boots begin to tremble. It’s subtle at first, a faint hum that slowly worms its way up my legs and into my chest. Then the whistle cuts through the night—sharp, piercing, impossible to ignore. It’s coming. Fast. I don’t move. I don’t even look. I just stare into the phone’s camera, that faint red light still blinking, still recording. I can feel the pressure mounting behind me, the scream of metal against metal, the air growing thick and electric like something primal is racing toward me at full speed.

“You hear that, Billy?” I ask, voice steady but louder now, cutting through the growing noise. I gesture behind me with my free hand, slow and deliberate. “That’s the sound of reality. That’s the sound of something too big to stop. And that’s me.” The train howls closer. Wind rushes against my back, tugging at my coat, clawing at the edges of the phone in my hand. The headlights flood the tracks in front of me, casting my shadow long and warped. Still, I don’t move. I don’t blink. I let the train scream past me, just a few feet away, a blur of rusted steel and relentless fury that shakes the entire ground. It drowns everything out. But not me. Not my voice.

“You don’t scare me, Billy,” I growl into the lens, holding the phone firm even as the world shakes around me. “And Dante... you sure as hell don’t either.” My jaw clenches. The wind tears past, the tail end of the train thundering by in one final, vicious gust. I take a slow step forward, past the tracks, letting the camera catch my eyes—clear, focused, cold.

“You wanted a message?” I ask, locking eyes with the screen. “Here it is.” I hold that look, unwavering. “I am the train. And I’m not stopping for anybody.”

Then I press stop.

And as the camera dies, the world around me finally exhales. The night is quiet again. But the echo of the train—the weight, the fury, the promise—still lingers.

I pocket the phone and start walking, the sound of the train still rolling in my ears like distant thunder that won’t fade. The city stretches around me in cold silence, the kind that settles in your bones when the adrenaline wears off. I pass flickering storefronts and shuttered alleyways without looking twice. My feet take me back to the hotel, but I don’t go in. Not yet. Not like this.

I cut through the edge of the lot and lean against a concrete pillar, the cold biting through the back of my coat. My hands are still tense. My jaw still locked. I can feel the weight of something unfinished pressing down on my chest, and I know exactly what it is.

I pull out my real phone—my personal one, the one I swore I’d never use for anything tied to this life—and scroll through the contacts until I find the number I never saved under his name, but always knew by heart. Jerald. I stare at the empty message box for what feels like forever. My thumb hovers. My pulse ticks. Part of me wants to walk away. Let the silence hold. But I can’t—not anymore. I can’t keep pretending this isn’t happening. That he’s not out there. That I didn’t help shape the way he looks at the world now.

I start typing. Slowly. Carefully. Every word like a needle.

“If you’re going to keep watching me... then it’s time we talk. Face to face. No more shadows. You know where to find me.”

I read it twice, then press send before I can second guess myself. There’s no follow-up. No plea. No threat. Just a line drawn in the dirt between who we were and who we are now. I don’t expect a reply. I don’t even know if he’ll read it. But if he does... then the rules change.

I slip the phone back into my coat and let my head fall back against the wall, eyes closing for a moment as the night breathes around me. The cold doesn’t feel so distant anymore. It feels earned. Deserved.

He wanted a signal?

He just got it.