

December 25, 2024

The Seton and Shaw children were making out like bandits this year.

Laura and Nathan had flown back to Wisconsin with their children the weekend before Christmas to celebrate with her extended family, and then come back to Las Vegas for a celebration at her new home with several guests invited. Those guests included the twins' godmother Jada Kaine *and* Laura's newest ally, Josh Kaine and his sister Jesse. It was only natural for the retired champion to bring a literal sleigh pulled by a reindeer (read Josh Kaine in a silly fursuit and antler headband) loaded with presents for the twins. Said reindeer got immediately tackled and roped into nearly an hour of piggy-back rides around the yard, much to the amusement of the adults in the house.

Presents were opened shortly after breakfast with Nathan thoroughly enjoying his role of wrapping-paper-gathering-Dad, and there was one present that got snatched up before any of the kids got too excited. One that was wrapped in black, red, and gold paper, addressed to Charlie from *Santa Breedlove*. Laura didn't know how such a thing had appeared at her house undetected, but she wasn't going to let the rivalries from her job bleed over to her family today of all days.

A rare moment of quiet in the kitchen found Laura enjoying a cup of hot chocolate in the kitchen. Sure, this was Las Vegas and it was sixty degrees outside, but it was Christmas. The SHOOT Project World Champion refused to give up certain traditions no matter how warm it was outside. Cheyenne, Alan, Charlie, and Jesse were in the backyard, attempting to fly their new drones without crashing them into the house. Nathan had gone out on the roof once already to retrieve Cheyenne's.

It brought a warm smile to her beautiful face. She adored this time of year, the warmth and magical feelings the holiday season brought was nothing short of spectacular. It served as a pleasant distraction that soon enough, the winter break for SHOOT Project would be over and she would be in the thick of dangerous competition again. Being the World Champion was akin to being the fastest gazelle on the Serengeti, she was the queen of those grassy plains...but there was no end of predators on the prowl, looking to take the crown she'd rightfully earned.

It's real nice seein' everyone so happy.

The familiar voice came with a distinct Appalachian accent as Laura turned to see Josh Kaine enter the kitchen. He stopped just on the other side of the counter, smiling at the aerial ruckus unfolding in the backyard.

And the break's been real nice too, been in the gym most days workin' out and sparrin' with local indy guys. Sorry I ain't been by before now to brainstorm a plan for after the break; just been busy gettin' Jesse all settled and helpin' Marjorie with the articles 'bout my bio dad...and

there was that whole hospital stay for Ma that she's been threatenin' me about if I don't keep my mouth shut.

He managed a nervous laugh, waving off the suddenly concerned look in Laura's eyes.

Don't worry 'bout her none, she's just bein' stubborn. Wanted to get a bit of free time to talk with ya, Ms. Laura, I got us some potential teammates to help back ya up against Breedlove.

She had another sip of her drink.

Don't worry about it. Family should come first during a layoff like this. You've got everything you're doing, I managed to be with Madison, Jack and my new niece. Still weird seeing her as a mother, but...

Laura's smile turned to a small grin and she let out a laugh.

I wanted to go into a whole Scarlett O'Hara rant but I'll be nice. Save the Rhett stuff because tomorrow is another—

The laugh became more noticeable as she stopped herself.

Sorry. So... okay... serious stuff. What have you been up to?

She gave a concerned and caring look at her best friend's son. She knew he had gone through a bit of trouble for this; part of her still wondered if it was worth it for him. The smile returned to Josh's face quickly enough, despite her concerned expression.

Been plenty busy, Ms. Laura. Lou's down to join us but she's in Japan for now, so she's loopin' in Jane and Cormac. Jane's a solid lady, helluva badass in the ring and out of it. Ain't met Cormac in person yet, but Lou says he's solid too. With Mick keepin' an eye on our rears, we got a good start to keepin' them sneak attacks to a minimum.

He paused as she set about mixing up a mug of hot chocolate for him. Josh took it gratefully, giving Laura that bright Kaine smile that reminded her so much of his birth mother.

Thanks, ain't had hot chocolate since my last Christmas at my folks' house with Nikki. Almost forgot how much I like the stuff. Easy to forget how much the little things matter when you got problems like Breedlove breathin' down your neck.

See, you'd think so, but... not really. It's almost easier to appreciate everything here. But it makes work *that much* harder. If time could just freeze this *minute*—

The sound of a drone buzzing became louder... and louder... and louder, until:

BANG!!

Right into the side of the house. Laura and Josh both jumped, but Laura immediately got the “stern mother face” as she glanced outside. Everyone but one small person was scrambling around. Only Cheyenne stood stunned and motionless. Laura opened the nearest window.

CHEYENNE PHOENIX!!

It wasn't me!

It was me! I'm so sorry!!

Josh took a step to the left, able to see more of the backyard this way and his sister stopped dead in her tracks looking like she was expecting the worst. He tapped Laura on the shoulder and she moved over to let him look over the damage. Charlie stood frozen against the side of the house, eyes wide. One of the drones had indeed smacked into the side of the house and was stuck on the gutter. He laughed to himself as Nathan came storming through the kitchen to get to the backyard. It made sense for Shaw to retrieve it, he was the tallest person here today.

Don't worry 'bout it, Jess! We'll get it fixed if it's broke; y'all just be real careful 'round Ms. Laura's house.

With the situation seemingly handled, the window was closed. His sister was hardly a child anymore, but at barely eighteen, he felt responsible for her. Looking after Jesse and helping her settle into a more vanilla life had done much to assuage the pain from his last relationship ending.

May be easier for you, but I ain't used to all this. First time in my life I'm sidin' more with parents than the kids, yanno? I know I ain't her parent but that don't stop me from tryin' to make sure Jesse gets to have a good family again. It's good practice for whenever I get a chance in the future to be a dad. Gonna be a while yet, I think. Wanted to settle down with Nikki, start a family, but she went runnin' for the hills.

Laura's eyes open wider at that. It was like reality taking another strike at her. Josh acting like an adult. Madison becoming a mom. Where had time gone?? She gave a brief shake of her head.

Be careful on that. Once you play grown-up, it's almost impossible to turn around. I know it's impossible and borderline wrong, but that's why part of me wants to borderline shield Chy and Alan for almost ever. They're about as perfect as is.

Her expression of near disbelief made him laugh. Josh sipped at his mug of hot chocolate before speaking again.

Ain't just playin' grown-up, Ms. Laura. More the reverse nowadays. Like pretendin' to be a reindeer and run around your house with your kids on my back until I fall over. Been a grown-up for a while now, but I love kids. Always have, if I'm bein' honest. Chy and Al are perfect kids, same with Charlie...even though he's a lot more sneaky than he lets on. Jesse ain't really had a chance to be a normal kid since her folks kicked her out, so I really appreciate you bein' okay with me bringin' her today. Shoulda seen her yesterday when Jada took her shoppin' for new bedroom stuff—she picked out the most princess-lookin' vanity table in the whole store. Jada's way better at helpin' with the girly stuff than me.

Next time y'all have a date night and need a sitter, lemme know? Chy was talkin' up the pizza and movie sleepovers they did with me and now Jesse's all excited to have one.

Laura has another hearty laugh.

I think that night will come much sooner than you think. Probably in the next couple days. But, ummm... back to business. You got The Wild Ones? So it's you with them? I know they don't fall short on doing what's necessary. What'd it take to convince them?

Josh shrugged, finishing off his mug of hot chocolate.

Far as I know, they're already convinced. Told ya, my friendship with Lou ain't transactional. I need help, I ask for it. She needs help, she asks for it. That's what friends do for each other, Ms. Laura. We just gotta work out logistics and expectations and stuff, I'll sit down with 'em soon and let ya know. Best I can figure, it all just hinges on you. We'll have your back, but you gotta have ours too. I know you ain't never been a big team player in this business, just like Ma. She had to be dragged kickin' and screamin' into bein' part of any team effort. So if you're real serious and committed to this, I'll make sure Jane and Cormac are too.

His smile returned as he gazed out the window to the children playing gleefully in the backyard, with the addition of Nathan to their games.

Might have made a new friend while Ma was in the hospital too, but jury's still out with that one.

Okay, what's with the hospital stuff? Obviously your side, but Jada too. You know her. She's not gonna tell me a thing and now that you're making casual mention a second time? I *have* to pick at it.

Fine but I'm tellin' her you bugged me until I broke. She's been stressed more'n usual lately and she collapsed at home. Miss Lilah only saw her on the cameras 'cause she's still in Boston, so she called me and I had to rush her to the ER. You know Ma's health ain't great to begin with, but them doctors are on her constantly to keep stress to a minimum. Main neurologist that looked her over told me the alcoholic neuropathy's gettin' worse, she's fucked up and there ain't no real fixin' the damage. Sobriety's just prolonging the inevitable.

He shrugged again, clearly trying to hide his agitation at his birth mother's stubbornness. Josh only had her in his life for less than a decade. No one wanted her to live out a long life more than Josh.

Miss Lilah knows 'cause I told her everythin' the doctor told me. She can't come home yet, s'why Jesse and I have been keepin' an eye on Ma. Doctors said she's probably only got a couple more years, providin' her luck holds out.

WHAT!?

Laura knew of Jada's health issues; though not the absolute severity of them because of Sinn's unwillingness to discuss things more than needed. She lowered her head and wrapped her hands over the top. It wasn't an inspiring response from Josh, but it seemed to crush Laura more than expected. There was so much about her that only Jada knew—personality quirks, mindset, why she did and does what she does. And now there's a presumptive clock set on her??

There's quiet before a couple sobs came from the World Heavyweight Champion. He didn't mean to, but Josh just stung her. The younger man didn't speak right away—he'd honestly been surprised that Jada hadn't told Laura anything about the severity of her issues. They were best friends, after all. He moved to her side, wrapping his arms around her in a reassuring embrace.

Ms. Laura, you know how Jada is. She keeps all her cards close to the chest until it's time to play a hand. I'm sorry, I thought she would have told you of all people. Just...you and I know her better'n anyone, save Lilah. You know she's too damn stubborn to die before she's good'n ready. I'm sorry—I didn't mean to make ya cry.

He rubbed at her arm. He hadn't intended to make the older woman cry on Christmas, of all days. Josh had been holding a lot in lately, but trying to compartmentalize these emotions hadn't done him any favors.

You...you want me to go get Nate? Or Ma? She'll probably listen to you if you yell at her enough.

She didn't lift her head. Just giving a strong enough nod for Josh to notice. All that told him was she wanted *someone*. He risks upsetting her further.

Which one, Ms. Laura? Or both?

Laura has a quicker, more lively nod of her lowered head as she softly sobbed again. He sighed again, pulling out his phone with one hand and shooting off a quick text to his birth mother before waving to get Nathan's attention outside. Seeing his lover hunched over the

counter brought a wave of concern to the math teacher and he hurried inside. The kids could keep themselves occupied.

What the hell is—

You fucking idiot, *why* did you say anything?

Jada's words came out hissed, knowing exactly what Josh had said to her best friend without having to ask. There were only a few things that could make Laura break down like that. Nathan's brows furrowed in frustration as he guided her arms around him and held her tightly, being that steady presence the World Champion needed in that moment.

What the fuck is going on, Jada? What did he say?

Laura was clearly in no state to talk.

He fucking told her about my hospital stay when it wasn't his business to tell.

It is my goddamn business when you're makin' me keep secrets from people who love you, Jada.

Josh wasn't about to buckle under the heavy gaze of Sinn. He'd been trained by her. He was her son, despite not having raised him. He wasn't intimidated by her anymore. Nathan glanced between the two Kaines before rubbing his hand up and down Laura's back, trying to console her.

With what she's got coming down the pipeline, the last thing she needs is someone else to worry about.

Laura looked up after one last, long sniffle. While sorrow was within her, a fire grew in her eyes as she turned to her bestie. A bit of a growl is in her voice as her vision quickly bounced from her boyfriend to Josh.

Could you two please go outside for a moment and watch the kids?

Nathan and Josh saw her expression and took the hint, heading outside. The room was barely cleared before the Champ's voice raised as tears streamed down her cheeks, righteous anger in her gaze.

*What the **FUCK** is wrong with you!?? I am your **BEST FRIEND!!** You collapse and go to the hospital and I only hear about it from **your son!?** Jada, **WHAT THE FUCK!??** I know you're sick, but *I should know these things!**

Something inside of Jada buckled for a moment, before she shut down the emotion and turned on her heels to leave the room. Laura all but snarled at the retired wrestler, grabbing her arm and using her superior height to keep Jada where she stood.

DO NOT FUCKING GO ANYWHERE!!

The brunette snarled at Laura, her fingers wrapping tightly around the taller woman's wrist. Jada spoke through gritted teeth, meeting her best friend's bright blue eyes with no fear...and no remorse.

You want to know what the fuck is wrong with me? I'm fucking dying, that is what is wrong with me, Laura. I am *never* going to get any better. I am on a long and painful fucking decline and I'm dealing with it the best way I can...by *living the rest of my fucking life on my terms*. What good does it do you to know that I'm dying? What good comes from telling *anyone* besides my wife that I will not be here in three to five years?

Sinn's nails dug into Laura's skin, their eyes met and neither of the stubborn women would back down from this confrontation.

Who am I supposed to talk about Cheyenne and Alan's growing up? Who am I supposed to talk about my title defenses with? Who the fuck am I supposed to drink coffee with!??

The World Champion all but shrieked at Jada, pushing her back into the kitchen wall. She knew that her best friend could not abide being restrained, but Laura also knew that Jada would take any and all opportunities to leave the room and the conversation. There was an angered silence between them before the blonde saw something she'd never seen before.

Hot tears started to stream down Jada's cheeks.

There is no changing what will happen to me, Laura, and I don't want to be treated like I'm some sickly pathetic thing that needs to be looked after. It is *my* decision. I am not going to die in the next week, or even the next month...but I want to live out whatever time I have left like there is nothing wrong. So I didn't tell you. Josh only knows because Lilah called him, but I wouldn't have told him either. If you think that makes me some sort of monster, then I am a fucking monster...but I cannot function with everyone treating me like I'm made of glass. I **know** you. If I'd told you, you would do exactly that.

The yelling was over and her voice showed wear from it, but she continued with a calmer rage.

*Do not try deflecting blame. Lilah deserves to know. She is your wife. I deserve to know. I thought I was your friend. What if you collapse and end up dying because no one knows because you were too fucking stubborn to tell anyone? And you're only found because someone calls the police for a wellness check? Do you have **any** idea how **badly** that would crush me? My best friend just died because she's too proud?*

Fuck that, Jada.

I may not be able to do a *thing*, but *I deserve to know* if you get worse. I love being World Heavyweight Champion, but it means a *helluva lot less* if I'm down a best friend. I don't need to know your bilirubin levels on a blood test but *God*, woman! Talk with me! That's my job as your friend!

You are my goddamn friend, Laura. You're my **best friend**. I can't—

She had to stop, angrily wiping the moisture from her eyes and cheeks. It was fucking Christmas. The last thing she wanted to do was cry...or make her best friend upset.

I hadn't had an episode in a fucking year before two days ago. I hate the fact that I even have to deal with this shit, let alone deal with the knowledge that someday in the near future I won't be here to listen to you talk about the kids or drink coffee with you or listen to you gush about Shaw. Laura, I have been through thousands of hours of therapy just to come to grips with the fact that I did all of this to myself. If you had *any* idea how hard it's been just to accept that, let alone the idea of telling other people that I'm fucking dying because...

Sinn ground her teeth together, slamming her fist back against the wall and grimacing at the pain. That was the wrist that had been shattered in that last match with Osbourne Kilminster and was surgically pieced back together.

I am doing what I need to do to get through this, Laura. Lilah and I have safeguards in place—I just want to live my fucking life on my terms. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but goddamn it, I can't get through this if everyone around me is treating me like a fucking invalid because they know I'm slowly dying.

Laura stared hard at her friend. A couple tears made their way out as she breathed heavier from sadness and frustration.

You're the oranges to my apples. The fact you and I can *co-exist*, never mind be best friends, probably makes God wonder what went wrong when he formulated us. There are nights only you and Dube know about because I told you. There are thoughts of mine only you know about because I told you. There are feelings I kept to myself and only you know because I told you. *You* know me more than anyone ever can. That includes my parents, my kids, even *Nathan*. So you'll have to excuse me for being a *bit* emotional and borderline *hurt* that you think it's okay to die behind my back.

Fine, you're excused and I love you to pieces, you fucking fruitcake.

Her voice broke as she said it, trying her best to swallow back the tide of emotion threatening to spill forth. She couldn't stop herself from wrapping both arms tightly around the taller woman.

That fucker in the sky did nothing wrong when he made you, Laura, and I'll fight anyone who says anything to the contrary. I might go down quicker nowadays, but I'll still fight 'em. You're the best person I've ever known.

Laura gave an equally strong hug in return.

Thank you for being the perfectly imperfect bestie, but if you keep this kinda stuff from me again I'm going to whoop your ass.

Fine...I won't keep the bad shit from you anymore.

You're a stubborn ass, but I love you too.