



Rising From the Ashes

By Jaimee Pifer

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Rising From the Ashes

As the sound of a cell pierced the room, Jared jolted awake with his heart pounding and body covered in sweat. “What, Jeff?!”

“Another rough night?”

“What do you think?” Jared snapped as he clutched his head still hearing the echoes of his wife’s screams.

“I will keep this call short. I persuaded a producer to cast you in a documentary about a man who climbs Mount Kilimanjaro. It’s time to come back to the acting scene.”

“But...”

“No buts, and please don’t let me down. I set you up with an instructor in Kingston; a national rock climbing champion.”

“Fine,” Jared sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. Jared ended the call and looked around his room strewn with clothes and liquor bottles. His eyes rested on a picture of his wife on their wedding day. His heart clenched with pain as he remembered the truck driver who took the life of his wife and unborn son.

As tears gathered in his eyes Jared heard Natalie whispered into his ear, “It’s time to live your life again.”

“But how?” Hearing no answer, Jared forced himself out of bed and headed to the bathroom. He moved as if there were chains on his feet. “Stupid light,” he grumbled as he shaded his eyes from the glare of the florescent light bulb. Looking at his disheveled face in the mirror, Jared shaved off his stubble with trembling hands.

Jared entered an old brick building and came into a room filled with rock climbing gear. The first thing he noticed was the smell of sweat, chalk and polyester. He could hear people climbing downstairs. A young woman in black exercise pants, a blue tank top, and a harness came out of one of the changing rooms. Her eyes brightened when she saw Jared. “You must be Jared. I’m Melanie, your climbing instructor.” She shook Jared’s hand.

“You’re not what I expected.” Jared said in a surprised tone.

Melanie smirked, “Few people do.”

Jared chuckled along with Melanie. “How did you know it was me?”

“My goddaughter loves watching your show where you voiced the Speedster. When I received a call that I would be coaching you I was thrilled.” Jared smiled for what seemed like the first time since his wife’s death. “Let’s get you suited up, and we’ll start with the basics.”

A few minutes later, Jared was downstairs in the climbing arena garbed in a harness and climbing shoes. “First thing. Put the rope through the two loopholes on your harness and then feed the rope through the figure eight. Once you’ve done that, put your hand on the lead rope, and wrap the loose rope around your thumb twice before pulling it through to make an S shape.” After a few tries, Jared was able to tie in. “Perfect! Now you get to climb. I will be down here belaying you.” Jared grabbed onto the first green hold and climbed his way to the top.

“This is too easy!” Jared called out from the top.

“Wait until you do the difficult ones. It takes a lot of training and practice to master the art of rock climbing. We will focus on your technique and building your strength.”

A week later, Jared was moving through the levels of difficulty. "I can't seem to get this one," he complained as he fell a couple of inches from trying to get the next hold. "The holds are too slippery and small."

Melanie tossed him a bag of chalk. "Rub the chalk on your hands. It will help your grip. Use a pinch hold with your fingers like a crab's pinchers to help pull your body up to the next hold." After Jared completed the course, Melanie said, "Nice! You did it! It seems like you are in a different world while climbing."

"I find I forget my pain while I am climbing," Jared said surprised at how easy it was to open up to her. "I signed up for the beginner's challenge at a competition in two weeks."

Melanie's face brightened and said, "That's the same one I have signed up for but in the advanced competition. Let's design a program for you so you are ready for the competition. It will be intense but worth it."

Jared spent another week training on a hangboard where he performed pull ups and dead hangs, which consisted of hanging from the holds. He climbed the same course two to three times in a row to help establish endurance. Over time, he built strength in his fingers until he could clasp small holds while climbing.

One day, he found Melanie climbing with no ropes. Her climbing was smooth and fluid as she manoeuvred her way to the top. She swung her body back and forth to gain momentum and then jumped to grab a hold. Melanie didn't have a strong grip so her body scraped against the wall as she fell on to some blue thick mats on the floor. Jared jogged towards her as Melanie scanned for any injuries as if her life depended on it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just a bruise and a couple of scratches. I am sorry, but I have to cancel today's session."

"Why? Over a fall?"

Melanie sighed, tightened her ponytail, and turned around to face Jared. "Guess it is time to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I have hemophilia which means my blood does not clot when I'm injured. Any injury could be fatal."

"If that's so, why do you rock climb?"

"Try living with your parents who wouldn't let you out of the house or do anything because they didn't want to lose you. I want to enjoy life and not waste a second. If I die, then so be it. Beats living in constant fear and suffocating under my parents' control and the terminal illness."

"Wow."

"Yes, I'm thankful I moved out when I did. Well, I need to keep an eye on my arm to make sure the injuries don't turn into anything serious. Will see you on Monday."

Jared groaned as he opened his eyes. He could hear sirens and a sharp screeching sound as if the car was being torn apart. "Sir, can you hear me? We are getting you out of here."

Jared could make out a firefighter's uniform. He mumbled, "Natalie, my wife. Is she alive? We were coming home from our first prenatal appointment." Jared turned his head with a grimace and took in his wife's form. Natalie's strawberry blonde hair was caked with blood and a jagged piece of glass was sticking out of her neck.

“I am sorry, sir. She didn’t make it.”

“No!” Jared said with an anguished cry as the firefighters lifted him onto a stretcher. While the emergency crew was transporting Jared into an ambulance, a large explosion occurred. His car went up into flames while his wife was still inside.

Jared woke up with tears in his eyes. Today was the anniversary of his wife’s death, Monday, February 1st. He turned to look at their wedding photo. “Can’t go another year without you.” It has been two years since his wife’s death. In the evening, Jared drove to the closest liquor store to buy a few cases of beer and liquor. He went back home, sat on his bed, opened a can of beer, and said, “Cheers!” to the photograph of his wife. Jared drank until he fell asleep. The next morning he couldn’t handle the pain so he continued to drink until he became unconscious.

Melanie ended her call on her cell that day for the tenth time. “Strange... Jared is not picking up. Something is not right.” She called Jeff, Jared’s agent, and demanded that they head over to Jared’s apartment. That night Melanie and Jeff banged on Jared’s door. “Something is wrong. He missed his rock climbing session, and he always calls if he will miss it.”

“You have to understand that yesterday was the anniversary of his wife’s death.”

“Did you check on him?” Jeff remained silent with eyes downcast. “So you left him alone. Does he have any friends who offer support?”

“To tell you the truth, his friends stopped calling after a year. Jared became an angry and withdrawn person unlike what he used to be. We didn’t know what to say or how to help him.”

Melanie’s eyes flashed with indignation as she stated, “He was grieving, for heaven’s sake! It’s common for people to have a change in their personality when someone close to them dies. Just give him time to process his grief. All everyone had to do was be there for him whether by calling or visiting. He shouldn’t have to face this alone. Someone needs to be there to help him through this.” Jeff unlocked the door. “Call 911!” said Melanie. She rushed to Jared’s side, cleared the vomit from his face, and checked his pulse. “He’s not breathing!” She knelt amongst the empty liquor bottles and pumped his chest until the paramedics arrived.

Jared smelled antiseptic and heard the steady beep of a heart monitor. He groaned as he opened his eyes from his drugged and drowsy state. Melanie was sleeping next to him on a chair with a book on her lap. “Melanie,” Jared croaked.

“Jared, you’re awake! I’ll get the doctor.”

“Wait. Water.”

“Right, you must be thirsty.”

After taking a few sips, Jared asked, “What happened?”

“You drank yourself to death, but the paramedics were able to revive you. We thought we lost you,” said Melanie with her voice cracking at the end.

“We?”

“Melanie and I,” said Jeff as he scanned the room avoiding eye contact with Jared. He took a step back. “Going to grab a cup of coffee. Glad you’re doing okay,” said Jeff as he turned and hurried out of the room.

“Is he always like that?”

“Yes. He only cares about securing the next contract.”

“What a jerk!”

“I agree. It’s about time I find a new agent. What day is it?”

“February 3rd.”

“Hang on. The rock climbing competition is today. You should be there.”

“Um...”

“Don’t tell me you missed it?”

“I did, but there will always be other rock climbing competitions. I was worried you wouldn’t make it. We almost lost you a few times while the doctors were pumping your stomach.”

“Oh, Melanie. You shouldn’t have stayed.”

Taking his hand, Melanie said, “Your life is more important than a rock climbing competition.”

A voice interrupted them, “Sorry to bother you. I am Dr. Fells and I’m here to check on you, Jared.” While Dr. Fells was giving a routine examination, he explained to Jared that he was in the psych ward on suicide watch for the next 48 hours. He pointed out various routes Jared could take to help him with his grieving.

Jared’s face fell at the news, but Melanie squeezed his hand and said, “It will be a long road ahead, but I will help you through it.”

Jared glanced at her and said, “Why help me? Everyone else has abandoned me during my period of grief.”

“Jared McKenzie! After all these weeks together, I thought you considered me your friend. And as your friend, I will help you through this difficult time compared to your so-called friends in the past!”

Jared chuckled and said, “A feisty one, isn’t she?” Dr. Fells nodded with a grin as he put his stethoscope back around his neck.

Two Months Later

Jared stared at the ceiling and turned off his alarm before it went off. He sighed, “What’s the point of setting it if I am not receiving any sleep?” Looking at his alarm, Jared leapt to his feet realizing that he has a rock climbing competition this morning. Jared guzzled back a cup of coffee and drove to the competition.

Melanie gave Jared a hug when he arrived and asked, “How are you doing? You look exhausted.”

“The counseling sessions are helping, but I can’t get any sleep. My counselor says I have post-traumatic stress disorder from the trauma I experienced in witnessing my wife’s death.”

“Taking any sleeping meds?”

“Nothing seems to help. Right now I am functioning on 48 hours without sleep.”

“Are you sure you want to climb today?”

Jared nodded his head. “I had coffee this morning and seeing you always brightens my day.”

A voice crackled over the P.A. system, “Melanie Davenport, please report to Arena One.”

Melanie took a step back flustered. “We better go. Are you still good with belaying me?”

“Always,” smiled Jared.

Jared gazed in wonder looking at how Melanie navigated the holds. When she was near the top, Jared's eyes drooped. *Not now. Have to stay awake.* A wave of exhaustion swept over him as he followed the pull of sleep. *I'll just close my eyes for a couple of seconds.*

As he drifted to sleep, Melanie yelled, "I am ready to come down!"

Jared heard nothing as his body leaned forward putting his weight on the lever causing it to flip the other way. He jerked awake when he heard a scream and a thud. Jared saw his car on fire in front of him and firefighters dragging him away from the crash. He kept shouting, "My wife! Someone please get her. She's still trapped."

"This man is insane. He's hallucinating."

"No, I am not! What are you talking about?" yelled Jared as he strained against the hold of the men.

A firefighter knelt down beside him and said, "Sir, you are in the Furnace Room at the rock climbing competition. Close your eyes and when you open them again, you will see yourself in the Furnace Room."

When Jared opened his eyes, he could see two men restraining him. "What happened?" The two men looked at each other with solemn eyes. A gnawing sensation gripped Jared. He scanned the room and saw Melanie being carried on a stretcher.

He heard one paramedic say, "Her vital signs are low. We need to hurry."

"No," Jared moaned, "No! What have I done? Melanie!"

He lunged towards Melanie as a man yelled, "We need help over here!" It took four men to restrain Jared as a paramedic administered a sedative.

Jared woke up in a hospital room where he recognized Dr. Fells. "Hello Jared."

"What's going on?"

"Do you remember what happened?"

Flashes of the rock climbing competition flickered through his mind along with Melanie. "Where's Melanie? Is she okay? Is she..."

"She's fine, Jared. Alive and recovering."

Jared sighed with relief as he sank back into the bed. "What were her injuries?"

"She suffered internal bleeding in her abdomen, bruised ribs, and a broken arm. Now, it's time to talk about you. Judging by the length of your recovery period, you haven't been getting any sleep."

"What do you mean recovery period? I was at the Furnace Room earlier today."

"That was three days ago. You slept right through. Something your body needed. Your counselor will work with you on developing techniques of how to handle flashbacks. I am going to recommend a psychiatrist to help you with your PTSD and sleeping problems."

By the end of the week, Jared was preparing to leave the psychiatric ward at the hospital when he heard a knock and a voice saying, "Hello Jared."

Fear and guilt coursed through his veins as he turned around at a slow pace. "Melanie... I... um."

"It's okay, Jared."

"No, it's not. I almost killed you. Someone I... how did you survive?"

"Through infusions to help my blood clot. Don't think I notice when you change the subject

mister,” she said putting her one arm on her hip since the other one was in a sling. Jared cracked an amused grin as he tried to stifle a chuckle. “What’s so funny?”

“You, Melanie.”

“Humph. Well, I could press charges against you for attempted murder,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes. Pain flashed in Jared’s eyes as he gazed at her with a sorrowful expression. “Too soon?”

He wrapped her in a hug and rested his chin on her head. “You have helped me out these past few months and I should have told you about my sleepless nights and flashbacks. When I saw you on the stretcher, I realized that you are someone I am starting to love. I still have a long road ahead if you still want to journey it with me.”

“Oh, Jared. You don’t have to ask,” she said while wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Well, Miss Davenport, it’s about time I take you on our first date. How about next week on Monday?”

Melanie’s phone rang causing them to drift apart. “It’s my Mom. I can’t drive in the state I’m in. Gotta go.” She hesitated at the doorway, turned around and headed back to Jared planting a kiss on his cheek. “I am looking forward to dinner and hearing how your documentary is coming along,” she said with a smile leaving a stunned Jared behind.