

A Fool's Paradise

Dusting her hands of excess soil, Dr. Aaryn Jamison reached for her smock and buttoned it all the way down. She was used to men eyeing her appraisingly as this one just had. "Did you need something, Mr. Denali?" Aaryn's tone was brusque, one hundred percent businesslike.

Caught ogling her, Jayson turned to stare out her window as she buttoned her doctor's smock. He continued staring at the mountains looming in the distance until she cleared her throat, reminding him of his purpose for being there.

"Yes, actually, I do need something." Jayson reached behind him and closed her office door before stepping further into the room. He approached her desk and stared down at the photos on it. He dared not touch anything in her office. Except, when his eyes fell on the picture of her climbing a 500-foot rock called The Prophecy Wall, Jayson couldn't help but pick it up to stare at it closely. It took balls to climb mountains. Jayson scaled mountains in his movies. But those were props that were flat on the ground while special effects did the rest to make it look like he was scaling the tallest mountains in the world. This, what he held in his hand, was the real thing. It explained the strong muscle tone of her arms. Man that he was, he ogled all of her on full display in the photo. Jayson's opinion of the good doctor was quickly changing. It could be they had simply gotten off to a bad start after all.

He was startled when she plucked the photo from his hands. Seeing that he'd just rekindled her anger, Jayson wanted to quickly ward off her vituperative onslaught. He offered her a smile that had never failed to soften a woman's heart and said, "Dr. Jamison, I'm sorry."

She, however, never batted an eye but continued to stare at him with those piercing eyes of hers, not saying a word.

"Look, for what it's worth, I apologize. You were right back there. If I flew off the handle, it's because I was only protecting my mother. You have to admit, you were a little rough on her. When she broke down crying, all I could do was lash out in anger. I came to your office because

my mother wants to stay here. And she wants you to treat her. Both she and Dr. Baldwin seem to think that won't happen unless I apologize. So here I am. I'll even get down on my knees if you want. We might have just gotten off on a bad foot. If that's the case, again, all I can say is, I'm sorry."

Jayson quieted because in the face of her stonewall silence he was beginning to feel as though he was babbling. Jesus, what was it about this lady that he found so intimidating? And there she was staring at him with those impenetrable eyes of hers. His smile usually worked on most women, but he had yet to see her crack one.

"What I'm asking, Dr. Jamison, is for you to attend to my mother. I'm asking you not to let my behavior or your opinion of me get in the way of my mother's care." Jayson stared at her, waiting for a response.

Aaryn had stepped away from him after she took her photo from his hands. She crossed her hands over her chest. "Your mother will be just fine, Mr. Denali. Shriners, as you know, is an excellent facility. There are any number of physicians here who can, and are, qualified to treat her. She will do well. That will be my recommendation to Dr. Baldwin, that someone other than myself should treat your mother. As for you, Mr. Denali? You, I do not like. Period. You waltz in here and think you can throw a blinding, megawatt smile my way and all will be forgiven? It's not even about the words you spoke to me back in the other room. Don't kid yourself by thinking I was offended. I don't give a rotten apple about what you think of me. It's you I don't like. I find that I'm offended by your very person. I don't like your cavalier, disdainful attitude toward people and I definitely don't like your chauvinistic, dismissive attitude toward women. Your mother's a lovely woman, but you, Mr. Denali, are an asshole. End of story."

Jayson looked as though he'd just been harpooned. All apologies forgotten, Jayson said, "Damn! Who died and left you judge and executioner of the free world? To think I came here to apologize?" Jayson's lips curled in derision. "Lady, you are one *serious* piece of work. I don't know who put a bug up your butt, but you most definitely take the prize for 'Unprofessional Doctor of the Year'. No wonder I couldn't find anything about you on the hospital's website or even on the internet.

People don't have anything nice to say about you, so they don't say anything at all. I don't have a clue of what gives you the right to judge me given that I don't know you and have never ever laid eyes on you before this day, but you have got major issues. And you don't know a damn thing about me, lady, because you've got your facts all wrong."

"I may not know you personally, Mr. Denali, but your history is written all over you. You've got more broken hearts trailing after you than a cemetery has dead bodies. You've traded on your good looks to get by all your life. You use women like paper plates at a picnic. You're selfish and you think only about yourself. There are women who have slit their wrists and ended their lives because they were foolish enough to think you would love them, while in reality you couldn't be bothered to give them a second thought after you left their beds. They may have lain down with you and given you their hearts, but when they got up, you took a piece of their soul.

"These same women, and countless others, would have settled for a piece of you, but you couldn't even give them that. Their deaths will follow you forever, Jayson Denali. I pity any poor soul foolish enough to become involved with you—especially the one whose bed you left last night. Her stench is still all over you. And you really want to know the kicker? The kicker is, you're not capable of loving someone unselfishly. You walk around punishing every woman you meet simply because of one woman who broke your heart more years ago than you can remember. Oh, yes. I may not know you personally, Jayson Denali, but I can read your spirit and root out your serial dishonesty towards women. The little that I do see: I. Do. Not. Like." Aaryn walked to her door and held it open for him to leave. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients that I need to see about."

Jayson stood in the middle of her office for a long while feeling completely denuded. He didn't stand there because he wanted to, but because he was rooted to the spot. Too many jumbled thoughts were clamoring through his mind at once to focus on any one of them. Maybe this lady was a tabloid reader and believed everything she read in the gossip mags.

That was all Jayson could come up with. It was the only way she could know so much about him. Or it could be she was best friends with one of the many women he'd slept with and later dumped. Or perhaps she was related to a friend of a friend of a friend. The scenarios were too many to consider. On top of that, her words had a stinging effect deep inside him, leaving him bereft of speech. Finally, as Jayson walked out of her office she swung the door shut behind him. She may as well have added, "*Don't let the doorknob hit cha where the dog shoulda bit cha.*" He walked down the hall, zombie-like, and went straight past Dr. Baldwin's office heading for the men's room. He needed a moment to get *himself* together.

❖ Excerpt #2 ❖

In his last season with the New England Patriots, Darius Grey had suffered a broken neck and was completely paralyzed. Even after intense surgery, because of the fractured vertebra, he remained paralyzed from the neck down. Every one of his doctors counseled him that it was unlikely he would ever walk again.

By the time Aaryn had come into Darius's life, he was wheelchair bound and as distant and unreachable as any patient she'd ever encountered. It was his wife, Gayle, who had talked him into coming to Shriners. Darius had seen a number of doctors in a short period of time until he finally had met with one who promised him he would walk again. When that assurance proved unfounded, it caused Darius to lose all faith. The pain of having his hopes dashed yet again was more than he was willing to bear so Darius became rigidly resigned. Outwardly, he appeared to be taking his newfound status in stride.

Inwardly, he'd cloaked himself behind a mountain of anger, self-pity and regret. When it appeared former teammates and fans had forgotten him, his wife Gayle was the only one left to fight for Darius's emotional and physical survival. Against the advice of his doctors, she told him about the astonishing, groundbreaking work that she'd heard was being done at Shriners. How men and women with similar prognoses as his were walking again after undergoing treatment. She even showed him several

articles that were written about one physician in particular, Dr. Aaryn Jamison.

Incredibly, only three months had passed since Gayle had contacted Aaryn in hopes that she could convince Darius to undergo treatment at Shriners. That initial call had left Gayle devastated on two fronts. First, Darius refused to participate in the conversation and secondly, Aaryn explained that she didn't influence anyone toward treatment because there were so many people who *wanted* to walk in healing that she didn't have time for anyone who didn't. Aaryn had not been callous in her explanation, just straightforward about the plentiful pool of people from which there was to draw. Besides, the Center already had a waiting list.

But Gayle was stalwart in her efforts to get Darius into treatment. She even lobbied the NFL to make a sizeable donation to Shriners on Darius's behalf. Three weeks later, Gayle and Darius were on a chartered plane from Potomac, Maryland, bound for Salt Lake City.

As the three of them sat in consultation, Aaryn understood the dynamics at play. She truly admired Gayle's strength and tenacity because it was obvious she was fighting for the survival of her family. Gayle just needed Darius to fight as well. But that fight was becoming increasingly harder to conduct on her own as Darius withdrew deeper into himself. Aaryn could only imagine the strain the couple was undergoing. Thirty minutes into their conversation, with Gayle doing most of the talking, Aaryn noticed neither of them had broached the issue of conjugality—or the lack thereof, which surely was a contention between them. But a marriage counselor Aaryn was not. Her only aim was to uncover whether Darius was serious about healing. If he wasn't, it did not mean he would not receive treatment, it just meant that Aaryn would not be the one treating him.

Having established a foundation of trust, Aaryn asked, "Gayle, may I spend a few minutes alone with Darius?" A nervous Gayle stepped outside the office.

Aaryn pulled her chair close to Darius until their knees nearly touched. She laid her outstretched hands on his lap, her palms facing upward as she took his hands in hers.

“Darius, all I want is for you to take several deep breaths and relax.”

What transpired was an experience Darius would later describe to his wife as one he'd never before encountered.

He and Aaryn had stared at each other unblinking for several minutes. Uncomfortable at first, Darius looked away to study objects in the room. But the intense way Aaryn stared at him willed him to return his gaze to hers. His eyes scrutinized her face and he found himself examining her in a detached and non-judgmental manner.

Darius saw a woman with beautiful, flawless dark chocolate skin whose age was indecipherable. Her face was devoid of makeup, except for the clear coat of gloss on lips that were full. She had a wide nose and thick bushy eyebrows that most women he knew would have plucked long ago. Her hair was thick, course, wavy and long. Tendrils escaped the knot she wore at the back of her head. As his eyes drifted back to hers, the word that came to Darius to describe her was “natural.” She wasn't beautiful in the model-like way that his wife, Gayle, was. However, she struck him as an unusual woman who didn't need the adornment of facial makeup because her beauty lay inward.

Darius recalled the two articles he'd read about her and wondered what had led her to become a doctor and to work in Salt Lake City. Hers was the only African American face he'd seen since his and Gayle's arrival. He found that significant in light of the photo on her desk that showed her concentrating intently as she scaled a mountaintop peak. Darius was a sophisticated, well-traveled man. But in all his life, he'd never met an African American person who climbed mountains. Hiking, he could understand. But climbing a mountain? That was beyond him. And people thought that football was dangerous!

He wondered if she was married. Though she wore a loose-fitting white overcoat, he could tell she was an extremely shapely woman. Darius was at once curious about who she was. For some reason, he had the sense that she was an intensely strong and private woman—one who was nurturing, guileless, different. As she held his hand, Darius began to sense something strange, a foreignness he couldn't quite identify. Brief flashes of something inexplicable confused him momentarily before giving way to...certainty—a knowing that everything was going to be alright.

Suddenly, it felt like he was transported through a dark vortex where everything around him traveled faster than the speed of light. And yet, Darius felt safe and knew he had nothing to fear. From out of nowhere, he had a strong sensation of aloneness. Not loneliness, but a state of austere solitude until he realized intuitively that it wasn't him who felt this way...*it was Aaryn!*

Feeling like he was prying on her thoughts and not understanding how he was able to sense these things, fearfully Darius wanted to pry his hands from hers but he couldn't because of his paralysis. As if sensing his desire to withdraw from her, Aaryn merely gripped him tighter until he relaxed again.

When she didn't release him, a calm stillness came over Darius. The moment he stopped mentally fidgeting, childhood memories and images of his mother came to mind. Until the age of seven, he'd been raised in a small town called Alligator, Mississippi. Though his mother had called them "hard times" Darius hadn't known it. All he remembered was the warm feeling of being loved. After his mother had died, he was sent to live with relatives in a neighboring town. For the first time in his life, Darius knew what it meant to be lonely. But it wasn't the loneliness he remembered as he stared into Aaryn's eyes. It was the warm sensation of love. Inexplicably, Darius felt the same rush of emotion he'd felt as a young boy whenever his mother would pick him up and plant kisses all over his face. He remembered how she would laugh uproariously as he made a show of wiping away her kisses, both of them knowing he loved receiving them as much as she loved giving them. The feeling was so strong Darius could almost feel his mother's arms around him.

And then he remembered how she was abruptly snatched away, out of reach, like one of the butterflies that had often evaded his youthful grasp. At that precise moment, Darius realized that like Charles Foster Kane in the classic film *Citizen Kane*, he had lived his entire life trying to recapture that same feeling of unselfish, unconditional love that his mother had planted in him as a child. With his emotions raw, Darius suddenly felt the magnitude of frustration Gayle was suffering from as she tried to be strong for the both of them. Unexpectedly, Darius began to weep.

Five minutes after his wife had closed the door on her way out, as Aaryn's hands gripped Darius's, sobs overtook him. For once, Darius forgot about the age-old stereotype that said men do not and should not cry. It certainly wasn't planned, but he found himself shedding tears for his mother, to whom he'd never had the opportunity to properly say goodbye or to even tell how much she'd meant to him. He grieved for his wife, whom he secretly feared would someday leave him for another man—one who was worthy of her. And he grieved for the manhood he now felt stripped of, knowing he would never enjoy the thrill of having children of his own.

Quietly, Aaryn got up and opened her door to beckon his wife back inside. Gayle immediately went and knelt in front of her husband throwing her comforting arms around him. Aaryn left to give them privacy. Fifteen minutes later, she stepped back inside and pulled up another chair so that the three of them were sitting in a small circle. Aaryn sensed the room's atmosphere was "clear" because in that moment anything could be created with and between the couple. What Aaryn wanted to know was if Darius was *willing* to believe he could walk in his healing.

The next week, a determined Darius returned to Shriners. After two months of furious therapy, what some of the finest surgeons in the world had said would never happen, happened. Darius began walking, albeit with the use of two canes. Two weeks later, he was walking unassisted. Because of his enormous progress, Darius was released from the Medical Center the following week.

His recovery generated headlines around the country. A press conference took place the day of his release. Former fans returned in droves to support him, and even people who weren't fans were happy to know the man who once rushed over 8,000 yards for the NFL, whom many doctors proclaimed would never walk again, was well after all. His story was carried in every major newspaper and press footage of him leaving the hospital unassisted was replayed on all the major television and cable networks.

The news coverage was huge for Shriners as well. It was also free publicity. The only drawback was that Aaryn didn't want any part of the media blitz.

As miraculous as Darius's case was, to Aaryn his story was no more exhilarating than the many others she'd had the good fortune to witness. The only difference was that Darius was a beloved and celebrated sports hero who commanded media attention. Of all the people she'd treated, whether wealthy or poor, their healing was no less amazing.

❖ Excerpt #3 ❖

Timing was everything, the difference between life and death. Odds were against him saving them both, but he would not leave without her. Forty seconds remained before the next explosion ripped throughout the building, decimating the entire southeast section along with him and the girl. The air above him was thick with smoke from rapidly approaching flames. Mindful of the electric wires that dangled menacingly around him, he ignored the pain in his body as he crawled through glass and rubble to reach her. *"Thirty seconds!"* announced the voice recorder on the bomb. Struggling to his knees, he wrapped his arm around her waist to pull her up. *Trapped!* Her dress was crushed beneath a huge chunk of fallen concrete. Forced to improvise, he ripped it from her body, hauling her to her feet. *"Ten seconds!"* Lunging through the broken glass doors, he thrust his weight against hers, propelling them both over the iron railing. Milliseconds after their feet left the tenth floor balcony, the thermal explosion rocked the building. Huge balls of fire erupted from the eviscerated structure. Shattered glass and concrete fragments cascaded through the air. He and the girl plunged ten floors below crashing into the ocean. Moments later, he resurfaced amidst wreckage holding her body above water. Claspng her close, he spotted the shoreline and led them to safety.

Jayson lay sprawled in the sand gasping for breath. The female stunt double quickly departed to be replaced by Rita Danza, his leading lady. The actress positioned herself atop him, clad in a skimpy bra and thong bikini. Water droplets streamed down her lush body giving her the appearance of someone freshly hauled from the ocean. Her wet jet black hair fanned dramatically around their faces as she clung to him desperately. The cameras and lighting were angled to maximize her sex

appeal. Though she was positioned to look helpless, Jayson knew the Salma Hayek look-alike was anything but.

“Cut!” yelled Kurt Wyler, the movie’s director.

The sharp feel of teeth piercing the side of his jaw caused Jayson to wince and pull away.

“That’s for standing me up last night, you jerk.” The beautiful Latin bombshell jumped to her feet and kicked sand in Jayson’s face before turning to stalk back to her trailer. Staring after her, Jayson stood to wipe sand particles from his face and neck. His and every other male eye on the movie set followed, in appreciation, the curvaceous starlet’s angry departure.

“Don’t remember that scene in the script. What was that about?” Kurt asked as he approached.

Jayson’s jaw clenched as he stared at the blood on his fingers. Without displaying his mounting ire at the temperamental star, he replied, “I guess she felt the need to embellish the script.”

Kurt Wyler was directing the action film Jayson was presently starring in. He was as world famous for his films as Steven Spielberg or James Cameron. Jayson had starred in several of Kurt’s films. Each one was a box office hit. Their current film, *Pendulum II*, was expected to generate even greater ticket sales because of the sequel’s daring special effects. The movie was a guaranteed draw for millions of viewers because of its dazzling death-defying stunts, action-packed thrills and chilling edge-of-the-seat suspense. Critics were already abuzz with pre-movie hype though the movie’s release date was more than six months away.

Kurt’s Executive Producer came and stood alongside them. She worked with Kurt on most of his films. Interrupting their ogling, she said to Jayson, “If she bit you, you should let the set medic look you over to make sure she didn’t give you rabies.”

Kurt laughed at Jayson’s expense as they walked towards the front of the film set. “You asked for her, Jay, you got her. I told you from the beginning we should have waited for Jolie. But you had to have Rita.

After eight weeks of putting up with her histrionics, thank Christ that was the last film shot.”

Jayson wasn't about to permit Kurt the luxury of selective memory. “Need I remind you that we *both* agreed to go ahead with filming so the release date wouldn't be delayed by nine months while we sat around waiting for AJ? Besides, Rita has her own box office appeal. Every red-blooded male able to breath on his own accord will pay to see the film just because of the junk in her trunk.”

“At least we've got good footage of the dustups between you two. We should release some of the photos to the rag mags to ensure we put our own spin on what's written. Otherwise, someone else on the set will sell the story and the gossip mags will have a field day. I can see the headlines now. ‘Fireworks on *Pendulum II* Movie Set.’ Or, ‘Jayson Denali Attacked by Scorned Actress.’ ”

Jayson nodded reluctantly. He'd known better than to become entangled with his highly strung leading lady. He was more irritated with himself than anything. Since he'd ignored the warning signs, he was forced to deal with the consequences. The good news was, now that the production phase was complete, they could both move on to greener pastures—something Jayson was willing to do after only two weeks into the affair.

Jayson said, “Can you have PR work with my publicist? Tell them to neither deny nor confirm there's anything between Rita and I. If they must add to the rumor mill, I want them to say she dumped me and not the other way around. I've got enough negative publicity and paparazzi hounding me as it is without sparking a war of words between her camp and my own.”