Episode 242: Jessica sensed disaster coming

Hey this is Scott – just before we get into today's story with Jessica, I wanted to let you know about a What Was That Like in-person meetup that's happening next week. This will be in Orlando, Florida and it looks like it will be on Wednesday, January 14, 2026. All the details are in the Facebook group at WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook. So if you're in the Orlando area, I hope you come out and hang out for a while! We'll have some drinks and some fun! Again, that's Wednesday January 14, in the evening, but you can get all the details in the listener Facebook group. I'm looking forward to meeting YOU! Okay, on with today's episode.

Have you ever had a feeling of impending doom? Like you just knew something bad was about to happen?

Quite a few years ago, I was in New York City. I went with a friend to a late comedy show, and when it was over we got on the subway to get back to the hotel. This was pretty late, like 2 am or maybe even later. We were on the train, waiting for the doors to close. Personally, I was feeling fine. But my friend, Teri, was more aware of our surroundings. There were a few other people on the train and she did not feel comfortable at all. She said that we needed to get off the train before the doors closed. So we did.

I didn't get it at the time. But Teri just had this bad feeling that something was about to happen and it was not going to turn out well for us. But whatever it was, we took a taxi instead and got back safely.

My guest today is Jessica. She is an avid rock climber out in the Pacific Northwest. She was involved in setting up a climbing event for hundreds of people, and she just kept having this feeling that something was very wrong. And she was right.

Scott
This story is centered around an event called the Smith Rock Craggin' Classic. That's a 3-day rock climbing festival in central Oregon put on by the American Alpine Club, which is a national nonprofit, and you were the event coordinator. What exactly were you responsible for?

Jessica
Basically getting the whole event off the ground from scratch - securing the land and getting the contract for that, getting all of the permits and licensing to do the event, and having alcohol. It was getting all of the volunteers, getting all the vendors to buy booths there, getting food. I mean, everything that you could think of coordinating - where everything was going to be placed, making the parking lots. It was just everything from top to bottom that you would think. Entertainment prizes. Secure prizes for the giveaways and raffles. Yeah, it was a very big project.

Scott

How many people did you expect to have or participants?

Jessica
We had always oversold. We always ended up having about 300 guests. This year, we knew that we were going to have more, so we still oversold. It ended up being, I think, 327-some participants who bought tickets. Then, we had 50 volunteers and then another 50-plus vendors and athletes and guides. So, over 400 people.

Scott
Yeah, there were more than 400 people on site in some category or another. When you did this, at the same time, you had a full-time job with the state and you also managed a rock climbing gym, and you were the assistant director of another national nonprofit climbing organization, the Ladies Climbing Coalition. It sounds like too much for one person.

Jessica
I have a workaholic attitude during that time. I think that's where a lot of my value and pride came from - just doing a lot of work. And I love the climbing community, so being involved in every aspect was great. My day job gave me the funds to be able to be involved in all of those organizations.

Scott
To me, if I had to coordinate all those different things, it would be stressful. Was coordinating this a paid position?

Jessica
It was. It was a contract position. I had done event coordinating in a previous lifetime before the ‘20 or 2008 crash. So, I had a lot of skills and I really loved that job and I was able to get into this as a contractor and it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it even with all the stress.

Scott
And were you able to have some people help you - like assistance?

Jessica
Yes. Thank goodness. Yeah, the first two years– I had different assistants each year, and this most recent event, it was a gal from the Ladies Climbing Coalition who I'd worked with for years, and she had been at the previous events and kind of knew the whole schedule. So she came in as my assistant and I was so thankful to have her there.

Scott
It helps when it's somebody you already know, I'm sure.

Jessica

Yeah. That you worked really well with. Yeah, she was great.

Scott
Okay. Now, if we take a short step back, earlier that year, you had a pretty serious climbing accident and you were still recovering from that.

Jessica
Yes. Yeah. On April 1st, the Ladies Climbing Coalition was on a trip in Arizona and it was a super freak accident where a big boulder fell off from above me and hit me while I was on the wall. Had to be rescued off the wall and helped out. I didn't break anything, but it did cause a lot of damage. So yeah, I was just fresh off of that six months out and I was gearing up for all of the planning while this injury was fresh. So it was definitely a lot to handle,

Scott
Man. What was the feeling that you had the day before that accident?

Jessica
It was so strange. Suddenly, a handful of people who were supposed to come on the trip just started to cancel left and right for all different reasons just very quickly, right before even the day of when we all first got there. And I made a comment of, “Gosh, makes me feel like something bad is going to happen.” And all these people who canceled last minute are going to say, “Oh my gosh, thank goodness I wasn't there because X, Y, Z happened.” And they said, “Don't put that in the universe, Jessica. What are you doing?” I'm like, “I don't know. I feel it in my gut. Something bad is going to happen.” And the very next day, I got squished by a giant rock.

Scott
Yeah, man. Are you typically a superstitious person? That might not be the right word, but is that typical of you?

Jessica
No, not superstitious, but I definitely have very strong intuition. I get those gut feelings and I ignore them most of the time because I just think, “Ugh, I'm sure it's fine. I'm just overreacting.” But they have turned out to be the universe screaming at me to pay attention and I am now.

Scott
So back to your planning for this event, you had a few unknowns, like loose ends. What was going on?

Jessica
There were a couple of big things. One, the park where– we were having all of our clinics inside Smith Rock State Park, and you can go down and access a very small portion of the park on one side of the

river and then there's a bridge to get to the majority of the climbing. They were redoing the bridge that summer and then they came across major delays. It was not even a hundred percent sure if the bridge would be up by the time we had our event. So, I had to plan two different events - one for inside the park and one for shuttling people outside of the park to other climbing areas.

The other one was that the land that we had secured, the land owners were doing renovations that was definitely minimizing the space that we had available, but they said, “Look, it's going to be great. You're still going to have tons of space. No issues.” And then more and more delays kept happening with that to where we didn't know if we would have the land available. So I had that same feeling of, “Man, everything seems to be going wrong. These are bigger roadblocks than normal.”

Scott
Right. Because you had planned this event two years previous also, right? What were all these things that were going wrong this time?

Jessica
I wasn't able to get one of my permits approved. It was every loophole in the world– it was like it was stacked against me to get this permit approved. The bridge was maybe not going to be up, and then we had no idea how to get folks to other places 20 minutes away to do these clinics that they'd paid for. The land– well that's where 50 of my vendors were going to be. Parking was there, camping was all there. There were vendors that were pulling out at the last minute. There were sponsors pulling out at the last minute. There were pro athletes that were either getting hurt or getting better offers and canceling last minute, and the pros are usually who do the clinics. So I just was left with, “I don't even know if I'm going to have space to do this, if we're going to be able to go in to do this, if we're going to have any athletes to do. Everything was falling apart at the seams.” I made a comment probably a hundred times over the summer of, “I just feel like something's wrong, but I just feel like we should not have this event.” To me, it feels like one of those movies where it’s the end of days and all the rats are running from the city because they know something's coming. And I go, “That's my event. Everybody's running from it and I don't know why. Like, everything was going wrong. I could not get anything to just piece together easily.”

Scott
Yeah. You said a bunch of the pro athletes were canceling. That's part of the big draw for people buying tickets, right? Because they want to see their idols, right?

Jessica
Right. And learn from the pros. And the ticket prices were $80, so it was cheap and easy to get there.

Scott
I mean, there were other people kind of higher up than you in this organization in planning. Did you express your fears to them at all?

Jessica
Yes, and coincidentally, the leadership had changed slightly where they brought in a new person. So my boss from previous years was now higher up and they brought in another person to take over her job, and that person was also in the Ladies Climbing Coalition, my friend who was also there during my accident, so very close with her and trusted her and I was so excited to just have her onboard with us. I kept telling her, “Something's just not right. I don't think I can get this off the ground. There's too much going wrong.” I also was very clear with her that, because of the accident earlier, I was really struggling to be able to hold all this stress together and she was so wonderful and supportive and just, “Well, however I can help.” My assistant was so helpful and wonderful, and so I thought, “Well, I just got to keep going.”

Scott
Really, in any year, all of these things going wrong would be stressful, but you were already in a sort of a compromised state of mind after your injury. You kept saying that you should cancel the event and you even drew lines on the map for some kind of escape routes. What were you thinking with that?

Jessica
Yeah, I just had this deep gut feeling that something was going to go wrong, something bad was going to happen, and at that time it was, like, peak forest fire. We had record forest fires. They were everywhere. It was so dry. We had burn bands for the event, and I thought, “You know what? That's what it's going to be. It's going to be a forest fire or maybe an earthquake or something and I need to make sure that I have all of these parking lines exactly how they are, so there are clear exits where people can flee. There's going to be areas on the sides. There's going to be gates open. I need to make sure a lot of people can get out of here really fast if they need to.” Oddly enough, my boss had said that she created a disaster plan for the first time that year as well. So there was something in the air,

Scott
But your boss still wasn't quite on board with “Yeah. Maybe we should just call it all off” like you were.

Jessica
No, it was full steam ahead and you're going to get through it. We're going to figure it out, and I figured out, “It was you, Jessica, who is going to figure it out. It'll be great.”

Scott
The week of the event, where were you at as far as usable land and that kind of thing?

Jessica
It was bad. We had gone out on a few trips prior just to check the land and the progress and it was, like, okay. They made promises that this was all going to be done, this is clear, blah, blah, blah. So we went in the day before - this would've been the 17th - and walked the land and it was an absolute disaster. Absolute disaster. The whole center of the field was raised up probably 3 feet, or they had

just put in some sort of water tanks and they were like, “Nothing heavy on this because it'll blow. You can't use any of this space.” And so a space that normally fit 10 and 50 vendors, I now had to eliminate 90% of that usable ground.

So we were just walking around trying to figure out at the last minute how to get everybody in there because people were showing up the next morning. So I called my boss just bawling, and I said, “I don't know what to do. There's no space for anything. I don't know where to put all these people. He lied about the land. It's not done. I can't take it anymore. I am at my limit. I am literally at my limit and I don't think I can handle one more thing going wrong. I will break.” She was so great and she said, “You got this. I'm going to be there in the morning. I'm going to help you. We'll get everybody together. We're going to get it figured out.”

Scott
So your boss is trying to be reassuring to you. And then we go to Thursday and all the volunteers start arriving.

Jessica
Yes. This year was kind of different because we actually had an Airbnb that was right next to the land we were using, and that was because, normally, we would camp, but because I had the injury, they were so kind as to get the house. We had a bed and we kind of had a home base. So all of the volunteers were in the backyard. We had all of the items I'd secured for the raffles out. We're pricing them. We're getting everything put together. We're getting the plan out of where everything goes, who's in charge of this, who's in charge of that. Everything's just full steam ahead, trying to get everything where I can, and then I was going to have my boss come in and help me figure out what are we doing with all the tables. I'm trying to have a good day. It's sunny. It's beautiful out. The vibe is great. I was out in the field. There were some vendors starting to get things pulled in. Everything was supposed to be sent out on Wednesday and they did not. It was coming a day late on Thursday.

Scott
What were they delivering that they were late on?

Jessica
All of the tables and chairs that's for all the vendors,

Scott
Kind of critical.

Jessica
Yeah. Yes, big piece. Big piece missing.

Scott

So that puts you a whole day behind just in that aspect.

Jessica
Right. Normally we like to have tents and tables and everything set up. I have everything labeled so that way people can just walk up and go there, but people were coming and I had nothing. So just one more thing on the pile of not going my way.

Scott
Just hearing you talk about this. I feel stressed myself. Then your boss arrives.

Jessica
Yes. She calls me and she says, “Hey, I'm here.” And I'm like, “Yes! Oh my gosh! Finally! She's a great friend. I can't wait to see her. She's going to help me. She's going to calm me down, give me a hug. Everything's going to be great.” So we head back to the house and there's a few volunteers inside the house and she says, “Hey, I need to have a quick meeting with you.” I said, “Okay.” She goes alone, “We need everybody out.” I was like, “Oh, okay. So I sent the volunteers out. She closes the door and locks it, pulls the shades.” I'm thinking, “What in the heck is going on here?”

Scott
You had to be completely confused. Did you think you were about to get fired or something?

Jessica
No, not at all. I just thought, “Are we having a shot? Are we getting a drink first?” I don't know what's happening. Oh, I can remember it so clearly. She is kind of standing in the walkway and she says to me and my assistant, “I want you guys to sit down.” And I'm like, “Oh God. This is bad.” And she said, “I got some information last night and it's bad.” And I said, “Okay.” She said, “When you called me last night, I had just received the information and I was at my best friend's house, drinking a bunch of wine and crying.” I’m like, “What happened? Did somebody pass away? What's going on?” She said, “There is a notification from the FBI that they received information that a man had written some sort of manifesto and he said that he wanted to target people to kill in a mass shooting, and he named our event. I was just in shock. She said that they had been watching him for about a week - a few days to a week. This is what I was told. He was under 24 hour surveillance, they lost him, and all they know is that he is on the road and on his way here. They don't know where he is at. I just remember looking at my assistant next to me and my eyes are starting to well up and she is stoic - I was so impressed. I'm starting to melt. She is very stoic.

My boss is also very stoic because she did have some time to digest and she said, “This is a real threat.” And I said, “Okay, so we're canceling.” And she said, “No.” I said, “I'm not sure what you mean. We're canceling, right?” She said, “No, they're very confident that they're going to get him before our event.” And I said, “Well. If they lost him on a 24-hour surveillance, I have a lack of confidence in their skills.” And she said, “Well, they have license plate readers out there and they're going on all the routes from Portland to here.

Scott
License plate readers…

Jessica
Yes. And I said, “You don't think this guy knows how to ditch a license plate?” And she said, “Well, they know what he looks like.” I said, “You don't think this guy knows how to change what he looks like? I mean, he's planning something this big. I think he's probably taken some precautions to not get caught. So we're just going? We don't know where he's at. He could already be here.” And she said, “Well, did you see down the street?” I said, “No, I've been here working.” And she said, “The whole street is blocked off. There's a whole tactical team at the end of the road.” Because with Smith Rock State Park, there's one main road you can get in on and there's a couple of different avenues from the sides coming into there. So they had the main access point blocked with a tactical team apparently. And she said, “There are police everywhere.” And I'm like, “What?” So I jokingly said, “I mean, we get to go home, right? Someone else is going to run this.” And she said, “Yeah, you can go home, you don't have to stay.” And then I'm just like, “What do I do? Do I just bail and abandon everybody and run or what?”

And she did say that they did have a cancellation letter written up and ready to send out, but that they wanted to wait to see if anything was resolved.” And I was like, “Wait for what? Wait how long? Wait for him to come and start shooting? What is it that we're waiting for? You want to wait 3 hours? That's how long it takes for him to get from Portland to here. He's already gone. He's already been on the road.” So I said, “So we're just supposed to go back out into the field and keep setting up business as usual?” She said, “Yeah.” And I had a hardcore meltdown. She said, “Take some time. Go call somebody if you need to call somebody. But we cannot tell anyone. You cannot tell anyone what's going on.” And that just was a lot.

Scott
Man. You could call someone, but you couldn't tell that person that you called anything about it either, right? Or what was the guideline on that?

Jessica
I could call somebody as, like, a support to just have a quick meltdown freak out that wasn't involved and then go back to work, but anybody on site connected with this event? Absolutely nothing, I could say.

Scott
The people on site whose lives were actually at risk.

Jessica
Yeah. Who were targeted. I just couldn't believe it. I said, “Well, why don't we just cancel now?” And they said that the police had told them that, “Well, we'd rather have him come to you so we can catch

him because we know where he is going. If you cancel and somehow he gets wind of that, he might decide to go somewhere else that we don't know where he's going and then could kill people.” I'm like, “So we're bait? So we're bait.”

Scott
Who did you call?

Jessica
Oh, everybody. Nobody answered.

Scott
Oh, so you weren't even able to vent to anyone?

Jessica
I couldn't talk to anybody. I went out into a field. I think I called my dad. He didn't answer. I did not want to call my daughter because she would've lost her mind because the threat was still active. I tried to call my best friend. She didn't answer. At that time, I did not have a relationship with my sister, but I was like, “I don't know.” So I called her. And it's, like, emergency calling. Call, call, call, no answer. And then my assistant was like, “Jess, why don't you call your therapist?” I'm like, “Oh my gosh, great idea.” So I called her, “No answer.” So, yeah, I just had to tuck it way down.

Scott
So you just went back and you're working side by side with these people thinking, “Wow, I know something that they really should know, but I can't say.

Jessica
Yes. Yes. That was so hard. I just remember the first encounter– well, besides all the volunteers who were watching us come out of the house in just freaked out faces, I remember walking into the field and one of our regular vendors - it's a church group that provides free breakfast for everybody there. He's so amazing. He's such a helpful person. They're such a great group, just great humans. They were the first ones to walk up and they had questions and somebody was like, “Hey Jess, they have some questions. Can you come over here?” So I just remember walking up. They had parked their rigs. My back was to the road and I was facing them, looking at them, just not knowing if I'm going to get shot in the back, if I'm going to watch them get shot. I am doing my best to hold it together and just have a conversation. They knew I was so stressed out because everything had already been going wrong, so they maybe just thought it was that. I can barely spit out sentences without bawling and just thinking, “My gosh, we could be dead in 30 seconds, I don't know, in 1 minute, 5 minutes, an hour” and then trying to focus on plans of, “Oh, okay, logistics. Okay, you move here.” It was so hard.

Scott
Just thinking about this, it seems like a really bad decision from a liability standpoint if something did happen and people were injured. I know it would be obviously a huge inconvenience to cancel the

event, but these people are weighing that risk versus risking the lives of everyone there. That just doesn't make sense.

Jessica
It didn't make sense to me either. I just had a hard time believing that the police said, “There's an active mass shooting threat on his way here. Carry on as usual.” Maybe they did. I can't wrap my head around that. It took everything to get this one freaking event off the ground. And I raised between $25,000 and $35,000 every year for this event. So, to have spent all the money it takes to put it up and then to not get any of that money in return… that's just how it felt to me because I can't imagine just going ahead and sending all those people out into a field knowing somebody's coming to murder them. I don't know how they made that decision. I still have a lot of anger with that decision, and I've tried really hard to also give them grace because I know this is the first time they have ever had to make a decision like that. They have never encountered anything like this before. So we were all going through it for the first time. At the same time, maybe hindsight, they'll make a different decision but, for that one, it was, “Get on out there and keep going.”

Scott
Later that afternoon, your boss called another meeting.

Jessica
About three hours later, I think, she called another meeting. In the meantime, there are police coming in, having meetings with them. It's a weird vibe. Sorry, let me back up. One thing that they had said that the police told her is that even if they catch him, they're still going to keep a police presence overnight just to ensure that we're safe out there because it's the middle of nowhere. So she has another meeting, pulls us in, she said, “They got him.” And I'm like, “Whoa, what? They got him? Oh my gosh, great. Where was he?” She just kind of shook her head and I said, “Where was he?” And she just kept shaking her head.

And I said, “How close was he?”

And she said, “He was really close.”

And I just could not believe it. She said, “I have some bad news.”

I said, “What?”

And she said, they're pulling all of the teams out. Nobody's going to be here tonight. And I said, “Oh my gosh, are you serious? What if he had a friend? What if he came previously and there's something out here that can harm us? What if he posted it on the dark web and some weirdo's like, “Hey, sounds like a good plan. Let me get in on that.” I don't know.

Scott
So they were going to have police protection overnight anyway. But now you're saying there's not going to be any?

Jessica
None.

Scott
Did they say why?

Jessica
They felt confident that he was by himself. I was like, “You were confident you could watch him for 24 hours a day too, but you didn't.” So I had all these thoughts of, “Well, what if this guy was in it? What if he hacked our emails? There's addresses there. There's my assistant from the previous year. We had his address on everything. That's where all of the companies were shipping stuff to - his garage. He was letting us use it because he was living local.” All I could think was, “What if there's another plan on his home?” Who knows? I've never experienced anything like this. All I know is to expect the worst.

Scott
Yeah. You don't know all the scenarios, but law enforcement's supposed to be trained to kind of figure out what are the potential scenarios and defend against that.

Jessica
Yeah.

Scott
When they arrested him, what did they find?

Jessica
They found an AR 15. They found two, I think, Beretta handguns. They found armor-piercing bullets. They found body armor and other tactical gear. Some of his weapons were modified

Scott
And the AR 15 is semi-automatic anyway. Every time you pull the trigger, another round goes off.

Jessica
Yeah. Makes it easy.

Scott
That is potential for a whole lot of damage.

Jessica
Yeah. I found out later that night that he was waiting on a trail head 30 minutes outside of the park. So, just waiting for everybody to arrive.

Scott
Oh, just unbelievable. But you had to have some relief though that they got him.

Jessica
I did. I had some trust issues, I mean, between them losing him on surveillance, between the trust of this company that should be protecting us, not willing to protect us. I just wasn't sure that the threat was really over. So, all night long we went out and tried to celebrate - “Have a drink and just kind of take a breath.” But at that point, my nervous system was absolutely done.

Scott
It was already shot. You said, “Everything's going wrong. I can't handle one more thing.” And this was one more really big thing

Jessica
That was way over the limit of what I could handle. So I ended up being so violently ill all night long. I didn't sleep a single minute. I had so much anxiety. I felt like I had electrical shock, like, current just running through my body all night. I was up pacing. I was getting sick. It was just a physical reaction to everything, I think.

Scott
Next morning, were there any police around?

Jessica
Funny how the night before, they assured us that, “Everything was fine. There's nothing wrong. We got him. We're not staying.” And the next morning, there was the most intense police presence, even more than the day before. There were helicopters, there were drones, there were unmarked and marked cars. The road into Smith Rock is just this one road, and then it has a cul-de-sac at the end, and then you come back. So, as one trooper would pass and come around, as soon as he'd come around, the next one would go by. There was not a police car driving in front of our event.

Scott
Do you know why did they come back?

Jessica
Stories are that they, “Oh, we're just scouting out the area to see where he was looking to attack. We're just getting ahead on the investigation and just looking for size wise and blah, blah, blah.” And

I'm like, “You do not need a force like this. You need a drone.” And that's about it. So I think that they found something more. I was told that there was some sort of letter or something inside of his car that had more details of what he was going to do. I know that they had gotten a warrant for his car super early in the morning. They didn't get it when they arrested him. They couldn't get in his car and get all the weapons until later. So I'm guessing maybe when they saw everything that was in there, they were like, maybe this is bigger. I'm not sure. They were very tight-lipped after that.

Scott
Well, with the big police presence, were any of the other volunteers asking about what was going on? Were you able to talk about it openly at this point?

Jessica
I was not allowed to tell anyone, and I said, “This is getting really hard to try to brush away.”

Scott
Right. People must have been wondering, “Why are all these cops here? Something's going on.”

Jessica
Yeah. And so I was told to tell them that– because I think there was a large, like, a half marathon going on that day too in the park and there was, like, another large group in the park as well. It was a really busy weekend. So I was told to just make up a story of, “Because it's such a busy weekend, they're just out here for protection, for extra precaution. This is such a busy place. Everybody knows that's never happened out there ever.” So yeah, we just had to keep lying.

Once I saw the police presence and started getting going, I literally had not slept at all the night before. Now that the threat was gone, I looked at my boss and I said, “I'm not staying. I have to leave. I can't function here. I won't be any good to you. I am broken.” And she said, “Okay.” And I said, “And I am never coming back here to do this event ever again.” And she said, “Okay.” And then I began trying to figure out how I was getting out. I had rented a van to take all of these materials from my house to the event three hours away. I didn't have a car. They still needed the van because they were doing the event. My neighbor was watching my dog and I think I asked something about “Have you taken Yara out?” or some question about my dog. And she could tell something was wrong and she said, “What's wrong?”

I couldn't tell anybody, so I just said, “Something happened here and I just need to come home.”

And she's like, “What happened?”

I said, “Just something happened.”

She said, “Was it bad? Are you okay?”

And I said, “It was bad. I just need to come home.”

And she said, “How are you going to get home?”

And I said, “I am going to maybe try to rent a car. I was sick all night. I couldn't sleep.”

She's like, “You're not driving if you didn't sleep all night. I'm coming to get you. I'm taking the day off of work. I'm coming to get you.” That blew my mind.

Scott
So you weren't going to ask her. I mean, she's driving three hours each direction. That's a big ask.

Jessica
I was not going to ask her. I was like, “I'll rent a car, I'll pull over and sleep as much as I need to, but I just need to get out here.” And she's like, “Nope. You wait there. I'm coming.”

Scott
And it sounds like your boss was pretty understanding about that decision.

Jessica
Yes, she was. And I had conversations with her too of I can't believe– because then, after all of it was over, she said, “Yeah, when you called me, I was having my meltdown because I got the information the day before you did - or two days before - and I was told I couldn't tell you. And then, when you called and said, ‘I cannot take one more thing or I will break’, it was the worst because I knew the next day I was going to have to come and ruin your life.”

I'm like, “Oh my goodness.” I just was so angry that why would they send her. She was coming from Colorado. They knew there was an active threat and the company still sent her into this space. It's just bad decisions all the way around. So, I was like, “Please come with me. Leave. This is not worth it. Come with me. Come hang out for the weekend.” And she's like, “Well, if you're leaving, I got to run this.” So her and my assistant took over and they both understood and were very caring and said I was very brave for leaving and choosing myself, but I could also tell they were not happy about having to do this on their own. I was leaving them. I felt like I was abandoning them.

Scott
That decision made absolute perfect sense, but that doesn't completely get rid of the guilt that you feel in doing that.

Jessica

Yeah. I wanted to stay even when I knew there was a threat because I just thought, okay, if something happens, I just want to be here to be able to help however I can. These are people that I care about a lot and have relationships with and if I have to help lure them here, and if something happens, I want to be able to help on the backside if something happens. Now that the threat was gone, I was like, “Okay, my job is over. I'm going to get out of here.”

Scott
Did the event proceed as planned? I mean, was it considered a successful event?

Jessica
It did proceed as planned. It was not the most successful of my years, I think, just because so many people bailed at the last minute. But yeah, they went on as planned. Again, just holding it close to the vest. We weren't allowed to tell anybody. I was at home and, all of a sudden, I started getting phone calls because, when I left, I just said, “I have a personal emergency. I have to go. I'm not going to be able to come back.” I started getting phone calls saying, “Oh my gosh, Jessica, are you okay? We know why you left.” And I was like, “Oh no, I hope they don't think that I slipped this information out.” So I texted my boss and said, “Hey, I'm getting phone calls. Apparently, it leaked to the news. It's out. Just so you know.” And she said, “Yeah, we heard. We're getting ready to make an announcement.”

So, that Friday night, they made an announcement of what happened and they spun it off like, “Nobody's going to take us down. We're strong climbers. You can't keep our community down. We saw this threat and we prevailed.” Half the people were, “Woo. Yeah.” And then there was a good portion that was really angry that we didn't tell them. These were our friends and I felt bad because some of these friends that we had asked to be there and help and participate then cornered my assistant and just went after her about it. She didn't have anything to do with it. We were doing what we were told. So I had a lot of guilt for leaving her by herself to deal with that and with being able to look those friends in the face and just– I don't know. I've struggled for a couple years of why I chose to do what I'm told as opposed to what was right and neither option was really very good.

Scott
Yeah, I can understand that. But on the other hand, she could have left as well. It was her choice to stay.

Jessica
Yeah.

Scott
Well, like you said, this happened two years ago and actually the court proceedings are still wrapping up. What was he charged with?

Jessica

He had, I think, originally, about 28 felonies. There were four attempted murder charges. There were, I think, about 15 attempted assaults with a deadly weapon. There was a handful of misuse of a firearm and I think that was about it.

Scott
So there were four counts of attempted murder. Do you know where they got that number from?

Jessica
I'm guessing it was from his manifesto where he said part of his plan was to go out to Smith Rock and kill belayer one, belayer two, spectator one, spectator two. So he wanted to kill the belayers while the climbers were on the wall. So then there was that panic where, depending on what type of belay device you use, the climber might die as well or the climber was stuck watching people on the ground die and having that traumatic experience.

Scott
And not have anywhere to go. They're just sitting ducks right there.

Jessica
Right, right. Very sadistic.

Scott
Oh man. This man's name is Samson Garner and he was 41 years old. Do you know anything about him?

Jessica
I don't know anything about him except for what the police and the DA have told me. He was a member of the American Alpine Club, but wasn't active. He was a member, I think, of a search and rescue team that was out there, but also hadn't been active in a while. He was a member of another organization out there and also hadn't been active for a while, but he was in the community.

Scott
That makes it even more weird.

Jessica
So weird. This is definitely a group of people that is known for being supportive and loving and just loving earth and being outside and sharing the sport with each other. So, yeah, the target of that was very strange. I think it was just an easy target where he knew that my event was coming up - it had been going on for years even before I started doing it. So he knew that it was going to be a large group of people and he could just come in and that's what he said. He wanted to come in and kill as many people as possible and then take his own life.

Scott
As we record this, he was just sentenced within the past few weeks to 30 years in prison. It was seven and a half years for each of the four counts of attempted murder. And I read in an article the defense wanted them served concurrently, so he'd only served seven and a half years. But the judge made them consecutive terms, so 30 years total. You read an impact statement. First of all, did you see him, were you in the same room with him?

Jessica
No. That whole court proceeding was just a nightmare. It had been delayed for a year, and then it's six months, and just kept getting delayed and delayed. Unfortunately, my victim advocate was not very on his game for this, so I'd asked questions, I wouldn't get answers. He'd mentioned an impact statement and I kept saying, “Yes, I would like to participate.” And then the day of the hearing I said, “Okay, do you need this impact statement? You haven't said anything.” And he said, “Oh, well, they didn't mention it. I think it's strong enough that we don't need it.” “Okay, because I haven't prepared anything. I wasn't going to go through that emotional work if I didn't need to.”

Then, they were supposed to go back to the hearing at 1.30 and he called me at noon and said, “Hey, do you have that impact statement?” I'm in Portland and this is happening in Bend, Oregon three hours away. I said, “I do not.” And he said, “Do you think you could make one up for me real quick to be read in the courtroom in, like, 45 minutes?” Okay, sure. So, yeah, I wrote it up. I actually Googled”How do you make an impact statement.” It said, “How are you related to this event? Who are you that day, what happened, how you feel, how it impacted you.” So I just kind of built it like that and I emailed it over. He said, “This is great.” And then they had somebody read it in the courtroom on my behalf, and I guess I was the only one who made an impact statement.

Scott
In that impact statement, you did not address him directly, but you mentioned a woman. Can you just read the last two paragraphs of your impact statement for us here?

Jessica
Yes. I said, “I do not wish to address the defendant in this letter. I don't think my words to him would have any impact on him taking accountability, and it won't change the damage done to my life or the lives of those he's threatened. I do, however, need to address Penny Gneiting. I want to say thank you for being so brave and reporting this. Thank you for trusting your gut. You saved my life and the lives of many people I care about. You are the hero in this story.

Scott
Who is Penny?

Jessica
Penny is the defendant's ex-girlfriend, and he had emailed her about his thoughts on doing this. Thank God she took it seriously. She turned it in and they took her seriously. I can't imagine somebody who is

talking about this type of anger and destruction, and then you are going behind their back to turn them in– there were so many variables of what if they didn't believe her and then she just told on him and testified against him in court? What if he wouldn't have been found guilty? I can't imagine what she was going through and how brave she was to do all of that. But yes, the police put the handcuffs on him, but if it wasn't for her–

Scott
Yeah, her decision to take action almost certainly saved a lot of lives.

Jessica
Yeah, I'm just forever grateful.

Scott
The recent sentencing had an effect on you emotionally even two years later. Can you talk about that?

Jessica
Yeah, it was a really strange thing in that, most of the time, between the event happening and the trial, I had no ill feelings towards him whatsoever. It was very strange. If anything, I felt empathy for him just with mental health issues and being in such a dark place that you're so hurt, that you just want to put that type of hurt out there. Then, I got more information during the trial and how it was being minimized and blown off and all the horrific details of everything else inside his letter. When he was sentenced, I felt validated because so many people didn't really understand. They would say, “But he didn't kill anybody, but he didn't shoot. So what's the big deal?” And then found guilty of all those charges was very, “Okay, this was a big deal.” And then getting the full sentencing was more validation of, “Yeah, this was huge.” Then I felt so much relief for myself, for everybody else involved, and I felt sad for him and his family, his children. Instead of getting help, he chose this route and changed his whole life and this isn't anything you can really bounce back from. So, yeah, it definitely was a lot to process.

Scott
Have you had therapy to help with this?

Jessica
Oh my goodness, yes, I have. I was already going through therapy from my accident. I was doing EMDR therapy and I did get a hold of her - my therapist - the next day, and I said, “We need to shift gears. I need to talk about this.” We did EMDR for this as well. I did it for two years every week to just work through the trauma, the fear, the guilt. The guilt was so overwhelming. That ate me alive. I mean, I was in therapy all the way through the week before the trial, I think, and at that point, I was so obsessed with knowing every single detail. I think I just thought that would help me make sense of it. So I wanted to be on the WebEx to watch it. I wanted to be there in person. I wanted transcripts. I wanted to read every newspaper article. I wanted it to be my life and she pointed out how unhealthy that was.

Scott
Yeah, it sounds like it was an obsession, sort of.

Jessica
Yeah, it was. I don't know where it came from but, as we got closer to the trial, it was like, okay, there's no WebEx and I'm like, “Okay, so I can't watch it. I don't have vacation. I can't go there.” And I felt okay with that. I was like, “Okay, that's good.” Then, I wasn't really getting great updates and so that was actually really nice to not– I mean, I was still getting emails every single day of, like, little snippets of what happened that day. Then, when he's like “Oh yeah, we don't need an impact statement” I thought, “Okay, you know what? I think I can be okay with that because I don't know how much what I have to say is going to impact anything anyways.” So I told my therapist that I just feel really good about having little interaction with this whole thing. It has been nice to just have that break and I feel really solid not having anything to do with it. I don't even know if I'll write an impact statement. She said, “Wow, that is such a huge change. I'm so happy to hear that.” And sort of, with that, I graduated - better than saying cured but–

Scott
That had to be so gratifying for her to see from where you were two years earlier to be able to emotionally and mentally just let go of it.

Jessica
Yeah. And she's always really good. I thank her all the time and she's like, “You did the work.” I'm like, “I did do it. Yeah.”

Scott
You did.

Jessica
Yeah.

Scott
You left the climbing organizations that you were part of. What was the thought process in that?

Jessica
Fear.

Scott
Fear of another potential shooting?

Jessica
Yeah. Logically, that doesn't make sense.What are the odds that was going to happen to me anyways? I left the American Alpine Club and I was running the Ladies Climbing Coalition. With that, I was doing monthly meetups for women and non-binary climbers, and we'd have climbing trips, and we were also trying to set up a festival on the same land that this event was on for the spring and I just told the director that I can't, I don't have any energy. I have to spend every ounce of energy trying to get myself back together after this year and I don't want to be climbing in groups outside like that. I can't. This all happened in October and then I quit that day and then, I think it was the very end of January, I “retired” from the Ladies Climbing Coalition.

Scott
Do you still climb?

Jessica
I do. I do. I didn't really climb that year because of my injuries from my accident. I did go out in 2024 to Smith Rock after a few canceled last-minute trips where I was freaking out, but my climbing partner is so supportive and I cry a lot when I'm out there.

Scott
That seems like a huge step to go back to that location and do a climb there. You got to be proud of yourself to do that.

Jessica
I am. There's times where I'm literally just ugly, snot, nose crying, bawling the whole way up the climb and crying the whole way down, and he is just, “We can leave whenever you want to leave. I don't care if we climb at all. Just getting you here is great.” So it's just so nice to have that supportive person. Also, I let this experience rob me of so much of my life for the last two years that trying to take it back– I went to my first outdoor concert this summer.

Scott
Large group of people outdoors.

Jessica
Yes, I had to have some medication to do it. I still haven't been into a movie theater. I still haven't been into a concert venue. I still don't go to large group events. Maybe someday.

Scott
Little bit at a time. You're making progress.

Jessica
Yes.

Scott
How has this experience changed how you look at the world, if it has?

Jessica
Oh, I wish I could be more just all rainbows and butterflies about it, but it has shown me some really dark sides of a lot of people, and it has shown me the weight of true friendship because I don't have a lot of those friends around anymore. Nobody's angry at me, even though I feel like they are, in my head. But I think it was such a big, terrifying event that maybe we all remind each other of it.

Scott
Okay. You associate those friendships with that big, terrible thing.

Jessica
Yeah. That's where I feel like it probably comes from. I have learned that no matter how much I don't want to be, I am resilient and strong and I can get through anything, I guess. I'm good for now. No more please.

Scott
Yeah, when you go through something like this and you come back from it, it's like, “Wow, I did that. What else am I capable of?”

Jessica
Yeah. And it was definitely support from other people. I didn't really talk about this that much, but maybe a handful of people knew all the details. That's why I really wanted to share my story - because in the papers and the way the statements came out, this bad guy tried to do a bad thing and the police saved the day. Yay. That's not how it rolled out. There was a lot of trauma and fear and, in my opinion, betrayal involved in this whole thing.

Scott
All right. Well, Jessica, you did great and thank you. Thanks for sharing your story.

Jessica
Thanks for letting me tell my story. I appreciate it.

Scott
I can tell you this – Jessica has put in the work to be able to get through that trauma and move on with her life. Therapy has helped her and so many people.

And here's a little bit of podcast trivia. Back in episode 194, titled "Chris survived a home invasion" – there was a Listener Story that was pretty interesting. It was from a woman who kept finding some kind of substance on her office chair at work. Yeah, it was interesting but it was also pretty disgusting when the storyteller told how it turned out and what it was. Well – the woman who told that story was Jessica, the guest on today's episode.

And we have a voice mail. This voice mail came in this past November, the week of Thanksgiving here in the US. She was listening to the Tuesday Question episode titled "What song always brings back a particular memory?" and toward the end of that episode, Meredith and I were talking about the song called Chasing Cars. If you heard that episode, you know that song had an impact on me, and it did for this listener also -

Krista
Hey, Scott. My name is Krista. Today, Tuesday, November 25th, and your storytelling with narratives launched this morning, and I am sitting here at my grooming shop listening to it, and you guys are talking about the song Chasing Cars. I was like, "I don't know that song" and, just as Meredith said, I went to really listen to it, and I definitely know that song. I turned it on and I just paused and I just felt shivered all over my body. We are in the season of life right now while we're raising kids, working full time, and that was just a reminder to slow down, lay down with your partner, and remember what we're here for. We're not here for a long time. We're here for a good time, just to slow down, make memories. So thank you for that song which I heard today, and thank you for your podcast. I really enjoy listening to it as I sit here and groom dogs. I'm a dog groomer, and I groom lots of dogs all day. I'm actually currently in the middle of grooming a big, fluffy white sheep dog, though he probably has my tears on his hair. But anyways, have a happy Thanksgiving from Oklahoma, and love to hear your podcast. Thank you.

Scott
And if you have a comment or question about a past episode, you can always call the podcast voice mail line. You can call any time night or day, and you'll always get voice mail. The number is 727-386-9468.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And here we are again, time for the Listener Story. And I want to say this – if you have ever thought "I'd love to send in a Listener Story, but I don't have any interesting stories" – well, just send me an email at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com and we'll work on this. Everyone has stories like this – they just aren't always at the top of your mind. But we can figure it out.

This listener tells about an unexpected conversation at the grocery store.

Stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

(listener story)

I was at the grocery store one day, and I was at the checkout, and a young girl was serving me. She might've been no more than 16. As I was loading my groceries onto the conveyor belt, she's doing her thing, I'm doing mine, an older lady approached her, who was her supervisor. It said on her badge that she was a supervisor. She said, “Oh, can I have a word with you to the young girl?” And bearing in mind, I'm still loading up my groceries and I've just sort of carried on what I'm doing and let them have their conversation.

The crux of the conversation was basically the young girl had decided to hand in her resignation after what appeared to be a long list of requests that had just been denied. She said, “Look, I want to go back to do more study. I'm not getting enough time off.” The supervisor, who was an older lady– you could see there was a clear sort of imbalance of power because you've got this young 15, 16-year-old and then this older lady and the conversation was very much one-sided for, I would say, 90% of it, where the supervisor was sort of talking at the young girl and saying, “You should have given me more notice. This isn't good enough. We need a bit longer next time.” Although she wasn't specifically yelling at the young girl, I could feel the intimidation for her and it sort of went on like this for a couple of minutes and then the youngster eventually decided that she had obviously had enough and said, “Look, I need to resign because it's interfering too much with my studies and I'm not getting time off or I'm not getting the shifts that I've requested, and I feel like I've given you plenty of notice.” She explained herself quite well without over explaining.

Then, the conversation came to an end and it sort of ended with her supervisor saying, “Okay, thank you for letting me know. I've accepted that now and we'll go through the formal process and then we can put through your resignation.” And as the supervisor walked off, the young girl sort of just looked at me. I'd been there the whole time and I heard this entire conversation and she just looked at me and she let up this huge sigh. Her eyes were welling up with tears. She said, “Oh, I've been so nervous about that conversation.” I just looked at her and I said, “You did amazing. I mean, I know that was hard, but look how you stepped up. Something that you have to remember is conversations like that are always tougher in your mind when you're building up to them. But if you conduct yourself the way that you just did, then you'll do great in life. I mean, life is all about hard conversations and we get very nervous about it, particularly when it's with someone who's a lot older and in a very different position of power, if you will, from where you are, but you did really well.” And she just beamed after that. She just looked at me and she sort of just beamed and she was very emotional. I could see that she had that emotion behind it, and you could see the tears in her eyes.

I visibly saw her uplift after I said that to her. Then, we kind of went back to pleasantries. I packed up my groceries and I left and I kind of didn't really think much of it, and I got home and I just sort of mentioned to my partner, “Oh, this happened in the supermarket today. We have a young girl who's up and coming to 13 and she's probably going to start looking at jobs in the next couple of years.” My partner said to me, “You probably don't realize it, but she'll remember what you said to her for the rest

of her life because, in the life of a young person, that's quite a defining moment.” So, yeah, I like to think that she might take something of what I've said away with her and remember it.

To her credit, she did step up. I mean, it was a very clearly intimidating conversation. When you're older, you look back on those things and you probably don't realize how intimidating it is for someone that young because, as you go through life, you sort of build up that experience. But with her being so young, I don't think she had really gotten to that point yet. So hopefully, she took something away and she did really well and I was quite proud of her.