

HOOKER AVENUE by Jode Millman

EXCERPT

Chapter One

There was no doubt about it. Jessie Martin felt a storm brewing.

Without warning, the blue sky darkened to an ominous purplish gray. A blade of lightning sliced open the sky, releasing a sudden downpour, and illuminating the Hudson Valley landscape as though it were a grainy black-and-white photograph. Seconds later, a crack of thunder shook her car.

Staring ahead through the blurry windshield, Jessie gripped the leather steering wheel as her heart mimicked the rhythm of the windshield wipers battling the deluge. It felt as though the world was ending, and all she wanted to do was get home to her boyfriend, Hal Samuels, and her baby, Lily.

The shrill ringing of her cellphone made her swerve toward the oncoming traffic on the slick roadway. Jessie righted her Jeep, and reflexively tapped the button on her steering wheel, activating the Bluetooth connection to her cellphone. The act was second nature and offered a brief respite from the hazards demanding her attention.

“Hal?” she asked, believing he was checking in. “I’m on my way home from Adams Market and I’m caught up in a pop-up storm. I should be home in a few minutes, unless there are road closures because of accidents.” There was a long silence and unease curled in her midsection. “Hello, Hal? Are you there?”

“Jessica, that’s extremely interesting, but why aren’t you taking my calls?” The low, raspy voice of her former mentor, Terrence Butterfield, resonated throughout the interior of the car. “How rude, my dear. After all we’ve meant to each other. And the secrets we’ve shared.” He paused.

His menacing tone turned her skin to gooseflesh, and before he could speak again, she smashed the phone button with her fist, disconnecting the call.

“What the—” she screamed, stopping before an expletive slipped out. Like an idiot, she’d let her guard down. She should have known that even after she’d helped put him away for murder, Terrence wouldn’t let her go.

Terrence had always been possessive of her, even when she’d been his student at Poughkeepsie High School over a decade ago. But something deeper, more disturbing, lurked beneath the surface. Last summer, he’d lured her teenage friend, Ryan Paige, into his home with drugs and booze. Ryan, who had been like a younger brother to her, was never seen alive again. And after the cops discovered his dismembered body in Terrence’s basement, Terrence was charged with his murder.

It still alarmed her that Terrence, her father’s best friend and one of the most popular faculty members at the school where her father was principal, was a psychotic, cold-blooded butcher. And as unreasonable as it may be, she felt responsible for Ryan’s death because she’d been blind to Terrence’s true nature, the monster hiding behind the charming mask.

Minutes ago on the phone, his voice had sounded so crisp and clear that he’d seemed to be sitting next to her in the passenger’s seat, his icy breath whispering in her ear. With Terrence’s vampiric presence lingering inside her car, Jessie’s eyes cut to the rearview mirror. Only the pitch-blackness of the stormy night reflected at her. Then, out of habit, her eyes whipped to the car seat buckled in the back seat. It was empty. Thankfully, nine-month-old Lily had stayed at home with Jessie’s mother while she’d made the quick trip to the grocery store.

The storm, the traffic, and the groceries rattling around in the hatchback had monopolized Jessie’s thoughts, as they should have; she’d been too focused on them to expect that Terrence would call her. Again. It had been two days since Terrence’s last call, and the problem was he never contacted her from the same number. He was a sneaky bastard. Sometimes he’d call her house and sometimes her cellphone, but he always phoned when he assumed she was alone.

It was unbelievable that a murderer, albeit a murderer acquitted on the grounds of criminal insanity and institutionalized in a state-run psychiatric center, could contact her. Or as she viewed it, stalk her. Jessie wasn’t sleeping. She wasn’t eating. She flinched whenever the doorbell or the phone rang, even if it was her parents, or Lily’s father, Kyle Emory, or Hal. She’d kept Terrence’s calls a secret from everyone, but Jessie felt like she was about to snap.

Another downpour engulfed the Jeep, and Jessie’s gaze darted back to the highway. She hadn’t thought it could rain any harder, but in an instant, Mother Nature had unleashed a tantrum.

Squinting to see through the misty sheets of rain, Jessie's grip on the steering wheel tightened. Her fingernails sliced into her palms and her arms trembled as she fought to steady the Jeep on the slippery roadway.

She needed to pull off the road. She needed to get it together.

Jessie switched on her turn signal and then flipped on the emergency flashers. She coasted off the highway onto the narrow shoulder, parking a safe distance from the road on a grassy patch enclosing a strip mall parking lot, and exhaled a deep breath. As the storm swirled around her, she wondered why her life was so damn complicated.

For years, Terrence had been her friend, her teacher, and her mentor, even her confidante. Then, he'd become her greatest betrayer. To get the murder charges against him dismissed, he'd accused her of violating his attorney-client privilege, jeopardizing her law license. He'd alleged that she'd informed the cops about Ryan's murder after he'd confided in her about the killing. But she hadn't talked. Kyle had called the cops and had only admitted it under oath at the pre-trial hearing to dismiss the charges. Although Jessie had been exonerated of all wrongdoing, Terrence's unfounded accusations had caused her irreparable damage. She'd lost her prestigious job, her fiancé Kyle, and almost her life and child.

"Don't be stupid," Jessie mumbled under her breath, battling the aftershock of Terrence's call. "He's been locked up for nine months and won't be released, ever." While the thought reassured her, Terrence had been harassing her since his commitment, and she hadn't done a damn thing to stop him. She'd believed she was rid of him. But her inaction, her passivity, was allowing him to ruin her new life with Lily and Hal.

The nagging tightness in her shoulders relaxed as she decided, there and then, to seize control. Resolving the Terrence crisis was on her, not him. She'd hatch a plan, and if necessary, seek Hal's help. After all, he was the District Attorney who'd prosecuted Terrence.

The rain was letting up and her yellow emergency signals pulsated in an eerie disco beat over the shimmering landscape. She switched them off and flicked on the high beams as she wiped away the condensation blanketing the inside of her windshield.

As her eyes adjusted, her vision followed the muted light of her Jeep's headlights deep into the rain-drenched darkness. A car length or two ahead, the lights reflected off a glittering object lying in a shallow puddle. For a second, the lights twinkling like tiny snowflakes mesmerized her. Then her sight expanded, focusing on what appeared to be a bulky, glistening mass.

At first glance, it appeared to be the size and shape of a small child. But it couldn't be. Logic told her that the object was probably a bouquet of deflated Mylar balloons, a pile of white garbage bags, or a golf umbrella blown off to the side of the road. Her eyes, and imagination, had to be screwing with her because any reasonable person would have taken shelter in the storm.

Jessie's thoughts flickered back to Lily, and the news stories about toddlers wandering out of their homes and into the woods. Her paranoia might be farfetched, but the shiny rolling waves looked more like the curve of a shoulder than deflated balloons. Another glance at the toddler-shaped mass confirmed that it was too human to ignore.

She needed a closer look.

Jessie opened her car door and stepped outside into the rain, a cold shower so fine and intense that the drops perforated her clothing like needles. She shivered. Her damp skinny jeans and silk blouse clung to her like a second skin.

The amber glare of the parking lot's lights shimmered along a narrow ditch lining the edge of the lot, and the beams of her headlights shone like a spotlight across the grassy roadside. Never veering from the path of light, Jessie inched closer to the slippery ridge of the ditch.

In a flash, the landscape became bathed in a blinding white light and then faded back to black. A sudden clap of thunder made her start and, losing her footing, Jessie tumbled forward onto the slick, rain-soaked earth. Her hands and knees sunk into the mud as she caught her breath and collected her wits. Water dripped into her eyes, and she blinked it away to regain sight.

Her eyes searched frantically through the storm for whatever she believed she'd seen.

Scrambling to her feet, Jessie crept toward the trench. The gully was about five feet deep, shoulder height for her, and was collecting runoff from the storm.

She sucked in her breath as realization dawned. She had not been mistaken. There, in the darkness, she spied the sole of a bare foot, pale and pink against the murky water. A sudden coldness seized her core as her eyes traveled up what appeared to be a leg toward a body partially submerged in the puddle. The person wore a silver sequined bomber jacket and jeans smeared with dirt and brush, which had camouflaged it, preventing easy detection. It had been pure luck that her headlights had reflected off the jacket at just the right angle to attract her attention.

From where Jessie stood, it was difficult to say whether it was a man or woman, dead or alive, but there was definitely a body lying in the mud curled up in the fetal position. The person's face was

hidden beneath a mass of long, straggly hair that floated like a halo in the black water accumulating around it.

She thought she heard a moan, but the pulse throbbing in her ears and the rain pulverizing the ground muffled all other sounds.

“Hey,” Jessie yelled. “Hey, can you hear me?”

She received no answer.

Jessie shouted again. This time, an arm and leg twitched in apparent response to her call. Those minute movements signaled she was staring down at a person who was still alive, still breathing, at least for the moment. From the volume of water streaming into the trench, every minute, every second counted.

Juiced by adrenaline, her thoughts bounced between whether to climb down into the gully or call for help. The retaining walls of the ditch were already crumbling and sliding down into the bottom of the trench, making them steep and slick. If she climbed down, it might be impossible to scale back up the muddy slopes, and then they’d both be stuck in the ditch. Or worse, they could both drown.

And she’d left her phone in the car.

“I’m going to get help,” she shouted. The whipping wind blew the words back into her face. “I don’t know if you can hear me, but hang on. I’m calling for help.”

Jessie’s legs grew weak as she turned and dashed back to the car, her feet skating through the grass and mud. Breathless, Jessie slid inside, rummaged through her bag, and dialed 9-1-1.

“Dutchess 911. What is the address of the emergency?” asked the dispatcher.

“Hello, operator? I need your help,” Jessie said, her voice ragged with terror. “There’s a person lying in a ditch and we need an ambulance right away.”

“Ma’am, please slow down. What’s your location?”

“What? I’ve got a dying person here. I need your help.”

“Ma’am, first we need to pinpoint your location in case we’re disconnected. Now, what’s the intersection or landmark closest to you?”

Jessie sighed in frustration and slowly repeated her plea for help. “I’m in the City of Poughkeepsie on Dutchess Turnpike, right across from Adams Farm Stand, near the Starbucks. There’s an injured person trapped in a storm drain. The water is rising fast, and I can’t get to them.”

“Okay,” the operator said. “What is your phone number and your name?”

“Jessie Martin,” she replied, and provided her cell number.

“Thank you, Jessie. Can you tell me if the person is still breathing?”

“Yes, they appear to be, but not for long if they don’t get help.” Panicked, she’d been rushing through her responses and paused to compose herself. “He or she appears to be semiconscious. I don’t know how they ended up there or how long they’ve been there, but the rainwater is collecting in the ditch and they’re going to drown if you don’t send help. Please, please send someone right away.”

The dispatcher repeated the facts to her—injured person, storm drain, rising water, Dutchess Turnpike—and asked Jessie to confirm, which she did. “Thank you, Ms. Martin. Are you in any danger?”

The operator’s robotic, monotone inquiries made her question her involving the authorities. Recently, she’d learned that contacting them wasn’t always the best course of action. Before Ryan’s murder, she’d trusted the criminal justice system wholeheartedly. But that was before she’d almost lost everything she cherished. She couldn’t face another attack on her integrity and professionalism without imperiling the fragile sanity she clung to like a life preserver. Yet, here she was repeating the same stupid mistake.

“No, I’m fine. I’m in my car, but there’s a person outside whose life is in immediate danger.” The dispatcher had asked her so many damn questions without providing one iota of help that Jessie felt like screaming. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down and keep her emotions in check.

“Yes, I understand. I want you to remain in your car, and I’d like to keep you on the line until emergency services arrive. Someone will be on the scene shortly.”

Shortly was a subjective, if not relative term, which could mean anytime between ten and twenty minutes. In this rainstorm, maybe even longer. Hopefully, the person would survive that long.

Screw this, Jessie thought, scanning the interior of the car for her first aid kit and anything that could serve as a lifeline.

As the line went dead, a flash of white light caught her eye. In the rearview mirror, Jessie detected headlights careening toward the rear of her Jeep. Right toward her.