

THE MIDNIGHT CALL by Jodé Millman

EXCERPT

Chapter One

“I think I killed someone,” the man’s voice whispered across the phone lines.

“Terrence,” Jessie Martin’s voice croaked, husky with sleep. She’d know her mentor’s voice anywhere, anytime, even in the middle of the night. In the pitch darkness she bolted upright in bed and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve done a terrible thing, committed a sin against God,” he said.

The anguish in his voice made the fine hairs on her skin prickle with fear, and her hand flew up with a desire to protect the baby tumbling around inside her swollen belly. Yet, it was the slow, quiet monotone of his voice that frightened Jessie even more than his confession. Her mentor usually had a confident, intense voice that commanded attention. Tonight, it was flat, as if he were no longer aware of reality.

“There’s blood everywhere.” Terrence’s hollow voice cracked. “He was just a boy... a boy. I don’t know how it happened. Oh my God, what have I done?”

Nothing was making any sense. Terrence Butterfield. Her mentor. Her teacher. Her friend. A killer? Impossible. But if what he said was true, the only way for her to help him was to remain cool and calm. She inhaled deeply to repress the panic crushing her chest and blew it out in a slow, cleansing breath as she’d learned in Lamaze class.

She turned toward Kyle’s side of the bed. Empty. She gripped his pillow in her fist. She’d find him in a moment.

“Terrence, how—what happened? Was there an accident?” She tried to control the tremor in her voice.

“No, it was not... an accident.”

Jessie tried to get him to talk, pushed him for more details. It wasn’t normal for Terrence to stay quiet for so long about anything. Ever. So his lengthy, heavy silence only intensified her unease over his vague confession about killing a kid. If she’d gone into criminal law instead of corporate law, the

right questions would've rolled off her tongue. For now, she'd have to rely on the adrenaline rush and her instincts.

"Just tell me where you are," Jessie demanded. "Whatever's happened, I can help you."

"I'm at home and... I have a gun. I can't continue to live. I need to make peace with God."

"Listen to me. Put the gun down." Jessie's mind raced. If Terrence had intended to kill himself he wouldn't have called her. He wanted her to keep him alive. "There are people who love you. Your family, your students—we all love you."

"I don't know what to do. I'm so confused."

"This is what you are going to do." It felt odd commanding him, reversing the roles so that she was the mentor and he was the pupil. Hopefully, Terrence had enough wits about him to comply with her instructions, but there was no response except for the clicking of his tongue as he wheezed into the receiver. "Just put down the gun and call the police. Tell them there's been an accident. Don't say anything else. Are you with me? I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few minutes. Please don't do anything foolish. Promise me."

The cell phone hung like a dead weight in Jessie's hand as the line went dead. Moist palms stroked the curve of her child in a strong, circular motion. A tiny foot rose up to accept the caresses like a cat seeking to nuzzle, and once sated, the appendage receded into the depths of her womb.

Jessie thought there must be some mistake, but she knew what she'd heard. The stretched-thin quality of his voice convinced her that something was seriously wrong.

Kyle, her fiancé, hadn't returned to their room, so she called out his name. No answer. Flinging back the covers, Jessie set her bare feet on the cold wood floor and ran toward the dresser.

Get dressed. Find Kyle. Go to Terrence. Before — She didn't want to consider the possibilities.

"Kyle," Jessie called out again, rifling through the drawers. Three shirts spilled out onto her feet. She grabbed a striped t-shirt and wriggled into it. It was a bit snug over her belly, but there was no time. She had to go. "Kyle!"

The bedroom door flew open with a crash and Kyle burst into the room, wild-eyed. "Is it the baby?"

"No, no, it's not me, I'm fine, but we've got to go," Jessie said, yanking on her sweatpants. "Terrence said that he's killed someone and he's going to kill himself." She gathered her flyaway hair

into a ponytail and hurried toward the bathroom door, but Kyle stepped in front of her blocking her path.

“You scared me half to death... and this was, yet again, about that old—I mean, about Terrence.”

Jessie flinched and jerked back, glaring at him.

“Let’s a take a second before you do anything crazy and discuss this.” Kyle paused. “Babe, as odd as he is, you don’t believe that Terrence killed anyone, do you?” He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. When she didn’t respond, he added, “Just in case, why don’t we call the police and let them handle it?”

Jessie shook her head adamantly. “Kyle, there’s no time to get into this right now so please, call my dad. Have him call Terrence.” She shivered uncontrollably from the tension ricocheting through her body, her teeth chattering so violently she believed they’d shatter. “Ma-make him stay on the phone until we g-get there.”

“Come ‘ere.” His tone softened. Kyle encircled her in his arms and a tender hand reached down to embrace their child. She trembled, immune to the warmth of his touch and his soft, cajoling whispers in her ear. “You shouldn’t be running around in the middle of the night.”

“Sweetie, look, I’ve got to go and I’d appreciate it if you came along,” she said, disguising her fear with determination.

After four years together, Jessie knew that Kyle knew better than to argue with her; after all, she was a lawyer. A damn good one, and once she set her mind on something there was no stopping her. It was all part of her job. Her clients demanded it. But this was the first time the call had come before the arrest. And it was the first time the late night call had been from Terrence.

Kyle growled and released her, shaking his head in resignation. “I guess I can’t stop you, can I?” He stepped into the crumpled jeans lying on the floor, then zipped them up and was tugging a Yankees sweatshirt over his head when she disappeared into the bathroom. When she returned to the bedroom, it was empty.

Jessie discovered Kyle downstairs in the kitchen. He shoved his phone into his jean’s pocket and fiddled with her car keys with his free hand.

“Did you call my dad?”

Kyle nodded. “Ready? Come on, let’s go.”

She reached into the pocket of her hoodie and discovered her phone wasn't there. "Damn, I must have left my phone upstairs. I'll be right back."

He twisted his mouth in a soured expression. "Okay. I'll meet you in the car."

As she returned upstairs, she tried to remember where she'd last seen her phone. She'd been in such a rush to get ready that she could have set it down anywhere in the bedroom or bathroom. She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid, especially with Terrence's life at stake.

Jessie entered her bedroom and gave the room a quick once-over. Her phone was nowhere in sight.

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Several minutes later, Jessie slipped into the Jeep that was idling in the driveway. Kyle was anxiously tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Sorry I took so long. My phone was under the nightstand. I must have knocked it there when I was getting dressed."

Kyle grunted, threw the car into reverse, and backed out of the driveway.

Jessie's eyes were drawn to the keychain dangling from her Jeep's ignition. It contained the motley gray rabbit's foot that Terrence had bagged on one of the many hunting trips with her father. They'd made an odd couple, her father and the younger teacher, but they had a lot in common, and they'd always come home with a kill or two. After one trip, Terrence had presented the token to her with great flourish on the night before she'd left for law school, attaching it to a Black's Law Dictionary and a pound of Ethiopian coffee beans. Jessie had kept it with her always for good luck: during finals, the bar exam, and her job interviews. Whenever the fates needed an extra boost.

Now, the sight of the cherished charm made her shudder as it assumed a more grisly visage. She felt sorry for the little critter so brutally killed and felt a twinge of doubt as to whether she really knew the man who'd been on the other end of the line—the patient friend who'd spent his Saturday mornings laboring with her over her college admission essays, the charismatic bachelor who'd delivered yellow roses on her mother's birthday, the popular high school teacher who'd brought history to life by dressing as Genghis Khan, George Washington, and Gandhi. And who, ever since she was a teenager, had been the keeper of her deepest secrets and dreams.

For Terrence's sake, Jessie hoped that he'd been mistaken tonight. Otherwise, he'd need more than her rabbit's foot to protect him.

Kyle screeched to a halt at the curb in front of Terrence's home, and she glanced toward the small white clapboard ranch. While the neighboring houses were dark, Terrence's house shone like a beacon among the Cape Cod cottages nestled along the quiet, tree-lined boulevard in Poughkeepsie, New York. In the humid August night, hazy lights blazed from every window, illuminating the well-manicured lawn and beds of roses and daylilies that she'd helped him plant more than a decade ago.

Terrence's tall, lean silhouette was framed within the front bay window. He was speaking on the phone, presumably to her father. The front door stood ajar, inviting her to enter.

In the darkness, Jessie glimpsed two black and white cop cars creeping toward them from the opposite direction. With sirens silenced and headlights extinguished, the cars glided toward the far curb and parked. Bathed in the amber glow of the overhead street lamps, the officers were motionless inside their cars.

"Did you call the police?" Jessie asked.

Kyle didn't answer. "What are they doing?" he whispered, as though the cops could hear.

Jessie eyed Kyle, but there were more pressing matters. "They're probably waiting for back up. Come on. Let's go." She cocked the door handle, but Kyle grabbed her arm and squeezed. She glanced over at him, confused.

"You're not going out there, Jessie."

"This is Terrence's life, Kyle." Her voice trembled with conviction, fear, and the desire to help the one man she trusted and revered almost as much as her own father. Kyle never understood that before Terrence entered her life, she'd floundered in school. At best, she'd been a B student. Terrence's energy and enthusiasm had ignited a spark inside her, instilling knowledge, values, and moral lessons that had helped her achieve her goal of law school. She'd had many teachers and professors over the years, and recognized the rarity of such a man. She was deeply grateful to Terrence but Kyle insisted that the man was a fraud.

Jessie started at the sudden sound of the patrol cars' doors banging open like cannon fire. She blinked rapidly to dispel the horrible image unfolding in slow motion. A pair of officers emerged from each vehicle. They drew their guns and strode in the direction of Terrence's house. Her eyes tracked them through the pools of streetlight dotting the avenue, knowing they were on a collision course with Terrence. She felt paralyzed, like during the surreal seconds before an automobile accident, and the powerlessness of skidding toward the unavoidable impact.

“Come on, Kyle.”

“Please stay in the car, at least until we know it’s safe.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Terrence won’t shoot us.” Instinctively, Jessie ran a hand over her belly, and in response to the baby’s sharp jab to her ribs, she yanked her arm free from Kyle’s hold. Opening the door, Jessie slid out of the Jeep and sprinted up the sidewalk toward the broad front steps with Kyle trailing on her heels.

“Stop! Police!” commanded a gravelly voice. “Hands up. Over your head, where we can see them.”

Jessie gasped, stopping in mid-stride. She froze in place, the toes of her sneakers flirting with the bottom step of the porch. Fumbling through the pitch darkness, she threaded her fingers in her fiancé’s. Kyle clasped them, tugged her close to his side, and slowly, they raised their joined hands into the air.

“Sir, I’m here to see Mr. Butterfield. I’m an attorney. He’s expecting me,” Jessie shouted. Judging from the cop’s voice, he was still a good fifty feet away. Far enough for her to make a mad dash for the front door. The door was so close, but Kyle’s grip tightened, digging her engagement ring into her flesh.

“Miss, don’t move,” the officer said. “Please remain where you are. For your own safety.”

“It’s all right, Jessica.” Terrence leaned against the doorjamb, swinging the screen door open to the night air. His voice sounded distant, otherworldly, and his fine-boned features were obscured by the night’s shadows. “Officers, please come in.”

The four police officers swarmed past them with their pistols aimed at the waiting figure. Two officers inched their way up the steps onto the front porch, while a few yards away, the other two covered them from the bottom step. As the team passed, Kyle stepped forward, shielding her from danger and obstructing her path to Terrence.

Terrence might need her, she thought, so she skirted around Kyle and waited and listened. She needed to be ready.

“Sir, are you Terrence Butterfield?” an officer asked.

“Yes.”

Jessie had instructed him to keep quiet and sensed that he was about to break the golden rule—never admit anything.

“We’re investigating a report about the discharging of a firearm at this address. Sir, do you have a weapon? Please show me your hands,” said an older officer with a pockmarked face, as he edged another step closer.

Terrence raised his hands over his head. In his right hand, he gripped an old-fashioned revolver, like Jessie had seen in the Westerns. “I think I have killed someone.”

“Terrence, stop talking!” Jessie exclaimed.

As long as Terrence kept his mouth shut, maybe she could salvage the situation. There had to be a reasonable explanation. Maybe there had been some horrible accident. Maybe he’d stood his ground against an intruder. Maybe he was drunk or stoned or he was hallucinating. She needed to know. To hear the truth from him.

“Sir, I’m Sergeant Mike Rossi and this is my partner, Officer Jen Macy.” Rossi crossed the threshold, while Macy signaled for the other team to spread out around the back of the house. Cautiously, Rossi inched his way toward Terrence. “Mr. Butterfield, please set the gun on the floor.”

Terrence’s trembling hand offered him the weapon.

Rossi stepped backward, looking startled by the movement, but keeping his gun steady, trained on his target. “Just do as I say. Put the gun down and place your hands on top of your head.”

“Please take it. I don’t want it.”

On the bottom porch step, Jessie balanced on her tiptoes, craning her neck to spy on the action through the screen door and windows. She held her breath as Terrence and Rossi eyed each other across the barrel of the shiny gun aimed point-blank at Terrence’s chest. Tension seized Terrence’s muscles, accentuating the slight tic along his jaw that appeared only when he felt threatened. It was a sign that he could attack with little provocation, something she’d witnessed more than once when he’d fended off troublemakers in his classroom.

Locked in a stalemate, Terrence and Rossi continued to glare at each other. Time seemed to stand still, interrupted only by the echoes of the midnight freight trains snaking along the banks of the Hudson River.

Jessie’s pulse thrummed in her ears as she watched, too terrified to move.

The seconds ticked by and then, suddenly as if his nerve had drained away, Terrence’s jaw slackened. He lowered his hand and set the weapon on the coffee table to his right. Then, he hung his head and cradled his temples with his hands.

“Drop to your knees,” Rossi shouted, backing Terrence away from the window so that both men vanished from sight.

Jessie inhaled, inviting humid, sweet air into her lungs, and steadied herself against the steps’ banister. “I should really be in there.” She edged her way up to the next step. “He needs me.”

“Let the police do their job, babe.” Kyle’s fingers clamped around her wrist like a vice. His eyes darted to her baby bump, and then they shifted, staring directly into her eyes, concern crinkling his brow.

Jessie’s gaze swung back toward the house, consumed with the frustration that a bizarre tableau was being played out only a few yards away. Helplessly, she listened to doors slamming, footsteps thundering through rooms, and snippets of conversations and commands drifting outside into the night. As hard as Jessie tried, she couldn’t hear Terrence or see him, and she prayed that he was holding up under the pressure. At least Terrence knew that she and Kyle were there for him and had his back.

Relief flooded her when Rossi herded Terrence back into view in the front hallway, but her chest tightened when a voice crackled over the two-way radio dangling from the officer’s belt.

“Sarge, can you read me? You need to see this... down here in the basement. Copy?”

A scowl hardened on Kyle’s face, and his fingers turned to steel bands squeezing her wrist past the point of pain. Jessie flinched, and he released her.

“Keep your eye on Butterfield,” Rossi said to Macy. “I’ll be right back.”

Jessie massaged the shelf of her belly as the baby’s angular limb stabbed deep into her chest cavity. She lowered herself to the dew-covered steps to ease the wooziness engulfing her like fog. The hour. The heat. The rush. It was all catching up with her.

She needed to shake it off. Stay alert and focused for Terrence. He’d always been there for her—the proms, graduations, fender benders, and panic attacks before the bar exam. Now, it was Jessie’s turn. She owed it to him, and herself, to unearth the truth.

“Terrence, we’re still here. Just do as they say,” Jessie blurted, hoping that the sound of her voice would give him the strength to carry on, although her grit was circling the drain.

“Let’s go.” Kyle loomed over her, his mouth pinched at the corners. “You can’t even stay on your feet. You’re tired and there’s nothing more you can do for him. Not tonight.” He offered her a hand.

Jessie glared at him with an anger that recharged her depleted battery. Kyle knew better. Once she committed to a cause, she never budged. “I’ve got to help him get this mess cleared up. There’s been a mistake.”

“A mistake? It looks to me like Terrence finally flipped out and killed somebody. But I can’t expect you to be objective about him. You wanted him to be our kid’s godfather.” Kyle paused, clenching and unclenching his fists. “You know, sometimes Terrence seems like a third party to our relationship.”

Kyle had a way of believing the worst whenever it came to Terrence. It never bothered her when Terrence called to chat about the latest movies or books he’d read or stopped by to watch a football game with Kyle. He was Terrence being Terrence, and she knew that there was no ulterior motive on his part. Ever since she’d been a kid, she and Terrence had been close, and over the years he’d done plenty for her. And she for him. He’d worn many hats in her life—friend, confidante, teacher, mentor, even an uncle—and Kyle had known that from the beginning but Kyle insisted that Terrence was taking advantage of their friendship by calling and popping in uninvited. Why couldn’t he acknowledge that each man had a special place in her life?

Low voices discussed the need to secure the crime scene and call the paramedics, the forensic team, the district attorney, and the medical examiner. Although criminal law was outside her wheelhouse, Jessie knew the working parts of a homicide investigation, so these whisperings confirmed her worst suspicions. First, there was a dead body or bodies somewhere in the house —probably the basement. And second, Terrence was implicated in the homicide.

Suddenly, the screen door swung open, and the dark figure of Terrence Butterfield emerged from the house in handcuffs shepherded by Rossi and Macy. With his head drooped forward against his chest and his limp arms shackled at the wrist, he shuffled across the whitewashed porch and down the entry steps.

Terrence drew closer and the veil of night shadow enshrouding his face and body revealed something much more sinister. His handsome face was smeared with glossy red liquid and his dark brown hair was clumped into a tangled mess. A rank stench, like rotten cabbage boiled in sulfur, emanated from the tattered, bloody shirt clinging to his chest. The smell of death on him hit her like a slap and grew worse with every step he took toward her.

Stifling a gag, Jessie garnered her strength and stepped into their path. She double-checked the name on his silver badge. “Officer Rossi, I know that you’ve got a job to do, but I do, too. Before you take Mr. Butterfield anywhere, I’m putting you on notice that he is not to be interrogated without my being present.” She cleared her throat. “And has he been read his rights?”

Rossi eyed her with contempt, as though insinuating that she had no right to question his actions or authority. “We can discuss that after Mr. Butterfield has been booked.”

“I think that we should discuss it now.” Jessie’s tone was insistent, hard.

Before they could respond, Terrence spoke up, “I believe that I’m entitled to speak with my attorney.”

“You can speak with her down at the station. Move along, Mr. Butterfield,” Macy said, shoving the captive’s shoulder. “Ma'am, please move out of the way.”

For a long moment, Jessie remained stationary, considering how far she could push the cops before she crossed the line. Her heart urged her to defy Rossi and speak with Terrence right then and there, yet her head warned her to follow the protocol. Strategically, the latter would be best for both of them.

“Not a word,” Jessie counseled him as she stepped aside. Terrence stopped before her and gently rested his cuffed hands on the round of her belly. She smiled and cupped her hands over his in reassurance. “Don’t worry. We’ll be right behind you.”

Gazing into his eyes, she searched for the truth, but instead, found cold, dead-fish eyes, and his dry, cracked lips were curled in a crooked, haunting smile. She shrank away from him, huddling against Kyle to steady her buckling knees.

The officers grabbed Terrence’s shoulder, ushered him toward their patrol car, and loaded him into the back seat. The engine started and with lights flashing and sirens blaring, the police car sped off into the night.

Nothing in her thirty years of life had prepared her for this moment. This tragedy.

Terrence’s life was in her hands. And in that instant, Jessie realized that she must follow her heart. She knew the kind, caring friend, teacher, and confidante that he’d been to her. She needed to disregard the blood, the stench, and the nagging worry that he was a cold-blooded killer. She’d prove him innocent. She owed him that.

As the police car taillights disappeared into the darkness, an undeniable dampness seeped onto Jessie's abdomen. Her eyes widened in horror as she looked down at her sweatshirt. Beneath the Syracuse University logo, a grisly tattoo of handprints smeared across her belly. Jessie flipped over her quivering hands and stared at her palms, black and sticky with blood.

“Oh, my God.”