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Vengeance Road

Written by Rick Mofina

Published by MIRA Books

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RICK MOFINA
vengeance
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Published in Great Britain 2011
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0444 9

60-0611

Printed in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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The taxi crawled along a road that knifed into the night at Buffalo's eastern edge.

Its brakes squeaked as it halted at the fringe of a vast park.

Jolene Peller gazed toward the woods then paid the driver.

"This is where you want to be dropped off?" he asked.

"Yes. Can you kill the meter and wait for me, please?"

"I can't, you're my last fare. Gotta get the cab back."

"Please, I just have to find my friend."

The driver handed her a five in change, nodding to the pathway that twisted into darkness beyond the reach of his headlights.

"You're sure your friend's down there?"

"Yes, I need to get her home. She's going through a rough time."

"It's a beautiful park, but you know what some people do down there at night?"

Jolene knew.

But she was living another life then. If you could call it living.

"Can't you wait a bit?" Jolene asked.

"Not on my time. Gotta get the cab back then start my vacation."

“Please.”

“Look, miss, you seem nice. I’ll take you back now. I’ll give you a break on the fare because it’s on my way. But I ain’t waitin’ while you wander around looking for your problem. Stay or go? What’s it going to be?”

Tonight was all Jolene had to do the right thing.

“I have to stay,” she said.

The driver gave her a suit-yourself shrug and Jolene got out. The taxi lumbered off, its red taillights disappearing, leaving her alone.

She had to do this.

As she walked along the path, she looked at the familiar twinkle of lights from the big suburban homes on the ridge that ringed the parkland half a mile off. When she found Bernice, they’d walk to a corner store then get a cab to Bernice’s apartment. Then Jolene could take another one to the terminal, claim her bags and catch a later bus.

But not before she found Bernice.

Not before she saved her.

And tonight, for one brief moment, she thought she had.

Less than an hour ago they were together in a downtown diner where Jolene had pleaded with her.

“Honey, you’ve got to stop beating yourself up for things that were never your fault.”

Tears rolled down Bernice’s face.

“You’ve got to get yourself clean and finish college.”

“It’s hard, Jo. So hard.”

“I know, but you’ve got to pull yourself out of the life. If I can do it, you can do it. Promise me, right here, right now, that you won’t go out tonight.”

“It hurts. I ache. I need something to get me through one more day. I need the money. I’ll start after tomorrow.”

“No!”

A few people cast sleepy glances at them. Jolene lowered her voice.

“That’s a lie you keep telling yourself. Promise me you won’t go dating tonight, that you will go home.”

“But it hurts.”

Jolene seized Bernice’s hands, entwined their fingers and squeezed hard.

“You’ve got to do this, honey. You can’t accept this life. Promise me you will go home. Promise me, before I get on my bus and leave town.”

“Okay, I promise, Jo.”

“Swear.”

“I swear, Jo.”

Jolene hugged her tight.

But after getting into her taxi and traveling several blocks, Jolene was uncertain. She told the driver to go back so she could check on Bernice.

Sure enough, there she was. At the mouth of a dirty alley, on Niagara, hustling a date. The cab stopped at a light, Jolene gripped her door handle, bracing to jump out and haul Bernice off the street.

But she didn’t.

To hell with that girl.

Jolene told the driver to keep going to the terminal. She didn’t need this shit. Not now. She was leaving for Florida tonight to build a new life for herself and her little boy. Bernice was an adult, old enough to take care of herself.

Jolene had tried to help.

She really had.

But with each passing block, her guilt grew. Soon the neon blurred. Brushing away her tears, Jolene cursed. She couldn’t leave Buffalo tonight with that last image of her friend standing in her memory.

Bernice was an addict. She was sick. She needed help. Jolene was her lifeline.

And tonight, every instinct told Jolene that something was wrong.

The driver muttered when she requested he take her back to the alley. But by the time they'd returned, Bernice and the man she'd been hustling were gone.

Jolene had a bad feeling.

But she knew exactly where they'd be.

Down here, by the creek.

Funny, Jolene thought, during the day this was a middle-class sanctuary where people walked, jogged, even took wedding pictures near the water.

And dreamed.

Most locals, living their happy lives, were unaware that after dark, their park was where hookers took their dates.

It was where you left the real world; where you buried your dignity; where each time you used your body to survive, a piece of you died.

Jolene knew it from her former life; the life she'd escaped when she had Cody. He was her number-one reason for getting out. She'd vowed he would not have a junkie mother selling herself for dope.

He deserved better.

So did Bernice.

She'd been abandoned, abused, but had worked so hard to get into college, only to face a setback that led to drugs, which pushed her here. The tragedy of it was that she was only months away from becoming a certified nurse's aide.

Bernice didn't belong in this life.

Date or no date, Jolene was going to find her and drag her ass home, if it was the last thing she did. Jolene was not afraid to come down here at night. She knew the area and knew how to handle herself.

She had her pepper spray.

She arrived at the dirt parking lot, part of an old earthen service road that bordered the pathway meandering alongside the creek. The lot was empty.

No sign of anybody.

As crickets chirped, Jolene took stock of the area and the treetops silhouetted against a three-quarter moon. She knew the hidden paths and meadows, where drugs and dates were taken and deals completed.

Through a grove, she saw a glint of chrome, like a grille from a vehicle parked in a far-off lot. Possibly a truck. Jolene headed that way. She was nearly there when a scream stopped her cold.

“Nooo! Oh God nooo! Help me!”

The tiny hairs on the back of Jolene’s neck stood up.

Bernice!

Her cry came from the darkest section of the forest near the creek. Jolene rushed to it. Branches slapped at her face, tugged at her clothing.

The growth was thicker than she’d remembered. Her eyes had not adjusted; she was running blind over the undulating terrain.

She stepped on nothing and the ground rose to smack her.

She scrambled to her feet and kept going.

There was movement ahead, shadow play in the moonlight.

Noises.

Jolene didn’t make a sound as she reached into her bag, her fingers wrapping around her pepper spray.

A blast to the creep’s face. A kick in the groin. Jolene had done it before with freaks who’d tried to choke her.

She swallowed hard, ready to fight. Heart pumping, she strained to see what awaited her. Someone was moving; she glimpsed a figure.

Bernice? Was that her face in the ground?

A metallic clank.

Tools? What was going on?

The air exploded next to Jolene with a flap and flutter of a terrified bird screeching to the sky. Startled, Jolene stepped away and fell, crashing through a dried thicket.

She was unhurt.

The air was dead still.

A figure was listening.

Jolene froze.

The figure was thinking.

Her blood thundered in her ears.

A twig snapped. The figure was approaching.

She held her breath.

It was getting closer.

All of her senses were screaming.

Her fingers probed the earth but she was unable to find her bag. Frantic, she clawed the dirt for her pepper spray, a rock, a branch.

Anything.

Her pulse galloped, she didn't breathe. After several agonizing moments, everything subsided. The threat seemed to pass with a sudden gust that rustled the treetops.

Oh, thank God.

Jolene collected herself to resume looking for Bernice, when she was hit square in the face by a blazing light.

Squinting, she raised her hands against the intensity. Someone grunted, a shadow strobed. She ran but fireworks exploded in her head, hurling her into nothingness.