

The Clock Strikes Midnight

Unedited Version

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Part One

Chapter One

"It's a fast growing tumor, Miss Knox," Dr. Mills told Janie. "Hard to detect early, I'm afraid."

His words--chemotherapy, death, prognosis--collided in her head and buzzed around as if lost.

She had done some wicked things in her life. *It serves me right to die young.* A chill of fear ran up her back.

"How much time do I have?" She swallowed the heaviness in her throat. *Stay focused. Don't panic.*

He fiddled with the stethoscope around his neck.
"That's hard to say."

How they must hate telling people they're going to die.

"Listen, doctor, I need to know. I've got things to do."

"Unfortunately I can't be too precise. We do have counselors who can help you put things in order, if that's what you mean." He reached for the prescription pad.

"Can't you give me some idea?"

"These things are hard to predict," he continued.

"Some people live as few as three months; others make it longer, maybe even a year."

She stared at the wall behind him where he had hung his diploma, illegible from her vantage point. Her life with Sue Anne had been too good. This was God's punishment for all the bad things. Three months. "And there's nothing you can do?"

"We could operate, but to be honest--and you asked me to be honest--it might just add a few more months, maybe guarantee you a year. Or, there is the risk of dying in surgery." He paused and shook his head. "Personally, I wouldn't recommend chemo, not at this stage. I'm sorry. You can always get a second opinion, though. I'd be glad to make a referral."

"That won't be necessary."

He scrawled something on his pad. "Is there anyone you'd like me to call?"

She got up, surprised her legs held her. "No, thanks."

He handed her the prescription. "This will help with the pain."

She left the doctor's office and drove directly to the drug store on the corner. While she waited for the

prescription, her mind played out what she had to do. Go home. Pack. She couldn't face Sue Anne, who would insist on knowing everything, and Janie had things to take care of. Things she had put off for too long. *Three months*, the voice in the back of her head said. *My God! I need more time*. She took the bag of meds from the faceless pharmacist and raced home.

Once there, she pulled down the hidden staircase and climbed into the attic where cobwebs stretched across the beams above her head. Her flashlight shone on the rows of boxes, a Lava lamp, and an old black and white TV she and Sue Anne had stowed there when they moved in nearly twelve years earlier. Such a beautiful day that had been.

Brushing the cobwebs from her face, she edged her way toward a container the size of a shoebox. She had hidden it there while Sue Anne was busy unloading the van and arguing with the movers. She blew off a thick layer of dust-- twitching her nose to keep from sneezing--and lifted the lid. She rummaged inside until her hand caught hold of the gold-inlaid music box she was looking for, turned it upside down, and peeled off the adhesive holding a flat, narrow key.

Ten minutes later, she tossed an overnight suitcase and the music box into the trunk of her bright red Honda Accord and took off.

In her rearview mirror she watched the wide beach fade in the distance. When she and Sue Anne had found their house on Tybee Island, it had been in shambles but less costly than those in historic downtown Savannah. With their joint incomes, they could barely afford putting a bid on the house. Over the years when their incomes expanded--Sue Anne with a thriving interior design business and her own multiple beauty salons--they had fixed up the place, replacing faulty pipes and painting the rooms with bright colors. Her body tensed with regret as the world she loved grew smaller in the distance.

In the four-hour drive from Savannah to Atlanta she considered what Dr. Mills had told her. She was going to die. Her time was running out. Everything she thought about doing someday, she must do now. She let out a long, tired sigh. *I'm not making excuses for what I've done in my life. I just want to sort it all out and right some wrongs before it's too late.*

She reached for a cigarette, put it in her mouth, but didn't light it. She had stopped smoking ten years earlier but never tired of the feel of a cigarette between her

lips. The smell of tobacco triggered memories long ago buried--Mom sitting at the kitchen table with an ashtray full of cigarette butts and a glass of whiskey in her hand. Her older sister, Marlene, washing dishes at the sink. Her stepfather, Ralph, red-faced with sweat under his armpits, standing in the corner, cussing about something at work.

One good thing about being dead, the memories would finally go away. She chuckled at the irony. Wasn't that what she had always wanted? Freedom from those awful memories?

She rolled into Atlanta, amazed at the tall buildings sprouting up everywhere. The city was like a Monopoly board full of new hotels and houses. Cars tooted at her snail-like pace. She had grown up in this city. One would think she would know how to get around. But after 20 years, things change. She stopped at a BP Station to fill up. Afterward she pulled out her iPhone to search hotels downtown. She wanted to stay near two places, the old C&S Bank and Lawton and Brady, Limited.

She paid for the gas and ventured back out onto those streets with bumper to bumper cars filled with people wanting to be someplace else. She relaxed her white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. *I'm more afraid of driving in Atlanta than of dying.* Finally she pulled into the parking

deck of the Edgewood Hotel, a small facility within the shadows of the massive Bank of America building, formerly C & S Bank, and a few blocks from Lawton and Brady.

Her watch read 5:15 p.m. She imagined Sue Anne, unaware of her absence, making her weekly run to Kroger to stock up on groceries. Of course, this would include a bag of Milkbones for Charlie, their ninety-two pound yellow lab who was celebrating his fifth birthday tomorrow.

She unloaded her small suitcase and checked in.

When she began to unpack, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her father's eyes stared back at her, bringing back a memory she'd long ago repressed.

"Daddy, when I get my kitty, can I name him Davy?" she had asked, yanking Marlene's Davy Crockett mug full of M&M's from her grasp. The colorful candy spilled all over the backseat of the car.

"Mama, tell Janie to—"

"Janie, behave," Daddy said, admonishing her for an instant with his eyes from the rearview mirror.

"Malcolm, look out--!" Mom screamed.

Janie slammed into Marlene. Pain. The world tumbled topsy-turvy. The mug flew across the interior of the car, colors of the rainbow falling all around her. Then, everything went black.

When she opened her eyes, Mom's blood-streaked face rose in front of her out of the darkness.

"Wrap your arms around my neck, honey." Mom lifted her from the wreckage.

Janie clutched her doll by the dress while the rain beat her curly hair flat. Marlene stood on the side of the road.

"Try to walk," Mom said, toppling her from her arms.

Her head pounded and blood trickled down her leg. She leaned on her good leg and limped in the direction of her sister.

"Mama, where's Daddy?" Marlene asked between sobs.

Mom took Marlene's hand and yanked her forward with Janie in tow.

Marlene lurched back toward the smashed Oldsmobile with smoke billowing from its hood and a big tree lying across the roof. The Davy Crockett mug lay shattered by the back tire.

"Daddy! We can't leave Daddy!" Marlene yelled, picking up pieces of the broken glass.

They had left Daddy that day and piled into an old Chevy pick-up truck with a bashed in headlamp, belonging to a man with carrot-red hair. Mom pushed them inside the

truck and ordered the man to get help. But by then it was too late for Daddy.

It was too late for all of them.

Janie sorted clothes to hang in the closet. Her head throbbed. A sunbeam caught the golden edge of the music box sitting on the vanity. She rose from the bed, drawn to the one memento she had taken from her family home on Briardale Lane. She lifted the lid. Her mother's favorite song, Beethoven's *Ode de Joy*, hummed from the little box. If only someone other than the man with the carrot-red hair had stopped that night--a soccer mom or an elderly couple.

After the funeral, the man with the carrot-red hair, whom she later learned was called Ralph Cooper, had stayed. In a dark corner of the church, she and Marlene ducked down in the pew to get a good view of him talking to Mom. When the man bent his head toward Mom and touched her arm as if by accident, Janie gasped, and Marlene hushed her with a finger to her lips. Then the man kissed Mom's hair. Chills had run up Janie's arm, not from the cold but from some deep dread gnawing inside her like when Lewis Watring had punched her in the stomach on the playground.

When Aunt Sarah returned from the bathroom, the carrot-red hair had vanished.

Perhaps if they had told Aunt Sarah then, things would have worked out differently. As it was, she and Marlene had both kept quiet, and Ralph Cooper had wormed his way into their lives and had turned their worlds upside down.

Janie rubbed her temples. She lifted a pile of clothes and placed them in the small bureau under the hotel mirror. Marlene would be shocked to see her after all this time. After their daddy died, she and her sister had clung to one another--each becoming the others lifeline, but all that had changed.

She loved Marlene, but she feared how she would react upon her return. Marlene might hate her for leaving.

She stepped to the window and watched the sun travel lower in the sky. Tomorrow she would find her sister and explain everything to her. *I must have Marlene's help. I can't do this alone especially with the clock ticking away.* Marlene and only Marlene could get what she needed from Ralph. She'd tried to do it once without Marlene and failed. She didn't have time to fail again.

Moving from the window, she telephoned Sue Anne.

"I'm in Atlanta," she told her.

"What are you talking about, love? I thought you were going to the doctor. What are you doing in Atlanta?" The worry in her voice nearly broke Janie's heart.

"The doctor sent me here for a second opinion," she lied. "I should be home in a few days after the tests."

"But, what did he say? Are you okay? Did he say what was causing the pain?"

Janie cleared her throat to calm her voice. Lying to Sue Anne wasn't easy. "He's not sure what's going on yet. That's why he sent me here. I'll be at Emory all day tomorrow. Don't worry. I'm sure they'll figure out what's wrong if anything."

Silence.

"Janie, what aren't you telling me? How could you go there alone?"

"Look, I had no choice. And, I thought it best to come here by myself. It'll give me a chance to see Marlene. She's going to freak out when she sees me. Imagine what she'd do if you came too."

Sue Anne laughed. "That's the Lord's own truth. Do you want me to call Steven?"

"That'd be great. I can call him from here, but it would save me a bit of time, and I don't know how much free time I'll have. Ask him to take care of the shops until I get back and not to let Lucinda drive him nuts."

"I miss you already," Sue Anne said before hanging up.

Janie went into the bathroom to shower. Her trained fingers massaged her head with shampoo fortified with lavender soymilk, opting against the standard hotel brand. How many heads had she massaged? Hundreds of women told her they had nearly fallen asleep while she gently rubbed their scalps. She moved her hands along the inside of her cranium and down her lower neck and rolled her head from side to side. The comforting fingers, the warm water, and the smell of lavender did nothing to reduce the knots that held her body in bondage.

Later, she studied the skyline from her hotel window and waited for the hamburger and sweet tea she'd ordered from a nearby restaurant to arrive. Being in Atlanta made her stomach queasy. She had abandoned this city the week after a jury had convicted Ralph Cooper of killing her mother. She had left with all her worldly possessions in a single duffle bag, hopped on a bus to Savannah, and resolved never to return.

She turned from the scenic view and took a deep breath to steady the wild beating of her heart. Everything inside her screamed go, run, escape.

I must finish this. I owe it to Marlene.

Chapter Two

Marlene lifted her head from the dining room table. The candles had burned down to cold wicks. Darkness had sneaked in and with it a heavy cloud of silence. The light on the CD player flashed. Outside a dog barked and a motor roared in the distance.

She wrapped her arms around her chest and rose with an aching stiffness in her legs. Her head pounded. The odor from the uneaten dinner--spaghetti and sausage--filled her nostrils. Her watch read 2:30 a.m. Fumbling for the light switch, she squinted when the glare hit her eyes.

"Oh, God," she murmured, her mind abruptly traveling to the day she and her husband, Peter, had bought this house.

"It's perfect," he had told her, beaming like a little boy on Christmas morning. He saw it and bought it without consulting her.

The dark mahogany plank floors, scratched and scraped from post-Civil War days, had begged for a good buffing. More recent owners had covered the walls with light green-striped wallpaper she instantly detested. Peter had guided her into the kitchen where he raved about the bay window and the spacious countertops. The flowery wallpaper had dulled to an ancient shade of yellow. She appreciated his enthusiasm but would have liked participating in the selection. *Typical. Pull on my chain and I'll follow you anywhere.*

"One of the things I like best," Peter continued with an eager lift to his voice, "is the way the stairs curl to the top like in *Gone with the Wind*. They're not as steep as they look. Can't you imagine Scarlett O'Hara standing on the landing?" He had raced up the stairs and held out his arms to her, mimicking Rhett.

Tonight the steps felt steeper than the tallest mountain in the Rockies. She mounted one after the other while clutching the handrail like an old woman. Her stomach fluttered and her legs throbbed from the strain. Halfway up, she paused to catch her breath.

She had lived in houses with steps all her life. There had been steps in the house on Briardale Lane. Memories of those creaky stairs created a new wave of nausea. She swallowed hard to choke down the bile and continued her climb.

By the time she reached the top, her heart pounded as if she had sprinted a mile. The hallway was gloomy and silent. She switched on the lamp and inched to the bedroom where the drawers stood partially open, and clothes spilled across every surface. Peter had packed hurriedly and hadn't taken everything. *A good sign?* The note, written on his personalized stationery and probably with the gold pen she had given him on his last birthday, was propped on the pillow of the king-sized bed. Her hand trembled as she read:

I'll be back tomorrow to collect the rest of my things. P

A single sentence after almost nineteen years of marriage. She crumpled the note into a wad. The pink and green curtains and the matching comforter looked too cheerful in this large, lonely room. Her tabby cat, asleep in the middle of a pile of clothes, raised her head when Marlene walked in but didn't utter a sound. She scratched the cat behind the ears, and crawled in bed.

"It's just you and me now, Nellie."

Nellie butted her face against Marlene's hand and purred.

Daylight woke her later that morning. She eased off the edge of the bed and rubbed her temples. Nellie meowed at the door. Marlene let the animal loose and peeked out the window at the bright sunshine piercing through dark, threatening clouds.

Gloomy days like this reminded her of Mama, who once said, "I love the crash of thunder and the blaze of lightning. It's so thrilling."

Marlene craved sameness, routine and calm sunny days.

The telephone jarred her back to reality. She reached for it, but didn't lift it. *Probably Peter, perhaps to arrange a time to get his clothes.* She had no idea what she would say to him and right now couldn't face him, even on the phone. But after the fifth ring, her resolve weakened, and she lifted the receiver.

"Hello, Marly."

She sucked in her breath, immediately recognizing the voice, but not knowing how to respond.

"Are you there?"

"I'm here," she finally said. "I'm just shocked to hear your voice."

"That's understandable." Janie paused. "I'm in Atlanta, and I'd like to see you."

Marlene answered with a rueful chuckle. She stood up, ran her fingers through her hair, and paced the floor. Of all days for Janie to reappear. She couldn't believe it.

"So you say you're in Atlanta, as if you were here for a weekend visit and just wanted to drop in for a howdy-do? You've got some nerve calling like this." She couldn't control her bitterness. And, why should she after all this time and not a peep from her sister? Her head thundered like a sledgehammer. She stumbled into the bathroom and downed two aspirin.

When Janie didn't answer, and when the silence on the other end of the receiver became oppressive, Marlene added, "Where are you?"

"The Yellow Star Café next to Lucille's shop. I came looking for her." Janie paused. "I guess her shop's gone."

"Lucille died in a car wreck," Marlene blurted out without any pretense of concern for her sister's feelings.

Janie gasped. "When?"

"God knows. Not long after you left. What difference does that make now? What difference does anything make? You abandoned her; you abandoned me; you abandoned all of us."

Janie didn't answer.

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," She said and hung up.

Memories of the past shot in front of her eyes like gnats blurring her vision. A gun, a letter, blood. The memories kept coming back, usually at night when she closed her eyes.

She reached for the vodka bottle hidden under the bathroom sink and poured the last of the contents into a glass by her bed, swallowing slowly and savoring the warm liquid as it tingled through her body like a familiar, welcoming hug. Then she rose and dressed.

The Yellow Star Café sat on the corner of a back street not far from the Emory University campus. She caught a glimpse of herself in the window as she neared the café. Her hair hung loosely around her face. She couldn't remember the last time she had added highlights. She tucked the droopy strands behind her ears and pushed through the door.

Inside, several college-age boys in jeans and T-shirts lolled around the counter, drinking coffee and munching donuts. They didn't even look up when Marlene sauntered by. Instead, they elbowed each other and snickered when an attractive girl in skinny jeans passed by the window.

She spotted Janie in a corner booth. From this distance her sister hadn't changed much. She easily recognized the curly blond head glistening in the beam of sunlight from the window. Janie wore a gray suit with a white blouse buttoned high at the neck, very un-Janie-like.

She neared the table, wobbling on her three-inch heels but managing to keep her balance. When Janie rose to embrace her, she quickly slid into the booth, avoiding her sister's attempt at a hug.

"Want some coffee?" Janie asked, settling back in her seat.

"Yeah," She answered and caught the waitress's eye with a motion for a cup.

Marlene clenched her jaw, not sure how to begin. She studied the waitress who poured from a steaming pot. The woman's tired face was marred with wrinkles running across her forehead. She wore an apron, splashed with coffee and mustard. The waitress haphazardly poured fresh coffee into both cups without saying a word. Janie mopped up the spilled coffee with a napkin.

"Looks like you could use a nice breakfast," Janie said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Janie blinked. "You look tired. Your eyes are all red and puffy. Are you okay?"

"Fine and dandy."

Janie recoiled as if struck by a rattlesnake.

"What's the matter with you?" Marlene asked.

Janie sipped the coffee. "You just look different. I'm trying to adjust. That's all." Her sister's hand shook when she replaced the cup on the saucer.

Marlene let out a loud, ugly laugh. One of the boys from the counter glanced in her direction. "You don't look so hot yourself."

Janie didn't answer.

"Well?" she said, after tasting the coffee.

"Well, what?"

"Come off it. You disappeared, vanished without a trace, and you pop in this morning as though you never left after almost twenty years of silence. How can you just sit there? Talk, tell me what happened. Why didn't you write? Why didn't you send me something, anything, to let me know you were still alive?" She turned away and studied the flecks of gold on the Formica table.

Janie didn't respond.

Marlene took a deep breath. "So what did you do? Where did you go? Are you married? Do I have nieces and nephews that I don't know about?"

"That doesn't matter now," Janie said, waving away Marlene's questions. "I'm not married, and you don't have to worry about any nieces and nephews. Mostly I wandered around. I got jobs doing hair. I have my own shops now. I hoped I might see Lucille while I was here. She'd taught me so much, and I never really thanked her." She looked toward Lucille's former salon, her eyes luminous with emotion.

"I told you. Lucille died." Marlene's voice was harsh, as if she were talking to a forgetful old woman.

Silence.

"I needed you at my wedding. After everything--for God's sakes." She choked back a sob. "When people ask me if I have any brothers and sisters, I tell them they're all dead."

Janie continued to watch her with a maddening scowl, like her fifth grade teacher when she gave the wrong answer.

Marlene lifted the coffee cup to her lips with trembling hands. More brown liquid splattered across the Formica tabletop.

"My disappearing act happened a long time ago. It has little relevance to today, to now," Janie finally said.

"Maybe to you."

Janie took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I missed your wedding. But I couldn't come back. I wasn't able to breathe until I got out of this town. I felt as if a big giant hand was holding me down, keeping me away. You've no idea."

"No, I wouldn't know, would I? How do you think I felt?" Marlene's voice rose again.

The boys at the bar turned and stared in their direction. This was probably the most exciting thing that had happened in this café since Ted Turner bought the Braves.

"I know Mama wasn't what she should have been," she continued, "but she loved us. I know she did. What the papers said about her wasn't fair. She didn't have it so easy, married to someone like Ralph. No wonder she drank." Her voice shook while she spoke. "You left me to face this community alone." She paused, licked her lips, and tasted the coffee mixed with her raspberry flavored lipstick.

"You had Aunt Sarah and Peter," Janie corrected her.

"Naturally you don't understand. You'll never understand what it was like. I wanted to believe you

weren't selfish, but when you left like that, leaving me to bear the burden alone--"

"I can't explain it. I felt suffocated in the same town as Ralph."

"He was in prison."

"It didn't matter. I had to leave." Janie stopped and then said, "Or die."

Marlene stared at her. "Then why come back now?"

Janie drank her coffee and wrinkled her brow. "I've got things I need to do. Seeing you for one."

"So, you've seen me. You can check that off."

Silence.

Finally Janie asked, "Where's Ralph now?"

"Where do you think? After he was released, he hightailed it to Briardale Lane. Living in our house, if you can believe the nerve. He calls me every day, wanting to know if I've heard from you. He's possessed with you. Why won't he leave it all alone?"

"All I can say now, Marly, is I'm sorry. I'm here to make it right. I can't do anything else."

"It's too late. All you'll do now is cause trouble. Ralph paid his price. Mama's dead. It's over."

"I wish it were that simple."

"What do you mean?"

Janie ran her hand over her forehead. "I don't think he's paid his price--not for what he did to our family."

Marlene's stomach clenched. "What are you talking about? Talk to me, Janie!" She slammed her fist onto the table, rattling the cups and spilling more coffee.

A pain stabbed Marlene's head. Flashes shot across her mind--her mother lying in a pool of blood, face turned sideways, eyes vacant, the smell of gunpowder.

"Ralph claims he's innocent," Marlene said.

Janie's face drained of what little color it had.

"What do you mean he claims he's innocent?"

"He says he never killed Mama. I've had to bear the brunt of it--the letters and telephone calls begging me to help him. Maybe he really is innocent. With all the new stuff they're doing with DNA, he could prove he didn't do it, couldn't he?"

Janie blinked. "You're crazy. DNA won't help him."

Marlene shook her head.

Janie sat up. "What? Tell me what you're talking about?"

"The jury convicted him without the gun--mainly on your testimony. Would they have done so had they found the gun?"

"Of course they would have, and they might have sentenced him to life instead of twenty years. He killed Mom."

"I wish I could remember. I keep seeing images."

"What images?"

Tears filled Marlene's eyes. "I've tried to bring it back, but all I see are pieces and I'm not sure if what's real and what's a dream. Ralph thinks I know something. He thinks I have the answer."

Janie leaned toward her. "He's up to something. Why would he pressure you now that he's out?"

Marlene shook her head and sniffed into a tissue. "I've no idea."

Janie reached for her hand. "You can find out. He'd tell you. He trusts you."

She stared at her sister. "Don't open all this up again. I can't take it. Promise you won't."

"Please, Marly. Help me do this. I want to make this right before--"

"I can't. Don't make me." More tears splashed on the table. "If you want to make things right, then go away."

Janie pulled away and took a deep breath.

After a few minutes, Marlene wiped her nose with a tissue, reached inside her purse, and drew out a cigarette.

"When did you start smoking?" Janie asked.

"Who cares? Peter hates it. I think I do it to drive him crazy." She laughed a bitter laugh. "I'm not going to light up so don't panic."

Janie shifted in her seat.

Marlene twirled the cigarette.

"Marly, I don't like the way you look. You're so thin. Don't you ever eat?"

"You've got some nerve. Showing up here like this after not having shown the slightest bit of interest in me in twenty years and then telling me I need to eat. If this situation weren't so pathetic, it would be hilarious."

Janie narrowed her eyes. "Somebody needs to say it; you look like hell. Your eyes are all bloodshot, and your skin looks pasty. But your hair, good God, Marly, you had such amazing hair."

A burning heat rose to her cheeks.

"Talk to me," Janie said. "I'm scared for you."

"Oh, cut the crap." She jerked away from her and snapped the cigarette in two. "You're a stranger to me. You don't know me from, from say that kid over there." She pointed to a young student who sat alone at the counter. The others had left.

"We're connected. Like it or not, and I don't like what I see," Janie said.

"Sounds like you see a washed up old hag to me," Marlene retorted. She finished the last of the bitter coffee and smacked her lips.

"Not exactly. I see a very angry woman who is irritable, tired, and a little drunk. I see a woman who frightens me because she reminds me of my mother."

Marlene swallowed hard, steadied her voice, and then said, "You don't care about me anymore than you cared about Mama. Go back to wherever you came from. You can do nothing here but cause more trouble, and believe me, I have enough of that without you."

She got up from the booth and staggered out of the café, trying hard not to lose her footing on the slippery tile floor and not to turn around and look at her sister.