

*The Clock Strikes Midnight*

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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 12 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 soy milk, 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.*