

Jerry B. Jenkins & Dallas Jenkins

# MIDNIGHT CLEAR

A NOVEL



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
Carol Stream, Illinois

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*Midnight Clear*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Jenkins, Jerry B.

Midnight clear / Jerry B. Jenkins, Dallas Jenkins.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1659-8 (sc : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1659-3 (sc : alk. paper)

1. Christmas stories. I. Jenkins, Dallas. II. Title.

PS3560.E485M53 2007

813'.54—dc22

2007023358

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Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# ONE

December 24, 8:15 A.M.

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## *Lefty*

Lefty Boyle's rusted '76 Caprice sat half a football field from the other cars in the factory parking lot, and he was in it—head back, eyes closed, mouth open, drooling.

A loud knock on the window interrupted the Hallmark portrait.

The car door opened from the outside. "You alive in there?"

The voice belonged to Kamal, the janitor who'd served as Lefty's alarm clock for the past three days.

Lefty stirred. "Yeah."

With that word came a stench of alcohol and morning breath that almost startled Lefty fully awake. Almost.

"You're fifteen minutes late. Dale's looking for you, and he's more ticked than usual."

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Lefty tried to sink back into sleep. Nothing to think about. No reminders of, well, anything. Sleep was good.

Kamal nudged Lefty's shoulder. "You hear what I said?"

Lefty opened his eyes a sliver, but the morning light blinded him. He saw just enough to be reminded of where he was. He didn't remember exactly how he had gotten there, but fortunately, routine was his guide. As long as he got to his workplace parking lot at the end of each night, he would be where he needed to be the next morning.

"Yeah, I'm coming. And thanks for making me late!"

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry! My boss, who pays me, wanted me to do something more important than waking you up. Next time I'll tell him I work for Lefty."

For a foreigner, Kamal had an impressive grasp of American sarcasm.

Lefty grabbed his mangled toothbrush from the visor and stumbled out of the car. The effects of sleeping upright for six hours, combined with his usual morning headache, nearly caused him to collapse. He steadied himself against his car, rubbed his eyes, and took a deep, nasty breath. He found the factory entrance up ahead, trained his eyes, and headed toward it.

Two minutes later, his shoes shuffled across the

sticky floor of the factory bathroom. Lefty brushed his teeth and smoothed his greasy hair. He noticed a mustard stain on his shirt and, thinking quickly, turned the shirt inside out and took another glance at himself.

The shirt idea was a good one. Perhaps today had some promise. And wasn't it the twenty-fourth? Yeah, the last day before a holiday break for a few days. He could make it through today no problem. He straightened his shoulders and stared confidently at the image of himself before spotting his boss behind him in the grime-spotted mirror.

"Hey, Princess," Dale said, "when you're done putting on your makeup, get your royal behind into my office." The door slammed behind him.

Lefty's shoulders returned to their slumped position.

Merry Christmas.

### **Kirk**

It wasn't even 8:30 in the morning, and Kirk was tired. Not a good sign.

The call had awakened him at 6:30. Kirk found it hard to believe that his seventeen-year-old employee had magically fallen sick the day before Christmas, but he was at least impressed the kid got up that early to call him. *If only he was as committed to his work . . .*

The fact that it was Christmas Eve wasn't what

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annoyed Kirk about coming in. He had no special plans, and he wasn't a big holiday guy anyway. It was more that he had gotten his hopes up about sleeping in today. Kirk took only a handful of days off each year; and when he did, he slept in till noon, worked on the porch he'd been building for years, and relaxed. He'd been looking forward to today for over a week, and he'd been in the middle of some deep sleep when he was informed that this day would be the same as the 360 or so other mind-numbing days of the year.

Kirk wheeled into Mr. K's Quick Stop and parked in his usual spot, off to the side, amid loose gravel and tall weeds, close to the woods. He glanced up at the rusted sign. *Good grief, what a cheesy name.* That he was responsible for it made it worse.

He unlocked the door and two padlocks and stepped inside. His place. Four rows of "convenient" goods (healthy food was inconvenient, apparently) in front of a wall of beverages and frozen food. The side wall bore random fishing items and included a tiny, greasy eating area no longer open for business. Large banners, depicting beer and cigarettes consumed by people who looked nothing like his customers, hung from the ceiling.

For most gas stations of this ilk, opening meant turning on the pumps, the cash register, and the food machines. But try as he might, Kirk couldn't break the routine he'd started when he first bought

the place and actually gave a rip. Toilet scrubbed. Garbage emptied. Soap dispenser filled. Paper towel and napkin canisters loaded. Merchandise organized. And, of course, brewing the gourmet coffee. He knew that offering gourmet coffee at a place like this was akin to offering a filet mignon at a hot dog stand. His store and his customers didn't deserve gourmet coffee. But he couldn't do the instant stuff. Just couldn't.

He finished the brew, wiped down the counters, and tossed some loose trash. For the local trailer park families, shirtless smokers, meth addicts, fishermen, and long-distance travelers who thought the Southwest would be a good Christmas location, Mr. K's Quick Stop was ready.

*Sorry, We're Closed* became *Yes, We're Open!*  
Merry Christmas.

### ***Eva***

Eva was determined that her death would cause no complications for anyone, and since today was the day—or rather, tonight would be the night—she thought it best to prepare.

She trudged through her house toward the kitchen, running through a mental checklist of the tasks she needed to accomplish today. She had always made a point of ensuring nothing was left undone or turned on when she left the house for

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vacation; she certainly wanted to make sure of the same now that she was leaving her house forever.

As Eva grabbed the cat food bag from her kitchen counter for the last time, it wasn't sadness or remorse she felt. Just a sense of duty. She would accomplish her tasks today with calm and dignity. She would not cry, she would not be overly sentimental, and she would not act scared. This would be like any other day, just perhaps a little busier.

Eva lugged the bag out to her driveway and, leaning against the house, bent and filled the bowl. The sound brought Scrappy, the neighborhood stray, running. As the cat dug in, Eva emptied the rest of the food onto the concrete. Scrappy would need enough to last however long it took for someone to discover Eva's body.

Merry Christmas.

### ***Mary***

Mary pulled into the drop-off spot at the elementary school a bit too fast. Her morning routine with Jacob always seemed rushed now that she was raising him on her own. At six years old, Jacob had no problem getting up at 6:45 every morning. But Mary did. She would turn on the Disney Channel for him, go back to bed for half an hour, then slam through the morning to get him to school by 8:15 and herself to work by 8:30. It helped that she didn't need to look flawless and that she and Jacob were both fine with



Nutri-Grain bars in the minivan as their breakfast of champions.

Jacob's too-cute teacher, wearing a too-cute Santa hat, bounced out to greet them. "Hey, Jacob!" Megan said. "How're you doing, buddy?"

Jacob smiled and waved, unbuckling his seat belt.

Megan's smile vanished, and she cocked her head. *Here it comes.*

"Hey, Mary. You doing okay?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"Seriously. You doing all right?" Megan lowered her voice, as if to emphasize the seriousness of her question.

Mary paused. Megan wasn't going to let her off the hook, especially today. "As well as can be expected. Seriously."

Thankfully, Jacob struggled with the door, and Megan rushed to help him out of the van.

As he ran off, Mary called out, "Love you, Jacob! Be good!"

Without turning or slowing, he hollered, "Love you!"

Mary turned back to Megan. "His juice box is in his backpack. He'll try to tell you I forgot to give him—"

"Got it." Megan smiled knowingly, then looked puzzled, peering in at Mary. "Hey, you know those seats *are* adjustable."

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Mary had been riding low in the seat, reaching for the wheel, for a year and had gotten used to it.

“Oh. Yeah. Well, this is the way Rick liked it, though. I just . . . you know . . .”

Megan backed off. “Yeah. Okay. See you at noon?”  
*Finally.*

“See you at noon.”

Today was December 24. This conversation would not be the last of its kind, Mary was sure. *People are just trying to be nice*, she reminded herself.

Merry Christmas.

***Mitch***

Mitch exchanged his car for the fifteen-passenger van in the church parking lot. The van needed gas for a dozen small trips all afternoon and evening. This jaunt to the gas station would mark the only time he would be in it without a load of loud teenagers.

It was going to be a miserable day, plain and simple. In six hours, when he had to take his youth group kids caroling, it would get really miserable. But this was also the one-year anniversary of the accident.

A year before, Mitch’s car had been in the shop, so Rick, his best friend and one of the youth leaders, gave him a ride home from the church youth party. The drunk driver never slowed as he raced through the intersection and rammed the driver’s side of Rick’s car. Mitch suffered cracked ribs and a sepa-

rated shoulder when Rick's body drove him into the passenger door.

Mitch had needed a sling and bandages. Rick had needed epic, emergency surgery. A year later, he was still institutionalized.

Everything had changed that night. *Everything*. Rick wasn't really Rick anymore. On the rare days he was settled enough to have a moderately coherent conversation, they had nothing to talk about. Most days Rick was like a two-year-old, everything included—tantrums, diapers, you name it. Either way, the casualness and shared sense of humor that had defined their friendship were gone, replaced by awkward small talk.

Mitch hadn't visited him in weeks; it was too hard, and the visits didn't seem to do much for Rick anyway.

Now, as Mitch passed through the same intersection, he got that same chill and couldn't keep from looking both ways repeatedly. He'd passed through it hundreds of times in the past year, but it was always the same. Every time, random details of the accident flashed in his mind. The screaming of a woman bystander, the blood pooling in Mitch's lap, the flashing lights of half a dozen cop cars and ambulances. Every time, he shuddered and felt weak because of his reaction.

The fact that the accident had taken place on Christmas Eve made forgetting or ignoring the

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one-year anniversary impossible, even if he had wanted to. Eventually, Christmas Eves might feel normal again. But so far, this one wasn't looking good.

Merry Christmas.

## About the Authors

JERRY B. JENKINS ([jerryjenkins.com](http://jerryjenkins.com)) is the writer of the best-selling Left Behind series and author of over 170 books total. He owns the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild, an organization dedicated to mentoring aspiring authors. Former vice president for publishing for the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, he also served many years as editor of *Moody* magazine and is now a member of the Institute's board of directors.

His writing has appeared in publications as varied as *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, *Parade*, *Guideposts*, in-flight magazines, and dozens of other periodicals. Jenkins's biographies include books with Billy Graham, Hank Aaron, Bill Gaither, Luis Palau, Walter Payton, Orel Hershisser, and Nolan Ryan, among many others. His books appear regularly on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly* best-seller lists.

Jerry is also the writer of the nationally syndicated sports-story comic strip *Gil Thorp*, distributed to newspapers across the United States by Tribune Media Services.

Jerry and his wife, Dianna, live in Colorado and have three grown sons and four grandchildren.

DALLAS JENKINS started Jenkins Entertainment with his father, Jerry B. Jenkins. Within a year, they developed, financed, and produced the \$2 million independent film *Hometown Legend*. Dallas directed the short film based on this novel, *Midnight Clear*, starring Stephen Baldwin, which won a Crystal Heart Award from the Heartland Film

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Festival and was the opening night selection at the San Diego Film Festival.

In 2006, Dallas was the co-executive producer of *Though None Go with Me*, a movie based on his father's book, which aired on the Hallmark Channel. His feature directing debut, also called *Midnight Clear*, recently won the Cinequest Film Festival award for Best First Feature. It will be released in December of 2007. Dallas has also written dozens of articles in nationally published magazines.

Dallas and his wife, Amanda, live in Los Angeles with their three children. He can be reached directly at [dallas@jenkins-entertainment.com](mailto:dallas@jenkins-entertainment.com).



## **An Interview with Actress Victoria Jackson**

VICTORIA JACKSON was raised in a Bible-believing, piano-playing, gymnastic home with no TV. Her dad was a gym coach, so she competed in gymnastics from age five to age eighteen. She was also a cheerleader and a homecoming queen. Victoria attended Florida Bible College, received a gymnastic scholarship to Furman University, attended Auburn University for one year, and ended up in Hollywood, California, via summer stock in Alabama, where she met Johnny Crawford (of *The Rifleman* fame). Crawford put her in his night club act and later sent her a one-way ticket to the showbiz capital.

Victoria performed stand-up comedy for two years until *The Tonight Show* starring Johnny Carson put her act—which consisted of her doing a handstand while reciting poetry—on national TV. Following her twenty-two appearances with Johnny, she starred in several movies and TV shows, most notably *Saturday Night Live*.

In 1991 Victoria reunited with her high school sweetheart, married him, and moved to Florida, where he's a police helicopter pilot. As a mother of two, homemaking is Victoria's priority now, but she's always available to perform. Recently she has guest-starred on shows such as *The Naked Truth* and *The 700 Club*.

**What is it like being a Christian in Hollywood?**

I think being a Christian in Hollywood is the same as being a Christian in any other career. You are outnumbered and sometimes excluded or misunderstood. For example, my husband is on the police force, and he is a minority there just like I am when I go to work. In our workplaces, we both have to try to be a light in the darkness, be the ultimate professional for God's glory, and love our coworkers to the Lord.

**When and how did you become a Christian?**

I became a Christian at age six when I knelt by my bed next to my dad and asked Jesus to forgive me of my sins and come into my heart. Then I got baptized at our church, Carol City Baptist.

**Did you feel pressure as the only Christian on *Saturday Night Live*?**

At *Saturday Night Live*, I did not feel pressure being the only Christian. My dresser Beth Lincks was a Christian and prayed with me sometimes. Mary D'Angelo, my hair stylist, prayed with us too. Mostly, I focused on doing the best I could, not getting fired, and trying to keep up with the greatest comic geniuses of our generation!

One time I thought a sketch wasn't appropriate for me as a Christian to do, and I asked Lorne, the boss, if I could not be in it. He was very kind and understanding and gave the part to another actress. The dress rehearsal audience didn't laugh at the sketch, and it was cut from the show.



**Have you always talked about your beliefs on set?**

I have always tried to witness to my friends and coworkers throughout my life when it was appropriate of course.

**What inspired you to become a part of this project?  
You are known for comedy. What made you take on  
a more serious role?**

I was thrilled to be asked to be in my first Christian movie. I thought (director) Dallas Jenkins would do a great job. I'd met him once before. I thought the script was very good.

**Which character do you most identify with?**

I most identify with K Callan's character (Eva Boyle)—the lonely, older lady. Being forty-eight years old now, I keep wondering what my purpose will be when my kids leave the nest and the acting roles dry up. I know I'm supposed to serve God, but how? I like the verse in Psalm 92:14: "They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing." I hope I am still acting when I am an older woman. K did a great job and is beautiful.

**Why is *Midnight Clear* an important story to both  
Christians and nonbelievers?**

*Midnight Clear* is an important story because it is about hope. If we could see the big picture, like God does, we wouldn't give up on ourselves.

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**This movie deals with some serious issues. What would you say to people facing depression and suicidal despair?**

What I would say to people facing depression and despair is (a) they are not alone—many of us have felt the exact same way, (b) we all have failures and sadness in our lives, (c) read the Bible and pray, (d) with faith the size of a mustard seed you can see the sun again and be useful and happy, (e) pray “God, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief” and He will, (f) and think about someone else. Helping others always brings a high!