

---

# MINUTE ZERO

Stronghold Book One

---

CHRIS JAYNE

**INFERIS**  
PRESS

Published by Inferis Press

©2020

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Chris Jayne  
Minute Zero

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-507-9

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-508-6

Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-509-3

v8

Cover Art by Inferis Press

---

PART I

Minute Zero

---



---

## Chapter 1

---

Lori  
Monday  
11:00 AM Mountain Time  
Graystone Rest Area, I90, Montana

**L**ori Dovner dried her hands on a paper towel, then froze as she caught her own reflection in the grimy restroom mirror. A punk rock college student after a rough night out stared back, pale, utterly disheveled. She looked nineteen, short spikes of black hair everywhere.

What happened to the most sought-after private chef in Miami? What happened to the thirty-four-year-old mother of two? Her friends and clients back home would certainly be shocked to see her now. People invited her into their homes and opened their kitchens to her, expecting her to make an excellent impression on their guests, and she never met the public without carefully tasteful makeup, an expensive handbag, good shoes. Now, she wore no cosmetics, her careless

appearance exacerbated by the tacky plastic sunglasses she'd taken to wearing in public, so stupidly large that they approached Elton John proportions. Nevertheless, they had the desired effect. Her five-year-old had cried the first time he'd seen her, and she didn't even recognize herself when she looked in the mirror. No stranger could possibly associate this grubby black-haired teenager in holey jeans and coffee-stained sweatshirt with the poised, immaculate professional the news channels and tabloids were showing to the public.

She paused a final second, realizing something else. Her face was noticeably thinner, even to her own eyes. It was no wonder: she'd hardly done more than pick at food for the last week. Previously there was never enough time to go to the gym, and she'd despaired for years about the last ten pounds she'd put on when she was pregnant with Brandon. Maybe she could get a new celebrity diet book out of this: "Lose Weight While Running For Your Life." Yeah, there was a plan.

Swallowing hard, Lori pulled the glasses off, reached for a paper towel to wipe away the hot tears that had suddenly welled in her eyes as she asked the question for the millionth time: *What the hell was she doing here?* Then, *stop*, she told herself ruthlessly. Just stop. The questions had no answers. Bad things happened to good people.

Lori finished blotting her eyes, then rinsed the scratchy towel in the warm water, and wiped the parking lot grit off of her skin, telling herself that this was almost over, that she could do this. They had 130 miles to go, just a little more than two hours travel, though she spared just a second for a cynical thought. For a week, all she had wanted to do was get "to Montana," and when they crossed the state line this morning, the cruel joke hit her: Montana was a big place. A very big place.

They still had almost 250 miles to go.

A toilet flushed. Out of the stall further down the long row,

a young woman, perhaps thirty, emerged. She walked to the sink next to Lori and washed her hands. Lori gave her a brief smile as their gazes met in the mirror then turned away quickly to hide her reaction: the woman had quite the nasty bruise on one of her cheeks. Just as she did, though, she saw the woman return her smile.

Lori watched her surreptitiously in the mirror as she walked towards the door. This sharp-looking professional didn't seem like the type who would put up with getting popped around by a man, but, Lori reflected, you never knew. Hell, maybe she did kickboxing. In her tailored gray suit, carrying a simple, but obviously expensive black leather bag, she definitely looked out of place in the interstate rest stop which was populated mostly by folks who looked pretty much like Lori did now: jeans, sweats, tee shirts and a lot of hair that looked like it hadn't seen a comb in days. Women who looked like this generally flew to where they were going, just as, Lori reflected, she had, at least up until now.

As she moved away, Lori was distracted by the woman's hair. Very long, it was tied back in a neat ponytail that bounced when she walked, and Lori couldn't stop herself from thinking, for just a second, about her own long hair that she'd cut, about how Brandon had burst into tears when she'd come out of the seedy motel bathroom with short black spikes. She took a final glance into the mirror. Yup, the only thing missing were neon blue highlights.

Enough, Lori sighed. Focus on the next task. Focus on getting your kids to Roger and Lou's, because one thing was certain: your hair's not going to grow if you're dead.

Even as she looked at herself, though, she acknowledged that there was another reason she was hesitating this morning: her brother-in-law, Roger Hale. For most of the trip, she hadn't allowed herself to think about the reason she had had a falling out with her sister five years ago, but she could avoid it no

longer. There were a couple reasons, but high on the list was the fact that Lori thought her sister's husband was an arrogant misogynistic asshole who had forced his wife - her sister - to move to some Love-Honor-Obey commune. Good looking, really good looking to be sure, (if you were allowed to have thoughts like that about your sister's husband) but a jerk as far as Lori was concerned. No point in being polite about it, and that wasn't going to change when she walked through the door.

Of course, there also was another reason she'd been avoiding Roger as well.

*Stop it*, Lori again told herself ruthlessly. She couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. The reality was that it was *his* door she was going to be walking through in about three hours. A niggling voice that sounded suspiciously like her father's rang in her ears: "My house, my rules." When she'd called Lou, without hesitation her sister had said to come to Montana. In spite of Lori's falling out with her sister, Lou and Roger were there for her, and personal considerations took a back seat when your children's lives were on the line.

She stuffed the cheap plastic sunglasses back on her face; she took one final second to ruffle the punk cut back up into spikes. They'd have their lunch, and then drive straight through and be to Lou's by 3:00. And maybe tonight, in a house with her gun-toting brother-in-law, she would be able to sleep more than a couple of hours without waking in terror. She paused a final moment, wiped a stray hair back from her forehead.

As she exited the restroom she started running a mental inventory of what was left in the cooler. The kids were hoping she'd light up the camp stove and make grilled cheese or hot dogs...

A man was walking away from the men's restroom, not five feet in front of her. For one instant, she barely noticed him, just another stranger. And then it hit her. She froze, gasped as if



she had been punched, a frisson of fear slamming through her body, painful down to her fingertips.

It was Raoul Saldata.

This was the corpulent body that had haunted her dreams for the last week; she'd recognize him anywhere. The last time she'd seen him, he was wearing a bloodstained button-down dress shirt and chasing her with a knife. That shirt, of course, was gone, but it had been replaced with another that looked exactly the same, except for the blood.

Even though she could only see him from behind, there was no doubt. It was him.

Involuntarily, she shrank back towards the door of the woman's restroom. Had he heard her gasp? Should she run? But where to?

Frozen with indecision, all she could do was watch, not breathing, but within an instant she saw he'd made no movement to alter his gait. Nothing indicated that he'd heard the small, terrified sound behind him. If she hadn't taken the additional second to check out her hair one last time, they would have walked from the respective restrooms simultaneously. Would he have recognized her with the short hair and sunglasses? It wouldn't have mattered, because she would have recognized *him*. She would not have been able to hide an instant and terrified reaction, and he certainly would have noticed *that*.

Snack and drink machines hummed in the foyer between the restrooms. A middle-aged woman standing at a soda machine had heard her sharp draw of breath and turned to look at her curiously. "You okay?" she asked. Just as the woman asked the question, Saldata pushed opened the glass door and left the building.

Lori watched him walk, astounded. He had left. He was *not* going to turn around. He really had not seen her.

“Honey?” the woman persisted. “You look like you seen a ghost.”

Her mind spinning, she glanced over at the woman who was regarding her with a look of concern. “My... uh... ex-husband,” she babbled, saying the first thing that came into her head. “What a coincidence! Out here in the middle of nowhere.” Lori gave a nervous laugh and quickly tried to minimize the situation. “Crazy!”

The woman gave her a skeptical look, then, shaking her head, went back to the candy bar choices. Lori slowly floated just a bit closer to the glass doors and watched intently as Saldata walked across a small courtyard, towards the parking lot fronting the restroom building. The cars were parked in two long rows, one facing the building and the other facing away, looking out towards the interstate.

Lori knew more blind panic. Where were Brandon and Grace? When they’d pulled into the rest area, Simone, her au pair, had brought them to the restroom while Lori had taken her German Shepherd Sasha on a quick initial trip to the fenced dog run. They had no actual reason to come back up to the restroom building, but that meant nothing to a ten-year-old and five-year-old when candy machines were involved. Would Saldata know her children if he saw them? She had to assume he would; all of their pictures had been on the news, and even if Brandon was nothing more than a typical five-year-old boy, Grace, with her long black hair and lovely quarter-Korean features was very distinctive.

What did this mean? Lori’s head spun sickly with frantic questions. Somehow, Saldata had figured out they were on their way to her sister’s. How? Did that mean he knew she was in her Aunt Sylvia’s car? Luckily, in a state where every other vehicle was either a pickup truck or an SUV, Sylvia’s black Escalade was unremarkable. Also, it was parked behind the building right by the dog run, not in the front lot where most

of the cars parked. Unless someone actually saw the Florida plates, it wouldn't stick out.

The monster who was trying to kill her walked across the parking lot to one of the cars in the row facing away, and got into a small SUV. Even at this distance Lori could see the vehicle had the distinctive Montana license plates. A rental? It must be. Parked nearly directly opposite the building's doors, the car's reverse lights flashed on, and Lori realized with horror that, as it backed up, the driver would be looking in the rearview mirror. Shaking, she ducked back towards the restroom door and slid between two snack machines. She had no idea if he could see through the glass doors into the foyer area, but she wasn't taking any chances.

As the car pulled away, her heart stopped all over again. He wasn't alone. As soon as she saw the car in profile, she saw that there were two other occupants of the vehicle. In the driver's seat sat a man Lori recognized all too well. He'd been in Saldatta's house both times she'd been there, first for the original visit when she'd met the housekeeper and checked out the kitchen and then, the second time on the night of the party.

Actually, he'd been there all *three* times she'd been to Saldatta's house. The last time she'd seen him, he had tried to kill her.

The other occupant, the one in the back seat? Her vision spun and she staggered. Just when she thought it couldn't get worse, it did.

It was the woman she'd just seen in the restroom.

The woman at the snack machine was watching her again with a look of concern. "Honey," she repeated, "you sure you're okay?" She reached out and caught Lori's arm, obviously noticing that Lori was swaying on her feet.

The SUV moved out of her field of vision and Lori shook her head, wordlessly pulled out of the woman's gentle grasp, and cautiously approached the glass doors. She held her breath

in terror, imagining the worst, imaging that somehow her kids would be on the sidewalk, standing right there, in plain sight, but no. The car never slowed, and within a couple seconds, zoomed down the on-ramp towards the interstate.

Lori exhaled, a loud frantic sound that was almost a whimper.

Behind her the woman spoke. "That bad, huh?"

"Yeah," Lori said, and walked out the door.

A path divided the front area of the rest stop, containing the restroom and snack building, from the back area, where there was tractor-trailer parking next to the dog run. Two trucks idled there and, she saw now, completely shielded the Escalade. Relief slammed through her as she saw that neither her car nor the children were even visible from this vantage point.

They had passed through Billings about an hour and half earlier; she'd even seen signs on the interstate directing traffic to the airport. Given the fact that he was in a car with Montana plates, he'd obviously flown in and rented a car.

So how was he here? Had she been spotted somewhere along the road and it was just a good guess? No, if she'd been seen somewhere, Denver for example, it would take a huge leap of faith to randomly fly three people to Montana, and, for heaven's sake, for Saldata to come himself. Lori had no idea who Raoul Saldata was, but he wasn't someone who put himself out in public. Raoul Saldata had others do his dirty work for him. As she sped along the path, she knew it must be more than that. This was no fishing expedition. For Saldata to fly here - with "buddies" - he had to be positive. He had to *know* she was here.

There was only one way he could have known. Saldata had almost certainly found Michelle and Salvadore and they had been forced to reveal her plans and destination. For the last week, she'd been trying not to think about grim images of a

tortured dying man, but now they exploded in her head. She knew what lengths this man would go to.

Lori forced herself to focus on the here and now. Whatever had happened to her employees, it was done. The only way forward for Lori was to get protection, and make absolutely sure that Saldata never found her or her children.

Then, a startling awareness dawned, so staggering she stopped moving for a moment. Saldata *was* looking for her, obviously, but he wasn't looking for her *here*. He'd never even glanced around, never scanned his surroundings as he'd walked out towards the rented vehicle. What did that mean?

Somehow Saldata had figured out that she was on the way to her sister's. How no longer mattered, but once he'd known that, he probably guessed she'd left Miami almost immediately, last Monday, Tuesday at the latest, and he could read a map. He wasn't looking for her here because he assumed she was ahead of him, already at Louise and Roger's house, which she would have been if Grace hadn't gotten so sick that they had been forced to stop at a hotel for two days. When they'd left Florida last Monday, a week ago, she'd hoped they could make the trip to her sister's home in Montana by Friday night. They should have been to Louise's two days ago already.

Panicked, she knew she had to warn Louise, and she started to run so fast on the path she almost stumbled, but then she forced herself to calm down. It was 130 miles from where they were to west of Lewiston, near Hobson, where Lou and Roger's farm was. He might be a monster, but he wasn't a magician.

Plus, he had traveled here himself instead of calling the local authorities and giving them a made-up story, which would have been easy enough to do if all he wanted was that she be "picked up" for questioning. No, he was only interested in one outcome, and while he might have connections and influence in Miami, in Montana he had to go it alone.

Lori reached the Escalade and scanned the dog walk area. It was a nice fenced space, and Sasha was off the leash, cavorting ridiculously with a Dachshund about one-tenth her size. Simone and Grace were sitting on a bench within the fenced area; Brandon was running around with the dogs. Good. She could call her sister and talk without the children overhearing.

As long as a steady supply of new toys and videos showed up on the journey, five-year-old Brandon seemed nearly oblivious to what was going on. Grace, however, had realized that something was terribly wrong, and it was starting to show in her face and in her demeanor. Lori had seen the ten-year-old crying several times when she thought no one was looking, though whether that was stress or ongoing consequences from her brief but violent illness, it was hard to tell.

She grabbed the burner phone from the central console and looked at it. So far, the few times she'd checked in with Louise, she'd called from a pay phone, not wanting to risk that someone was watching Louise's phone line and then could somehow track the disposable. Should she go back up to the building and see if they had pay phones?

Lori didn't want to take the time. Every time she called from a pay phone it took about five minutes of fooling around with the prepaid calling card, and half the time the pay phones didn't even work. She wanted to call Lou this second, tell her what was going on and figure out what to do. Her plans for a safe haven had just been burned to the ground and now there was no way she could go to their house.

Taking a deep breath, she dialed Lou's number on the burner phone. Now, she prayed that her brother-in-law, a person she had avoided talking to for five years would be the one to answer.

It was. "Hello?" a deep voice rumbled into the phone.

"It's Lori."

“Where are you? Louise said you’d be here last night.” No idle chitchat here: her brother-in-law certainly got right to the point.

Still, for a moment, Lori felt as if she were in la-la land. She’d tried to get through to Louise the previous night, getting a busy tone repeatedly, but then this morning her sister had finally answered. How did Roger not know? “I called this morning. Didn’t Lou tell you?”

“You called this morning?” Lori heard her brother-in-law’s rough exhalation. “That explains it. We actually had a little accident here this morning. The child of one of our friends fell off a swing and broke her arm. Louise went to the hospital with the mother. They were in such a hurry to get out of here, get the girl to the ER, I guess she forgot to mention it.” He paused. “So, what happened?”

“There was a huge wreck on the interstate in northern Wyoming just south of Sheridan, but...” She stopped, none of that mattered now. “Roger, I’m in trouble.”

His voice came back, quick and sure. “What’s going on? Where are you?”

“I’m at a rest area about an hour outside of Billings.”

“West or east?”

“West. We’re maybe 20 miles from where we go off the interstate and come north to Hobson. I think it’s at a town called Big Timber, but I can’t remember the road number.”

“191,” he supplied. She heard Roger speaking to someone else in the room, his voice distant, as if he was holding the phone away from his mouth. “Top drawer of the desk. Yeah, there. Should be a road atlas in there.” His voice came back into the phone. “I’m pretty sure I know where you are, but I’m getting a map. What’s going on?”

“The man who is after me is here. His name is Raoul Saldata and...”

“There? Now? With you?” Roger’s voice, while remaining calm, still carried a note of real urgency.

“No. I saw him just by chance. He didn’t see me. He got into a car and left.”

“You’re sure he didn’t see you?”

“Yes. If he’d seen me, there’s no way he would have driven off.” That was actually the understatement of the century. If Saldata had seen her, she would be dead. She quickly shared with her brother-in-law her theory that if it were not for Grace’s illness, they would already be at their destination and because of that, Saldata was no longer looking for them on the road. “Roger,” Lori’s voice cracked, “he wants to kill me. And he’s not alone. He’s got two people with him, a man and a woman.”

Lori heard what sounded like a door slam and then another voice muffled in the background, the words unintelligible, but it was definitely a male voice, and not her sister.

“How long ago was this?”

“Just a couple of minutes. I saw him, watched him leave, walked back to my car and then called you.” She did the quick math. “Four... five minutes.”

“So, two hours from here,” Roger stated flatly. Lori got the feeling he was talking to someone else as well as to her. “Is he armed?”

Lori swallowed, her throat dry as dust, thinking about what she’d seen at Saldata’s house. “I’m sure he is. But,” Lori had a sudden thought, “can you bring guns on the plane?”

“He flew?”

“He was in a rental car. I assume he flew. That means he would have had to bring the guns on the plane, right? Can you do that?”

“You have to declare them if you fly commercial. But, if this guy has enough money or influence, he may have come on



a private jet. Then he could bring anything he wanted.” Roger paused. “Tell me about who he’s with.”

“I don’t know who they are. I don’t know this man at all. I don’t know anything about him. I just did a party for him. But, the first one is some sort of assistant. A bodyguard maybe. I saw him at Saldata’s house. About the same age, late forties, early fifties. The other one is a woman. Younger, maybe thirty. Very professional. She looked like,” Lori envisioned what she’d seen in the restroom and suddenly Lori realized exactly what she looked like. “...like a lawyer or a detective maybe. She saw me in the bathroom.”

“She saw you?” Roger couldn’t hide the shock from his voice.

“Yeah,” Lori explained, “but she didn’t recognize me. Even if she had a picture of me, I cut my hair really short and dyed it black. I look very different. And the kids weren’t with me, thank God.”

There was a long pause as Roger was obviously considering the next steps. “Did you notice the model of the car?”

“It was a small SUV.” She thought about car models that she knew, ones that she and some of her friends owned. “It wasn’t as big as my Range Rover. Maybe something like a Toyota 4Runner? That size. It was gray. And it definitely had Montana plates.”

“How did he know you were coming here?”

“I don’t know, but...” Quickly, Lori shared with Roger her fear that Saldata had somehow found her employees, Salvadore and Michelle.

As she waited for Roger to respond, she watched her two children with Simone. Brandon had run over to Simone, and, his face turned up, he said something to her. He smiled, so sweet and trusting. My God, she had to protect them, all of them. The silence on Roger’s side of the call grew. “What

should I do? Where should I go? I'm so sorry." She heard her voice rising to shrill, but she couldn't stop it.

Roger interrupted curtly. "What's done is done, Lori. You need to hold it together. And the only thing that matters now is keeping everyone safe."

"I don't know what to do. Even if I turn around and I didn't come to you, he's still on his way there."

"I want you to stay there."

"Here? At the rest stop?"

"Yes, I'm going to send someone to get you. Do you remember my brother Deacon? He's on leave and visiting us for a few weeks."

For the second time in ten minutes, Lori felt like she'd been punched in the stomach and for a very long moment, she could not breathe. On a day when things could not possibly have gotten worse, they just did. "Yeah, I met him at your wedding," she managed to choke out. That flat statement masked a wealth of information. Did Roger notice how strangled her voice was?

Lori remembered Deacon Hale very well, but now was not the time to dwell on it, though why in the name of all that was holy had her sister not mentioned that Deacon was there visiting them? For a brief hysterical second, she wondered if she'd be better off taking her chances with Saldata. And in the next moment, she knew a hard truth, one she had never allowed herself to acknowledge. The main reason she had avoided being around Lou and Roger for the last five years was that Roger reminded her way, *way* too much of Deacon. She could barely gasp out her next, strangled question. "So, you're not coming?"

"No." Roger's voice was flat and hard. "If what you say is true, I have three people on their way here who are perfectly capable of putting a bullet into the brains of anyone in my family."

“You think I should just wait here? At the rest stop? What if he comes back?”

“You’re sure the woman didn’t recognize you?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. She just walked right out of the bathroom. I look really different, Roger.”

“Then, they won’t come back,” Roger responded, his voice full of confidence. “Why would they? And even if they’d turn around for some reason, they’d be on the other side of the interstate.” Lori saw the logic in that, as he continued. “Just sit tight. Deke’ll be there in two hours, give or take.”

In less than three hours she’d see him. See Deke. Could she do it? There was no way. No. Fucking. Way.

The phone went dead in her hand.

And in one instant the world changed forever.