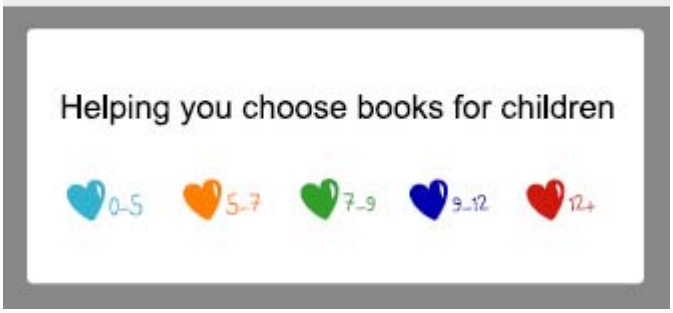
Lovereading4kids.co.uk



opening extract from

Time Runners Freeze-Framed

written by

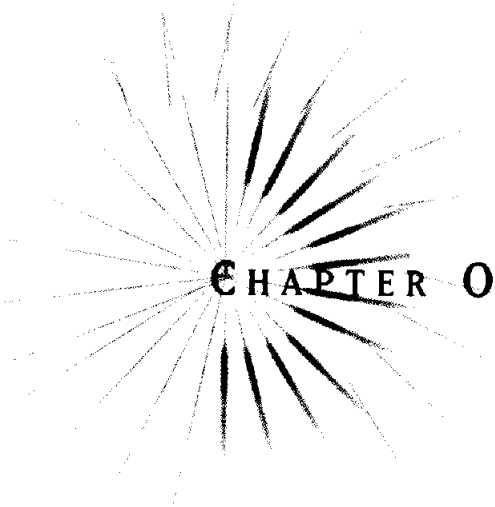
Justin Richards

published by

Simon & Schuster

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



CHAPTER ONE

Let me tell you about the day my life ended. I remember it as if it was yesterday, which maybe it was. Or perhaps it will be tomorrow. I lose track. After all, it was a long time ago.

Rewind: I need to start a day or two before that. When I first saw Anna, and when Midnight came looking for me.

It was after the end-of-school rush. I always waited for most of the other kids to leave. I'd go to the library or my form base and get my homework done. Easier than trying to do it at home with my little sister, Ellie, making a racket and Mum and Dad on my case. Easier to say, 'Yeah, I've done it.' And it meant I didn't have

to leave school with everyone else – the walkers and the bus children, upper school, teachers, the lot. I'd rather be on my own.

There were still a few other kids about and I recognized some of them. But it was a huge school. There were more children in my year than there were in the whole of my old school. I was the only one who went up from my primary school to Oakridge that year, but we'd moved into the middle of town and it was just down the road, so I could walk. New home, new school.

'You'll soon settle in,' Mum kept saying. 'You'll soon make friends and join clubs. You'll soon know loads of people.'

'It's OK,' I told her. 'I'm fine.' Though of course I hated it. Funny, that – you never appreciate things till they're taken away from you.

So there I am (or was, or will be), just coming out of the main block and starting along the drive. And that girl with the crooked, nervous smile is Anna – waiting. Certain it will do no good to speak to me, but knowing she has to try.

11TH OCTOBER

I thought she was just another schoolkid. She looked about that age, a year or two above me. Fourteen perhaps, maybe fifteen. But she wasn't wearing a purple school jumper or dark blazer. Someone's sister? I didn't really think about it. I didn't really notice what she *was* wearing – the pale blouse and loose skirt both held tight at the waist by a big belt.

I suppose it looked a bit out of place. Especially her watch. A flat black disc with a thin black strap. I noticed that, poking out the end of her sleeve. It looked kind of neat and cool, and I guess it didn't really seem to fit with the rest of her image. But when you're twelve and you hate your school and wish your parents would leave you in peace and someone else would adopt your kid sister, you really don't think too much about fashion.

'Jamie!'

I actually turned right round. Must have looked daft, staring in the wrong direction.

'It's me,' she said. 'Anna. Only . . .' She sighed

and pouted and shook her head. 'This is a waste of time.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'Do I know you?' Some older sister of a friend of Ellie's, I thought.

'You will. Unless you listen to me.'

Which sounded odd, and I probably laughed. I looked at my watch – I remember clearly that it was four minutes past four. The second hand was just grazing the number one. I barely glanced at it, though, just making the point I wasn't going to hang around.

'I don't have much time,' I said. And *she* laughed, though I had no idea why she thought it was funny. Not then . . . And it annoyed me, so I said, 'Yes. I've got homework to do. Need to check stuff out on the internet.'

She frowned, the smile gone. 'Internet?'

'My computer. Well, my dad's.'

'You have a computer?' She seemed astonished. 'At home?'

'I really have to go.' But I didn't move, just watched her.

She glanced over her shoulder, towards the science block, and suddenly her face was set and

hard, like she was trying to stay calm. Like she'd just been asked about homework she hadn't done and was going to bluff it out. Her eyes were cat-green, and her nose curled up ever so slightly at the end, finishing with a tiny flat bit. Her fair hair looked like it had been scaffolded into place with enough spray to withstand a hurricane. She was quite pretty really, I suppose.

'You're in danger,' she said, voice level and low. I must have looked like I really was about to leg it, because she added, 'Not from me, you twerp.'

I'd never been called a twerp before and I blinked in surprise. 'What?'

'Danger,' she repeated. 'Midnight is after you. I didn't think you were that important, but *he* does. Look, we don't have long.' She glanced over her shoulder again, and I saw someone looking back, from the shadows beside the science block. Just a shape, a silhouette. But it unsettled me.

'What are you on about?' I demanded.

'You said you had no time. Do you . . .' She frowned, trying to decide what to say and how to say it. 'Have you any idea what *time* actually

is or how it works? Where it comes from and where it goes? How you can travel through it as if you're on a journey? How it behaves and . . .' She paused, swallowed. 'And what lives inside it?'

'I've really got to go,' I told her.

I started to walk away, but she grabbed the strap of my rucksack and pulled me back. She was slight and slim, but a bit taller than me and stronger than she looked. She almost pulled me over.

'Lay off!' I dragged myself free. 'Go and hassle someone else.'

'No, wait.' She sounded afraid more than anything, and that frightened me. 'Listen, please – you must, or you'll be lost.'

I shook my head, turned and hurried away.

'Be kind to Ellie!' she shouted. 'You'll need her.'

I probably flinched at that. But I didn't stop. She was still calling after me, but I didn't listen any more, didn't look back. Didn't look at anything or anyone – the world could have been frozen around me as I marched head down out of school, away from the crazy girl.

When I got to the gate, I risked a look back. She was still watching me, but she turned away as I looked, and walked slowly towards the science block and whoever was there. I looked at my watch, not because I was wondering how long I'd been talking to her, but because I always checked the time when I got to the gate.

Four minutes past four. The second hand was just grazing the number three. I didn't think about that, I didn't really take it in. I looked back towards the science block, in time to see the girl talking with someone in the shadows. They were hidden partly behind a laurel tree. But I could see it was a boy. I only saw his silhouette, but he looked slightly shorter than her, younger . . . In a strange way, he reminded me of myself. The two of them, talking – that must have been how she and I had looked just a minute ago.

The boy glanced up and saw me. I still couldn't make him out. But I knew he'd seen me because he turned and walked quickly away, behind the building. The girl stared at me for a moment longer, then she followed.

*

That evening, Midnight came.

Ellie was sitting at the breakfast bar, swinging her short legs and drinking milk through a curly straw. Except the beaker was pretty much empty and she was still sucking – enjoying the throaty, gurgling sound it made.

'Don't do that, Ellie,' Mum said, without looking up. 'You had a good day?' She meant this for me.

'Yeah,' I told her.

Mum stopped chopping whatever vegetable it was we were going to have to eat tonight and looked at me. She obviously expected more, but I just wanted to forget about it.

'Science was good,' I said, hoping this would be enough. It wasn't, so I said, 'And we had history too.' Dead boring, I didn't add. Mum likes history. Used to like. Will like. Whichever it is.

I went to pack my rucksack for the next day. Mum was shouting something after me, or maybe at Ellie. I wasn't listening. I turned my music up loud and read an old comic book. I'd read it before, loads of times, so I knew all the stories.

But that just makes them funnier – when you know what's going to happen. Well, it's only drawings. Not like real life.

We didn't wait for Dad for tea because he was working late. I managed to keep Ellie out of my room, though she shouted from the other side of the door about playing some game or finding some toy. Or something. I had my 'Girl-Free Zone' card hung on the door handle, so I didn't answer. Anyway, I was reading.

The guest vegetable was broccoli and I didn't eat it. Mum glared, and I knew she'd give what I left to Dad with his dinner later. And he'd leave it too. Ellie talked non-stop, but she didn't say anything interesting. I tuned out.

'You're very quiet,' Mum said, when we'd done and I was helping clear the table.

'No,' I told her, 'Ellie's very noisy. I couldn't get a word in.'

'Well, she's gone now. What were you going to say?'

I shrugged. 'Dunno. Can't remember. Nothing much. When's Dad coming home?'

There were some letters on the hall table.

They had stamps, so I went out to the post box. Ellie was practising her recorder so no way was I staying indoors. You can't hear yourself shout when she's blasting away on that. Tuneless, random notes – endless, boring. Nothing like real music.

It was getting dark already and the street lights had come on, so the world was tinged with an orange glow. It was good to be outside and on my own. I was whistling, I realized, as I stuffed the letters into the box. One was too big and I had to fold it over and force it in. Something of Mum's. I pushed my hand right inside the slot to be sure the big envelope dropped down properly and didn't get stuck and left behind when the postman emptied the box. The top of the opening caught my knuckles – cold and hard.

When I turned back, there she was again – on the other side of the street. Anna. There was a bloke with her. But it couldn't be who she'd been with at school, because he was taller than her, a grown-up wearing an old-fashioned trilby hat. I could see them both clearly as they stood under the light on the pavement outside Mrs

Heggety's. She's complained to the council about it and they fitted a bit of metal on the back so it doesn't shine into her bedroom. The metal sort of forces the light down on to the pavement in an orange puddle, and that's where Anna and the man were standing.

I thought they were staring at me. But they were looking past me, I realized. I turned to see what they were looking at, but there was nothing there – just the post box standing by the hedge. And when I turned back, they'd gone.

I gasped out loud – saw my breath in the cold evening. Where could they have gone? How? One moment they were there and the next . . . Had I imagined them – an old-fashioned-looking girl and a bloke in a trenchcoat and a hat? Gone. I turned back to the post box. Not sure why. Maybe I thought when I looked again they'd have reappeared.

The church clock was starting to strike the hour. Must be seven o'clock, I thought. I started to count.

One . . .

There was a man beside the post box.

Two . . .

He was wearing a dark cape and a top hat and holding a silver-topped cane.

Three . . .

He stepped out from the shadows and the orange light made his face glow. He was smiling, and tapped the brim of his hat with the top of his cane by way of greeting. His face was angular – almost sharp, so his features caught the light and made patterns of shadows across his face like rippling water or smoke.

'Hello,' I said, startled. I had been half listening for the next chime of the clock.

'Good evening, young man,' he replied. His voice was rich and deep and dark, with a hint of amusement in every word, and I realized how quiet everything suddenly was. 'My name is Midnight,' he said, stepping towards me.

Midnight – I vaguely recalled the name from what Anna had said. But I didn't make the connection, not then.

'You seem perplexed,' the man continued. 'Can I help?'

'I was wondering where they went,' I told him.

'Did you see them? A girl and a man.' I pointed. 'Over there, by the light.'

'And now they have gone,' he agreed. 'I wonder who they were.'

'The girl's called Anna,' I told him. 'I met her this afternoon, after school. I'm sorry, I'm Jamie.'

He nodded, as if he already knew. 'Jamie,' he repeated. 'Jamie Grant, who lives in the end house and who, sadly, doesn't like history.'

I gaped. 'How do you know that?'

The man shrugged, but he was still smiling. 'Didn't you tell me?' He did not wait for me to answer. 'You say you've met this girl Anna before?'

'After school,' I said, still confused. 'I don't know her, she was just nattering on about . . .' I wasn't sure what she had been nattering on about. 'About time and stuff.'

'Time?'

I turned away, suddenly embarrassed at being asked. 'She said something about knowing how to travel in time.'

'Did she?' We were walking now. I had set off down the road, back towards the close, and he

was walking with me. His cane tapped on the pavement with each step. Otherwise it was quiet, so very quiet. Just the tap of his cane and the sound of his voice as he said, 'The problem, surely, is not so much the travel as proving that you were ever away.' He raised the cane and tapped at the empty air in front of us. 'How would you do that, do you suppose?'

'What do you mean?'

He sounded like he was making an effort to keep his patience. 'If you travelled into the past,' he said stiffly, 'how would you prove to anyone else that you'd been there? It isn't like going on holiday. You can't just send a postcard. A photo from the past. A snapshot, to show you there while it happens around you.'

'I s'pose not.'

'So, you'd have to find some other way to – what shall we say? – To put them in the picture.'

'Yes.'

We had reached the turning into the close. The man – Midnight – stopped and again tapped the brim of his hat with the end of his cane. This time it was a farewell rather than a greeting. It was

a strangely timeless gesture – like his clothes and his manner. I could imagine *him* fitting into the past quite easily.

'Till we meet again,' he said quietly. 'As we surely will.'

I watched him walking away down the street, barely aware that the clock was still striking. Or had it started striking again?

Four . . .

He seemed to fade into the shadows, melting into the night as he went. For a moment I thought I saw something running along beside him – a dog or perhaps a fox. Low and dark, with a staccato scuttling motion. Claws tapping like his cane on the ground.

five . . .

I waited for Midnight to reach the glow from the next street lamp. Then I would see what was with him, keeping to the shadows and the darkness. But he never got there. He seemed to have faded away into the gathering night. I turned and started into the close.

Six . . .

Heading back towards home. The end house.

Seven.

While in the distance, the church clock finished striking the hour.