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ALSO BY JAMIE COSTELLO

*Monochrome*

**jamie costello**

**THE  
MIDNIGHT  
CLOCK**



ATOM

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To Paddy, with love



## Author's Note

Some liberties have been taken with days of the week, which may not correspond to calendar dates for the relevant years.

Holloway Prison, on which the prison in this book is based, was the largest women's prison in the UK until its closure in 2016. Notable inmates included suffragettes Emmeline Pankhurst and Emily Wilding Davison; Irish Republicans Maude Gonne and Constance Markievicz; Diana Mosley, wife of fascist party leader Oswald Mosley; and Edith Thompson and Ruth Ellis, both of whom were convicted of murder and hanged in 1923 and 1955 respectively. Public unease over the execution of Ruth Ellis helped to pave the way for the abolition of the death penalty in the UK.

The case of Ruth Ellis was not the only one which led to calls for the abolition of the death penalty. Timothy Evans, hanged for the murder of his infant daughter in 1950, was later found to be innocent, and in 1953 Derek Bentley, aged only 19, was hanged after taking part in a robbery in which a policeman was shot dead by another teenager, Christopher Craig (who was too young to be executed, and served a prison sentence). All of these cases

influenced the writing of *The Midnight Clock*, in particular the character of Annie Driscoll – both Evans and Bentley had special needs, although this is not how it would have been described in the 1950s. Both have been the subjects of feature films: *10 Rillington Place*, directed by Richard Fleischer and made in 1971, remains the best on-screen account of what happened to Timothy Evans, and *Let Him Have It* (1991, directed by Peter Medak) is the story of Derek Bentley. There is also a film about Ruth Ellis: *Dance with a Stranger* (1985, Mike Newell).



# Chapter 1

7 June, North London

‘Seriously?’ I hiss at Dad as Skye takes her bags through to his bedroom. ‘She’s *moving in*? Like, *now*?’

He closes the door and motions me over to the other side of the sitting room, which is still full of unpacked boxes, so we won’t be overheard. ‘*Millie*.’ That comes with the slightly crooked and patronising you’ll-understand-when-you’re-older smile I’ve seen a lot of recently.

‘Stop looking at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like you’re being so patient because I’m being immature for not just fitting in with what *you* want. I don’t have to be “older” –’ I do air quotes to irritate him – ‘to know a dick move when I see one.’ I fold my arms and glare at him.

‘I didn’t say that—’

‘You don’t need to. And I understand already – you’re a selfish twat.’

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'*Millie*. I can't just change everything because your mum's decided to extend her holiday.'

'Right, so this is Mum's fault.'

'I didn't say that. But Skye's given up her place – I can't just tell her to find somewhere else until you can go home. And anyway,' he cranks the smile up a notch, 'this way you can get to know each other.'

'I don't want to get to know her.'

'*Millie*.'

'And stop saying my name like that! It's *really* annoying.' It's pointless carrying on this conversation, so I stomp off to my room.

So much for my first night at Dad's new flat. Aunt Saff was staying with me at our house the first week Mum was away, but then she decided to stay on in Greece for a while and Saff had to go back home to Cornwall. They were never going to let me stay in Dalston on my own, so Dad had to rush out and buy me a bed.

I guess Skye was always going to move in with him, only it wasn't meant to start while I was staying. I've met her a couple of times: massively awkward meals in restaurants with him doing this weird 'Jolly Dad' act because he's so nervous, and then telling me how the situation is 'far from ideal' – like it's some sort of natural disaster and not totally his fault.

Although . . . If Skye's here, maybe it'll stop Dad trying to *explain* it to me all the time. He does it like he's helping with a maths problem, not trying to justify leaving Mum for a woman twenty years younger who mostly talks in inspirational quotes. Last time he tried it I ended up calling him an old perv, so it wasn't exactly

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my finest hour, either. He looked so upset that I felt terrible, but kind of glad at the same time because of the way he treated Mum, so then of course I hated myself again.

The flip-flop emotions are real. I don't want to be angry all the time when there's nothing I can do about any of this. At least having to revise for exams will stop Dad trying to take me out for treats to try and make it up to me, as if I'm six, not sixteen. He's already given me £20 – guilt money, left on the pillow with a post-it note saying 'Love Dad xx' – like *that* makes up for anything. Having my own room is a relief, though, because it's not like this is a big flat and at the moment there isn't even a sofa I could sleep on.

It's OK for Mum. Her friend Cathy's got a villa with an actual private beach, which is where they're staying. I completely get it, though – even without the private beach – because Mum's been really unhappy, and I'm in favour of whatever makes her feel better.

My room has quite a high ceiling, but it's tiny: just enough space for the bed and the other thing Dad bought, which is this really horrible-looking Disney Princess chest of drawers. I've got no issue with sitting on the bed all the time, but there's nowhere to hang anything except a hook on the back of the door. This place used to be a prison before they converted it, so maybe this was one of the cells – except I think they knocked most of it down and started again. Mum said Dad had really lost it when I told her he'd bought a flat here, because . . . well, creepy. Voices trapped in the walls. Guilt and fear and sadness, all of that. Not that it seems to bother Dad – he even kept the big old prison clock that was on the hall wall when he bought the flat.

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With sunny rooms and no bars on the windows, you'd never know it used to be the biggest women's prison in the country. The only thing here that isn't new and shiny is that clock. I must have gone past this place hundreds of times on the bus coming home from school, but I never even thought about it. Dad said they've had loads of famous prisoners here, although I didn't recognise any of the names he mentioned.

It feels weird, knowing that. Most of my friends think it's cool, but they don't have to sleep here. It's good they think that, though, because it sort of makes up a bit for the five years when Dad was the constipated man in the Laxulite ads. I didn't even tell Yasmin, but of course someone had to recognise him so about thirty seconds later the entire school knew, and it was just really . . .

Urrgh, I can't even. So funny, right? Dad was an actor before he gave it up and started writing children's books. Mum's an illustrator, so she did the pictures – a whole series about a panda cub who lives in a village full of pandas who are farmers and have shops and things, and the little panda has very basic adventures where he's always home in time for tea. The books have been translated into about forty languages and made into cartoons, which is why Dad could afford this place. Actually, I think Laxulite maybe paid for some of it, as well – plus, we get a lifetime's supply of the stuff. This fancy box arrives once a year, at Christmas, with pictures of holly and reindeer and everything, which is just unbelievably *wrong*. Let's just hope he's remembered to tell them his new address, because if it's sent to our house Mum will probably find a way to feed him the whole lot when he finally comes over to collect the rest of his stuff.

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I hope whatever new arrangement we have when Mum gets back isn't going to end up like I'm this piece of property and they're fighting over who gets to have it when. I was properly relieved, though, when Dad left, because the atmosphere at home had been horrible for ages. During lockdown it was just . . . No words. Not that it's been exactly great without him, because Mum's pretending to be cool with the whole thing when she really, obviously isn't – but it's better than having that hair-trigger feeling the whole time, just waiting for the next explosion. Plus, I couldn't bear to talk to anyone about it while the whole build-up to him leaving was going on. Yaz kept asking me what the matter was and I just felt like I couldn't go there because if I did then I couldn't carry on pretending everything was going to be OK. I don't blame her for being pissed off at me, though, because sad people aren't exactly fun. I know she's dying to see what it's like here. I feel like it'll be too awkward with Skye right now, so I'll give her a virtual tour, to try and make up for everything . . .

I bash the pillow – which helps a bit, so I do it some more. Why can't stuff just go back to the way it was before, when everything was OK with Mum and Dad? Or maybe not totally OK, but more OK than this, anyway. FML.

Dad knocked on the door about three hours ago to say dinner was ready, but I said I didn't want any. I'm too angry to be hungry, and I don't want to see either of them, but I am dying to pee, and it's been quiet for about the last twenty minutes, so I reckon they must've gone to bed . . .

I clean my teeth, then stand under the shower for ages, trying

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to get myself calm enough to sleep. On the way back to bed I stop to look at the prison clock. It's fixed to the wall, quite high up, and has a round face in a wooden frame, and Roman numbers. Dad's put up these two neon signs he got from a junk shop on either side of it. There's a blue one saying 'Casino', which is OK, and an orange one saying 'Massage Parlour' which I'm really hoping I can get him to take down, because *eww*.

Weird how he managed to get those but forgot to buy any furniture – I mean, priorities, much? I suppose they must switch off, but Dad's left them glowing eerily in the dark. I'm surprised how dull the clock looks in comparison, but when I look closer I realise it's because there's no glass, so the neon isn't reflecting. There's obviously supposed to be, because there's a sturdy wooden frame, but it must have got broken.

The clock face must have been white originally, but it's greyed with dirt and age, a kind of off-cream. The Roman numerals are painted on, and the hands are thin and black. The name of the clockmaker – SMITH & SONS – is in little letters above the centre, with something else just below that's so small I have to stand on tiptoe to read it:

*Only Now*

That *totally* sounds like something Skye would say – supposedly so significant but actually just really annoying because, if you think about it for more than a nanosecond, it doesn't mean anything at all.

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Also, 'Only Now' is a pretty horrible idea for prisoners, because then you wouldn't want it to be 'only now' – you'd want it to be the future, when they let you out. Prison is even *called* 'doing time', like time itself is the punishment.

I reach up and touch the place in the centre where the hour hand and the minute hand are joined, so it's like the place where time begins. I don't know why I need to, I just do. I expect it to be cold and hard, because metal, but it's not. Instead, it's warm against my fingertip – and alive, like *another* fingertip, as if a hand were reaching through the clock to touch mine.

## Chapter 2

Whoa! I am *so* not that sort of person. Being under the same roof as Skye must be getting to me already. Next thing, I'll be coming out with the sort of crap that sounds like it should be on Pinterest in front of a bad photo of a sunrise.

I go back to my room and get into bed.

Right. Lights out. I'm done with today.

I really, really want to go to sleep, but I bet I won't be able to, because now everything is unsettling, even the flat itself. These walls don't look like prison thickness, but they better be, because I am not up for listening to Dad and Skye getting it on.

*Wish* I hadn't thought of that.

Might try one of those mindfulness exercises that Mum does, except you're supposed to be relaxed and right now I feel like I'm made of barbed wire.

Still, though. Deep breaths. Don't think about prisons, or about Yaz pulling away from me, or about revision or about Dad and Skye . . .

In . . .



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Out . . .

In . . .

Out . . .

I'm five again, in an abandoned fairground. There are trees growing through the rides, and towering above me, way, way too high, is a helter-skelter with the paint faded and flaking away. I've got to find Mum and Dad, otherwise – and I'm sure of this, even though I don't know how I know it – they're going to die. I run past the rusty Ferris wheel and the burnt-out dodgems and under the skeleton of the roller coaster, but I can't see them anywhere. If I don't find them, they'll die, and it'll be my fault . . . But then the helter-skelter begins to sway, the curvy slide sidewinding like a thick yellow snake, and it's creaking and it's going to fall, and suddenly they're there, right next to it, and the creaking is getting louder and louder and—

Oh, God. That was *horrible*.

My heart's thumping like anything, and even though I know it was only a dream – and you wouldn't have to be a genius to work out what that one was really about – I can't shake off the feeling.

Or the creaking noise, which is still going on. Please don't let it be Dad and Skye because that would be *gross*.

Wait.

That's not creaking. It's something heavier, more mechanical-sounding.

Like an old clock.

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Tick . . .

Tock . . .

Tick . . .

Tock . . .

What clock, though? There isn't one, except the big thing in the hall, which I got right up close to and it was really quiet. But now it's loud and insistent.

Tick . . .

Tock . . .

It's like it's trying to tell me something.

That's not possible, obvs, but it's still keeping me awake. And there *was* something weird about that clock. I know, because I felt it. Whatever it was.

No point in lying here getting annoyed; I'm going into the hall to have a look.