

MIDNIGHT'S TWINS

MIDNIGHT'S TWINS

HOLLY RACE

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.hotkeybooks.com

Copyright © Holly Race, 2020

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted
in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Holly Race to be identified as Author of this work
has been asserted by them in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the
products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781471409165
also available as an ebook

1

This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

To Ada
My other heroine

“The youthfull knight could not for ought be
staide,

But forth unto the darksome hole he went,
And looked in. His glistring armor made
A little glooming light, much like a shade”

– Edmund Spencer, *The Faerie Queene*



PROLOGUE

August 2005

The street was full of dreams and some of them were dangerous. Trolls stepped forth from the concrete undercuts of the Southbank and did battle with packs of wildcats. Cockroaches and rats swarmed towards squeamish dreamers. The flourish of a whale's spout arched up out of the Thames and over the balustrade, spraying Una in lukewarm river water.

What Una feared, though, was not a dream at all. The treitre had tracked her from Trafalgar Square, down to the river and across the flotsam-topped water. She thought she had lost it when she went underground, but now she could feel it nearby. Awareness crawled along her arms and up the back of her neck. Somewhere, it was watching her.

She had been stupid going underground, where she didn't have a clear idea of direction. Now she'd made the final leg of her journey even harder. She had to get back to Tower Hill, which meant that she'd need to cross the river once more and approach her portal from the south instead of the north, as she had planned. Well, there was no point in beating herself

up about it now. She had panicked when she spotted the treitre, it was as simple as that, and not one knight would have blamed her.

Una peered around the corner. Above her, a flock of vultures circled a pair of dreamers. Vultures in this world didn't tend to wait for carrion – they made their own.

No, she couldn't help them. She mustn't. She wasn't a knight any more. Her obligation was to her family now. No. Absolutely not. *Don't even think about it, Una.*

Damn it.

Snatching a heavy stone from the ground, she broke cover, running in superhuman strides towards the dreamers. Was that a flash of gold beneath the archway to her left, or was her mind playing tricks on her? The scar on her arm – barely visible in Ithr but still a fault line of skin and flesh in Annwn – prickled with the memory of its making. If it was the treitre she had better make this stupid charge worthwhile. She measured her leaps as she drew closer to the dreamers. The vultures were hovering in the gathered lull that precedes an attack. She adjusted her grip on the stone, drew back her arm . . .

Tap tap, tap tap.

Shit. It was behind her. Bile seeped into her mouth but she did not falter. The stone hit one of the vultures squarely in the chest, and with a firework boom the vulture exploded back into inspyre. Una didn't wait to watch – she was already sprinting down the riverbank, away from the clattering gait of the treitre. A raking screech told her that the other vultures had diverted their attention to her as well. Their shadows made whirlwinds on the pavement around her, growing darker and thicker as

they descended. One dived, its claws ripping at her hair. She knocked it off and built up speed. Past bicycles, leaping over dreamers and moving cars – faster, faster, away from the golden treitre and the nightmares that accompanied it.

A human screamed behind her. She glanced back. The treitre was gaining on her, but though she kept moving she couldn't help but see the bundle of clothes and hair heaped on the ground behind it. One of the dreamers she'd saved from the vultures only seconds ago, cut down just for being in the treitre's path. A rivulet of blood was already winding its way from the dying body to the churning life of the Thames.

Una's terror expelled itself as a throaty cry. She turned and ran, faster than she had ever run before, in this world or the other, leaving the vultures behind but unable to shake that relentless *tap tap* of the treitre's claws.

Dawn was already breaking, autumnal fingers turning the river to flame and the skyline to shadow. An Arctic wind blowing upstream numbed Una's face. With a crack, part of the river iced over. Dreams formed there: skaters in mufflers; polar bears and penguins. Una seized her chance. Sliding out onto the ice she aimed for the middle of the water. If the treitre followed her surely the ice would break beneath its weight. Beyond the frost, a sailing boat was making good time. With a great effort, Una leaped for the ship's side and swung herself on board. Dreamers and dreams alike craned over the sides and hung from the poles, but Una ignored them all. She shimmied up the tallest mast and looked back towards the shore. The treitre was there; its head, smooth and featureless except for

two black pinpricks for eyes, followed her. Woman and monster stared at each other. Then the boat turned a corner and the treitre fell out of view.

Una wouldn't allow herself to acknowledge that she now had one more death on her conscience. There would be time for that when she was back in Ithr, when she had left all of this behind. Instead, she drank in the unimpeded view of the city that had opened up ahead. Gulls as large as helicopters swooped around her, diving for the dolphins that played in the ship's wake. In the distance, the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf sprouted into existence like flowers bursting from the earth, before collapsing away into the old docks that some dreamers could still remember. She never tired of watching the city she loved morph and mirage before her eyes. But this would be the last time she appreciated it as anything other than a common dreamer.

Normal life. No more responsibility for millions of strangers. The only ones she would need to worry about were herself and her little family. Angus, frown lines forming already across his handsome face. Ollie and Fern, hands no bigger than cats' paws. She'd left them in neighbouring cots, gurgling in conversation. Sometimes the love made her want to rip open her stomach and push them back inside, where they'd be safe. She wouldn't be able to protect them forever, but she had a feeling she wouldn't need to. Not Fern, at least. She'd have to wait fifteen years, but then she could tell Fern everything. Maybe she could even join her. What adventures they would have together.

In the distance, a baby's cry echoed through Annwn. Una was sure that it was one of her children calling to her, across

the divide of dreams and reality. She was so close. The Tower of London emerged on the shore, and Tower Bridge just beyond. All she had to do was climb up one of the bridge's piers as the ship passed it, skirt the Tower itself, and she'd reach the portal back to her bedroom. Angus would still be sleeping beside her, one arm crooked under her neck, the other resting on her waist.

On the bridge, inspyre morphed into a pack of wolves, mouths open in a parody of smiles. Another shape took its place beside them. Tall, slender, sharp. The rising sun turned the golden monster into one of smoke. The treitre had found her again.

As though spinning a voice from her terror, the wolves opened their mouths and howled, their song reeling in the wind and scuttling up her spine.

Go.

She couldn't take the bridge now. She would have to go through the Tower. Una dived into the water, praying that she wouldn't attract the attention of the sharks, or their larger companions that lurked on the riverbed. There was no splash, no watery reverberation behind her. The treitre had chosen another route.

Una aimed for the bank, wrestling the currents beneath and the waves above. The Tower's foundations reared up through the murk sooner than she'd expected and she hit them hard, pain wrenching up one wrist. She felt her way along until stone became wood. This was Traitor's Gate – the old entryway to the Tower for those sentenced to die. She'd have to wait there until it opened. She counted the

seconds, forcing her mind off the tortuous dance of not knowing where the treitre was and her growing desperation to surface for air.

There was a shimmer in the water: the telltale blue light of a birthing dream. The hull of an algae-infested boat split the waves. The gate groaned open to admit the vessel. Una slipped through to the other side and broke the surface with a gasp. She was inside the Tower.

Ignoring the sobbing of the dream in the boat below, Una crawled out of the water and up a curved staircase. She tried to imagine herself dry, but she couldn't concentrate enough. The Tower had always given her chills – twelve years on from her first patrol here, she still hated hearing the screams of the condemned. Even the jewels locked in its belly seemed cold and cursed. She couldn't think about that now, though. She was so close.

From the bridge, the wolves' wails distorted inside the limestone walls into a siren, into a warning.

Una took the stairs five at a time. Arrow slits circled the turret like soldiers. The views flicked, staccato, from river to bridge to courtyard and repeat. A woman in heavy brocade slid across the enclosure below, the scars at her throat glittering like rubies. Round Una went, up, up. Another glance. The woman's chalky face was inches from hers.

Una stumbled back, slipped on a step. Wincing at the pain in her shin, she scrambled to her feet, grabbing the window ledge to pull herself forward.

Fern and Ollie, Una thought, pounding their faces into her mind. *Don't lose control.*

The woman in the window broke apart like a dandelion head. Una wished she could do the same. The fear was dragging her down, like a great cloak. Her babies cried out again, through the portal just on the other side of the Tower.

One step up, then two, quicker, quicker. She looked out towards the river.

Instead of water, she saw golden hide. Before she could react, a claw slashed through the window. The skin on her face parted like a zip.

Terror made Una sharp and swift. Dashing the blood from her forehead, she raced onwards. The staircase reverberated with a cacophony of breaking bricks and lead – outside, the treitre was matching her ascent. She erupted onto the roof and flung herself off the ledge. The air shifted against her legs and she knew that the treitre had tried to seize her.

With her focus divided, she struggled to keep her height as she flew above the courtyard. She had to force her mind away from her pursuer and onto the task at hand.

Fern and Ollie called out again.

Nearly there, munchkins.

She was too panicked to clear the tower wall. She hit it instead, using her shoulder to take the brunt of the impact. Gripping the stones, ignoring the pain lancing through her bruised arm, she pulled herself onto the escarpment.

The roof was empty. The street below was clear. Beyond it she glimpsed the portal just one good leap away. She climbed onto the edge of the battlement, measuring the distance, gathering her strength.

‘Una?’

The voice was soft, curious, familiar. It was of someone she loved. But how could that be?

Una turned and smiled. She reached out in wonder. Then with a jolt she realised the awful truth.

Fern's cries, weaving their way through the open portal, echoed around the Tower long after her mother had gone.



1

Fifteen years, two months and thirteen days later

Una Kathleen King

1978–2005

‘Was never lady loved dearer’

Cigarette butts are strewn around the grave. The cemetery’s a favourite hangout for local kids who can’t be bothered to trek into central London for their fun, and boy have they had some fun here. I kick a beer can onto another grave and slump down to the grass, realising too late that it’s still damp from the morning’s dew. Great. Moisture seeps through my school trousers, but there are other people around and I don’t want them to notice me standing up again straight away. Don’t want anyone thinking I’m weird. Ha ha. Like they don’t think that just from looking at me.

When I was younger I didn’t understand why Dad always wanted to bring me here. I didn’t realise that a dead mother was something you had to care about, even if you didn’t remember her. ‘Come for me, Ferny, eh?’ he would say roughly, pulling

on boots so tattered he may as well have been wearing sandals. 'Your mum'll like to see you.' But the graves frightened me. I hated the thought of walking over corpses. I'm sure it's one of the many reasons Dad and I don't see eye to eye.

I dig my fingers into the carved letters and wonder, for the millionth time, what my mother was like. I once overheard Gran call her a 'gypsy tart'. In photos there's a wildness to her – dark hair, wide mouth and pale skin. Dad rhapsodises about how kind and loving she was, which just makes me angry. I can't help but wonder whether, if she'd lived, I would have been my mum's favourite, like my brother Ollie is Dad's. We could have done all the things we're supposed to, like buying clothes and make-up, or going to see romcoms at the cinema and feeling awkward because we're both ogling the leading man.

But then I wouldn't like that version of my mum much either. I've never been into make-up anyway – I look so weird that a bit of mascara isn't going to make people stare at me in a way that says, 'Wow, she's hot!' instead of, 'What happened to her *face*?'

'What do you want from her, Fern? She's dead,' Ollie once asked me in the middle of a regularly scheduled argument.

The truth is, I don't know. Nothing about my mum makes sense. I've been told so many different things about her that she's like an abstract painting. Fun-loving, secretive, passionate, icy . . . How can one person be all those things? And if I can't work out who she was, how can I work out who I might have been if she'd lived? So many *what ifs*, so little info.

The church bell chimes eight, which is my cue to leave. I'll need to be quick to get to school on time.

'Bye, Mum,' I whisper, touching the marble one last time, and

hoist my schoolbag over one shoulder. I'm pulling my hoodie over my face when I spot him. Ollie is skulking at a distance, his expression as inscrutable as ever. I am suddenly very aware of the cemetery's silence. He wouldn't do anything to me here, I tell myself. Not even Ollie would stoop so low, would he?

Steeling myself, I skirt the graves instead of joining the path Ollie's on. I don't watch him, but I can sense him moving away too, towards Mum. We are two moons, spinning around the planet of our differences. Smokey hatred fills the space between us, pressing against my back as I walk away.

You'd never think, to look at us like this, that we are twins.

I take the back roads to avoid having to pass Wanstead Flats. My thoughts boomerang to Ollie. When did he start visiting Mum's grave on his own? My popular, handsome brother has never had time for grief, has never before needed to confide in a dead woman.

As I reach the station and pass through the ticket barriers, my phone vibrates with a message inside my bag. I bet it's Dad with another of his attempts at a motivational joke, but then I think of Ollie again and check. Maybe it's an explanation for his behaviour or, more likely, a cutting remark about our dead mother being my only friend.

I'll be thinking of you tonight.

It's from neither Ollie nor Dad. I raise my eyebrows as I reply to the unknown sender. *Wrong number.*

Tonight's Halloween, and it sounds as though someone's got big plans. Good luck to them. Mine involve changing into pyjamas as soon as humanly possible and cramming for a history test.

On the tube I studiously avoid the curious, pitying glances of my fellow commuters and stare at the front cover of *Metro*. The headline reads, *Ratings Soar for Sebastien Medraut*. The photo doesn't do justice to the politician – or at least, not to his eyes. I've seen him in person, outside school. His deep violet irises – somewhere between amethyst and sapphire – made a cyclist crash into a lamppost thanks to an ill-timed double-take. He has always laughingly denied they are lenses, and I've always believed him. I know all too well that eyes do indeed come in all colours. I can only read a snippet of the article.

In recent years Medraut has made a staggering comeback to once again capture the hearts and minds of a nation . . .

A typical puff piece, then.

The person whose paper I've been reading catches my eye and rustles the pages irritably. I resist the urge to point out that newspapers can – *shock, horror* – be read more than once, and slide my drawing pad out of my bag. The same face, picked out in oils, charcoals, watercolours, whatever I had to hand really, haunts nearly every page – an ageless woman, her fine features criss-crossed with scars and framed with wild, birds-nest hair. I go to colour in her mane, but I must have left my orange pencil at home. Damn.

When I come up for air at Sloane Square, I reach into my bag to check the time on my phone. The unknown number has messaged again.

Have you never wondered about your mother's death, Fern?

I stop dead in the middle of the pavement and a man glares as he pushes past.

Who is this? I reply, shock making my fingers clumsy.

But they don't respond. They haven't replied by the time I reach Bosco College, or by the time I'm forced to put my phone away at the start of double biology. They haven't replied by first break, when I am interrupted in my toilet haven by Lottie Medraut and her harem, or by the time break ends and I slip into the back of the Latin classroom. Why would I wonder about Mum's death? It was simple – she passed away in her sleep. Sudden Death Syndrome. Rare, tragic, but it happens to all sorts of people. There has never been anything to question.

It is only when I am standing in the lunch queue that my phone vibrates again. My whole body flushes as I spot the words on the screen.

Your mother knew me by another name, but you may call me Archimago.

Then, soon afterwards: *She and I were knights together in Annwn.*

Archimago? Annwn? I may as well still be in Latin for all the sense these words make. I have had time to order my thoughts now, though, and I know what I want to say. I won't be distracted by a strange vocabulary. *What did you mean about my mum's death?*

This time, the reply comes almost immediately.

Una didn't die peacefully at all. She was murdered.

It's as though the mysterious Archimago has reached through the phone screen, through my ribcage and is squeezing my heart, tight tight tight. I place a hand over my mouth to stop myself from showing too much emotion. No one else in the queue seems to have noticed my reaction, though. Half of

them are glued to their phone screens too. I look from face to face, wondering whether this is a malicious prank by one of my peers.

How do you know? I reply, and after a moment I deliberately put my phone back into my bag. If Archimago is watching I don't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing how shaken I am. I stare straight forward, my elbow pressed against my bag to feel the vibration should another message arrive. I choose the chicken curry and chocolate sponge, and take my lunch to my usual table where everyone knows not to bother me. Those words – *She was murdered* – ricochet around my skull until they break apart. *She was murdered. Was She Murdered. Murdered She Was.* I can't help it – I place my phone next to my plate. Elsewhere in the hall, Lottie Medraut's ringing laugh carries over the other voices.

Spoonful of curry halfway to my mouth, the screen lights up once more. Archimago has replied. I draw the phone towards me and rice spills in maggoty drips into my lap.

Because I killed her.



2

The lunch in front of me goes cold as I stare at the message from Archimago. This has to be a joke. *It has to be.* Mum died unfairly but naturally. She died in her sleep. Dad woke up to find her cold in his arms. How could she have possibly been murdered?

My phone rattles against the tabletop, and I realise that my hand is shaking. I put the phone down and trap my fingers between my knees. *Think, Fern.*

I get up clumsily and stride out of the hall, sliding my still full lunch tray into the collection trolley. I need some fresh air. Outside, I try to call Archimago but they messaged me from an unknown number. I have to settle for replying to them. *You're lying,* I type. *I'm going to the police.*

Of course I do nothing of the sort. Uncertainty, confusion and anger curl through my body. I consider calling Dad, but that doesn't seem right. Dad and I have never been able to talk about Mum. Mentioning it to Ollie is out of the question. And they're all I have, really.

The clink-clink of cutlery and plates rings out from the lunch hall. Students laugh, gossip, compare homework. Teachers nod at me as they pass.

Because I killed her.

I cannot be here.

Ignoring the startled questions from the receptionist, I fly out of Bosco and onto the street, running south to the Thames. There, I hang over the fence, nursing a stitch and taking great gulps of river air. A solitary gull is being tossed about on the water, wings flapping fruitlessly. It catches my eyes briefly and I nod in sympathy.

She was murdered.

I check my phone again. Archimago hasn't replied to my threat. Maybe they've been frightened off. Maybe they've had their fun for now and will slink away, a perpetual question mark at the back of my mind.

I open a search on my phone and type in *Archimago*. All it brings up are references to a character in an old poem and a load of internet personas. I try searching for *Anwn* next, checking the spelling against Archimago's text. This time the results are more interesting: *ah-noon* is the name for the underworld in Welsh folklore. Where the dead live. Spectral fingers seem to tippety-tap up my neck. I still don't understand, though.

I read Archimago's messages again. *She and I were knights together in Anwn*. Right. I type, *knights Anwn*. The Internet returns a handful of results and at the top, a link to a video. It's titled, *The Truth About Your Nightmares*. I click on it, ignoring the irritated glares of the people around me as sound blares out.

A young woman – dark hair, dark skin and sharp eyes – stares up at me.

'Do you think you're safe when you sleep?' she asks. 'Well, think again. The knights aren't just –'

Inexplicably, the video cuts out mid-sentence, leaving me with a blank frame and a timebar that ticks on through nothingness.

I refresh the page and even try turning my phone off and on again, but nothing reveals the rest of the video. Baffled, I head down into the Underground and take the next tube back towards Stratford.

'Don't stare at her, you're being so rude,' a woman whispers to her boyfriend on the other side of the carriage. I catch the boyfriend's eye. He's smirking. The stranger opposite me is watching me intently too. I know the type. He wants to get into a staring contest so he can start something. It's been happening a lot lately. I close my eyes to avoid him.

The train rocks gently. Mum's face, dark hair billowing across crinkled eyes, taunts me. *I was murdered, Fern*, she seems to whisper. *Are you going to do nothing about it?* The raging lullaby of the Underground's tunnels pitches me into my mother's smile. I land in a woodland nightmare. Dough-faced Jenny is there, and so is Ollie. It is his face I see most clearly as he slips away guiltily. Then Jenny steps in front of me. *'You're a witch, Fern King, and we all know what they used to do to witches . . .'*

The match is struck. Autumn's leaves, crunchy underfoot, are ready for the flame. I scream, I plead, I humiliate myself, but my bonds are too tight and Jenny is too eager to taste my fear. Except she's not Jenny now; she's my mother, my father, my brother, baying in turn for my burning.

The exquisite, intimate pain of the fire doesn't reach me, though. Not this time. This time a pair of metal-clad arms lifts

me away from the sparks. I catch a glimpse of a face, freckled beneath scars and framed with red hair, before she shoves me backwards. I fall as if from a cliff, and jolt awake. I am still in the train carriage. People are still staring at me. But now I have yet another question.

I search through my bag for my sketchpad and fling open the pages. My guardian angel.

My fingers trace over the wild, bird's nest hair etched onto every page. Over her scarred, ageless face, and the armour that looks as though it once belonged to someone much bigger. She's been haunting my dreams for as long as I can remember. In my nightmares – and I have a lot of nightmares – this warrior woman has always arrived to save me.

A knight. That's what Archimago had said, and the woman online had mentioned *sleep* and *the knights* before her video cut out. Could they be connected to this mysterious armoured guardian?

'But you're just a dream, aren't you?' I whisper. Her impenetrable features stare back up at me, and with a lurch I realise that the only possible answer – *of course she's just a dream* – doesn't feel certain at all.