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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.

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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 *Annwn* 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 Annwn*. Right. I type, *knights Annwn*. 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.

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