

TWICE UPON ~A~ TIME



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HARRISON

* SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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*For Carolyn and Janice,
who are twins.*



*Our story begins
With identical twins . . .*

Chapter One

THE MORROW TWINS

Once upon a time – time is important in this story – two babies were about to be born in the city of London. It was the wrong time, in most ways, for them to arrive. For a start they were six weeks early. And it was winter; a winter which froze the water in the gutters and left fringes of icicles along rooftops that dangled like tassels on a rug. It was also New Year's Eve – though only by a thread.

At two minutes to midnight on the last night of the old year, the first baby was born. Meredith Morrow was black-haired, blue-eyed, hungry and *loud*. By the time she had been wrapped in a snug blanket, still giving a lofty cry for something quite so small, bells all over the city were ringing out to welcome in the New Year.

Her sister Rose arrived nine minutes into the New Year, and just eleven minutes after her big sister. The same black hair, the same soaring cry, the same everything – as far as the eye could see, anyway. Like a mirror image of each other, or a reflection of a sky in water.

It was only later that an odd discovery was made: both clocks in the house had stopped. One at two minutes to midnight; the other at nine minutes past. The exact times that the twins had been born. Not just any twins – a pair born not only between night and day, but on different days, months and years.

Meredith and Rose knew the story just as well as they knew all their favourite fairy tales. Their mother had repeated it often enough over the years. The tale of the Morrow twins' arrival reached far and wide. With the old year and the new between them, and the stopped clocks, the story became something like folklore or a fairy tale itself. It even appeared in some of the local newspapers.

As for the business with the clocks, Alice Morrow had often wondered how and why the clocks had stopped at the exact moments her daughters were born – and whether it was linked to the *strange* things that happened when it came to her girls and time . . .



*Two sisters named Merry and Spike
Are twins, so they both look alike.
When clocks near them chime
They don't tell the time
But trouble is certain to strike . . .*

Chapter Two

FOX HOUSE

It was Spike who saw Fox House first. Merry had been looking out for it, determined to get the first glimpse, but the long journey from London had left her bored and restless and she'd been making up a limerick about her sister to pass the time.

Merry looked up from her notebook and cleared her throat. Spike glanced over, eyes narrowed, as Merry began to recite:

*There was a young lady called Rose,
Who had the world's ugliest toes.
Attractive they ain't
And the stink makes you faint!
So remember to cover your nose.*

There was a silence as Spike considered Merry's efforts.

'Not bad,' she said thoughtfully, and not insulted in the least. Spike rarely let other people's words upset her – even if they were usually met with a prickly retort. She put on a deep, snooty voice. 'But only the ill-mannered say "*ain't*".'

'Urgh.' Merry wrinkled her nose, recognizing Spike's impression at once.

Mum recognized it, too. 'Is that Mr Russell?' she asked from the driver's seat.

Spike didn't answer. The subject of their last tutor was still a sore one with Mum. It had been Spike who'd finally scared off Mr Russell (or Mr Brussels Sprout, as they called him) for good. Merry hadn't been sad to see him go. He was snooty and had smelled horribly of sprouts. It was nice to know they wouldn't see him again. London was miles behind, already in the past. Merry had firmly decided not to miss it.

'*But,*' Spike continued, 'it wouldn't only be my toes that stank. It'd be all of my feet. And *your* toes are every bit as ugly as mine.'

Merry rolled her eyes. 'Anything else?'

'Yes,' said Spike, squinting out of the window. 'You know no one calls me Rose.'

'Mum does when she's cross,' Merry muttered sulkily. Spike's criticisms always outweighed any praise.

‘Can you two stop bickering for a minute?’ Mum interrupted. ‘Spike, you’re meant to be map-reading – you know I’m hopeless with directions.’

‘I *am* map-reading,’ said Spike. ‘And speed up, we’ve been in this car for ever. I could’ve walked it quicker.’

Merry winced as the car went over a pothole. Mum *was* pretty hopeless with directions, and an infuriatingly slow driver.

Spike opened a book on her lap called *The Pocket Guide to Poison* and took out a crumpled map tucked inside. She glanced down the page of the book.

‘Did you know, one of the deadliest—?’

‘*Spike!*’ Mum said, exasperated.

Spike huffed and checked the map. ‘Take the next left turn.’

Merry sighed and returned to her limerick. Should she change ‘Rose’ to ‘Spike’? She was so deep in thought that she missed Spike’s scornful tut.

Then, ‘Huh,’ Spike said, more loudly. ‘I thought it’d be bigger than *that*.’

Finally Merry looked up and her tummy did a little tumble of excitement.

The house crouched in a dip among trees on a wide stretch of land. Two turrets like pointed ears stuck up from the greenery, as though they were listening as the car approached. It had red brick walls and windows like dark, shining eyes. *Fox House*. Perhaps it was the name,

but it looked like a fox, too. The way it was half hidden like a vixen sheltering from a storm. It was beautiful, but those windows made her wonder: were there secrets concealed within its walls?

‘You’re daydreaming,’ said Spike. ‘Let me guess . . . about the house having secrets?’

‘All houses have secrets,’ Merry replied.

Spike could read her thoughts as well as Merry could read Spike’s. They were close – it had always been this way.

Mum took the turning, forgetting to indicate as usual. Fortunately, there were no cars behind to toot at them. A twisting road brought them to a tiny cottage with a sign that read, *Gatekeeper’s Lodge*. The car crawled past it, drawing closer to the house. Spike had been wrong – as they got closer it was clear that it *was* big.

‘This is it,’ Mum murmured. ‘Our new home. For the next few weeks, at least.’

Mum’s work was in art restoration. She repaired old paintings, valuable ones. Sometimes valuable meant expensive, or even priceless. Other times it meant they were simply precious to the person who owned them. Her job took them to all sorts of places and sometimes included accommodation and meals.

‘But it’s *miles* away!’ Spike had spluttered furiously, when Mum had announced the news of her latest client, an eccentric widow named Lady Belmont who

owned Fox House. 'In the middle of nowhere! There'll be nothing to do, and worst of all it'll be *quiet*.' Her blue eyes blazed. Spike hated silence.

'It won't be too quiet,' Mum had said firmly. 'It's a busy house with plenty of background noise, and it'll do the pair of you good to get some clean country air into your lungs.'

Spike glowered. 'I like dirty London air just fine.'

'We're going, Rose.' Mum's tone was final.

'Snort,' said Spike rudely. She had taken to doing this recently: saying the word rather than actually snorting. She thought it was more effective. 'You said there's always work in London.'

'There is,' said Mum. 'But why stay in one place when you have a job that can take you anywhere?'

'Hmm, let's see.' Spike pretended to look thoughtful, even though she was simmering like a pot. 'Because we could have a nice home instead of moving every few weeks? Oh, and some actual *friends* that don't get left behind?'

'But you've always made friends easily . . .' Mum said, a guilty look crossing her face. 'And besides, we're running out of tutors.'

'We can't have tried them *all*,' Merry said in surprise.

'Not all.' Mum had picked at one of the ever-present specks of dried paint on her finger. 'But you can be sure most of them have heard of *you*.'

Spike smirked. 'Bad news travels fast.'

Mum frowned. 'Of course, if you really want to stay in one place, we can. But that means going to school.'

'That might not be so bad,' Merry said cautiously. 'We could give it another try?' She quite liked the idea of going to a proper school the way other children did. Spike, however, didn't. While she didn't enjoy silence, loud places with sudden noises – like schools – were also a problem. But the twins hadn't been in school for several years.

The car brought them to a set of high black gates. Mum drove through, on to a white gravel road, which curved towards the house like a bushy fox's tail sweeping up to the door.

Now they were closer Merry could see two more turret 'ears' on the other side of the house. They parked and clambered out, stiff-legged, before unloading their bags. Merry sniffed deeply. So *this* was clean air. Green, leafy and fresh. Even the house looked clean, its red bricks glowing in the spring sunshine like a cosy fire to welcome them.

The crimson door gleamed like it had been freshly painted. Mum reached for the brass knocker, but before she could touch it the door opened and a woman stood in front of them. She was dressed from head to toe in black and white, in plain clothes and sensible shoes. Even her hair was black with several grey streaks, pulled back into a no-nonsense bun. She had a large and

important-looking nose. A nice nose, Merry thought. Strong and capable-looking, somehow. Of sniffing out fibs, maybe.

‘Alice Morrow?’ the woman inquired, looking Mum up and down. It wasn’t an unkind glance, but Merry was suddenly aware of how they must appear. Mum in her paint-speckled dungarees, ponging faintly of turpentine. The twins in their shabby clothes. All three of them with long black hair that hadn’t seen a comb for days. In fact, Mum didn’t even *own* a comb; she mostly used her fingers. As for the last time any of them had had a haircut . . . well. Merry couldn’t quite remember (and she didn’t think the wonky fringe that Spike had cut herself counted). Mum was paid well for her work, but she became so absorbed in it that she forgot to do normal things. Like having regular dentist check-ups or taking the bins out, and lots of other things Merry found embarrassing.

The woman turned to Merry and Spike. ‘And the twins, Meredith and Rose. Goodness, you *are* identical. I’ll never be able to tell you apart.’ Her eyes lingered on Spike, who had picked up a snail and was carefully putting it on the edge of a plant pot, no doubt to prevent it being stepped on.

‘Oh, everyone says that at first,’ said Mum hurriedly, with a wary eye on Spike. They had all heard this sort of thing before, countless times. But while Merry liked being a twin, Spike sometimes grew exasperated with

everything that went with it: the stares, the comments and questions. All of which they would be sure to receive here, as newcomers to Fox House.

‘I’m Miss Burdock, the housekeeper,’ said the woman. ‘Come in.’

They stepped into the cool, dark entrance hall. Miss Burdock shut the door and beckoned them after her. ‘You can leave your things there. I’ll have them taken to your rooms shortly.’

Quickly she whisked along the hall and they had to hurry to keep up with her. Her long skirt swished as she walked, revealing stripy black-and-white stockings. Merry held in a giggle. Miss Burdock reminded her of a badger, with her stripy hair and legs. They passed dark wooden doors and cabinets displaying trinkets, games or odd little puzzles. Even the wallpaper looked expensive. It was green with gold peacock feathers. Several old paintings hung high on the walls. Merry hurried after Mum while Spike stomped along behind, their combined footsteps ringing off the tiled floor.

‘Keep up!’ Merry hissed, keen to stay on the quick-footed Miss Burdock’s good side. Spike glowered in return and motioned to something up ahead. Merry’s tummy lurched as she spied a grandfather clock next to a small table holding a vase of daffodils, still in bud. *Drat!* Why did Spike always see things first? Merry tried her best to be a noticer but usually got distracted by one

thing or another. (Did this mean she was like Mum? She hoped not. She promised herself she would never let a bin overflow.) And of course, Spike made things like this her mission. She'd never forgiven Merry for being born first and seemed determined to make up for it by beating her at everything else, especially smart replies.

Mum glanced over her shoulder and shot them both a warning look – she'd noticed the clock, too. Obediently Merry sidestepped to the right, making sure she was a good distance away as she passed it and taking care not to look at it directly. Strange things happened when the twins were around clocks, which was why they always—

Ting!

The clock rang out loudly. Ahead, Miss Burdock stopped abruptly, with Mum almost colliding with her.

Ting! the clock went again. Mum's shoulders stiffened.

'Strange,' Miss Burdock muttered, pulling out a pocket watch – but suddenly she and mum were speaking and moving at double speed, their words rushing out in a jumble. The second hand of the grandfather clock was whizzing round quickly, and the daffodils in the vase on the table were bursting open one by one.

Merry felt heat rushing into her cheeks. She slowed down, allowing Spike to catch up.

'You just had to, didn't you?' she whispered.

'What?' Spike said innocently.

'You . . . you *touched* it!'

‘Accidentally,’ said Spike.

‘Rubbish,’ said Merry at once.

Spike shrugged infuriatingly. Merry pressed her lips together and followed Mum and Miss Burdock, who after a few more seconds, thankfully returned to their normal speed. They went past the stairs, which were thickly carpeted in green, and into a large kitchen. Already Merry’s mind was ticking over, trying to make words rhyme. Burdock was a lovely name, but tricky.

There once was a lady, Miss Burdock . . .

No. That wouldn’t work. She had another think but couldn’t come up with anything that properly rhymed with ‘burdock’. She’d have to know a bit more about Miss Burdock first. Perhaps she could make up a rhyme about the house instead.

Fox House all alone on the moors

Hides secrets behind all its doors—

Oooh! She liked that already.

‘Come, sit down,’ Miss Burdock said. ‘You must all be tired and hungry after that long journey.’

They each took a seat at a long wooden table near a fireplace. Bunches of dried herbs hung from above, along with pots and pans of all sizes. The kitchen counter was neatly organized, with a pile of folded tea towels and a row of cookbooks held in place by two old-fashioned irons acting as bookends. It was homely, and Merry liked the feel of the place instantly. The herbs swayed

in a draught and she could smell rosemary and mint. They looked like they belonged in a witch's kitchen. Spike was looking at them with interest – she would be able to identify far more of them than Merry could.

‘What’s that?’ Spike asked, pointing to the far end of the kitchen where there was an odd round structure built from grey stone.

‘It’s an old well,’ said Miss Burdock.

Merry got up and went to have a look. The stone wall was built in a circle at about the same height as the table. It was covered by an iron grate, secured in place by a large bolt. Inside, it plunged into darkness.

‘How unusual,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve never seen an indoor well.’

‘It’s no longer in use,’ said Miss Burdock. ‘Some parts of Fox House – including this kitchen – are very old. About six hundred years, in fact. And none of the owners – the Belmonts included – have ever wanted to change it.’

‘Will we be meeting Lady Belmont?’ Mum asked. She sat up a little straighter, looking anxious all of a sudden. ‘I like to speak to clients prior to beginning a new work.’

Miss Burdock shook her head. ‘I’m afraid not. Lady Belmont mostly keeps to her rooms and leads a very private life. But she’s left detailed instructions for you, and you’ll meet her nephew, Alastair. He visits fairly often.’

Was it Merry’s imagination, or had Miss Burdock’s nose flared slightly at the mention of the Belmonts’

nephew? Like she had smelled something bad?

Miss Burdock put a large teapot, milk jug and cups on the table. She did not ask whether they all liked tea, and Merry got the impression that she was the sort of person to be baffled if you didn't.

'So,' said Miss Burdock briskly, cutting bread in neat slices. 'You've come up from London? That's a long way from family and friends.'

'We have no other family,' Mum explained. 'It's just the three of us. The twins' father died before their second birthday. He was a photographer and insisted on going off to dangerous places. The last I heard he was somewhere in the Amazon rainforest. There's some confusion about whether he was eaten by a jaguar or swept down a river. Knowing him, it was probably both.'

Merry watched Miss Burdock's nose very closely. There was a slight twitch, as though she had scented a lie, and Merry felt a mild thrill. Mum's story was *almost* true, although the 'eaten' part was exaggerated. There had only been one jaguar bite.

'Oh dear,' Miss Burdock said, her voice as even as her slices of bread. She placed a plate of cheese sandwiches in front of them, which they reached for enthusiastically. 'It's always a novelty to meet twins,' Miss Burdock added. 'Which of you is Meredith?'

'I am,' said Merry, between chews. 'But everyone calls me Merry.'

‘And so you must be Rose,’ said Miss Burdock.

‘No one calls me Rose except Mum,’ said Spike.

‘We call her Spike,’ Mum said, half-heartedly nibbling at a sandwich and clearly itching to get to work. She was maddening when it came to meals, often forgetting to eat when she was deep into a painting. ‘It’s a nickname.’

‘Merry and Spike,’ Miss Burdock repeated, brushing crumbs into the sink. Just then a bell jangled loudly.

Spike dropped her sandwich and covered her ears, wincing.

‘It’s just a bell from upstairs,’ Miss Burdock said, frowning.

‘Rose has sensitive ears,’ Mum explained. ‘It began a few years ago after the twins had meningitis. The doctors say it’s tinnitus. It’s a sort of ringing in them; that’s how she describes it.’

‘On a good day.’ Spike lowered her hands cautiously. ‘On a bad day it’s more like a screeching.’

‘Sudden loud noises can make it worse,’ Merry added.

‘Or if it’s too quiet,’ Spike said, with a mutinous look at Mum to remind her of her assurances in the car. ‘Silence makes the ringing seem louder.’

‘I see,’ said Miss Burdock, her expression softening. She nodded to a row of silver bells mounted on the wall. One was trembling slightly from where it had rung. A label below it said: LADY BELMONT. ‘The bells are used to summon me when something is wanted

elsewhere in the house,' Miss Burdock added. 'They were used much more years ago, when Lord Belmont was alive. Now I fear they just make it easier for Lady Belmont to stay in her rooms all the time.'

'Have you worked here long?' Mum asked, her gaze wandering round the old-fashioned kitchen.

'Fifteen years,' Miss Burdock replied, with a sad smile. 'And yes, things used to be busier. The Belmonts often held lavish parties or had friends to stay, but that all stopped when . . .' She caught herself. 'There were more staff back then. Now it's just a handful to keep things ticking over.' She glanced at the bell again. 'Excuse me.' She left the kitchen in a swish, her shoes clicking down the hall like badger claws.

When the sound faded Mum turned to the twins.

'Which one of you was it?' she asked suspiciously. 'Who did that to the clock?'

As usual neither of them said a word. Merry scowled, but Spike refused to own up. It was an unsaid rule that the sisters never snitched on each other. They waited for their mother's usual response, which was, 'Then you'll both be punished,' but it never came.

'Just stay away from the clocks.' Mum sounded very weary all of a sudden. 'This job is important. The last thing I need is you two getting into mischief.'

They both nodded silently.



*Fox House is a curious place
Where Lady B won't show her face.
And the people there know
(But don't like to say so)
That a girl disappeared without trace.*