



WINTERBORNE HOME
FOR
VENGEANCE
AND
VALOUR

ALLY
CARTER

LOTHIAN

To Cat, who always had more faith in me
than I had in myself

PROLOGUE

Everybody knows what happened to the Winterbornes – that one day, twenty years ago, two perfect parents took their five perfect children out on their perfect boat for a day upon the water.

Everybody knows that, twelve hours later, only one Winterborne returned – bloody and bruised and clinging to the smouldering rubble, with absolutely no memory of that anything-but-perfect day.

Everybody knows that the lone surviving Winterborne grew up with the finest chefs and governesses. That he had only the best tutors and wore only the nicest clothes and was a charming boy, with his mother's quick wit and his father's kind eyes.

Everybody knows that the young Winterborne heir was destined for greatness – that, despite his tragic past, he had been born a prince and would, surely, someday become a king.

Until the day when Gabriel Winterborne simply walked away from his perfect life, never to return again.

Nobody knows the truth.



THE MUSEUM

‘**A**nd on the right we have young Gabriel Winterborne!’ April looked to her right, but it was just another painting. In a whole room full of paintings, none of which were all that impressive to April. After all, you can’t eat oil-covered canvases. Or, well, you *could*. But April strongly suspected you probably shouldn’t. You could burn them for firewood, of course. Maybe sell them down on Front Street to the old woman with the long white braids and the dog that looks like a fox. But there was no point in wondering what a painting like that might be worth. No one like April was ever going to own one.

But that didn’t stop the young woman in the burgundy blazer from looking up at the painting like it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

‘Note how Gabriel clings to his father’s hand? He was ten when it was painted, and it’s the last known portrait of the Winterborne family. A month after it was finished, his whole family would be dead and young Gabriel would be *orphaned*. Can you imagine?’ the guide said, but then she seemed to remember who she was talking to. She looked at the kids who filled the room.

Some ran a little too fast. Some stood a little too still. All wore clothes that didn’t quite fit, and they looked at those paintings as if they too were wondering how many meals one of them might buy. But Blazer Lady just threw her shoulders back and raised her voice, shouting over the Johnson twins, who were arguing about which superhero’s farts would smell the worst.

Because they were at a fancy museum.

They were on their best behaviour.

‘Follow me, children! Follow me!’

The museum was super pretty, April had to admit. Nicer than the group home. Cleaner than the school that was only open four days a week because they couldn’t afford to run the buses on the fifth day. Which meant on the fifth day, there was no free lunch, which meant on the fifth day, April usually had to be ‘creative’, but that

was OK. Being creative kept April sharp. And, besides, it wasn't going to last for ever. As soon as her mum came back, everything would be OK.

So April decided to enjoy the bright, clean rooms with the shiny wood floors and tall windows. Even the air smelled fancy (fart debates aside). They were close to the ocean, and the breeze was clean and fresh. April felt like maybe she'd climbed on to a spaceship that morning instead of a rusty school bus. It felt a lot like it had brought her to another world.

For reasons April couldn't quite pinpoint, she turned around and took one last look at the steel grey eyes of the Winterbornes.

'Hey, April!' Girl Taylor whispered. Boy Taylor was on the other side of the room, joining in the fart discussion. 'I dare you to touch it.' Girl Taylor pointed at the painting, crossed her arms, and tried to look tough. But April was very good at a number of things; ignoring foolish dares happened to be one of them.

'What's wrong?' Caitlyn with a *C* asked.

'Are you too chicken?' Kaitlyn with a *K* said, chiming in.

'Nope,' April told them. 'Too smart.'

April shouldn't have said it. She was always doing that – letting her inside thoughts become her outside words. It was one of the things she wasn't good at, and it made people like Girl Taylor and the C/Kaitlyns hate her even more than they already did. But April couldn't help the fact that she was different – that foster care was temporary for her. That her mother was coming back – probably any day now.

'You think you're so much better than us.' Girl Taylor's hands were still crossed over her chest, and she was sticking out her lower lip. It was her tough-girl stance, and April knew she was supposed to be intimidated.

She just wasn't very good at that either.

'No,' April said, trying to sound nice and sweet. It wasn't her fault she had the kind of face that looked mad unless it was smiling. And smiling for no reason made April's head hurt.

'I just know what that is.' April pointed to the tiny sensor that was sticking out from behind the painting. 'Laser,' she whispered, like that single word should be explanation enough. But judging from their expressions, it wasn't. 'It'll cut off any finger that touches it.'

'No, it won't.' Caitlyn with a C's voice sounded sure,

but her eyes lacked conviction.

‘Of course it will. That particular kind of laser burns at fifteen hundred degrees. It has to cauterise the wound as it slices because the museum can’t risk getting blood all over everything.’

‘Yeah,’ Girl Taylor said. ‘That’s true.’ (*It wasn’t true.*) ‘I knew that.’ (*She totally didn’t know that.*)

April forced a smile. ‘Of course you did. You probably saw the guards, too.’

‘Uh . . . *guard.*’ Kaitlyn wasn’t that impressed, and she made sure April knew it.

But April pointed to the other side of the room. ‘Yeah. One uniform. But that janitor has been cleaning whatever room we happen to be in since we got here. And she’s wearing an earpiece identical to the guard’s.’

That part really was true. April didn’t know how she noticed these things. Or why. Sometimes she thought it must be because her mother was a world-famous art thief. Or spy. Or thriller writer. But whatever made April think the way she did must have come from nature. Her mother hadn’t been around long enough for nurture to have had much effect.

Yet.

After all, her mother was coming back. Soon.

‘Yeah, well, maybe she’s not a guard,’ Girl Taylor said. ‘Maybe she’s April’s *mother*.’

And just like that, everyone remembered the pecking order. April wasn’t the alpha female. She wasn’t the beta either. In fact, April wasn’t even part of the pack, and that was very much the way she liked it.

‘No. I think *that’s* April’s mother.’ Kaitlyn pointed to a painting by Picasso of a woman who was shaped like a Barbie doll that someone had put in the microwave.

‘No,’ Caitlyn said, catching on to the game. She found a painting of Medusa’s severed head being held aloft by a dude with a sword. ‘That’s April’s mother.’

The three of them laughed like they were super funny, and April laughed too. It was easier that way, she’d learnt three group homes ago. Better to fake laugh some of the time than fake smile all of the time. That was just maths.

Besides, the guide was looking at them and yelling, ‘Girls! Keep up!’

April didn’t know when – or why – the museum had gotten so crowded. Suddenly, it was like the bell had just rung, and there wasn’t enough room in the hall as April

pushed against the current of people that was flowing in the opposite direction. She might have been lost if she hadn't seen the guide in the centre of the big atrium, looking up at a man who stood a little too tall and a little too still to be human. Which he wasn't, April realised once she got a little closer.

'Now, who can tell me who this is?' the woman asked the kids.

And they all yelled, 'The Sentinel!'

The guide laughed. 'I guess that was an easy one.'

'Go, Sentinels!' Boy Taylor yelled, and the beta boys whooped.

'Yes. Most people know about the mascot, but who can tell me about the *legend*?' the guide asked. For the first time that day, April felt the kids go quiet. Still. They leaned closer, and the woman dropped her voice as she said, 'Two hundred years ago, a ship was crossing the sea when a terrible storm began to brew. The crew knew they had to lower the sails or risk being blown off course, but the sails were stuck, and they wouldn't come down. Lightning struck. The wind roared. And while the captain shouted and the crew panicked, the ship's lookout began to slowly climb the mast, higher and higher, a long knife

held between his teeth, and a sword in his belt. He wasn't much more than a boy, but he kept climbing and climbing and then—'

'He cut the sail?' one of the beta boys asked.

'No,' the guide said simply. 'He fell into the ocean and died.'

It was like the air went out of the group – like they'd been holding their breaths and hadn't even realised it.

'But then a great big wave tossed him back on to the ship, and when the crew looked up again, the lookout was high on the mast, cutting the sail free, and saving their lives.'

'So he *didn't* die?' a Johnson twin asked.

The guide raised her hands and shook her head. 'No one knows. They say that, in the next moment, the wind blew and lightning struck, and the captain was never seen again. Eventually, the ship reached land, but for weeks – months – years later, there were reports of a young man wielding a sword and long knife, wandering the city, always there to help when evil was about to strike! Always wearing black. Always disappearing into shadows, like the mist rolling off the sea.'

For a long time a hush descended over the group,

but then the kids began to mumble and whisper amongst themselves.

‘The Sentinel’s not a legend!’

‘Yeah. My grandpa said the Sentinel is real.’

‘The Sentinel lives in my old neighbourhood.’

‘Man, you’re crazy. There ain’t no Sentinel.’

‘Then how do you explain . . .’

The individual arguments bled together until it was just like the fart discussion, but with a far less obvious answer. (The Hulk. The Hulk’s farts smell the worst.)

April didn’t want to be part of the argument or the crowd. She just wanted to enjoy the sweet-smelling air and the bright, clean room, so she drifted away from the kids, through the exhibit, and into the big, wide hall, where she found herself standing with a group of adults who all seemed to be waiting for . . . something.

But April had never liked waiting.



WILL THE REAL GABRIEL WINTERBORNE
PLEASE STAND UP?

As April pressed and slipped and weaved and squirmed her way through the crowd, she realised that most of the people were carrying notepads. At least three ladies were holding microphones and wearing too much makeup and standing beside men with big cameras resting on their shoulders.

A silky red ribbon stretched across the doorway – like the finish line of a race – but no one moved towards it, which seemed like a waste to April, but then someone said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us!’ and she saw two men approaching from the other side.

One of them was carrying a comically large pair of scissors and had a look in his eye – like he (A) knew his scissors were ridiculous and (B) would have loved to have

been anywhere other than there. But he forced a smile as the first man kept talking.

‘As the museum’s director, it is my great pleasure to open our newest exhibit – one that I’ve been working on for quite some time, I don’t mind saying.’ He laughed and glanced at the man with the supersized scissors and the very sad eyes. ‘The Winterborne family has been the cornerstone of our community for more than a hundred years. Building industry. Championing the arts. In fact—’

‘Mr Winterborne!’ one of the women with the microphones yelled. ‘Has anyone claimed the reward?’

It took a moment, but eventually, the man with the scissors shook his head and said, ‘No.’

The director looked angry that someone had dared to interrupt his speech. He was just opening his mouth to speak again when another shout came from the crowd.

‘Is it true you’re going to have your nephew declared dead if no one claims the five million dollars?’

April’s eyes went wide. *Five million dollars?* Surely that wasn’t right?

But Sad Scissor Man didn’t correct them. If anything, he seemed extra sad as he said, ‘My nephew has been gone for a decade. I had hoped that a reward for information

about his whereabouts would help us locate him, but we've had no success, and so—'

'Uncle Evert?'

The voice was low and gravelly but loud enough to make the man stop. The crowd whirled around and parted, clearing the way as the stranger slipped closer to the red ribbon and the man with the giant scissors.

'Uncle Evert, don't you recognise me? It's me. Gabriel!' the man said. The crowd gasped. And Evert Winterborne looked like he was going to pass out.

But before anything else could happen, another voice rang out from the other side of the room, shouting, 'Imposter!' and the crowd shifted to take in a different man. This one was scruffy and ragged, wearing expensive clothes that had definitely seen better days. '*I am the real Gabriel Winterborne!*' the newcomer shouted.

All around April, cameras started to flash. She heard one of the women with the microphones say, 'Please tell me you're getting this.' The cameraman nodded as Gabriel #1 pushed towards Gabriel #2.

'Liar!' Gabriel #1 shouted and the whole room turned like they were watching a tennis match.

'Imposter!' Gabriel #2 yelled, and April suddenly

was afraid she might get dizzy.

‘Uncle Evert?’ Gabriel #1 was inching towards the red ribbon and the man, who was slowly backing away. ‘Surely you know me? I’m Gabriel. I’m your long-lost—’

‘Scum!’ Gabriel #2 yelled, and April couldn’t help but notice that he’d suddenly started speaking with a very bad, very fake British accent. ‘You are no Winterborne, sir! I am the true Winterborne heir!’

‘Liar!’

‘Scoundrel!’

‘Imposter!’

‘Thief!’

Neither of them looked anything like the boy in the paintings. And it was like neither of them had ever heard of DNA. But five million dollars was on the line. April didn’t even have enough money to pay the fines she had at the library.

‘Stop!’ Sad Scissor Man shouted, and both Gabriels suddenly went quiet. ‘My nephew is gone. My nephew is, in all likelihood, dead.’ He started to turn and leave, but then he remembered the ginormous scissors and the ribbon and the reason everyone but April was standing around.

‘Here.’ He gave the ribbon a snip. ‘Consider the Winterborne Exhibit officially open.’

And then he walked away.

April had no idea what happened to the fake Gabriels. They must have given up and skulked away. Regardless, nobody was paying much attention to her as she drifted past the cut edges of the ribbon and into the big room filled with more paintings and statues. But other things too – like mannequins in long ball gowns and sequin-covered dresses with fringe along the hems. There was a uniform from World War II, and a wedding dress made out of the most delicate lace that April had ever seen.

With every step it was like she went further and further back in time, until she was looking at a sign that said **THE WINTERBORNE FAMILY JEWELS**. Then all April could do was stand there . . . hypnotised. Mesmerised. Staring at necklaces and rings and strings of pearls so long they could have wrapped April up like a mummy.

And that was when she saw the box.

It was about the size and shape of a shoebox, but like no shoebox that April had ever seen. This box was covered in gold and pearls, diamonds and rubies, but the most interesting thing in April’s opinion was the lock that sat

in the centre of the ornate crest.

An ornate crest that looked exactly like the one on the key that April had worn around her neck every day since she was three years old.

An ornate crest that April had traced with her fingertips, over and over and over again – the only gift from a mother who had left her at a fire station with nothing but that key and a note that read *This is my baby, April. Keep her safe. I'll be back soon.*

That's how April knew that her mother would come back for her. *That's* how she knew that all the Taylors and C/Kaitlyns in the world were wrong. They had to be!

Ten years in the system had taught April that parents abandon kids, sure. But they don't abandon keys to treasure chests. And April had been looking for her mum ever since.

But as April inched closer and closer to the small ornate box, she couldn't shake the feeling that, all this time, she'd been looking for the wrong thing.



A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

April had many talents. At least five. Maybe six, depending on how you counted them.

For starters, she was the best climber at any of the houses she had ever lived. She was the best at freeze tag and the least afraid of spiders. No one ever found her when they played hide-and-seek, and she was the most likely to remember things like what the combination was to the lock they kept on the refrigerator, even if she only saw her foster mother punch it in one time in the dark.

That night, April was grateful for all of her talents.

They were what let her sneak, light as a feather, through the living room and collect a pack of matches, a black hoodie, and a banana (because you should never do a heist on an empty stomach).

She'd paid careful attention at the museum and remembered exactly where the service entrance was and what code the guards had used to go in and out. She'd noticed the gap in the fence – too small for someone who wasn't completely desperate to even think about crawling through.

But, most of all, April was completely desperate.

She was little and she was strong and she had absolutely nothing to lose.

The parking lot was empty when she got there. There were security cameras, of course, but they were the kind that moved, and that only happens if the cameras have blind spots, so April stood perfectly still for a long time, watching the cameras sweep across the dark lot. Really, it was just like dodgeball, and April was excellent at finding the place on the court where no one had an easy shot. Then she slid through the fence and across the parking lot and to the door that opened with a tiny *click*.

Inside, there wasn't even a laser grid. No iron grates. Not even a single German shepherd roaming around, growling up at her as soon as she inched quietly inside.

It was dark, though, so April was glad she'd brought the matches and remembered the silver candelabra that was

sitting with the Winterborne family dishes.

It only took a moment for her to light all the candles and then ease through the big, deserted room. Moonlight shone through the windows. The old gowns practically glowed, and April felt her heart beat a little faster. Her hands started to tingle, like her fingers didn't want to work with the rest of her body. Like they knew they were getting ready to touch whatever it was her mother wanted her to find.

The room seemed different in the darkness. Maybe it was all in April's mind, but it smelled different too. Almost like . . . the Hulk's farts. And a gas station parking lot. (Which, really, is kind of the same thing.)

But she moved on until she was standing in front of the little jewel-covered chest. For a moment she just stood in the candles' flickering light, breathing. Watching. She didn't see any sensors. There weren't any cameras on the walls.

There was a giant mirror, though, and when April saw a man behind her, she jumped. But it was just the statue of the Sentinel, standing in the atrium, keeping watch, and she realised that the only other person in the building was either a ghost or a legend, and neither one would be

strong enough to keep her from finding out what was in that chest.

April stopped breathing, and her hands started shaking, and the key bit into her palm as she held it. Waiting. Wondering. Hoping and praying just a little.

Was it a letter? A map? Maybe the number for a Swiss bank account or a book at the public library – one that would have a code written on the back page in invisible ink and she'd have to use lemon juice and a hair dryer just to read it?

It was quite possible that this was just the first step. She might just be beginning her quest tonight, but that was OK. At least she'd be on her way.

So she put the key in the lock.

And took a deep breath.

And turned.

And absolutely nothing happened.

'It's stuck,' April said, even though no one was there to hear her. She wiggled. She jiggled. She even spat on the lock, hoping it was just old and rusty and figuring spit had to be good for something.

But the key didn't turn.

Which had to be a mistake.

She looked behind her, searching the room for some kind of solution. The Sentinel still stood in the atrium. A knife in his belt.

She could pry the lid open, April realised, whirling back around. But she'd put the candelabra on the case and hadn't noticed the wobble. She certainly wasn't expecting it to tip.

April absolutely did not intend for all five candles to go tumbling off the side of the case, falling to the floor.

'No!' she shouted, but it was too late. The long white gown had a train of delicate lace that swept all the way to April's feet. She saw the candles land. Immediately, she leapt to kick them out, but the antique lace was like a fuse, and the fire was soon blazing down the train of the wedding dress and up the hem of every garment it passed – jumping from the clothes to the curtains. From the curtains to the wall.

April wasn't sure when the alarms started blaring or the lights started swirling. Really, she wasn't hearing too well. Or seeing too well. Or breathing too well, come to think of it.

She was thinking just well enough to turn back to the little chest and pull out her mother's key.

It was far too late to stop the fire. The room was filling with smoke, and April felt herself stumbling. She had to get to an exit. She had to get outside. She had to get away, but—

She fell.

And the key tumbled from her hand, disappearing among the flames and the smoke and the terror that was stronger than anything that April had ever felt in her life.

There was a little more air down there, of course, and April was mad at herself for forgetting that smoke rises. She started scrambling and clawing, fighting against the smoke and fire and time itself as she ran her fingers along the floor, searching. Desperate.

The smoke was swirling now. The shadows were moving. It was almost like the Sentinel was alive. Like he was with her. Like she didn't have to die alone. She could feel him sweeping closer and closer.

And closer.

And as her vision filled with stars and she drifted off to sleep, one thought filled her mind: *I thought he'd be taller.*