PRAISE FOR

WINTOUR'S GAME

"Quick-witted and sharp-tongued, Alex is a compelling lead protagonist with a thirst for survival in a jam-packed plot. Dungan's debut will have action fans waiting impatiently for a sequel."

Irish Examiner

"I was completely hooked. Bring on the sequel!"

Irish Times

"From the very first line, WINTOUR'S GAME has more twists and turns than a car chase. With a propulsive, time-bending plot and a fantastic hero, you can be sure the future belongs to Alex Wintour."

Shane Hegarty, author of *Darkmouth & Boot*

"A gripping, fast-paced teen sci-fi thriller that reminded me in all the best ways of the ARTEMIS FOWL and ALEX RIDER series."

Triona Campbell, author of *Game of Life or Death*

"I was blown away by this non-stop action thriller, which grabs you from the first page and doesn't let you go until the explosive finale has burned away to ash. I read the whole thing in one sitting, barely able to breathe. Alex is my new favourite YA heroine and I can't wait to see what she does next."

Bryony Pearce, author of *Savage Island*

For My Parents

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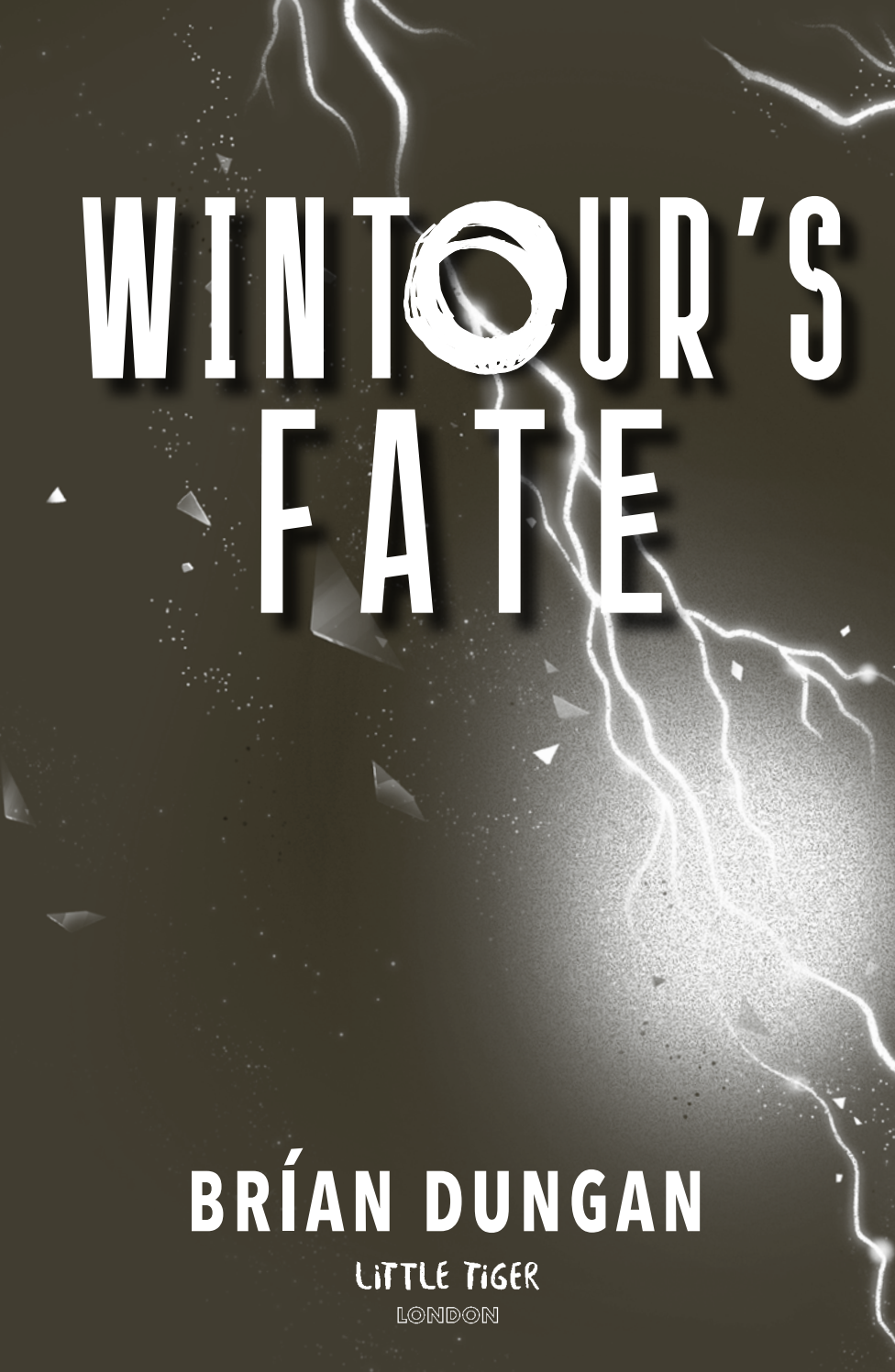

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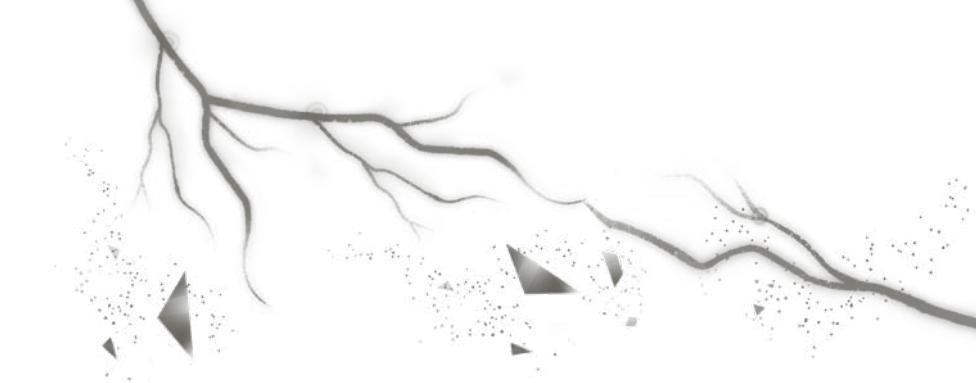

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HEY, KIDDO

Alex's head was full of dreams. Visions scudded across the surface of her consciousness like the shadows of clouds on a hillside, fleeting and swift. But was that what they were? She couldn't be sure, given the last few hours and all they had given up.

Richter's Percussion Emporium exploded in front of her again and again, but she could see Murray Richter inside this time, his hands a blur and cymbals crashing as his blind eyes met hers.

Lynch leant in close, his breath hot and sickly sweet. *Always the way with Oracles*, he was saying, *so busy looking to the future they can't see the truth in front of their faces*. Then that leer, that damned leer, like he knew what she was thinking and they both knew that it was too little, too late.

Cole knelt by her bedside, his handless pocket-watch tether counting out its insistent rhythm. *Don't think of it as a cave, Alex,* he was saying. *Think of it as a canvas*.

And there was Tana, his hand on the button, watching her

with a Zen-like calm as fire and death rushed to claim him.

Goodbye.

But the memories had company. Entwined like lovers, other scenarios ran alongside, above, below and between.

A warm, bright day and a creaking swing set, the *cree-craw* of its straining hinges lost beneath a child's laughter. *Her* laughter.

The rumble of the Tube at the end of the line becoming the rhythmic thump of a crowd baying for blood. *Her* blood.

A voice, veiled and laden with hidden truth. *But it is* you *who are lost.*

And that hand holding hers tightly then, just for a moment, letting go. Only for an instant. Only for an eternity.

Clawed, jewelled fingers, a cigarette clenched tightly between the withered digits, grasp her wrist and twist.

But she's looking into the face of a stranger, who smiles.

"Hey, kiddo."

beep. beep. beep.

Alex awoke to a steady metre.

And as the memories, or whatever they were, faded, reality snuck back in.

It was weirdly comforting and led her to suspect that she wasn't, in fact, dead. But it was still too early to make any assumptions.

A warm glow from the room bled through her still-shut eyelids. Opening them was going to take some effort,

but summoning what strength she could, she battled the crust that had sealed them shut, cracking them open just a touch.

A hospital room swam blearily into view. Ochre tones of a London sunset washed the walls, subduing the floor-to-ceiling whiteness of the place. Dark curtains wafted lazily by the large window, dampening the sounds of the city outside to a muted afterthought, but that was as far as the decorators had got.

Casting her eyes about the spartan room, Alex quickly took stock.

From where she lay, she could see only a storage cupboard beneath the open window and a blue high-backed faux-leather chair, a checkered blanket folded neatly across the armrest. Besides that, a bunch of life-sustaining paraphernalia was attached to her by a network of tubes, the functions of which she chose not to think about for now.

Good old NHS, she thought, pulling out the stops as always.

What the room didn't include, she noted with relief, were any other patients. She had the place to herself.

Swallowing drily, she craned about with a wince, delicately test-running her neck muscles. A colourful bouquet of fresh flowers sat in a vase on the locker next to her bed and, correcting herself, she added them to the room's meagre inventory.

Someone's been in to see me, she thought, the flowers offering up their fragrance. And recently.

Cole? The Galloways, maybe?

Wait, did they even know she was here? Did they even

know she was *alive*? She hadn't known it herself until only a moment ago, so the chances were slim.

Then who had brought the flowers?

Propped carefully against the base of the glass vase, as if offering an answer, was a photograph. The image was faded and careworn and with an effort she strained forward to make it out.

A girl, her mother, a birthday cake and candles. A familiar scene to most kids Alex's age, but one that seemed utterly alien to her. Others were gathered around them at a kitchen table, but their faces were lost to either the murk of development or the photographer's hurried framing.

There was something about it though. Alex could almost *hear* the voices singing 'Happy Birthday'.

Something stirred on the other side of the room. There was a flash of white, a rustle and a gasp, and out of nowhere a doctor fled round the foot of Alex's bed to her side.

"You're awake. You're awake. Oh my God, you're awake!"

The onslaught was so startling that Alex's hands shot up instinctively, so that she glimpsed only snapshots of her attacker between her fingers. A dark tumble of chestnut hair, a gold fern earring and bright, tearful eyes amid a wave of dazzling lab coat.

The first thing that hit Alex, however, was a memory.

The smell of her perfume on my dress.

The doctor's scent struck her like a slap across the face, and when she grasped her by the shoulders, Alex felt her strength return. She scrabbled up the bed, heels churning the sheets into a housekeeper's nightmare, desperate to put as much distance as she could between herself and the

stranger's grip. But when her shoulders hit the headboard the iron frame clanged off the wall, bringing both of their efforts to an abrupt, stuttering halt.

The doctor immediately released her, hands raised in apology, seeing in Alex's wild-eyed expression that she'd overstepped. For a moment they just stared dumbly at one another, keenly aware that the first words uttered by either would set the stage for what was to come.

The woman was maybe in her late thirties. Alex always found that, past twenty, gauging people's age was impossible. Tall, trim and fashionably dressed beneath her lab coat, her hair hung loose past her shoulders, framing a pale face with a strong profile and a full mouth. Once upon a time, Alex thought, she would have been quite beautiful, but her high cheekbones just acted as pedestals now for shadowed, sunken eyes: ocean blue, laser-like and searching. Eyes that had seen too much of everything but sleep.

When the woman finally spoke again, it was deeper than Alex had expected with a raspy, desperate edge to it.

"Alex, right?" she said smiling, clearly knowing the answer and attempting but failing to appear calm. "I'm Christine. You're in hospital."

"Really? What gave it away?" Alex deadpanned, watching Christine's mouth O in confusion before snapping shut again. "How did I get here?"

"By ambulance. There was an explosion. D'you remember … anything?"

If anything, I remember too much, Alex thought, squeezing her eyes shut as a riot of memories broke loose in her mind.

You're an Oracle, Alex, Cole tells her. *Welcome to your future!*

Henry pushes her hair off her face with a welder's mask, eyeing Alex and looking decidedly unimpressed.

Tana puts her through her paces in the dojo, those damned dice rattling in his fist.

Denmark Street and London beyond it, frozen in time, as Lynch leads her towards a waiting car.

Kid, right now you nothing more than a kite dancin' in a storm, waiting to get hit by lightning, Murray says, handing her a black earbud with a flying kite etched on the side.

Sheena Petrovia welcomes them to the Bygone, mesmerising with a laugh and a featherlight touch.

Burning glass rains down around them as a fireball engulfs the Percussion Emporium.

SNAP! and the mourners at the Bygone freeze. *Let us end this little game here and now*, sneers Lynch, bearing down on her.

But the game had only begun.

The Blackwall Tunnel whips past and Tana pushes her to safety. Or so she thought.

The silence at the Nomination is deafening, as the Disciples' plans for the Chronolith are revealed.

If only they had known what that would mean for them.

Anders' maze and his son Lars's rage at the Acolyte's treachery.

Savita Singh, the spider in her web until Tana stabs her in the back.

Lynch's cold, hard sneer, which crumbles when he realises that after all, he was just another pawn.

And Cole, so determined to destroy the Chronolith that he hadn't realised it was right under his nose.

All Alex had wanted was her independence. Free of Roz, free of control. All she'd wanted was her own life to live. But what choice had Tana given her?

She'd accepted a cage so her friends could go free, and as its doors closed and fire swept through the Temple, she'd heard Tana whisper goodbye.

But wait. Was that the end of the story?

Hadn't there been something else?

When she opened her eyes again, Christine was gently reaching out, her own eyes brimming with burgeoning tears. But Alex slapped the hand away, making Christine flinch as if scalded, her reddening fingers balling into a fist.

What was this doctor's problem? Alex thought. She appeared to be wrestling with something, and Alex's refusal to play nice wasn't helping matters – but she'd just woken up to this randomer, what did the woman expect?

"Alex," Christine asked timorously. "Do you remember me?"

Alex's scoffing response that no, she did not remember her, withered and died on her tongue as she recalled the familiar scent of the woman's perfume. But what did that prove? There was, however, something about her, something about her bearing, her voice, her piercing blue eyes that unlocked a sunken chest in Alex, releasing its contents and sending them bubbling towards the surface.

She glanced again at the photograph propped up on the nightstand, and this time immediately recognised Christine as the woman in the picture. Some part of Alex's brain began busily connecting the dots, so that when Christine spoke again, she almost missed it.

Reaching out again tentatively, she lay a warm hand on

Alex's exposed arm before Alex could protest, and glancing down at it, Alex registered for the first time that she was wearing a hospital gown and not her own clothes.

"I was afraid this would happen," Christine said, her lip quivering, her breath escaping her in sharp, barely controlled rasps. "I don't know if it happened before the explosion or after but, Alex … I'm your mum."