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KILL SWITCH

CHAPTER I

WINTER

My ballet slipper brushes the hardwood floor as I slowly step down the long hallway. The glow of the candles on their pedestals lines the dark walls, and I fidget with my fingers as I glance from left to right at every closed door I pass.

I don't like this house. I've never liked it here.

But at least the parties are only twice a year—after summer recitals in June and following the premiere of the annual Nutcracker performance in December. Madame Delova loves ballet, and as my school's benefactress she considers it a "gift to the masses to descend from her tower once in a while to entertain the villagers and allow us into her home."

Or so I overheard my mom say once.

The house is so big that I don't think I'll ever see all of it, and it's filled with things that everyone is always gushing over and whispering about, but it makes me nervous. I feel like I'll break something every time I turn around.

And it's too dark. Even worse today with the house lit only by candlelight. I suppose it's Madame's way of making everything look like a dream, the way she kind of looks herself: surreal, too perfect, and porcelain. Not exactly real.

I press my lips together, pausing before I call out, "Mom?"

Where is she?

I step softly, not sure where I am or how I'll get back to the party, but I know I saw my mom come upstairs. I think there's a third floor, too, but I'm not sure where the next stairwell is to get to it. Why would she come up here? Everyone is downstairs.

I clench my jaw harder with every step away from the party I take. The lights, voices, and music fade, and the silent darkness of the hallway slowly swallows me up.

I should go back. She'll get mad that I followed her anyway.

"Mom?" I call again, scratching at the tights on my legs as the costume I've been wearing since this morning chafes my skin. "Mom?"

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" someone yells.

I jump.

"Everyone is uncomfortable around you," the man continues. "All you do is stand there! We talked about this."

I spot a sliver of light peeking through a cracked doorway and creep closer. I doubt my mom is in there. People don't yell at her.

But maybe she is in there?

"What is going on in that head of yours?" the man bellows. "Can't you speak? At all? Ever?"

There's no response, though. Who is he mad at?

Leaning into the doorframe, I peer into the crack, trying to see who's in the room.

At first, all I can make out is gold. The golden glow of the golden lamp shining onto the golden desk set. But then I shift to the left, my pulse hammering in my chest, as I see Madame's husband, Mr. Torrance, cross into my view from behind his desk. He stands, breathing hard with his jaw set, as he looks down at whoever is on the other side.

"Jesus Christ," he spits out with disdain. "My son. My heir . . . Can anything come out of that fucking mouth of yours? All you've gotta say is 'Hello' and 'Thank you for coming.' You can't even answer a simple question when someone asks you. What the hell is wrong with you?"

My son. My heir.

I inch down and then up, trying to see around the edge of the door,

but I can't see the other person. Madame and Mr. Torrance have a son. I rarely see him, though. He's my sister's age but goes to Catholic school.

"Speak!" his father bursts out again.

I suck in a breath, and on reflex, I take a step. But I accidentally go forward instead of backward and hit the door. The hinges creak, the door creeps open another inch, and I rear back.

Oh, no.

I scurry away from the door, and whirl around, ready to bolt. But before I can escape, the door opens, light spills across the dark hardwood floors, and a tall shadow looms over me.

I clench my thighs, the silvery ache burning like I'm about to pee my pants. Slowly, I turn my head and see Mr. Torrance standing there in a dark suit. The scowl on his face softens, and he lets out a sigh.

"Hi," he says; his lips curl in a slight smile as he gazes down at me.

On instinct, I retreat a step. "I . . . I got lost." I swallow, looking up at his dark eyes. "Do you know where my mom is? I can't find her."

But just then, the room's other occupant swings the door open even more, letting the knob hit the wall, and charges around his father and out of the room. Black hair hanging in his eyes, head down, and necktie draped untied around his neck, he rushes past me without a look and barrels down the stairs.

His footsteps disappear, and I turn back to Mr. Torrance.

He smiles, coming down and squatting at my level. I rear away a little.

"You're Margot's daughter," he says. "Winter, right?"

I nod, putting a foot behind me and ready to take another step back.

But he reaches over and places a hand under my chin. "You have your mother's eyes."

I don't. No one ever says that. I raise my chin so it isn't touching his hand.

"How old are you?" he asks.

He takes my chin again, tilting my head left and right as his eyes appraise me. Then they fall away from my face and down my white

leopard and tutu, past my tights and down to my feet. They float back up, meeting my eyes, but now the smile is gone. Something different plays behind his gaze as he stares at me, and I don't know if it's his silence, his size, or how I can't hear the party anymore, but I finish my step and pull away a few more inches.

"I'm eight," I mumble, dropping my eyes.

I don't need his help finding my mom. I just want to leave now. He was so mean to his son. My parents aren't perfect, but I've never been screamed at like that.

"You're going to be very beautiful someday," he adds in almost a whisper. "Like your mother."

I try for a few seconds and then finally I'm able to swallow the lump in my throat.

"The first time I saw my wife," he goes on, "she was in a costume very much like yours."

I don't have to imagine what Madame looks like in costumes. There are pictures and paintings of her all over the house and the studio.

Mr. Torrance stays there for a moment, his height and eyes hovering over me and making me uncomfortable.

Finally, he drops his hand and inhales a breath as if snapping out of something. "Run along and play," he tells me.

I spin around, darting the way I came, but I have to glance over my shoulder one more time to make sure he's far away and not following me.

But as I look, I see him continue down the hallway, open the door straight ahead, and pause for a moment as if seeing someone.

I almost turn back around to keep going, but he moves out of the doorway, swinging around to close the door, and I see her.

My mom.

I narrow my eyes, blinking to make sure it's her. White afternoon dress, long hair the same color as mine, playful smile on her lips . . .

The door closes, cutting off the image of her heading toward him, and I stand in the black hallway, the sound of a lock clicking echoing around me.

I should go. I don't know what's going on, but I don't think I should bother her. Twisting around, I run down the stairs, through the foyer again, and toward the rear of the house and the party.

The back door opens, a waiter coming through with a tray, and I slip out, fitting across the stone patio and through a sea of adults. Chatter surrounds me, people laugh, drink, and eat, while a flute player in a light blue gown shares a corner with a string quartet far off to my right. They fill the terrace with Vivaldi's Four Seasons, music I know really well from dancing.

The waitstaff clear silverware while glasses clink, and I glance up at the darkening sky, seeing the clouds cover the sun and cast a shadow over the party. Perfect for the candlelight.

Spotting a group in white, I see my friends, all similarly dressed, since we just performed in our recital earlier today, run behind some hedges. They're huddled together, giggling, and my sister, three years older than me, is in the middle of them. I only hesitate a moment before I take a step, following them.

Running around the hedge and onto the grass, I suddenly stop and inhale the rush of wind that hits me as it blows through the trees. Chills spread up my arms, and I glance back at the house and the windows on the second floor where I'd been. My mom might come looking for me.

But the party is boring, and my friends are this way.

Beyond the house and party, the land opens up into a vast lawn, lined and dotted with flower beds to my right and left as well as trees and rolling hills in the distance. It spans far and wide and looks like something out of a fairy tale.

I look over, seeing my sister in a tight group with our classmates. What are they doing? She glances over at me, smirks, and then says something quickly to them before they all rush into the garden maze, disappearing behind the tall hedges.

"Wait!" I shout. "Ari, wait for me!"

I take off down the small slope and toward the maze, stopping only briefly at the entrance and flashing my gaze to the hedges on either side.

The path is only visible for several more feet before I'm forced to make a turn, and I didn't see where they went. What if I get lost?

I shake my head. No. This wouldn't be dangerous. If it were, they would've blocked it off. Right? A bunch of kids just went in. It's fine.

I push off my foot, breaking into a run as the wind sweeps through the cypresses, the promise in the gray sky and looming clouds making the hair on my arms rise. I turn right and wind around the trees, following the path and losing my way as the entrance to the maze gets farther away from me the deeper I go.

The smell of earth fills my lungs as I breathe in, and even though the ground is covered with grass, dirt scuffs my slippers, and I shift uncomfortably. They're going to be ruined now. I know it.

But Madame insisted we keep our full costumes on, even after the performance.

Laughter and howling echo in the distance, and I shoot my head up, starting to walk faster to follow the sound. They're still in here.

After a minute, though, the sounds die out, and I stop, straining to hear where my sister and friends might be.

"Ari?" I call.

But I'm all alone.

I step timidly down the path, coming to an open plot of green with a big fountain in the middle. The space is about twice the size of my bedroom, surrounded by tall cypresses with three other pathways leading off from the big, open area. Is this the center of the maze?

The fountain is massive, with a gray stone bowl at the bottom and a smaller one on top. Water shoots from the spouts, filling the upper bowl and pouring down like thick waterfalls into the lower one. It creates the prettiest sound. Like roaring rapids. So peaceful.

But not looking where I'm going, I crash into someone and stumble backward. A woman's arms rise with her palms up and away from me as if I'm dirty and she doesn't want to touch me.

I see Madame's surprised eyes soften with her smile, her body graceful and fluid like this is a theater and she's always onstage.

"Hello, sweetheart." Her voice is drenched in sweetness. "Are you having fun?"

I step back and drop my eyes, nodding.

"Have you seen my son?" she asks. "He loves parties, and I don't want him to miss this."

He loves parties? I dig in my eyebrows, confused. His father doesn't seem to agree.

I'm about to tell her no, but then something to my right catches my attention, and I look over, thinning my eyes at the dark form.

The dark form inside the fountain.

It sits behind the water in the bottom bowl, almost entirely hidden.

Damon. Their son who was just getting yelled at upstairs.

I pause for a moment, the lie coming out before I can stop it. "No." I shake my head. "No, I haven't seen him, Madame. I'm sorry."

I don't know why I don't tell her he's right there, but after the way his dad just shouted at him, I guess he looks like he wants to be left alone.

I avoid Madame's eyes like she'll be able to tell I'm lying, and instead stare straight ahead. Her black dress flows to mid-calf, glittering with little jewels and pearls as the top hugs her slender body and the bottom sways as she moves. Her long black hair drapes down her back, as straight and shimmering as a cool stream of water.

I never hear my mom say anything nice about her, but while people are afraid of her, they are definitely nice to her face. She doesn't look much older than my babysitter, but she has a kid older than me.

Without saying anything, she glides around me and walks back toward the entrance of the maze, while I stay still for a moment, wondering if I should follow and just leave, too.

But I don't.

I know he probably doesn't want to see anyone, but I kind of feel bad that he's alone.

Slowly, I inch toward the fountain.

Peering through the streams of water pouring down, I try to make him out as he quietly hides. Arms clad in a black suit coat, resting on his

knees, and dark hair hanging over his eyes and sticking to his porcelain cheekbones.

Why is he in the fountain?

"Damon?" I say in a timid voice. "Are you okay?"

He says nothing, and through the falling water, I can tell he doesn't move. It's like he doesn't hear me.

Clearing my throat, I harden my voice. "Why are you sitting in there?" And then I add, "Can I come in, too?"

I didn't mean to say it, but I got excited. It looks fun, and something inside me just wants him to feel better.

He shifts his head, his gaze flashing to the side, but then he turns back.

I squint into the thin slices of air between the spills to see his head bowed and wet hair hanging in his face. I spot a flash of red, noticing blood on his hand. Is he bleeding?

Maybe he wants a Band-Aid. I always want my mom and a Band-Aid when I'm hurt.

"I see you at cathedral sometimes. You never take the bread, do you?" I ask him. "When the whole row goes to receive Communion, you stay sitting there. All by yourself."

He doesn't move behind the water. Just like in church. He just sits there when everyone else goes up the aisle, even though he's of age. I remember him being part of my sister's First Communion class.

I fidget. "I have my First Communion soon," I tell him. "I'm supposed to have it, I mean. You have to go to confession first, and I don't like that part."

Maybe that's why he stays seated during that part of Mass. You're not supposed to take the bread or wine unless you've confessed, and if he hates that part as much as I do, maybe he just sits out altogether.

I search for his eyes through the water. The spray from the falls hits my skin and costume, and the hair on my arms stands up. I want to go in there, too. I want to see.

He doesn't feel friendly, though. I'm not sure what he'll do if I climb in.

"Do you want me to go?" I lean my head to the side, trying to catch his eyes. "I'll go if you want. I just don't like it out here very much. My stupid sister ruins everything."

She took off with my friends, running away from me, and my mom is . . . busy. Seeing what it's like inside a fountain for the first time seems like fun.

But he doesn't look like he wants me here. Or anyone, for that matter.

"I'll go," I finally say and back away, leaving him alone.

But as I turn, the sound of the water suddenly changes, and I look over, seeing that it's hitting his hand now.

He reaches out slowly through the water for me, inviting me in.

I hesitate a moment, trying to see if I can make out his face, but still, it's covered by his drenched hair.

Glancing around me, I don't see anyone, and my mom will probably be mad that I'll get wet, but . . . I want to.

I can't hold back the smile as I reach out and clutch his chilled fingers, lifting my leg and stepping into the fountain.

So long ago.

That was so long ago, but that day was burned into my mind because it was the last day I saw my mother's face. It was the last day I saw my bedroom and whatever new décor she would fix it up with. The last time I could run anywhere I wanted, knowing by the clear picture in front of me that the path ahead was without danger, and it was the last time people weren't nervous around me, or my parents loved me more than they were burdened by me.

It was the last time I was included without question or could enjoy a movie, a dance, or a play the way it was meant to be enjoyed.

It was the last day I was me as I knew it and the first day of a new reality that could never be undone. I couldn't go back. I couldn't rewind and not go into that maze. I couldn't undo stepping into that fountain.

Because, God, I wished I never did. Some mistakes you never heal from, because after that day I would never see again.

And as my mother and I stood next to my older sister, now thirteen years later, on her wedding day, smelling her perfume and hearing the priest mumble through this blessed sacrament of marriage, I fought not to recoil or remember how, for one brief, beautiful moment, that fountain all those years ago was indeed a heavenly hiding place. And how I wished I was there now, if only to be away from here.

The rings, the kiss, the blessing . . .

And it was done. She was married.

My stomach dropped, and my eyes stung as they closed. *No.*

I stood there, hearing whispers and shuffles, and waited for my mother's hand to guide me down the stairs and out of the empty cathedral.

I needed air. I needed to run.

But my mother's and sister's voices moved away from me.

And the same chilled fingers I reached for in that fountain all those years ago now brushed mine.

"Now . . ." my sister's new husband whispered in my ear. "Now you belong to me."

CHAPTER 2

WINTER

Present

I freeze, fisting my hand and feeling him sitting across from me in the limo after the service. Damon Torrance. The boy in the fountain.

The kid in the disheveled suit with hair in his eyes and a bloody hand who would barely speak or look at me.

But now he was a man, tall and sure, and he had definitely learned to talk. There was a threat in his dark words in the church, but I could still smell that fountain on him. He smelled like cold things do. Like sharp water.

"Your father guaranteed us a lofty settlement as long as I stay married to you for a year," my sister said as she and Damon sit side by side, across from my mother and me in the car. "I intend to see it through. No matter what you pull."

She was speaking to him, but his voice was calm and resolute when he finally addressed her. "We won't be divorcing, Arion. Not ever."

His voice sounded turned away, like he was gazing out the window or anywhere but at her.

No divorce? My heart pumped harder. Of course he would divorce her. Someday, right? I couldn't even believe it had gone *this*

far. This was all just revenge on my family, after all. Why would he want to carry it out for a lifetime?

It was his plan to ruin us. Finding proof of my father's embezzlement and tax fraud and causing his flight from the country, the Feds seizing nearly everything we owned, our bank accounts drained, and now . . . the perpetrator of all the havoc swooping in to take advantage of three destitute women who needed support. Someone to save their home and put them back into the luxurious lifestyle and community standing they were accustomed to.

But no, I understood. As much as I wanted to pretend I didn't know the end game, I did. Deep down, I did.

His plan wasn't to ruin us. It was to torture.

For however long it entertained him to do so.

"You *want* to stay married to me?" my sister asked.

"I don't want to be married to anyone else," Damon clarified, his voice monotone and uninterested. "You're as good as anyone, I suppose. You're beautiful and young. You're Thunder Bay. You're educated and presentable. You're healthy, so children shouldn't be a problem . . ."

"You want kids?"

My sister's question sounded almost hopeful, and I closed my eyes behind my sunglasses, cringing. "Oh, God," I breathed out, unable to hold in the curse filled with nausea and disgust.

Silence stretched the space of the car, and I was sure everyone had heard what I'd said, and while I couldn't see him, I knew his eyes were on me.

How could she still want him? And they were going to bring kids into this madness? What he did when we were children wasn't enough to convince her how bad he was, and neither was what he did to me in high school. She knew he couldn't stand her, but still, she wanted him anyway. She'd always wanted him.

Arion didn't care that she had to marry him because of the predicament he'd created in the first place. We lost everything

because of him, but no fear . . . Here he was, giving all of it back by marrying the eldest daughter and tucking us in under the umbrella of his protection and his family's bank account. He made himself the cure, which wouldn't have been necessary if he hadn't also created the disease.

I hated him. My sister's new husband was the only man I thought I might kill someday.

"If you have extramarital affairs," Arion warned, "be discreet. And don't expect me to be faithful then, either."

"Ari . . ." My mother hinted at my sister to be quiet.

But she kept going. "Do you understand?" she pressed her husband.

I stayed turned toward the window to hide my face—or at least half of it—or maybe I wanted to appear as if I wasn't following the conversation, but the car was too small a space to escape his presence. I couldn't not hear every word.

Wasn't this something they should've discussed before getting married? Or wasn't this a deal-breaker for my sister?

"Let's get some things straight," he said calmly, "because I think you've forgotten exactly what your situation is, Arion." He paused and then continued. "You get my name. You get an allowance. You get to preserve your social standing in this community, including your lunches and your shopping and your fucking charities." His hard voice dug her grave deeper with every word. "Your mother and sister don't wind up on the streets, and that is where my obligation to you ends. Don't speak unless spoken to, and don't ask me questions. It aggravates me."

My chest rose and fell in shallow breaths as my stomach tightly knotted.

He continued. "I will fuck women who aren't you, but you can't fuck men who aren't me, because no one else can father my kids. Duh," he added snidely. "I will come and go as I please, and I expect you to be dressed and ready on the rare occasion we need to