
STRIPPED

The Watch - Book One

FINLEY BROWN



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Prologue

It could have been vengeance, betrayal, sabotage, or even an accident. However, those weren't the first words that sprang to mind when one entered a ballet studio. Graceful dancers, beautiful costumes, and the elegance of classical music brought together in the telling of a story, that was the image ballet evoked. But she knew better.

The music began, and she put her hand on the wooden barre, smooth and worn, and closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep breath before the *préparation* and the start of *pliés*. The ritual was so ingrained in her, it went beyond all thought or control, becoming nothing more than a meditation as she warmed up her body and stretched her sore muscles.

She looked across at the other dancers, each in their own space, both physically and mentally. Some were friends, others were enemies, all of them her greatest competitors. She could not get distracted. The discipline it took to wake up every morning and start again was what kept her going. The constant, self-centered need to reach both outstanding body and emotional control. She had worked her whole life for this, sacrificed most everything, enduring strict diets, long and

demanding rehearsal times, bloody feet, rejection, and it had finally paid off. This season, she had been named a soloist, a move up from the corps de ballet. It was not without controversy, though. Her grandfather was a major donor to the company. Whispers circulated through the dancers that her promotion had been bought. She was young at her age, to become a soloist in the Scottish National Ballet. She tried to let the rumors and nasty comments roll off her back; it was to be expected, jealousy ran rampant, and she needed to remain focused.

The ballet master walked around the room as he led class. "One, two three," he counted to the music. "Arm in fifth and relevé." He touched her shoulder, lowering it a millimeter. "Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. And relax. Other side."

The company was premiering the season with the debut of a new take on the classic *Swan Lake*, retold in a stripped down and contemporary way. With class over, she went to her assigned rehearsal room. She was understudying the dual role of Odette and Odile, the white and black swans. The principal dancers were already there speaking to the choreographer, along with the artistic director. She sat down to put on her pointe shoes, tying the ribbons around her ankles. The accompanist began to play Tchaikovsky's Second Act of the *White Swan Pas de Deux*, the melodic sounds of the piano contouring the light and shadow of the harmonies, evocative of the cursed swan and what was to come. The principals took their spots while she and her partner marked it at the back of the studio. The lead dancer, Irina, playing Odette, went to the corner to prepare for a complicated sequence of steps in which she ran and jumped into her partners arms as he lifted her high above his head. She did the same, but at the back, staying out of the way as she visualized the running pattern and hummed the steps to the music. Irina waited as the music built in intensity, then hitting the mark, she took off. Instead of

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a coupé, a step where the right foot cuts the left foot away and takes its place, she slipped, twisting her ankle. The prima ballerina landed with a thud and the sound of a loud pop was followed by an ear-piercing scream. Everyone gathered around as Irina writhed on the floor holding her leg.

Her partner called for help. "Her foot just went out from under her," he bellowed.

She froze, unable to move. The role was hers now. She would play the part of Odette and Odile. Rarely, did an alternate get the chance to take over a starring role. After years of hard work, sweat, and pain, now, in the blink of an eye, success.

The director went to the corner, wiping his fingers across the gray marley floor. "It's slick. Someone's put something greasy here. This was intentional."

In 1725, following the Jacobite rebellion of 1715, George I sanctioned General George Wade to form six watch companies to patrol the Highlands of Scotland. These companies were in charge of disarming the Highlanders, bringing justice to criminals and hindering rebels. The force was known in Gaelic as Am Freiceàdan Dubh, the dark or black watch. Their motto- Nemo Me Impune Lacessit. No one provokes me with impunity.

Chapter 1

Wraith drove the short distance to Eden Court Theater in Inverness, turning his black Mercedes GT into a tight parking spot. The blustery February wind skirted across the river Ness, cutting through him with frigid fatality and constricting his breath as he made his way from the car park to the entrance of the newly renovated building. He reached for the accursed inhaler in his pocket and took two puffs, opening up his scarred lung as he looked around at the modern building. Eden Court housed two theaters, two studios, two cinemas and three galleries, bringing the arts to the Scottish Highlands and the future.

He adjusted the bow tie on his tuxedo, making sure it was straight. It was opening night of the ballet, and anyone who was anyone in the influential Highland society would be here this evening. His grandmother used to take him to the ballet in Edinburgh every Christmas, to see the Nutcracker, but he wasn't here tonight as a spectator. He was here for work. He pushed his past down. It was no longer relevant in his life, and he rarely let himself think about it. In fact, it no longer existed. Funny, the memory would pop up now after eleven

months. He gripped the trombone case he held tight, showing the usher at the door his Scottish Ballet Orchestra badge.

"Take the hall to the left and down the stairs," the older man said, pointing to the forestage.

Wraith gave the man a brief nod. "Thank you." He proceeded down the hall, stopping when he got to the stairs. Instead of going down, he went up to the third floor and veered off to the right, going through a set of double doors and into the auditorium. He looked down; the orchestra was already in the pit. The sound of string and wind instruments being tuned vibrated through the air. He made his way to box forty-one, located house left, and set the trombone case under one of the blue seats, taking the badge off. He looked out over the theatre. This box gave him a horrible view of the stage, but he wasn't here for the show. Again, he was here for work. A nervous energy tickled his spine, causing the hair on the back of his neck to stand up. This was his first assignment, so he couldn't afford to make a mistake. He already knew where all the exits were located. He had spent the greater part of yesterday scoping out the venue. He knew his exact path, running through it in his mind one more time.

Guests and patrons would be arriving. He exited the theater. People mingled at the bar and restaurant, dressed in their finest attire, a sea of black suits and designer ball gowns. Wraith used the lavatory, keeping his eyes peeled the entire time. He was careful to blend in with the gathering crowd. He returned to his box seat, shutting the door. Ten minutes, until the show started. He stood at the back, out of view, and pulled a pair of theater binoculars out of his pocket, scanning the audience. There was movement in box thirty-six, on the opposite side of the theater. He tightened in on the space, bringing Angus McNeil into focus. The older man was alone. That was an advantage. He had spent the past month in Glasgow, trailing the business tycoon as he learned his mannerisms and

patterns. For a man in his seventies, he still managed to throw off a threatening presence with his blocky build and face like a cratered moon. McNeil unbuttoned his tuxedo coat as he sat down. His white hair was slicked back, and he ran his hand along his tightly manicured goatee, a gesture that only added to his menacing self-assurance. Few people crossed this man. The lights flickered, indicating the start of the ballet. Wraith laid out his gear and waited.

The theater went dark and the music began. He knew the musical score by heart. He knew exactly when to make his move and had it timed out to the music as he counted the beats. His own tormented dance with death wouldn't begin until right before intermission. His eyes drifted to the stage as Odette emerged, the white swan, ethereal and graceful. It was Angus' granddaughter, Primrose McNeil. When she was suddenly thrust into the starring role after the unfortunate and suspicious accident of the Russian principal dancer, Irina Beilkov, it opened up the perfect opportunity and place for Wraith to carry out his mission. Most of the time, his job was spent watching and waiting, as he collected the necessary data the tactical plan required, demanding extreme patience. But he had all the time in the world now, nothing but time. His life wasn't his own anymore. He waited, the music ticking down the minutes in his mind. At the start of the second act, he put on his night vision goggles, adjusting the chin strap as his attention was focused singularly on box thirty-six. He took his high-powered rifle from the trombone case. The .338 Lapua Magnum cartridge was already loaded; he had one shot. He knelt behind the seats and brought it into position, adjusting the scope. Angus sat watching the stage, entranced and unguarded. A bouquet of two dozen white roses sat next to him. He was infatuated as he watched Primrose float across the stage, fragile and beautiful, and it left him vulnerable. The music began to build as the story and dance unfolded, power-

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fully melodic in its synergy. Wraith closed his eyes briefly, letting the notes become his guide. He put his finger on the trigger as the coda climbed and the tension of the piece reached its climax. He and Angus were about to become one.

A shadow in the box made him blink. No more than a dark presence, he watched as the old man struggled, trying to stop the intruder but not before he was silently pushed over the edge. The curtain closed, and people began to scream as twenty-four white roses accompanied Angus down in a wicked and lethal pas de deux to where he lay face down on the cement floor. Act two was complete.