

CHAPTER ONE

September 1854

I opened my eyes, the air in my bedchamber pulsing with the kind of silence that only comes in the wake of sound — a sound that never should have been there. I waited, listening. Shadows hid the dressing table, my bookshelves, the roses on the wallpaper, each window swathed in a shroud of black. But my room was empty. I felt this as certainly as the satin coverlet clutched in my hand. And then it came again. A soft clink of metal, and a creak of floorboard in the hall. I watched a shaft of yellow light move across the crack beneath my door.

I flung back the coverlet and ran, barefoot and noiseless, across the carpet; all thought now narrowed to a single key that stood in the lock on my door. The same key I had forgotten to turn before climbing into bed. My feet stopped of their own accord just before the door, nightgown tangled about my knees, and quietly I pressed one cheek against the cold mahogany while my left hand felt through the darkness, searching for the key. There was a low murmur in the corridor, a man's timbre, and an answering grumble. Two of them. My fingers found the key. I turned it, slowly, dreading its click. And just as slowly,

I felt the knob above my key begin to move, twisted by a hand from the other side. The door locked with an audible *thunk* as the knob gave a short rattle.

And then I fled, skirting around furniture I knew to be there but could not see, hair wild and unbraided, through the inner door, across the bathing room, and into Mary's little bedchamber. I passed her sleeping form and tried the latch of the door to my uncle's workshop. Locked. I let out my breath. The room we called the workshop also had a door to the corridor, the corridor that held at least two men trying to enter my bedchamber. But it was not me they wanted to find, or my maid; I was certain of that. How long before they discovered they had the wrong door? I hurried to the rumpled bed, Mary's face just visible in the red light of her stove's dying coals.

"Mary!" I whispered. "Wake up!"

Mary's breath went in and out, whistling.

"Mary!" I grabbed a candle, thrust the taper in the coals, and put the flaming wick to an oil lamp on the bedside table. Light bloomed across her dreaming face. I shook Mary hard, and when that didn't work, shook her violently. Heavy lids fluttered, her mouth opened, and I clamped a hand over it before any words could come out.

"Men in the corridor," I said, holding my voice low.

Mary's eyes focused, going large and wide above my knuckles.

"We must get Uncle Tully. Do you understand?"

She stared at me a moment longer, then nodded. I removed my hand and she clambered out of the bed, her nightcap askew. "Lord, Miss, but you gave me a fright!" she hissed. "I don't know what this house is coming to when —"

“Never mind,” I said, pushing away her hands. She had been trying to stuff my arm into the sleeve of a dressing gown, as if I might be concerned at this moment with a lack of decency. “Where is the key? To the workshop?”

“On the table. But what about John George, Miss? Weren’t it his night to be watching in the —”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where he is. We have to get Uncle . . .”

We froze at the same instant, Mary’s gaze snapping up to find mine. There were voices in my bedchamber, echoing on the marble walls of the bathing room, no longer bothering with quiet. How could they have gotten through my locked door so quickly and without noise? The dressing gown slipped from Mary’s hands, becoming a silken puddle on the carpet.

I flitted to the bathing-room door, shut it softly, and slid its bolt into place — no lock to turn here — while Mary shuffled through the things on her bedside table, searching for the key to the workshop. The door moved, and then rattled hard in its frame, caught against the bolt.

I took a step back, and Mary knocked the key off the table and into a basket of knitting.

One.

I counted the dull, slow thuds of a shoulder ramming against the door.

Two. Three.

I grabbed the oil lamp while Mary got to her knees, scrabbling for the key in a tangle of yarn.

Four. Five . . .

Mary pulled the key free.

Six. Seven. Eight . . . She thrust it into the keyhole, fumbling with the lock.

Nine.

Wood groaned, Mary coaxed the lock to turn, and then we were in the workshop, running the outlandish paths that snaked through the stacks of my uncle's inventions. My light slithered over cogs and wheels of brass, catching on the metallic under-webbing of a shin or cheek, or a disembodied leg, their gears exposed like sinew and bone. And then we heard the wounded door succumb, splintering around the bolt.

I pulled Mary to a stop. My uncle's bedchamber was in the gloom on the other end of the room; I could almost see his door from where I stood. But I would not be so foolish as to show it to them. Mary looked at me and understood. We turned together, the lamp shining out from my hand like a beacon, facing the pair of black shapes that now stood motionless in the doorway of the workshop.

We examined each other. Two against two, white nightgowns and yellow light against dark clothing and shadow. The door to the corridor was too far away, across a sea of humanlike machines, all eyeless, skinless, and unfinished; there had been no one here to give life to their expressions for a long time. And then I saw that the living shapes before me were also without faces. The two men wore masks. Mary's hand tightened on mine.

The larger one took a cautious step toward my light, and I could just make out the glint of eyes through the slits in the mask, searching for the path that would lead him to us. He focused on my face and began picking his way gingerly in the dim. The smaller of the

two hung back, still and enigmatic. My eyes roved, seeking help that was not there.

“*Ne te déplace pas,*” said the large one softly, almost soothingly, as he moved. “*Ne bouge pas, Katharine.*”

My stomach twisted. He was speaking French, and he knew my name. I might not know what words he had used, but any doubt about why these men had come was now banished. I thought of my uncle Tully’s door, hidden only by the darkness behind me; I had not the smallest hope it would be locked. The man reached out a hand as he came, beckoning, a gentle gesture, almost imploring. In his other hand was a dagger, twinkling in my light.

“*On n’a pas besoin d’avoir recours à la violence, Katharine,*” he said. “*Donne-moi Monsieur Tulman.*”

This time I understood my uncle’s name and something about “violence.” The other man stood silent, waiting behind his mask. “Mary,” I said, hoping these men had no more English than I had French, “we will move toward the hall, away from . . . from . . .” I didn’t want to say “Uncle Tully.” Mary nodded, still gripping me hard. We took one small side step, together, toward the corridor.

“*Donnez-nous Tulman!*” the man said, voice now gruff. “*Maintenant!*” He waved the dagger.

“This way,” I said, very loud and clear. I pushed Mary slightly, and we took another step toward the hall, and then another. I bumped my hip hard as I moved around a workbench, eyes on the arm with the dagger. *Sleep, Uncle Tully, I begged silently. Stay asleep. And where are you, John George? You were supposed to be watching the corridor. You should have been in the corridor. . . .* Mary whimpered, her fingers digging into my hand. “Mr. Tulman is this way,” I said again.