



A Spark Unseen

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CHAPTER ONE

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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 rumped 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.

The man shouted again, and we had taken three more steps before I realized that the silent one was moving, coming fast across the room. In one movement, he had vaulted the workbench between us and yanked Mary by the arm, tearing her away from me. A small pistol cocked, the muzzle disappearing into her tangle of braids.

Mary screamed, yelling as if she'd been shot already, and my arm moved instinctively, acting on an eruption of pure, unthinking fear. I threw the oil lamp.

It was a decent shot. The lamp hit the man and exploded, leaving lines of streaking flame as the base skipped across the carpet. Mary broke free, pushing herself away from the blaze, stumbling over backward as the man dropped the pistol; his arm was on fire. I reached out for Mary and was jerked from behind, cold metal touching the warm skin of my neck. I sucked in a gasp.

“Ne bouge pas ou je te coupe,” said the man with the dagger, his breath hot in my ear.

I clutched at the viselike arm around my chest, pinning me from behind as the burning man struggled to rip off his jacket. The sharp point of the knife pressed into my throat. I squeezed my eyes closed, terror giving way to a sort of cold surprise. This was not how I'd thought I would die. Had not been part of my meticulous plans when I'd pulled on my nightgown and climbed into bed. There were this month's ledger books waiting on my desk, and the new plastering to start tomorrow in the ruined lower wing. That rent to be mended in my white stocking, and the walls of Uncle Tully's new workshop, rising stone by stone from the riverbank . . .

My eyes flew open, widening at the sting of the knifepoint as it

entered my skin. Lane would come back to Stranwyne Keep, and I would not be here to meet him.

And then the mouth at my ear grunted, the body behind me jerked, and the knife fell away from my throat. I spun, hand on my bleeding neck, and saw the masked man folding in on himself, like badly starched laundry, crumpling to the floor with an almost imperceptible thud.

My gaze traveled up and found Mary, each freckle dark on her pale and sweating face. She had a hammer in her upraised hand, its blunt end bloody in a flickering orange light.

I coughed and looked behind me. The burning man was gone, the hall door open, the air a haze. The jacket blazed in a ball of fire on the carpet, the flames inching outward.

“Water, Mary!” I yelled, stumbling to the drapes, hearing her throw down the hammer as she ran for the bathing room. I ripped the rods from the windows, dragging the heavy cloth over tools and torsos of clockwork, knocking them to the floor until I could pile the drapes onto the fire on the carpet. Smoke billowed. I stomped, beating the fire beneath the drapes with bare feet as Mary threw water onto both the cloth and me before running for more.

A few minutes and the fire was gone, the air around us a poisonous fog. Mary’s face was blackened, her watering eyes laying a white stripe on each cheek. She thrust a wet cloth into my face to breathe through as I staggered toward the naked window. I tried to turn the latch — an act that had likely not been attempted in more than two hundred years — and when it would not yield I picked up a metallic arm and smashed the windowpanes, sending sprays of

glass down into the gardens below. The cool autumn night sucked at the smoke.

I took a breath of the purer air, the burn of it like fire itself, and turned away from the broken window, stumbling through the wreckage of machinery, past the twisted shape on the floor, a dark stain spreading halo-like from around his head. The soles of his shoes were smoldering. And then I broke into a run across the workshop, scattering a bucket of screws and tearing my gown on a jagged piece of iron before I burst through the door in a cloud.

“Uncle Tully!” I yelled. “Uncle!”

I searched the bare and tidy room with streaming eyes. But my uncle was not there.