



The Dark Unwinding

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CHAPTER ONE

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Warm sun and robin's-egg skies were inappropriate conditions for sending one's uncle to a lunatic asylum. I had settled this point four hours earlier, while miles of road slipped beneath the carriage wheels. The clouds, to my way of thinking, should have turned themselves black, should have rumbled and crashed, and flung needles of rain at the trees. But there they lazed, the errant things, like tufts of discarded goose down, shadowing the slopes of the passing moors. I removed my gaze from the window. The weather was most insensible.

Beads of sweat rolled down my neck, the empty seat across from me rocking with the wheels. The interior of the carriage was crimson and airless, like Aunt Alice's morning room, where I do the family accounts.

"Katharine," my aunt Alice had said. She was perched on the edge of the velvet settee, stroking the head of a round-bellied pug, allowing it to lap tea from her saucer. The dog's dislike of me was almost equal to his mistress's. "Katharine," she had said, "I've a job to be done, a job for which I find you most suitable."

Yes, Aunt, I'd thought. *I am always the most suitable for your sort of jobs. Is there a maid to be scolded, another necklace to be pawned? Or has my cousin Robert done something disagreeable in the potting shed?* I blew on the wet ink of the ledger book and laid down my pen.

"Your uncle Tulman, I am afraid, has become unbalanced in his mind."

I waited, wondering if I would now be expected to rearrange the workings of a human brain. Aunt Alice set aside the saucer and drew a paper from her bag. The dog whined.

"This letter is quite concerning. Not only has your uncle refused to see Mrs. Hardcastle, he has caused her to fear for her life. She was obliged to flee. She also says that your uncle has undertaken certain projects at Stranwyne, projects that are seriously depleting the wealth of the estate. This would explain, of course, the reluctance about any little increases to our own family income. If we are not active . . ." She cast a loving eye on her only son, sprawled on the rug like a man-sized child, his puffy cheeks round with toffees. ". . . then there will be nothing left for poor Robert when he comes of age."

I closed the ledger book. That our income might be increased by denying "poor Robert" his daily access to the sweet shop was a fact I kept to myself. My realm was confined to the ink and subtraction marks; I had no say in what made the numbers come to be. Not yet.

"I have seen my solicitor," my aunt announced. "And due to the . . . delicate nature of these matters, I am told that someone — preferably one of the family — must go to the estate, to bear witness to your uncle's incapacities. And without, of course, attracting more scrutiny or scandal than need be." She gathered up the dog and

kissed it, glancing at me sidelong through her fringe of curls. “You, Katharine, are the soul of discretion.”

I woke late to my danger. “But, Aunt,” I said quickly, “surely you would wish to attend to such a matter yourself? It is our Robert’s inheritance, after all.” I was aiming for her weak spot, but she was far ahead of me.

“I am surprised at you, Katharine. Robert will be your sole provision in life once I am gone, so this concerns you far more than it does me, I’m sure.” She cuddled the squirming dog. “And you forget that it is the season. I, of course, could never leave London in the season.”

It was her unspoken words that silenced me. That I could have no hope of future provision beyond the charity of my vile cousin, and had no invitations to keep me in London for the season, were far weaker places than her love of money, and she knew it.

And so the carriage rattled onward to Stranwyne Keep, my trunk lashed to its back, a letter of introduction in my valise, instructions for declaring my uncle a lunatic tucked in my head. But I had given my situation and my cousin’s inheritance some thought since that day. Aunt Alice might be sharp, but Robert was an idiot, and with a mind unlikely to improve under his mother’s tutelage. If I could retain my position as keeper of the books, and with Robert of age, rich, and so easily manipulated, I might be able to create an independent world within the one I now inhabited, with an income that allowed me a certain measure of freedom. I had been tasting that freedom in my dreams for a fortnight. Vile Robert would inherit; I would make sure of that.

The driver hit a rut, and my teeth cracked together. I had bloodied my mouth twice before learning not to travel with my tongue between

my teeth. Country bumps, I discovered, came at you by stealth. I planted my feet, leaning back against the cushion as the road tilted, and then the sun was extinguished and the carriage plunged down into a pool of midnight.

I blinked in the sudden blackness. Wind and storm I had imagined more suited to my task; apocalyptic eclipse had never entered my mind. I reached out with a blind hand, fumbling for the window latch, but it became visible to me again almost at once, lit by a harsh, yellow-white glare. I put my head out the window.

We were in a tunnel, half round and large, wide enough for two carriages to pass side by side. The walls and ceiling were bricked and curving, illuminated every few feet by an orb of glowing gaslight. The artificial sparks glimmered one after the other, on and on, dwindling away in the long dark of the tunnel.

“Driver?” I called. “Where are we?” If the man answered, then the racket of hooves, harness, and carriage wheels had not allowed me to hear it.

I shut the window. This was unexpected. I did not like the unexpected, and though every one of my seventeen years had taught me to tolerate what I did not like, I disliked it still. The gaslights streaked, blurring as they sped past my eyes. I counted three hundred twenty-six through the left-hand window before the carriage went dark, tilted, and emerged once more into the sunshine.

The road led onto a circular drive. Behind me was the mouth of the tunnel, opening like an expression of surprise from a knoll of gray-green moor grass, while before me rose a wall of brown stone, growing upward as the carriage rolled forward. Stranwyne Keep. The stone house came closer, filling my square of glass, windowpanes and

casements and shrubbery passing by, and then I was jerked back against the cushions. We had stopped. I pushed down the latch and clambered out without waiting for the driver, bonnet and valise in hand.

Three rows of windows were stacked above those level with my eyes. Twenty-five or so in each row to the right, while to the left they were more difficult to count, the straight lines made irregular by insets and bays. About one chimney for every five windows was visible, and assuming that each floor shared, that would be at least four rooms to a chimney. My eyes roved the roofline. I could count thirteen chimneys at a glance. The place was a monstrosity.

I started at a touch to my elbow, but it was only the driver, a genial old man with a shock of gray hair and teeth to match. "Should I loose the trunk, Miss?"

"Yes, bring it down, please. Thank you." Gravel amongst weeds crunched beneath the man's feet, and for the first time I noticed the stillness, absolute but for the breeze and the birds. The arrival of the carriage had not roused the house. I marched up the steps, set the valise at my feet, took hold of a heavy iron knocker, and rapped.

Nothing happened.

The old man grunted, and I heard my trunk hit the ground with more force than I thought advisable for its contents. I wiped at the rust now staining my glove and knocked again.

"All right there, Miss?"

I turned. The driver was back in his seat, reins in hand, my trunk lying where it had fallen. *Coward*, I thought. I came down the steps and handed him a coin from my glove. He doffed his cap, chirruped to the horses, and I watched bits of gravel spray from the carriage

wheels as he whipped the horses around the drive and disappeared into the hole in the hillside.

I walked slowly to the door in the returning silence, wishing I was back in the speeding carriage, rushing through the gas glare to somewhere else, a somewhere that was of my own choosing. Then I wondered how much of that glare was Vile Robert's inheritance being sucked away by hundreds of gaslights in a useless tunnel. I lifted the door knocker, and rapped again. When there was still no answer, I put my rusty glove on the latch and pushed. The door creaked, reluctant on its hinges.

I stepped into a tall and narrow entry hall. Curtains of deep rose damask covered the two long windows on either side of the door, tinting the flooding sunlight a hot, brazen pink, a shade mirrored by the paint above the wainscoting and the matting on the floor. The color was an assault on the eyes almost as the silence seemed an attack on the ears.

"Hello?" I called. My voice fell dead in the stale, pink air. I shut the door behind me.

A set of neat footprints in the dust-covered matting, feminine from their size and narrow heel, led away from the door, meandering amongst the haphazard groupings of sheet-clad furniture. There were none coming back again. I clutched the valise, and began my own set of footprints.

In the very back of the room, where the sunlight could not penetrate, a wide staircase rose into darkness, and beside the stairs was a door, light leaking from its edges. I opened this, and found a windowless corridor, gaslit and stifling. Door after door slipped past me, set in walls the hue of half-ripened cherries, a sense of suffocation

growing as I moved deeper and deeper into the house. A closed door ended the hall, and behind it was another room, also windowless, a single chandelier throwing both illumination and shadow on nothing but clocks.

They were stacked on tables, on the floor, and covered every inch of wall. Old, new, intricate, and plain, gilt, brass, oak, teak, rosewood, and mahogany, and every one of them polished to perfection, shining in the dimness and glare. Those that were floor-standing were placed back-to-back or side-to-side, leaving narrow, winding paths through the jumble. One clock had the phases of the moon etched into its glass, another had tiny wooden figures that turned as the seconds passed, but they were all of them ticking, pendulums swinging, and at such different rhythms that I felt almost dizzy. I squeezed onto one of the paths, struggling to count as I maneuvered through the noise. The air was thick with the smell of oil and beeswax.

Something clunked to my left, heavy and metallic. I looked up to a tall black-enameled cabinet, my eyes following its pattern of gold-leaf paint to the cherub perched on its top, and above it, hanging from the ceiling, was a gilded birdcage. A stuffed bird sat inside, feathers jewel-bright in the light, the face of a clock forming the cage's rounded bottom. Cogs whirred as I stared, and the bird raised its wings with the rasp of a spring and one faint click. I turned, head swiveling. The birdcage had read five o'clock. All of them, every one of them had hands pointing to five. . . .

The cherub-topped clock boomed like a gong, the jewel bird sang, and an avalanche of bells, chimes, tolls, and whistles shook the floor. I covered my ears and fled through the clock maze, the valise and bonnet banging against my head, running for anywhere that was

away from the noise. I pulled open the first door I saw, thick and on massive iron hinges, ran through, and had to use both hands to pull it shut again. The clocks ended their announcement of the hour, and the thud of the door and their last discordant clangs came back to me in a fading echo. I looked up.

I was in a room of stone, chapel-like with its vaulted roof, columned archways, and the hush that had descended after the clock chimes. Arched windows tinted the sun, this time not with cloth, but with the grime that coated their glass. I tried to slow my breath, cool air entering my lungs, my boots tapping an unwelcome staccato across the stone-flagged floor. I raised a hand and touched the nearest column. The surface was worn, pitted. This room was old, older by centuries than the others I'd walked through.

I had the oddest sensation then, with the chill of that ancient column soaking through my glove. It was like being turned the wrong way out, inverted, as if by running through the clocks I had somehow moved backward instead of forward, and to a place that did not want me. I dropped my hand. I could make no sense of my surroundings. I did not like that. A draft moved, a teasing whisper on the back of my neck, and again my boots rang a rhythm on the floor stones, ruining the quiet, their noise returning from the shadows with a soft, bubbling giggle.

I spun on my heel, chest thudding, searching for a laugh that had seemed both before and behind me, and when I whirled about the other way I froze. A young woman stood not twenty feet away, plain, panting, and wearing my gray dress, staring back at me wide-eyed from a tall gilded mirror that stood propped against the wall. I let out my breath. I could see my boots, the valise, even my untidy hair.

I could also see two black eyes, glittering in a pale face that hovered just behind my shoulder.

I screamed, then clamped my mouth shut and turned, my shriek coming back to me, mocking. A little man sat at a table between two columns, a parson's hat the style of thirty years ago tilted on his head. The black eyes danced as he grinned, but now I could see that their sparkle was only glass, shimmering in the reflected light of the mirror. A crack ran down the porcelain of his face, twisting his smile. I stepped back. Whatever he was, the little man had not laughed.

"Where are you?" I called, eyes roving the emptiness. The columns held up a gallery, and on the far end, in the dim, top recesses, I could just make out a door. It was open, swinging slightly in the draft.

I set the valise at my feet, and smoothed my disarranged hair. Someone was alive and breathing in this house, if for no other reason than someone had to wind all those clocks. And that someone, I suspected, had just tried to make a fool of me.

I left the parson smiling at his table, my boots clacking to the far end of the room, where I jerked open a door and tromped down the salmon-hued hall behind it, bonnet swinging by its strings. I turned right, up a short flight of stairs, marched through a fuchsia room with more dust sheets, turned right again, and came to a choice: right, or left. A door slammed somewhere to my right so I went that way, skirt swishing against a carpet the color of faded sugar roses. I rounded the corner and flung open the first door I saw.

The inevitable color of this room was softened by smoke stains, peeling plaster, and a faint orange fire glow. Copper pans and braided onions hung from the ceiling, clouded by a fog of steam that blurred

the outlines of the furniture. But I could see a woman, stout and in a pale blue dressing gown, standing with her feet apart before a stove that needed blacking. She had just clouted the child in front of her on the head with a spoon.

“ . . . will be taking you straight to the bad place for such lies, Davy . . .” She looked up then, and her mouth dropped open. “Well, who the devil are you?”