The Clockwork Garden

An original fantasy novella by A. R. Calloway

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Chapter One - The Gate That Grew Overnight

Mira Solace had wound the clocks of Brindlewick for eleven years, and in all that time the town had never once surprised her. The bakery bell rang at six. The ferry argued with the river at seven. Old Tomas fed the pigeons outside the station and lied, cheerfully, about having once been a sea captain. Mira liked a town that kept its promises. She liked winding a clock and knowing exactly what it would do next.

So on the first morning of October, when she stepped into her grandmother's garden with a watering can and found a gate standing where no gate had been the night before, she did the only reasonable thing. She put the can down very carefully, as if the gate might startle, and said, "No. Absolutely not."

The gate was iron, green with age, and taller than she was. Vines had grown through its bars - not the polite ivy from the fence, but clockwork vines, brass leaves on copper stems, each leaf engraved with a number. When the wind moved them, they chimed, very softly, out of order. Seven. Three. Twelve. Five. Mira, who could hear a mainspring failing through a closed door, went cold all over. The numbers were counting down.

"Gran!" she called towards the house. "Did you order a gate?"

Her grandmother, Wren Solace, eighty-one years old and entirely unbothered by the impossible, appeared at the kitchen door with a teapot. "Oh good," she said. "It's early this year. Put the kettle on, love. And whatever you do, don't wind it."

"Don't wind what?"

"The garden, dear. It does so hate being wound by strangers."

Mira had questions. She had so many questions that they queued up and jammed, like market day on Bridge Street. The first one out was not her best. "The garden is a clock?"

"The garden," said Gran, pouring tea as though gates grew in flowerbeds every week, "is the reason Brindlewick's clocks have never once been wrong. Every town keeps time somehow. Ours keeps it here, under the roses. Your great-grandfather built the first mechanism. I have kept it these sixty years. And this autumn -" she nodded at the brass vines, which chimed eleven where twelve should have been "- this autumn it has started losing minutes."

"Gardens don't lose minutes."

"This one does. Yesterday it lost four. The day before, nine. When a clockwork garden loses enough time, the things planted in it begin to come up early. Or late. Or -" Gran glanced at the gate, and for the first time in Mira's memory, her grandmother looked her age. "Or in the wrong season entirely. Last night it grew a gate. Gates, love, are for keeping things in. Or out. I have never been sure which, and I built half the fence."

Mira approached the gate the way she approached a damaged escapement: slowly, with respect, and with her tools ready. Up close, the vines were warm. Not sun-warm. Body-warm, like something sleeping. Among the brass leaves she found a keyhole set into the gate's crossbar, and hanging beside it on a copper hook, a key - shaped, unmistakably, like a sunflower.

She did not touch it. She was proud, later, of not touching it.

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"Who is it for, Gran? The key."

"Whoever the garden chooses. It chose your great-grandfather. It chose me." Gran's tea had gone forgotten in her hand. "It has been choosing you since you were six years old and rearranged my entire herb bed by flowering time. I had hoped we'd have until spring. I had hoped for a great many things." The vines chimed again. Four. Two. The countdown, Mira understood with a horologist's certainty, was not measuring days.

It was measuring her.

That night, Mira did not sleep. She sat at her workbench with the shop clocks ticking around her like a parliament of patient friends, and she took apart the oldest of them - a regulator that had belonged to her great-grandfather - looking for anything he might have hidden for a granddaughter he never met. She found it at midnight, folded inside the pendulum bob: a single page, in handwriting like copper wire.

'If you are reading this, the garden is losing time, and it has chosen you. Do not be afraid of the gate. Be afraid of wasting what is behind it. Signed, E. Solace. P.S. - Bring a notebook. Bring two. You will want to write everything down.'

Mira laughed, alone in the ticking dark, because of course the answer to a family mystery was stationery. Then she fetched her two best notebooks, the brass pen her grandmother had given her at sixteen, and a lantern.

And at dawn, while the brass leaves counted softly down towards morning, Mira Solace - who had wound the clocks of Brindlewick for eleven years and had never once been surprised - took the sunflower key from its hook, fitted it into the lock, and turned it.

The gate did not creak. It exhaled, like a held breath let go at last. Beyond it there was no garden path, no roses, no fence.

Beyond it, an entire season was waiting - holding its breath right back.

- End of Chapter One. Chapters Two to Nine arrive with the launch edition of The Clockwork Garden (20,628 words, EPUB + PDF) at pagelyra.vercel.app -

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