Tales from the Clockwork Garden

Five Stories from Brindlewick - an original story collection by A. R. Calloway

Free sample - the opening of Story One, 'Roses in February'.

Pagelyra - Free Sample - Personal Use - pagelyra.vercel.app

Roses in February

The smell reached her on the shop steps, before she had the key in the lock: roses, in February, in the snow.

Mira Solace stood with her hand on the cold iron handle and breathed it in against her better judgement. It was not the ghost of a smell, not a soap or a scented candle or something the wind had carried from the florist's on Bridge Street. It was the real, green, honeyed weight of them - dozens of them - and it was coming over her grandmother's garden wall, through air so cold it hurt her teeth.

She unlocked the shop out of habit. She hung her coat on its peg out of habit. Then she took the long way through the back room, past the clocks ticking their patient parliament, and opened the garden door with the particular dread of a woman who maintains other people's certainties for a living.

The roses had come up in the night.

Not a brave early bud or two. All of them. Every bush along the south wall stood in full, absurd, summer bloom - pink, cream, and the deep red of the old climbers - each flower beaded with meltwater, each stem rising out of six inches of unbroken snow. The snow around the beds had melted in perfect circles, as if every bush sat in its own private June. Steam rose off the petals in the cold. It looked, Mira thought, like the garden had forgotten what month it was, and was too proud to ask.

"Gran," she called, in the voice she used for customers whose clocks had done something impossible. "Gran. Come and look at this, please."

Wren Solace appeared at the kitchen door in her dressing gown, eighty-one years old, with a teapot in one hand and the expression of a woman whose kettle has merely boiled. "Oh," she said. "Oh dear. They've come up early."

"Early." Mira gestured at the snow, the steam, the whole steaming impossibility of it. "Gran, it's February. There was a frost hard enough last night to split the pipe behind the scullery. Roses do not come up early. Roses come up dead."

"These ones come up when they're ready." Her grandmother came down the path in her slippers, quite unconcerned about the snow, and put the back of her hand against a red bloom the way you'd feel a child's forehead. "Feel that."

Mira felt it. The petals were warm. Not sun-warm - there was no sun worth the name - but living-warm, body-warm, as if the flowers were running a slight fever.

"The garden lost some time in the night," Gran said, in the tone of a woman reporting that the post was late. "When it loses time, it has to spend it somewhere. It spent it here."

* * *

Mira was a horologist. She had wound the clocks of Brindlewick for eleven years. She could hear a mainspring failing through a closed door, and she had a craftsman's deep, tidy hatred of explanations that did not explain. Gardens lost time. Time got spent. On roses. She opened her mouth to object to all of it, in order, and found her grandmother watching her with the mild, waiting look she remembered from childhood - the look that had always meant: you may ask, and I will answer, but only the question you actually ask.

Pagelyra - Free Sample - Personal Use - pagelyra.vercel.app

So she asked the practical one. She was proud of it, afterwards, the way you are proud of holding onto a railing.

"What do we do with them?"

"We cut them," said Gran promptly. "A hard frost is coming back tonight, and it will take every one of them where they stand. Cut, they'll last a fortnight in water. Left, they'll be black by morning." She went back up the path for the secateurs and the big enamel jug, calling over her shoulder: "And we don't make a song about it, love. Cut them like it's the most ordinary thing in the world."

It took an hour. The snow squeaked under Mira's boots; her fingers went numb and then, working among the warm stems, strangely warm again. The scent was so thick it coated the back of her throat. Gran moved along the bushes with the ease of a woman half her age, choosing, snipping, laying each stem across her arm, and if her hands shook once or twice, the secateurs made it look like nothing.

They filled the enamel jug, and a bucket, and finally the deep kitchen sink.

"There," said Gran, looking at her flooded, flowering kitchen with satisfaction. "Now. Half of those are coming over to your shop."

- End of the free sample. The rest of Story One, plus The Ferryman's Seven Minutes, The Keeper Before, What the Garden Gives Back and The Night the Clocks Agreed, arrive with the launch edition of Tales from the Clockwork Garden (EPUB + PDF) at pagelyra.vercel.app -

Pagelyra - Free Sample - Personal Use - pagelyra.vercel.app