The Saltmarsh Inheritance

An original cozy mystery novella by A. R. Calloway

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Chapter One: The Key That Wasn't There

The ferry came into Ternmouth the way it always had, shouldering through the harbour mouth with the gulls going up off the water in one white breath, and Nessa Calloway stood at the rail with her duffel at her feet and a chart tube strapped across her back and tried to feel something simple.

Grief was supposed to be simple. Her great-uncle was dead, and she had loved him in the uncomplicated way you love a person who taught you to read the water before you could read a clock. But what she felt, breathing in salt and diesel and the low-tide smell of the mudflats - mud, brine, something green and faintly rotten - was mostly the unease of arriving somewhere she had been avoiding for nine years.

"Nessa Calloway." Tom Reyes was waiting at the end of the dock with his harbormaster's cap in his hands, broader than she remembered and grey-flecked at the temples, which was unfair of time. "You got tall."

"I got twenty-nine," she said. "You got a harbour."

"Harbour got me. Come on - June's expecting you before she closes, and the whole town knows your ferry before you do." He took her duffel as if it weighed nothing. "I'm sorry about Silas."

"Me too." She fell into step beside him. "How bad is it, really? On the phone June said 'complicated,' which is lawyer for-"

"Marc's contesting the will." Tom said it without relish. "Filed two weeks after the funeral. Says the new one can't be right. The hearing's Thursday, ten o'clock, up at the county annex. Whole town's picked a side, and the other side's louder."

Main Street had not changed enough to mention: the chandlery, the post office, the Lantern Room café with its windows steamed gold. June Okafor's office sat above the hardware store, and June herself - fiftyish, silver-streaked, with reading glasses on a cord and the air of a woman who filed things in her sleep - came down the stairs with a folder already in her hand.

"Nessa. You look like Ruth." She said it as a fact, not a comfort. "Sit. I'll give you the whole of it once, and then questions."

The whole of it was this. Silas Wren, eighty-four, keeper of Ternmouth Light for forty-one years and its caretaker for twelve more after the light was automated, had died in his sleep on the third of March, in his chair, with his tide journal open on his knee. His will of 2019 had left everything - Marshlight Cottage, the marsh parcel, the boathouse on Heron Channel - to his nephew, Marcus Wren. But on the twelfth of February, less than three weeks before he died, Silas had signed a new will. The new will left the cottage, the parcel, and the boathouse to Nessa, with a covenant written into it in Silas's own dictated words: the marsh was never to be sold for development, not in whole, not in part, not ever. Marc was left the skiff Plover, Silas's tools, and his father's watch.

"Marc's petition says your uncle lacked capacity in February," June said. "He had a fall on the dock ice in January - a night in hospital. Marc says he 'wasn't right' after. And since Crossline Developments has a purchase agreement with Marc, contingent on the old will standing-"

"The condos," Nessa said.

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"The condos. Ternmouth Landing." June's mouth flattened. "They bought the Halloway farm in January. The marsh parcel is the piece that makes it waterfront. If the new will stands, the covenant kills the whole design. If it falls-" She slid the folder across. "The estate's frozen until the hearing. The boathouse is sealed by agreement between the parties. Nobody opens it, nobody forces it. Here's the estate inventory from March - drawn up mostly from your uncle's own household book. Keys are listed on the last page - they should be on the hook by the cottage kitchen door."

Nessa read the last page twice. Item: one brass tide-key, boathouse lock, nine inches, double bit, gull-wing bow. Item: one iron key, lamp room, Gull Point light. Both on hook, kitchen door, Marshlight Cottage.

"Two keys," she said.

"Two keys," June agreed. "Why?"

"Nothing yet." But her skin had prickled the way it did when a sounding on a chart came up wrong - not wrong enough to see, just wrong enough to feel.

* * *

The cottage stood at the end of Wren Lane where the road gave up and became marsh path, and it smelled, when she unlocked it, of cold hearth and pipe smoke and turpentine - Silas's whole atmosphere, kept under dust. His chart table still commanded the front room, its dividers laid in a ruled line. His tide journal sat beside them with a fisherman's float, cork and orange paint, wedged in it as a page marker.

She found the hook by the kitchen door where it had always been, a bent iron nail's grander cousin screwed into the door frame at shoulder height.

One key hung on it.

An iron key, black, plain-bowed, heavy in her palm as a sinker. The lamp-room key. She stood there a moment with it in her hand, looking at the two pale silhouettes in the dust and old varnish beside the hook: one small and narrow, one long - nine inches long, with a flourish at the top where a gull-wing bow would rest.

The tide-key was gone.

She was still standing there when tyres crunched on the lane gravel, and Marc Wren got out of a pickup with a boat's name - Kestrel - rusting through the paint on the door. Forty-four, weathered down to the essential timber of a person, his uncle's jaw and none of his uncle's patience.

"Nessa." He didn't offer a hand. "You've come for the reading of the will, then. Bit late. We read it in March."

"I've come for the hearing," she said. "Hello, Marc."

"Then hear this from me first, free of charge. Whatever paper he signed in February, that wasn't him thinking straight. He fell in January and he wasn't right after, and everybody in this town knows it except the ones being paid to forget." His eyes went past her, into the cottage, and something in his face did a complicated thing at the sight of the chart table. "I came the morning after he passed. Shut the water off, checked the pipes, the way he taught me. That's all. Before you ask."

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"I was going to ask about the tide-key," Nessa said mildly. "It's not on the hook."

Marc's expression closed like a hatch. "Then I expect it's wherever he put it. He was hiding things all winter. Ask his ghost." He got back into the truck. "Thursday, Nessa."

She watched the truck go, and because she was a cartographer and noticing was her trade, she noticed what she would think about later, scrubbing a kettle in the cold kitchen: Marc's boots, seen from the porch in good light, were mudded to the ankle - and the mud on them was the blue-grey mud of the tidal flats, sulphur-smelling mud, not the brown earth of Wren Lane, which had been dry for a week.

She did not think about it long. The light was going, and the tide tables pasted inside the kitchen cupboard said low water at twenty past six, and she had one thing she needed to see before dark.

The causeway ran from the cottage garden straight as a ruled line across the marsh - a raised spine of gravel and shell under cordgrass, drowned twice a day and exposed twice a day, hers and the gulls' in between. She walked it with the wind worrying her coat, past the black mirror-channels where the ebb was still sliding away, past eelgrass laid flat like combed hair. The boathouse stood at the far end on its stone footing above the deep water of Heron Channel: tarred boards, a boat door facing the channel, and a smaller door facing the causeway, barred by an iron lock plate the size of a dinner plate.

The padlock was old and enormous. But when she took it in her hand, her fingers came away filmed with fresh oil.

She bent close. The lock had been oiled recently - oiled thoroughly, the way you oil a thing you mean to use - and across the hasp ran one bright hairline scratch, new metal winking in the last of the light.

Someone had tended this lock. Recently. Carefully. And the tide-key that fit it was not on its hook.

She walked home ahead of the returning water with the smell of machine oil on her fingers, and she made tea she didn't drink, and when the dark came down she opened Silas's tide journal at the cork marker to read his last entries by lamplight.

Weather, at first. Wind southwest, glass falling, the ordinary liturgy of sixty years of keeping. Then, in the final month, the entries changed. The weather stopped. In its place, in his small unhurried hand, page after page of bearings.

Lamp to Gull Stone, 212°. Lamp to spire, 148°. Spire to the Stone, by the old reckoning-

A surveyor's traverse. Her great-uncle, in the last month of his life, had been re-surveying something, alone, in the cold, with the patience of a man who expected to be checked.

The final entry, dated the second of March - the day before Hattie Lindqvist found him in his chair - was five words long.

The light keeps what matters.

Outside, the automated beam of Ternmouth Light came on and swept the marsh, the cottage, the black channel, in one long indifferent arc, and Nessa sat in the circle of lamplight with her finger on the page and understood that she had not inherited a cottage.

She had inherited a set of workings, left half-finished, by a man who had expected her to finish them.

- End of Chapter One. Chapters Two to Six arrive with the launch edition of The Saltmarsh Inheritance

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