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Turning the Tide

Written by Christine Stovell

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Turning the Tide

Christine Stovell



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Prologue

On a pewter-grey day, with the rain running down his collar and an icy wind chopping him in half, Matthew Corrigan looked at the sorry old sight in front of him and knew he ought to walk away.

The building he was supposed to be viewing was in a lamentable state, too.

‘So, what do you say, then?’ There was desperation in the old man’s eyes, anxiety in the quavering voice. His navy-blue blazer was shiny with wear, his white cap yellowing with service, its gold braid brassy and frayed. ‘Nothing that a bit of imagination and a lick of paint wouldn’t put right, don’t you think?’

A bulldozer wouldn’t hurt either, thought Matthew.

‘And, of course,’ the Commodore added craftily, ‘it’s a prime location.’

Matthew smiled to himself. Anyone would think they were talking about a premium estate on the south coast, the kind of place with a manicured beauty, historic interest and royal connections. An exclusive site where properties sold privately to well-connected buyers. Not some broken-down old clubhouse with an arse of a hinterland behind it. Little Spitmarsh had once been a fashionable Victorian resort, but now its tide of popularity had ebbed to the point when it had finally gone out for good. Just too far from London for any sane person to contemplate a daily commute, and with a local economy so depressed it was almost suicidal, Little Spitmarsh clung wretchedly to the bleak east coast waiting for the cold North Sea to suck it under.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ the Commodore said, softly.

Well, it was true that almost anywhere else in the country the raw, wild beauty of this unspoiled waterscape would set

his heart racing with anticipation. Campion's Creek, a meandering watercourse through the salt marshes, looped into a neat spoon shape with the Spitmarsh Yacht Club's abandoned clubhouse on one side and a boat yard nestled in the opposite curve. In the Solent it would have been thick with masts; here, just a handful of boats jostled on their moorings as a gust of wind sent mercury waves across the water.

'Could you have picked a bigger dump?' had been Gina's depressingly predictable reaction, when he'd mentioned a possible redevelopment project in the run-down resort. As if having a hotline to celebville made her the expert in an industry where he was the rising star! Well, if she didn't believe in his work she didn't believe in him. He was sick to the back teeth of listening to the crap about her so-called career, as a so-called journalist on the pile of junk she claimed was a celebrity magazine. Maybe once she was seated on the terrace of his new restaurant, with a champagne flute in her hand, watching an amber sunset over the quicksilver creek, she could be persuaded that there was life beyond the metropolis.

'It'll be cash, of course,' he heard himself say. 'At the price we discussed. I'll get my solicitor to make the arrangements.'

The Commodore thumped his chest as he sucked in his breath and tried to speak. Pulling out a handkerchief, he wiped his brow then blew his nose.

Waiting until the other man was composed again, Matthew took one more look at the neat, black-stained, weatherboard buildings along the bank. 'Just out of interest, who owns the boat yard?'

The Commodore seemed to be struggling with something in his eye now, bending his head and fumbling for his pocket again.

'Oh, that belongs to Harry,' he said, his voice muffled in

the huge handkerchief. ‘Harry Watling.’

Harry Watling. A good solid name. A bloke he could do business with. Somewhere deep inside a voice was telling him this was a risky development and there was still time to walk away. Matthew ignored it.

Had he realised what he was about to take on, he would have been running.

Chapter One

On a fresh May morning, Harry Watling headed out for her favourite spot a contented woman. She liked to come to this secluded coil in the creek because nobody else did.

Only today someone else was sitting in her place. Harry pulled up and considered the dark brown hair curled into the pale nape of his neck, the black tee shirt stretched across broad shoulders and the long, athletic back which was turned against the world.

‘I don’t mind you staring at me, sweetheart, but your mother might have something to say about your manners,’ he said, without even looking round.

Harry sucked in her breath and waited for the temperature round her face to cool before proceeding.

‘Well, are you going to join me or not?’

No way, thought Harry, arranging herself further along the bank and staring firmly ahead to discourage conversation. Whilst her land didn’t strictly stretch to this side of Campion’s Creek, he had another think coming if he thought that acting as if he owned the place would make her back off.

Mercilessly carved away by the wind and waves, the soft shore had slowly retreated to leave Little Spitmarsh isolated from its neighbours, divided by miles of salt marsh and hemmed in by the sea. There was a sense of loneliness about the landscape which made it an acquired taste for many people, but which Harry loved. In winter the raw north wind could cut you to the bone, but in summer the sky over the marshes shimmered with heat and was alive with wild cries and flickering wings.

‘Perfect,’ said the stranger.

Harry gave him a swift sideways glance. Maybe she'd been a bit quick to resent his presence, after all. 'It's a world apart here,' she volunteered, surprising herself. 'You wouldn't even know there was a town nearby, it's so peaceful,' she said, nodding her head at another inlet where the single spire and assorted rooftops of the town centre could just be seen against the dim sky. 'Mind you, it's not for people who come here looking to escape – then moan there isn't an M&S. They're usually gone within a year.'

'Sounds as if you know a bit about the place.'

'I ought to. I was born over at the boat yard. My mother was supposed to have been booked in for a hospital delivery.'

'But you had other ideas?'

'Not just me! Mum and Dad had always wanted a home birth, so they deliberately left it too late. They must have been mad,' she joked.

'Or so crazy about each other they couldn't bear to be apart. Are they still the same?' he asked. 'No, don't tell me. They live in a solid middle-class villa now, and take nice holidays abroad, right?'

Harry clasped her knees and looked at her feet. 'Not quite. My father died when I was eleven. My mother remarried five years ago.' And didn't even try to save the business, she nearly added; simply sat by as a steady trickle of boat owners sheepishly slunk off to the much glossier marina along the coast, leaving a row of empty moorings like a pillaged charm bracelet.

Pulling at a tuft of grass, she went on, 'Now, I run the boat yard. I keep it going in memory of my dad and for everyone who works there or depends on it in some way. We've lost too much already; once there was a good-sized fishing fleet here, trading vessels and sea commerce. These days all that's left is a handful of fishing boats working long hours for little reward.

There's no tourism to speak of – no one chooses to come here if they can afford somewhere more glamorous – and the weekly market's dying on its feet. No wonder we're an unemployment black spot. The boat yard's one of our last links with a working waterfront.'

'Sounds like a tough call.'

Five years of hard slog. Beating back the waves of doubters, detractors and anyone else who thought that a slip of a girl could never keep the place going.

'It hasn't been easy,' said Harry. 'But the tide's turning, I can feel it. All I need now is a few more people who appreciate this,' she said, spreading her hands towards the water and the quivering silver rushes.

She stopped with a short laugh. 'Anyway, I should be at work, not talking about it. I'd better get back before anyone starts wondering where I am.' Scrambling to her feet, she was surprised to feel lighter for having spoken to him. Sharing a few of her concerns with a stranger made a change from talking to George who usually responded with a touch of his own philosophy; such as, 'Ah, none of us never knows what's round the corner for us, Miss Harriet.'

She turned to the man. 'I'm Harry, by the way, Harry Watling.'

He extended a hand and she smiled to herself at the thin leather bracelet laced round his wrist. Some hippy type, she thought, looking into his face for the first time. Hooded, hazel eyes returned her gaze, sleepy and sexy, and Harry nearly had to sit down again.

He smiled and a dimple creased his right cheek. 'Matthew,' he said in his soft, throaty voice. 'Matthew Corrigan.'

'Matthew Corrigan? Are you sure, George?' Harry squatted down to get a better look at her odd-job man and narrowly

avoided being blinded by a flying barnacle. George had been an old man when she was a little girl and didn't seem to have changed at all since then. An ex-merchant seaman, he'd managed to avoid learning almost any practical skills during his service; his knots came undone as soon as he turned his back and, whilst his painting skills would have given Jackson Pollock a run for his money, 'Convergence' was not the kind of finish most yachtsmen wanted for their boats.

His redeeming features were, firstly, he could tidy up for England and, more importantly, he had a wealth of memories about Harry's father. In addition George was popular with visiting yachtsmen, always willing to help carry their dinghies or take their lines. Whatever comments she might make about him to herself, especially when another load supposedly secured by George came whistling down around her head, Harry wouldn't hear a word against him.

'Persistent bugger.'

'Matthew Corrigan?'

'Who? No, this barnacle. Beats me how they keep hanging on.'

George gave the encrusted propeller another sharp dig and was rewarded with a ripe waft of dead fish as he dislodged another shell.

'Got 'im good and proper, that fellow.'

Harry felt like screaming. 'But what about this Matthew Corrigan? How did he persuade the Spitmarsh Yacht Club to part with the old premises? They've been quite content to let them rot until now.'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you,' grunted George. 'He's told the Commodore that he's going to turn the place into a bloody fish restaurant!' George had to wait for his shoulders to stop shaking with mirth before he could take aim at the propeller again. 'Who wants to eat bloody fish round here, I

ask you? Give me a nice bit of beef any day. The Commodore reckons there's one born every minute. Reckons this fellow doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Wrote them a cheque for the place then and there. More than enough to pay for the upkeep on that fancy new clubhouse of theirs over at Great Spitmarsh Marina.'

Harry felt better. Two Matthew Corrigans in a week was a bit of a coincidence, but it was a coincidence, nonetheless. The Matthew Corrigan she knew didn't look as if he had two pennies to rub together. There was no way *he* could bail the yacht club out of its financial difficulties in one stroke.

'Funny thing is,' George began. 'Damn! Come here, you bugger. Ah! That's got 'im.'

Drawing closer, despite the appalling stench, Harry willed George to go on.

'Funny thing is that the Commodore reckons this fellow don't look as if he's got two pennies to rub together.'

Harry felt sick and it wasn't just the smell of old barnacles.

Surrounded by oily furballs of old caulking, Harry was definitely ready for another cup of tea. In common with the vast pitch-pine deck of the forty-six-foot steel ketch she was working on in the yard, Harry also seemed to have developed a few weak points prone to rot invasion recently. In both cases the treatment was the same, she thought, her glance straying briefly to the old clubhouse. First, get rid of all the stuff you didn't want, plug the gaps, then seal to ensure a beautiful watertight surface which would maintain the integrity of the structure below. Simple. Who needed therapy when raking out several yards of old cotton and pitch would do just as well?

'I'll come down for it, George,' she bellowed, groping round for a piece of rag on which to blow her itchy nose.

'Right you are, Miss Harriet. It's on this oil drum when

you're ready.'

'Thanks, George.'

Feeling twice her age from being hunched over for so long, Harry rose rather stiffly and placed her feet with extra care on the rickety wooden ladder propped up against the ketch. Actually, now she'd got up she was really quite peckish; maybe she'd nip back to the house to make a quick sandwich, unless she could scrounge a chocolate biscuit from George, of course. Knowing how much he hated to open his biscuit tin even for her, Harry was just trying to picture the anguished look on his face and his eyes rolling like a little dog in distress, when her foot reached the last rung of the ladder and she stepped back into something warm.

'What are you playing at, George?' she grumbled. 'Any closer and I could have sat on your head.'

'Now, there's an offer you don't get every day,' said an amused voice. It didn't sound anything like George.

Harry's hands tightened on the ladder; she didn't need to turn round to see who it was. The point was – what was he doing here? And why hadn't he picked a time when she didn't look as if she'd just been pushed up a chimney or had, at least, blown her nose on something clean?

'Be careful about what you wish for, Harry,' he warned as she reluctantly pivoted round to face him. 'It might come true.'

'It hasn't,' she told him innocently. 'You're still here.'

The hooded hazel eyes sent her a look that could have smouldered a pillow at twenty paces. 'Ah, don't be like that, Harry. Not now we're practically neighbours.'

'So I gather,' said Harry, trying to concentrate on her grievance rather than allow herself to be distracted by long legs encased in faded Levi's or the soft dark shirt unbuttoned to show the pale column of his throat. 'You could have

dropped a hint to me about your plans instead of letting me ramble on. That would have been neighbourly.'

Matthew ran his hand over the ketch's steel hull. 'It would have been rude to interrupt when you were in full flow.' He stopped pretending to examine the ketch and smiled at her. 'I like to keep my ear to the ground and listen for clues about what's going on. That's why I'm good at what I do. Besides,' he added, 'as I see it we could both get something out of this deal.'

Had she heard properly? 'Could we? Now let's see. You, you're going to be the Raymond Blanc of Little Spitmarsh with your trendy new restaurant where, no doubt, all the locals will be queuing up to blow their dole on a deep-fried winkle and a frizzy lettuce leaf. Wouldn't you agree, George?'

George, who had been creeping closer during her exchange with Matthew, withdrew faster than you could say mollusc.

'And me?' she enquired. 'What do I get? Apart from some brash watering hole right on my doorstep and litter in the creek?'

'Well, Raymond Blanc does claim to be able to bring a woman to orgasm with his food alone,' Matthew told her, straight-faced.

'I'll add "noise nuisance" to my list of objections to your restaurant then, shall I?'

A muffled guffaw from behind a nearby keel showed that George was still within earshot.

'Think, Harry,' Matthew said. 'You wanted a working waterfront. Something to bring the visitors back. More jobs for local people. That's what I'm giving you. Come with me a minute.'

Before she could protest, he had seized her grimy hand and was steering her in the direction of the old clubhouse.

'Look,' he said, with a grandiose sweep of his arm. 'That's

the restaurant that will put this place back on the map again. Okay, it doesn't look very promising at the moment but just imagine what it will look like by the summer: a simple interior but with huge windows to make the most of that view. Cutlery gleaming in soft pools of light, the chink of glasses as folks sip their drinks on the terrace in the balmy night air.'

'You're the one who's barmy,' said Harry, snatching her hand back and sticking it firmly in the pocket of her work dungarees. 'Who are you trying to kid? Can't you see this town is dying on its feet?'

'I just gave it the kiss of life,' Matthew retorted. 'They'll be swarming round like flies when the word gets out. Won't be able to find seaside homes fast enough. Luckily for them, and you, my regeneration company will be able to provide just what they're looking for.'

'For two or three weekends of the year, maybe, but how will the town survive the rest of the time?' Harry hesitated. 'Run that past me again. What was that bit about me?'

He gave her a patient smile and produced his trump card. 'Look at all the wasted land you've got. Can't you see what you're sitting on here? You've kept the boat yard going, all credit to you – but it's hardly a mega-money game, is it?'

Harry could see where he was going. 'Oh no,' she said firmly. 'Hold it right there. I'm not parting with this place for anyone.'

'No one's suggesting that you should,' he told her. 'It's very picturesque in its own way. Just the sort of thing people want to look at from their balconies. Stops the place feeling like a housing estate. No, the boat yard stays. But the rest of the land isn't doing anything, is it? And if, say, you wanted to see it doing some good, what could be better than a discreet development of exclusive apartments? Include a few moorings in the package and it would be really tempting. Just think what

it would do for the boat yard's business!'

A flock of gulls wheeling above his head added to Harry's disorientation. Now she was imagining things; surely the harmless drifter she'd met by the creek wasn't seriously proposing to build houses all over her land? 'Do you mean to say,' she said, when she managed to speak, 'that you'd be prepared to sacrifice all this? That you would ruin what you told me was a perfect setting, for the sake of a get-rich-quick scheme?'

'Harry, credit me with a little intelligence; we're not talking Tenerife here,' he replied. 'You seem to have formed a rather negative impression of what I'm trying to do. Think environmentally sensitive, with building materials to blend into the landscape – something to attract professional people who will appreciate the qualities of the area. As I said, a discreet development.'

He really believed what he was saying and, judging from the tone of his voice and the self-assured smile that didn't reach his eyes, Harry guessed that this was where they discussed terms. She shook her head.

'There's no such thing.'

The smile faded a little. 'Aren't you being a bit selfish? What you're saying is that you're more worried about keeping this lot to yourself than promoting the town's well-being.' He shrugged. 'Ask yourself which option would benefit most people and I don't think there's a contest, is there?'

She smiled back at him as pleasantly as she could, just to prove how little he scared her. 'This is a deprived community – not a desperate one. Dumping a holiday village along this fragile, beautiful stretch of water and putting it at greater risk is not what local opinion would call a benefit. You might not like what I'm saying, but if you're any kind of property developer you'll listen to me. Today or tomorrow or at the end

of the week when you slide into your nice shiny Saab convertible and head back to London, if you've got any sense at all, you'll realise that this town requires long-term investment and real jobs. And I'm willing to bet you won't be in such a hurry then to throw bad money after good.'

He gave no indication that he'd heard a word she'd said, turning his attention instead to the creek and a suggestion of breeze just lifting the water. Eventually, he seemed to remember she was there.

'You don't know me yet, Harry, but you will,' he began quietly. 'I'm very successful at what I do. You, on the other hand, have good reason to worry.'

Harry braced herself and waited to see what nonsense he was going to come up with.

'You're not getting new customers, are you? And those you have got aren't getting any younger. Keeping a boat on a swinging mooring is lovely whilst you've still got the energy. But your customers aren't like that, are they? Half of them are going to find that they're too old to do the things they used to take for granted. And a trip in the dinghy just to get out to the mooring is one of them. Assuming, that is, they've got the strength to pull themselves onto the boat when they get there.'

By now his eyes were resting on hers and Harry was struggling against the onset of panic. How easily he'd tapped into her deepest fears for the future and made them seem real … She took a long, steadying breath. It wasn't true. She wouldn't let that happen.

'People are saying that your boat owners are all heading for the marina. Now you're a brave girl and you've worked hard, but it doesn't take a genius to see you're heading for trouble. Have a think about what I've said, Harry, and you'll be glad I came along.

'One more thing, Harry,' he added, whilst she fought back

another hot wave of fear. ‘We’ll have plenty of time to make each other’s acquaintance because I’m not going back to London, not for the foreseeable future. I live here now, took six months’ rental on a little place the other day.’ The dimple in his cheek flickered briefly. ‘I’ll be in touch soon.’

She was still standing there, staring at his back, when he turned and looked over his shoulder.

‘And Harry,’ he called. ‘It’s a thirty-year-old Volvo.’

Shiny new Saab or Swedish Brick; it didn’t make much difference to Harry. Both came from a place where the winters were long and invasion and pillage had once been national sports. It fitted.