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The Silent Orchard

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Unsent Message
- **Chapter 2** A Polished Funeral
- **Chapter 3** The Battered Journal
- **Chapter 4** Polite Stonewalls
- **Chapter 5** Grainy Footage
- **Chapter 6** Blood on the Mill Floor
- **Chapter 7** Bitter Harvest
- **Chapter 8** Time Slips
- **Chapter 9** Notes on a Windshield
- **Chapter 10** A Name That Doesn't Belong
- **Chapter 11** Roots and Ruptures
- **Chapter 12** Paper Orchards
- **Chapter 13** The Closed-Door Meeting
- **Chapter 14** Trace of Poison
- **Chapter 15** The Map in His Breath
- **Chapter 16** The Coded Ledger
- **Chapter 17** Story That Won't Print
- **Chapter 18** Convenient Arrest
- **Chapter 19** The Old Well at Night
- **Chapter 20** The Public Unmaking
- **Chapter 21** Winter of Exile
- **Chapter 22** The Festival Gambit
- **Chapter 23** Blackout Among the Rows
- **Chapter 24** Frost-Bitten Truth
- **Chapter 25** What Grows After

Introduction

Maya Lockwood saw the orchard before she saw the town. From the ridge road, its rows lay pinned beneath a pale sky, dark ribs combed over a hill that had cradled every season of her childhood. Frost still clung to the last windfalls in the ditch—misshapen fruit that had survived the harvest only to soften themselves into the soil. She rolled down the window and let the air touch her face. There was the smell she'd grown up with, a thin, sweet rot threaded with cold earth, the faint iron of a coming snow. The sign for Willow Bend leaned at an angle, as if tired of being asked to welcome anyone home.

Ben was waiting in the kitchen with the coffee already brewed, a habit he'd acquired after her mother left, when the mornings needed something to anchor them. He'd aged into the orchard the way the trees did—steadily, stubbornly—his plaid shirt clean, his hands a permanent map of scars. He didn't hug her. He pulled a chair out with his boot and tapped the manila envelope on the table. "They brought this," he said, as though the paper itself might decide to get up and walk away. The coroner's letter was precise, bureaucratic. Manner of death: suicide. He'd circled the word in pencil, not hard enough to break the page.

The funeral director had arranged Iris the way they arranged everyone—soft lighting, a winter scarf tucked gently around the collarbone, as if warmth could be added after the fact. People said nice things because that's what small towns knew how to do. They brought lemon bars and casseroles, used both hands when they took Maya's, spoke in tilted praises about Iris's kindness, her smile, her laugh that traveled. Mayor Crane arrived with flowers the color of campaign posters and a tone that slid easily over grief and into narrative: tragedy, community, resilience. Cameras clicked at a distance as if mourning had a soundtrack.

Maya was not good at the ritual of it. The room was too warm; the air tasted faintly of carnations and disinfectant. When she leaned in to smooth a strand of Iris's hair—something automatic, something she had done in bunk beds and bathroom mirrors—her fingertip paused at a shadow under the jawline. Not makeup, not a trick of light. A small, curved bruise, almost a thumbprint, the purple just beginning to yellow at the edges. She felt the old heat of anger pool low in her throat. She said nothing. The director's assistant was hovering with tissues. She stepped back and swallowed the word "how" hard enough to feel it all the way down.

On the walk back to the car, the cold found every place her coat didn't reach. Across town, the cider mill thumped—steady, hollow sounds that belonged to the season even if there was nothing left to press. She could smell the sweet residue of it riding

the air, mixing with exhaust and distant wood smoke. The mill windows were lit, and for a blink it looked the way it always had in November, busy enough to pretend the winter wasn't already inside everything. Maya thought of the report in her bag and the way it didn't mention a bruise. She thought of Iris's voice, the way it could sharpen when she felt cornered. Then she thought of the deputy who'd handed over a plastic bin of Iris's things without meeting her eye and said the phone wasn't among the items collected.

At the house, Iris's room was not the shrine people imagined. She'd been restless the last few years, hauling boxes in and out between apartments and the orchard like seasons. The bed was made tight enough to pass inspection. On the desk, a ring in the dust showed where a mug had sat too long. The window latch stuck. When she pried it open, cold threaded through, and the orchard smell came with it, as insistent as memory. Maya stood there until her fingertips went numb and thought of the summer they'd slept with the windows wide to hear the bees in the morning. Iris would name them under her breath—workers, scouts, guards—as if the world made more sense when you could sort it into roles.

Ben lingered in the doorway like a man peering into weather. "We don't have to dig at this," he said, a statement camouflaged as kindness. His eyes were red around the rims in a way she'd never seen. "Iris was... she was tired. People do things when they're tired." He meant it to absolve, to settle the water. But under the words she heard the orchard whispering its old bargain: harvest what you can, bury what you can't, and call it winter. She saw the pencil circle he'd pressed around the word in the report and pictured his hand shaking just enough to make the line wobble.

The town flew at her sideways over the next twenty-four hours—handshakes that held too long, casseroles stacked by the door, the local paper's front-page photo of Iris cropped so that the tattoo on her shoulder didn't show. People told stories that didn't quite match what Maya remembered. A clerk at the general store said Iris had been in good spirits last week; a neighbor swore there had been shouting in the driveway two nights before she died. Mayor Crane called again, the smile audible through the phone, to offer the full support of Willow Bend in this difficult time. Maya thanked her and stared at the orchard map still tacked to the hallway wall, the thumbtacks marking irrigation lines like constellations no one had named out loud.

That night, sleep came at an angle and slid away. She went downstairs and found the kitchen again, as if the coffee maker might solve something the report did not. The refrigerator hummed. The house made winter noises, small creaks and settle. She tried to picture Iris in this same dark, pacing the same wood planks, pressing a hand to the same window to feel the cold. A gust rattled the glass, and the orchard answered, the late leaves ticking like brittle tongues. Maya rubbed her thumb absently along the edge of the coroner's envelope. The paper felt too smooth to contain anything as jagged as what she knew: Iris was not gentle when she was frightened. She did not go

quietly. A bruise meant someone touched her where a goodbye didn't live.

In the morning, she noticed it because she was looking for something to hold on to: a faint scrape on the inside of Iris's doorjamb, the paint shaved away in a crescent at knee height. It might have been nothing. It could have been everything—a heel catching when someone is pulled, a turn too fast in a room that had become dangerous. She touched the raw edge with a knuckle. The orchard outside heaved a sigh she could feel through the floorboards. The town would prefer that circle around the word in the report to be enough. Maya felt the old stubbornness uncoil in her, a root she'd stopped pretending she didn't have.

"Something's wrong," she told the empty room, and the words didn't fix anything. They hung in the air like breath in cold, visible for a moment, then gone. But saying them out loud was its own small harvest. Outside, the rows stood patient and stripped, waiting for whatever came next. Inside, Maya opened a drawer and began to look.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Unsent Message

The house was too quiet in a way that made every sound feel like an accusation. Maya had been back for three days, and the silence had grown teeth. It nipped at her heels when she walked down the hall, caught in her throat when she tried to call out a greeting she no longer needed to give. Her father, Ben, moved through the rooms like a ghost who'd been told he was still under contract, performing the pantomime of breakfast and evening news with a dedication that didn't leave room for conversation. He rose before the sun, his footsteps heavy on the old stairs, and by eight he was out the door with a thermos and a purpose that didn't include her. That was fine. Maya had her own work to do, her own ghosts to confront.

She spent her first morning conducting a forensic examination of her sister's absence. Iris's room was on the second floor, facing the orchard. The bed was made with military precision, a habit Iris had picked up during her brief, disastrous stint at a community college before she'd come back to Willow Bend with the kind of wounded pride that could either harden you or turn you into something else. The closet door hung ajar, revealing a sliver of color—dresses, scarves, a pair of good boots Maya didn't recognize. The desk was clear except for a laptop, its lid closed. A faint ring of dust marked where a coffee mug had once sat, a circular ghost of caffeine and warmth. Maya ran her finger through the dust, feeling the grit. It felt personal.

Ben had already gone through the room, or so he claimed. "Nothing in there," he'd said last night over a dinner neither of them ate. "She hadn't lived here for weeks, May. Not really." His voice carried the flat finality of a man who wanted to close a book he hadn't finished reading. But Maya knew Iris. Knew her as well as she knew the pattern of frost on the orchard grass, the way it gathered on the north side of the trees first. Iris was messy and secretive and passionate, all rough edges and unpolished gems. She did not leave rooms that clean without a reason. The order felt like a message in itself, a deliberate erasure.

Maya started with the desk, pulling open drawers with a reverence that made her teeth ache. Pens, paperclips, a handful of receipts from the cider mill and the gas station. A map of Willow Bend with routes circled in red ink, lines that connected the orchard to the mill to the town square and then vanished into the woods beyond the old quarry. No notes, no diary, nothing to explain the geometry of her sister's last weeks. She moved to the closet, pushing aside hangers with quiet impatience. On the floor, tucked behind a row of shoes, was a shoebox. Maya lifted it out, heart punching a steady, stupid rhythm against her ribs. Inside: ticket stubs from a concert in the city, a dried maple leaf, a photograph of two girls with their arms around each other, squinting into a sun that looked like it might never set. Maya touched the edge of the

photo with her thumb. They looked like strangers now.

She was about to close the box when she saw it—a small seam in the base of the closet, where the floorboard met the wall. Someone had pried it up and not quite set it back flush. She knelt, ignoring the protest in her knees, and worked her fingernails into the crack. The board lifted with a faint whine of old wood. Beneath it, wrapped in a plastic grocery bag, lay a phone. Iris's phone. Maya's breath hitched. The deputy had been so certain: no phone was collected from the scene. It wasn't in the inventory, wasn't in the bin of belongings he'd handed over with eyes averted. And yet here it was, tucked away like a secret that had outlived its keeper.

She turned it over in her hands. The case was cracked at one corner, a spiderweb of fractures that had turned opaque with pocket lint. Maya pressed the power button, half-expecting nothing. The screen flickered, then bloomed to life with a low-battery warning and a cracked wallpaper—a photo of Iris laughing with her head thrown back, hair wild. Maya swallowed against a sudden, hot pressure behind her eyes. She swiped to unlock, expecting a passcode, but the phone opened without resistance. Iris had always been careless with locks, trusting that no one in Willow Bend would dare to pry. She had been wrong.

The notifications were sparse. A few text threads with friends, a missed call from a number she didn't recognize. Maya scrolled, her thumb moving on instinct, chasing the tail end of a life in reverse. Then she saw it: a draft message, unsent, sitting at the bottom of the screen like a question waiting for punctuation. The recipient was a contact saved as "J"—no last name, no picture. The timestamp was 2:13 a.m., the night Iris died. Maya opened it. The words were short, the kind you write when you're out of time or breath or both. They prickled up Maya's spine like frost.

They're not hiding it anymore. The old well behind the north rows. If I don't—

The sentence stopped there, a cliff in a dark place. Maya stared at the screen, the glow painting her face in cold light. The old well. She knew it, of course. Every kid in Willow Bend knew the old well. It was a place for dares, a place where the town's past had been buried in layers of rot and rust. The north rows were the oldest part of the orchard, where the trees grew gnarled and stoic, their bark scarred from decades of pruning and weather. Iris had gone there. Iris had been afraid. And someone—or something—had stopped her from finishing the message.

Maya stood, phone clutched tight enough to cut into her palm. She walked out of the room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. Ben was there, scraping the bottom of a coffee mug with a spoon, the sound grating against the quiet. He looked up, and his eyes moved to the phone in her hand. A flicker—surprise? Guilt?—then the shutters came down.

“Where did you find that?” he asked, his voice even.

“In her room,” Maya said. “Under a floorboard.”

He set the spoon down with a careful clink. “Probably didn’t want anyone seeing it. Iris was private about some things.”

“She was texting someone the night she died,” Maya said, and the words landed between them like stones. She held up the screen, unsent message visible. “She was going to meet someone at the old well. She was scared, Dad.”

Ben looked at the phone, then at Maya, then at the window where the orchard stretched out like a promise and a threat. He took a breath, the kind you take when you’re about to step into cold water. “Maya,” he said, his tone softening in a way that set her teeth on edge. “This is what she did. Iris got tangled up in things she didn’t understand. She made trouble for herself. And then... she couldn’t find her way out.” He reached for the phone, a gesture that was half comfort, half confiscation. Maya pulled it back.

“You didn’t tell me she was in trouble.”

“I didn’t want you making more of it than there was.” He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, a gesture that made him look smaller. “She was unhappy. She was looking for something to blame. That’s all.”

Maya shook her head. The words felt wrong in her mouth. “The bruise,” she said. “I saw it. At the funeral home. Under her jaw. That’s not nothing.”

Ben’s face closed. He looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. “People fall, Maya. People get hurt. It doesn’t always mean what you want it to mean.” He turned away, reached for the coffee pot, and poured the dregs into his mug. “Let it rest. For your own sake.”

Maya didn’t answer. She slipped the phone into her pocket and walked out the back door. The cold hit her like a slap. The orchard was a silhouette against a pale sky, the rows straight and true and terrible. She could smell the faint sweetness of rot that never quite left this place, the earth’s slow digestion of last year’s fruit. She took the path that led between the trees, her boots crunching on frozen grass. The old well was on the far side of the north rows, half-hidden by a thicket of brambles that had grown wild in the years since anyone tended this part of the orchard. She remembered Iris daring her to look down it when they were kids, the way the dark had swallowed the sound of a dropped stone.

The well was still there, a circle of cracked stone sinking into the earth, a wooden cover long since broken and replaced with a sheet of rusted metal. Maya approached it slowly, every sense alert. The orchard was never truly silent; there were always tiny rustles, the creak of branches, the distant hum of something that might be a tractor or might be the town itself. She knelt by the well's edge. The metal cover was heavy. She grunted, shifting it with a screech of metal on stone. The smell that rose from the dark was not the clean cold of deep earth. It was metallic. Sour. Something old and something new, and none of it good.

Maya clicked on her phone's flashlight and aimed it down. The beam cut a weak circle through the gloom, illuminating a shallow pool of black water and, just above it, a tangle of debris. Metal. Wood. Something wrapped in plastic that had half-fallen from a crevice in the stone wall. She squinted, trying to make it out. The light caught a corner of white—a label, maybe—and a glint of glass. Then something shifted in the dark and the surface of the water trembled, though there was no wind. Maya stood quickly, stepping back from the edge. Her heart was a frantic bird beating against the cage of her ribs.

The phone buzzed in her pocket, startling her. She pulled it out. A text from a number she didn't recognize. No name, no prefix, just a string of digits that looked too neat to be random. She opened it.

Stop digging. For your own good.

Maya stared at the words. The orchard suddenly felt vast and full of eyes. She turned, scanning the rows, the low stone walls, the line of dark trees that marked the boundary between the orchard and the woods. Nothing moved. She typed back, fingers clumsy with adrenaline. *Who is this?*

The reply was instant. *A friend of the family. Let her rest.*

The light on the phone flickered and died as the battery gave out. Maya stood alone in the cold, the weight of the unsent message and the warning pressing down on her. In the distance, the cider mill's thump went on and on, a heartbeat for a town that knew how to keep secrets buried deep.

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