

LETTERS FROM THE ORCHARD

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First Edition

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Cover designed by Lily Wentzell.

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The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where
we can go as we are and not be questioned.

— *MAYA ANGELOU*

LETTERS FROM THE ORCHARD



CHAPTER 1

The orchard came into view like a ghost rising out of mist.

Lila Brennan gripped the steering wheel tighter as her rental car crested the gravel rise in Wenatchee Valley, Washington, the tires crunching over fallen leaves, the sharp scent of early apples and woodsmoke drifting through the cracked window. It was late September—fifteen years since she'd driven this road—but her body remembered every curve. Muscle memory, like heartbreak.

The trees stood in neat rows, gnarled and hunched, their branches heavy with fruit and time. The ground between them was worn and quiet, the soil dark and soft from years of tending. The old barn leaned to one side, the red paint faded to a stubborn pink. The farmhouse—two stories of cracked white clapboard and shuttered windows—looked smaller than she remembered, and somehow older than time.

Much like her grandmother.

Lila parked beneath the sagging canopy of the carport, cut the engine, and sat in silence. The ticking of the hood cooling

down. The faint rustle of wind through dry leaves. The echo of her own breath, shallow and restless.

She hadn't volunteered her plans to anyone in the city—not her coworkers at the publishing house, not her assistant, not even Jonah's mother. But the board knew. *Of course they did.* They'd approved the leave, tracked the destination, and would no doubt be expecting her return by November—pressed, polished, and ready to salvage the next best-selling season for the imprint she managed. It was one of the publishing house's boutique brands, known for turning debut authors into literary stars.

She was supposed to be grieving, recovering, finding a bit of peace within herself. But the truth was, she'd been drowning long before the loss—swept under by endless meetings and relentless deadlines, speaking words that drifted past others like smoke, unnoticed. Admired in public, questioned behind closed doors. Her grief didn't interrupt anything. It only revealed how little she'd ever truly mattered.

And when the weight of pretending grew too heavy to bear, she did the only thing she could. She left.

Lila stepped out of the car and stretched, the chill of late September settling around her. She glanced toward the porch, half-expecting Ivy to be standing there, arms folded, judgment in her eyes. But the steps were empty. Just an old rocker swaying slightly in the breeze and a rusted watering can tipped on its side, forgotten.

I could still turn around, she thought. I could drive to Seattle, check into a hotel, disappear for another week. She wouldn't be missed. Not yet.

But her fingers were already brushing the brass doorknob, worn smooth by generations.

Inside, the house smelled of old wood, apples, and faintly of mothballs. A stack of unopened mail sat on the entry table

beneath a dusty vase of dried wildflowers. A coat hook still held her mother's old gardening apron, faded sunflowers on pale green cotton. The sight of it lodged in Lila's chest like a stone.

She took a breath. And another.

"Okay," she whispered, voice hoarse. "I'm here."

A floorboard creaked down the hall.

Lila looked up, her heart stuttering. Then the familiar shuffle of a walker followed, slow and deliberate. Ivy was awake.

And the past, which she had neatly boxed and shelved for over a decade, was suddenly, sharply alive.

Lila followed the sound of creaking floorboards down the hallway, each step stirring a memory. Dust caught the light like soft ash. She paused outside her grandmother's bedroom, knuckles hovering over the half-closed door.

"Ivy?" she called softly.

A beat. Then, dry as wind through brittle leaves, came the reply. "Took you long enough."

Lila pushed the door open.

The room was dim, curtains half-drawn. Ivy Brennan sat in the high-backed armchair by the window, a knitted shawl around her shoulders and her walker nearby. Her hair was pure silver, pulled into a neat braid that hung like a ribbon of moonlight over one shoulder. Her face was sharper than Lila remembered—thinner, paler—but her eyes still held that glacier-blue stare that could slice a person clean in two.

"You got my message, then," Ivy said, not quite a question.

"I did." Lila stepped inside, keeping her hands at her sides. "The hospital called. They said you fell."

Her grandmother shrugged, the motion small. "I tripped. The rug curled up under the sewing table. I'm fine."

"You broke your wrist."

"It's not a fatal condition." She gave Lila a long look. "And you didn't come when I was in the hospital. You waited."

Lila exhaled, forced calm. "I came as soon as I could."

"Hmm."

Silence settled between them like a thick blanket. Lila crossed to the window and opened the curtain wider, letting in a shaft of gold-tinged light. Outside, the orchard shimmered, sun-drenched and quiet.

"I didn't think you'd want me here," Lila said finally, her voice low.

"I didn't say I did," Ivy replied, without heat. "But someone had to mind the place."

Lila looked at her then. Really looked. Beneath the steel and stubbornness, Ivy looked... small. Fractured. As if a strong wind might blow her away.

"I'm not staying long," Lila offered, gently. "Just until you're back on your feet."

Ivy's lips curved—somewhere between a smile and a sigh. "We'll see," she murmured. She shifted in the chair, wincing slightly as she adjusted her arm in the sling. "There's soup in the freezer. Chicken and barley. You'll need to defrost it."

Lila blinked. "I'm not here to be your nurse."

"No," Ivy said, "you're here because you have nowhere else to go."

The words landed with the precision of a blade, and for a moment, neither of them breathed. Ivy turned her head slightly, looking out the window, her profile outlined in soft morning light.

Lila edged toward the very end of the bed and sat, careful not to disturb the perfectly folded quilt. Her movements were tentative, as though she were maneuvering around an invisible boundary.

"Jonah died three months ago," Lila said at last, her voice barely above a whisper. The words felt brittle, as if speaking them aloud might shatter her. "Car accident in Brooklyn. There was one of those sudden summer storms—the kind that comes out of nowhere. The streets were slick. He was on his way home from a meeting. One he never should've had."

Ivy didn't move. She sat low in the armchair by the window,

back straight, hands clasped tightly in her lap. Her eyes lingered on a patch of shadow near Lila, but never quite met her gaze. “I saw it on the news,” she said, tone clipped. “Jonah Brennan. The writer. Always on television, always selling his next big thing.”

“He was charming on camera,” Lila said, her voice softening with the memory, more to herself than to her grandmother. “People liked him. He made everything look easy.” She glanced down, turning her gold bracelet around her wrist. “He could sell anything. Even the story that we were happy.”

Ivy’s expression didn’t change. “People will believe whatever story you give them, as long as it looks good enough.” There was the briefest flicker of something—amusement, or maybe something sharper—but it faded. “Were you happy?” she asked, her voice level, no warmth behind it.

Lila hesitated. The silence stretched, broken only by the steady ticking of the hallway clock. “We were... very good at being successful together,” she said finally. “We knew how to build things. We could create the right image. At least on the outside.”

Ivy pressed her lips into a thin line. “Success isn’t happiness, Lila. Being clever, being ambitious—that’ll earn you applause, maybe even respect. But it won’t keep you warm at night.” She stared past Lila, unmoved.

Lila looked up, something desperate in her eyes. “No,” she whispered. “It doesn’t.”

Her mind drifted back to Jonah.

They’d met at a publishing gala in Midtown—one of those cocktail-glass affairs where everyone pretended they weren’t watching each other’s résumés walk by in borrowed tuxedos. Lila had been fresh off her first editorial win, flushed with ambition and the quiet kind of hunger that came from years of being underestimated. Jonah had been magnetic from the start. Not just charming—disarming. He had that lopsided grin and a

voice made for persuasion, the kind that could make a rejection sound like a compliment. He asked about her opinions, her work, her story—and listened like it mattered.

She should've known. Men like that always listened until they didn't.

But in the beginning, it felt like momentum—like partnership. They moved fast. Book launches, late-night takeout, whispered deadlines shared over the clink of ice in glasses. They built a life from glossy pieces: brownstone furniture catalog-perfect, a shared calendar full of galas and panels, a holiday card photo staged just off Fifth Avenue. To the world, they were a power couple. He was the face. She was the spine.

But behind the closed doors of their condo, the picture yellowed.

Jonah lived for applause. Lila lived for results. Somewhere in the blur of it all—book tours and red carpets, blurred mornings and lonelier nights—he stopped asking about her stories. He talked about their life like it was one of his chapters, something to edit for better pacing. There were good moments, still—quiet dinners, soft apologies, the way he'd curl around her at night like he was afraid she'd vanish—but more and more, she felt like she already had.

And then the phone rang, and just like that, he was no longer part of this world.

She missed him in pieces. His cologne. His jokes. The way he used to read aloud in accents, just to make her laugh. But mostly, she missed the version of herself she thought she was becoming with him—someone seen, someone certain.

Now, in the stillness of her childhood home, wrapped in silence and grief, Lila wondered if what they'd had was love. Or maybe it was never love—just two people whose needs matched up perfectly.

She turned her face toward the window. The orchard stood steady in the dark, trees exhaling against the wind. In her chest, a quieter ache had settled.

He was gone, and somehow, she remained.

Behind her, the silence stretched.

It was the kind of silence that pressed in close, humming with memories and words left unsaid between two people who'd lived too much together and spoken too little.

Lila turned from the window. Ivy hadn't moved and neither had she.

A tense stillness had grown between them—cold, unsparing. The air felt weighted by everything they hadn't said, all the years and disappointments wedged between grandmother and granddaughter. Neither reached for the other. They simply sat: the old woman in her chair, the young one on the edge of the bed, each holding her own losses close. Uncertain if the fire between them was worth tending, or better left to burn itself out.

Finally, Ivy broke the silence with a sigh—a sound more tired than resigned. “The attic roof is leaking again,” she said, her tone brusque, almost dismissive. “I meant to fix it this summer, but—” she lifted her arm in the sling, a gesture spare of self-pity and full of practicality, “you can see how that turned out. If you go up there, be careful. Some of the floorboards near the east window are soft. Last thing we need is another accident.”

Lila nodded, the instructions settling around her with a familiar weight. “I’ll take a look,” she said. Her voice was gentle, but firm enough to let Ivy know she understood. For now, it was a kind of truce—a return to tasks and repairs, things they could manage, when so much else felt untouchable.

Orchard House - Afternoon

The house had settled into its familiar hush—the kind that blanketed everything in a quiet, expectant stillness. Lila

wandered through the hallway with a cup of coffee cradled in her hands, steam curling upward like a ghost of comfort.

The walls were still the same pale blue. She paused at a framed photo of her mother, taken sometime in the late seventies—sunlight in her hair, a laugh caught mid-burst, eyes wide and wild like Lila remembered. A lump rose in her throat. She moved on.

Her old bedroom was at the end of the hall, the door still painted the soft lavender she begged for when she was twelve. She touched the knob and hesitated. When she opened it, the scent hit her first—dust and cedar, and beneath that, the unmistakable trace of lilac perfume, faint but present. Time-trapped.

The room was almost untouched. A twin bed with a faded quilt, a corkboard still pinned with yellowing postcards and curled photos. Her childhood dresser stood beneath the window, and on top of it, a cracked porcelain jewelry box in the shape of a swan.

She stepped inside and closed the door gently behind her, like she might wake something. The floor creaked in all the same places. The light came in from the west, casting long shadows that made the room feel smaller, or maybe it was just her—older, heavier with the years between.

Setting her coffee down, Lila crossed to the bookshelf. Her fingers skimmed across old paperbacks: L.M. Montgomery, Madeleine L'Engle, dog-eared copies of *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women*. She pulled one down—*A Wrinkle in Time*—and opened it to the inside cover. Her name was scrawled in careful cursive, the loop of the “L” embellished just like Ivy taught her.

Lila Anne Brennan – Age 10. If lost, please return.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “I got a little lost,” she whispered, running her thumb over the words. “*But I came back.*”

She sat on the edge of the bed and let herself breathe. For the first time in weeks, maybe months, the silence didn't feel suffocating. It felt... still.

From the window, the orchard stretched out in golden rows, the trees casting long shadows over the grass. A breeze stirred the leaves, and a few apples thudded softly to the ground, as if the trees were exhaling too.

Lila stood and opened the window, letting the cool air rush in. It smelled of apples, earth, and the faint sweetness of late roses.

She didn't feel like she belonged here. Not yet. But for the first time in a long while, she didn't feel like she belonged *nowhere*, either.

Orchard House - Late Afternoon

The knock came just as Lila was coaxing the ancient coffee machine back to life—a process she'd already become begrudgingly familiar with.

Three short raps on the back door. She froze, the filter in one hand, the other smudged with coffee grounds. Ivy hadn't mentioned visitors.

Lila wiped her hands on a dish towel and walked through the mudroom, past the spice cabinet tucked into the corner and the boots lined up along the wall—still only two pairs, still the same size. She opened the door.

There he was.

Cal Monroe.

He stood with a crate in his arms, one hip hitched, a wool cap shoved back on his head. The years had sharpened him with intention. His face was leaner, his jaw rough with stubble, and his dark green work coat was worn at the elbows. His eyes, though—those hadn't changed. Still the color of damp moss, still too observant for comfort.

He blinked once, slowly. "Well," he said. "Wasn't expecting you."

Lila folded her arms, instinct rising like a shield. "I could say the same."

Cal nodded toward the crate. "Weekly co-op delivery. Ivy's order. Kale, half a dozen eggs, one very suspicious-looking jar of elderberry syrup—and apples from her orchard, picked by me."

Lila allowed herself a faint, knowing smile. "She still thinks elderberry syrup can cure the flu, doesn't she?"

"She believes it can cure just about anything."

A pause stretched between them—not awkward, exactly. Just... weighted.

Lila stepped aside. "You can bring it in. Kitchen's the same."

He moved past her, footsteps thudding softly on the floor. The scent of him caught her off guard—earth, soap, maybe cedar. Like the orchard itself.

She followed him to the counter where he set the crate down with care, then glanced around. "Place looks mostly the same," he said.

"Mostly," she echoed, suddenly aware of how much lingered—how much hadn't changed.

He turned back to her. "How long are you in town?"

She hesitated. "Not sure yet."

Another pause. Then Cal nodded once, like he didn't believe her but wouldn't press. "If Ivy needs anything, she knows how to reach me."

"And if she doesn't ask?"

Cal's mouth quirked, just barely. "She'll still get it. That's how she operates."

Lila smiled despite herself. "Yeah. That sounds about right."

Cal took a step back toward the door. "Good seeing you, Lila."

"You too," she said softly.

But as he walked out, something tugged at her chest. She stepped forward.

"Hey, Cal?"

He paused at the threshold, one hand on the doorframe. "Yeah?"

"I didn't expect to feel anything coming back here." She swallowed. "But I *did*."

He met her eyes, quiet. "That's the thing about this place. It remembers, even when we don't."

Then he was gone, the screen door creaking shut behind him, and Lila stood in the stillness, heart heavier and somehow lighter at the same time.

Orchard House - Evening

The sun had dipped behind the hills, casting the orchard in long, dusky shadows. Lila stood at the sink rinsing the last of the mugs when she heard Ivy's voice behind her.

"So," Ivy said, "Cal Monroe stopped by."

Lila didn't turn around. "You knew he would."

"I had a feeling. He always brings the good eggs."

Lila placed the mug upside down on the drying rack. "You could've warned me."

"What would that have changed?"

Lila dried her hands on the towel, suddenly aware of her reflection in the dark window glass—tired eyes, hair pulled into a loose knot, a faint smudge of dirt on her cheek from earlier. "You didn't tell me he was still around."

Ivy's voice was steady. "He's always been around. That's the kind of man he is."

Lila turned then. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ivy raised an eyebrow. "Only that some people stay. And some leave."

Lila flinched. "Is that what this is? A test? To see if I'll stick this time?"

Ivy didn't answer right away. She moved slowly to the table

and sat, resting her arm—still in the sling—on a folded dish towel.

“I’m too old for tests,” she said finally. “But I know what regret looks like. And I’ve seen that boy carry too much of it.”

Lila stared at her. “He’s not a boy anymore.”

“No,” Ivy said, eyes sharp. “And you’re not a girl.”

The room filled with the soft hum of the refrigerator, the ticking of the old wall clock, the sound of the orchard settling outside.

“You know,” Ivy added, “he came by every week after your mother died. Checked on the pipes, cleared the driveway in winter. Never asked for a thing. Didn’t have to.”

Lila leaned against the counter, her voice softer now. “Why are you telling me this?”

Ivy looked at her for a long moment, then said, “Because I never told you back then. And maybe that was a mistake.”

It was the closest thing to an apology Lila had ever heard from her.

Before she could respond, Ivy pushed back her chair with a quiet scrape. “I’m going to bed. Don’t forget to lock the side door.”

Then she was gone, leaving the scent of lavender lotion and old books in her wake.

Lila stood there, still, her heart a quiet thrum. Outside, an apple fell from a branch and thudded softly against the ground.

Orchard House - Late Night

Lila sat curled in the armchair beneath the window in her childhood room, wrapped in an old quilt. The only light came from the lamp on the dresser, casting soft golden pools across the floorboards. Her coffee had gone cold. She didn’t bother reheating it.

She looked out the window, toward the orchard. The trees were nothing more than silhouettes now—dark, reaching arms against a navy sky. A few stars flickered overhead, blurred by drifting clouds.

It was strange, she thought, how a place could stay still while you changed so completely.

The house had barely altered. The orchard had aged but remained steady. Ivy was... different, and not. As sharp as ever, but slower, more fragile around the edges. Still capable of slicing her open with five words or less.

But it wasn't just Ivy that unnerved her. It was the weight of everything she hadn't felt in so long. The strange, quiet pull of this land. The throb of old memories pressing against the walls of her chest. And Cal.

Seeing him had been like stepping into a version of herself she'd sealed off. His voice, that steady gaze—it shook something loose. He hadn't welcomed her exactly, but he hadn't turned away either. And that might have been worse. It meant there was still something there. Some thread that hadn't snapped.

And now she was here, wrapped in a quilt made by a woman she no longer understood, drinking stale coffee in a house that hummed with the ghosts of her former life. She wasn't sure if she felt comforted or exposed.

She set the mug down on the windowsill and leaned back, eyes drifting closed for just a moment. But the ache behind them lingered, soft and stubborn.

She missed Jonah in fragments—his voice on the phone, the way he always smelled faintly of ink and cologne, the crackling city energy he carried like armor everywhere he went. But the grief was complicated. It flickered through her like a faulty light, abrupt and disorienting, leaving her unsure what exactly she truly mourned: the man himself, or the life she'd spent years convincing herself she wanted.

Tonight, restless beneath the weight of those questions, Lila

found herself moving through the silent house, guided more by instinct than intention.

The farmhouse was quiet in the way only old houses could be. Its bones were weathered but solid: white clapboard siding cracked with time, floors that creaked with every step, and wallpaper that peeled in the corners like it had finally given up waiting. The kitchen, with its chipped enamel sink and cluttered spice cabinet, still carried the scent of apples and toast. The sunroom glowed faintly from earlier, the last of the day's light clinging to the lace curtains and quilt-draped armchairs. The living room held the weight of untold stories, its bookshelves bowing under the burden of decades.

The bedrooms—all tucked on the first floor—felt suspended in time. Lila's childhood room still smelled faintly of lilac perfume, a twin bed neatly made beneath a west-facing window. Every corner of the house seemed to hum with memory, like the low ticking of the hallway clock or the thud of apples falling outside.

Lila hadn't expected it to affect her this way. But something about the stillness made her feel like the house had been waiting for her to remember something. She didn't feel like she belonged. Not yet.

She moved down the hallway, her bare feet brushing over worn floorboards, until she reached the far end—where the light thinned. There, tucked beside the linen closet, was the narrow stairwell that led to the attic. The door stood slightly ajar, as if it too had been waiting. Lila paused, then reached out and pushed it open.

She made her way up the narrow stairway to the attic, bracing herself against the wallpapered wall as she climbed. Each step creaked underfoot—a chorus of wood and old nails, steeper and more uncertain than her childhood memories had prepared her for.

As she reached the top, she flipped a switch, and a single overhead lightbulb buzzed to life. She pressed her shoulder into the attic door; it groaned, reluctant, before swinging open.

The attic unfurled around her, untouched by time—the shapes of old furniture slumbering beneath yellowed sheets, stacks of National Geographics reaching for the rafters, cardboard boxes precisely labeled in Ivy's distinct, looping hand. From across the room, a single window let in a muted spill of moonlight, its glass fogged with age and weather, softening the clutter into ghostly silhouettes.

She moved cautiously, heeding Ivy's warning. Floorboards near the window dipped and groaned beneath her weight. The leak she'd heard about had left a bruise-dark stain in the corner. But Lila was drawn elsewhere.

There, half-hidden behind a fractured mirror and a wooden cradle, rested a cedar chest. Nestled up against the far wall, it looked undisturbed—almost as if it had been waiting for someone to remember it. She knelt down, reached for the chest. Her fingers traced the familiar grain of the wood, lingering on the brass latch—but as she tried to open the lid, she found it wouldn't budge. A small, ornately shaped lock gleamed up at her, still fastened tight.

Lila exhaled, disappointment mingling with the faint, persistent spark of curiosity. She traced the outline of the lock with her fingertips, wondering what Ivy might have hidden away—what memories, what stories, had been kept out of reach for so long. Whatever the chest was keeping, its secrets would have to wait.

A distant owl called through the darkness—a single, mournful note that seemed to echo just for her. Lila lingered in the hush of the attic for a moment longer, then clicked off the light and made her way back downstairs, her steps soft and heavy on the worn floorboards.

Back in her room, she pulled the quilt tighter around herself and slipped between the cool sheets, letting the quiet of the

house settle in around her. Tonight, she allowed the silence to cradle her, grief flickering at the edges of her dreams.