

A NOVEL



*The Orchard of
Small Hours*



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NIMBUS HOUSE PRESS

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For my mother, who kept every letter.

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PART I

Autumn

CHAPTER 1

The Letter

SHE had not expected the house to smell of woodsmoke after eleven months empty. Clara Winslow stood in the hallway of Fern Cottage with the key still warm in her palm and let the familiarity of it settle over her like a coat she had outgrown but not yet given away. Dust motes turned in the light from the transom window. Somewhere above her a floorboard ticked, cooling or warming, she could not tell which, and for a moment she simply listened, the way she used to when she was small and certain the house was alive.

Her mother had died in March, quietly, in the front bedroom, with the orchard visible through the gap in the curtains she had never once let Clara close. The solicitor's letters had been brief and procedural. It had taken Clara until July to find the courage to come back to Ashcombe, and another week after that to open the writing desk in the parlour, the one with the brass key her mother had worn on a ribbon around her neck for as long as Clara could remember.

Inside, beneath a stack of receipts and a dried sprig of rosemary gone the colour of tea, she found the letter. The paper was soft with age, folded into quarters, and the hand that had written it was not her mother's careful copperplate but something looser, more urgent, pressed hard enough that the ink had nearly gone through to the other side.

Margaret, it began, I will not ask you again. The orchard was never yours alone to give away, and you know it. If you will not answer this letter I will come to Ashcombe myself, and you will have to explain to me, in person, why a promise made to our father means nothing to you now that he is in the ground.

It was signed simply, *B.*

Clara read it twice, then a third time, searching the flat grey light of the parlour for some other name it might belong to. She had no aunt. No one had ever mentioned a sister, a cousin, a single soul who might sign

themselves with so bitter and so familiar a letter. And yet the date at the top, faded but legible, placed it eleven years before Clara was born.



She carried the letter into the kitchen and set it on the table beside the kettle, as though giving it room to breathe might make it explain itself. Through the window the orchard ran down the slope in uneven rows, apple and quince gone wild at the edges where her mother had stopped pruning sometime in the last decade of her life. A low stone wall marked the boundary between Fern Cottage and the Reeve farm beyond it, and beyond that, the church tower, grey against a sky the colour of a nail.

Whoever *B* had been, her mother had never spoken of her. Not once, not in illness, not in the long slow accounting people make of their lives when they know an ending is coming. Clara folded the letter along its old creases and put it in her coat pocket, where it sat all afternoon like a stone she had picked up without meaning to keep.

The Garden Wall

THE wall between the two properties had been built, Clara's mother once told her, before either family could remember why. It was low enough to sit on, which Clara was doing, absently pulling moss from between the stones, when Thomas Reeve came up the far side of the orchard with a ladder over one shoulder and a dog trotting ahead of him that she did not recognise.

"You'll want to mind that top course," he said, by way of greeting. "Loose since the frost. My father kept saying he'd see to it."

"Your father," Clara said. "Is he—"

"Retired. Mostly." Thomas set the ladder down against a quince tree and looked at her properly for the first time, the way people in Ashcombe had been looking at her all week, with a caution that was not quite pity and not quite curiosity but some patient blend of both. "I was sorry about your mother, Clara. She used to bring my father cuttings from that pear tree of hers. Every year, like clockwork."

"I didn't know that."

"There's a good deal you likely don't know," he said, not unkindly, and crouched to examine a graft low on the quince's trunk, giving her a moment to decide whether that had been an invitation or simply the truth spoken plainly, as people did out here.

She took the letter from her pocket before she had quite decided to, and held it out across the wall. Thomas read it standing, his mouth tightening slightly at the corners, and when he handed it back his manner had changed, gone careful in a way that told her more than any answer would have.

"That would be Bridget," he said finally. "Your grandfather's other daughter. There was a falling out, before my time, over how the orchard was left. My father might remember the particulars better than I do. He doesn't much like to talk about it."

“I have an aunt.”

“Had,” Thomas said, gently. “She left Ashcombe before you were born and never came back that anyone here knows of. I’m sorry. I’d have thought someone would have told you by now.”



Clara walked back through the orchard alone as the light went long and gold across the grass, the letter warm again in her pocket, and found that she was no longer certain which was the stranger fact: that her mother had kept a sister a secret for thirty years, or that the orchard itself, every crooked row of it, might have been the reason why.

What the Orchard Kept

THE cottage at the orchard's far edge had belonged, Thomas's father told her over tea the following afternoon, to no one in particular for the better part of two decades. It had been Bridget's, once, in the years before the falling out, and Margaret had never had the heart either to sell it or to open its door.

The key, when Clara finally found it, was hanging on the same hook as every other forgotten key in Fern Cottage's scullery, unremarkable among a dozen others. The lock turned stiffly. Inside, the air was cold and close and smelled of dust and something sweeter beneath it, apples stored long past their season, though the room was empty of anything but a bed frame, a washstand, and a small writing table under the window.

In the table's single drawer she found the diary.

It was not long. Bridget had never been one, it seemed, for wasted words; the entries were short, dated, practical, until they were not. Clara sat on the edge of the bare bed frame and read by the last of the daylight, and somewhere in the space of an hour the sister she had never known stopped being a signature at the bottom of an angry letter and became a person: twenty-six years old, furious and frightened in roughly equal measure, writing about a father's promise and a sister's silence with a plainness that ached.

The last entry was dated three days before the letter Clara had found in the writing desk. *I have said what I came to say*, it read. *If Margaret will not answer me I do not know that I can stay in this village and watch her keep what was meant to be shared. Perhaps that is exactly what she is counting on.*

There was nothing after it. No account of what had happened, no reconciliation, no explanation for thirty years of silence between two sisters who had grown up beneath the same crooked apple trees. Only the

orchard itself, still standing, still bearing fruit every autumn as though it had no memory of the argument that had split a family down its middle.

Clara closed the diary and sat for a long while in the darkening room, listening to the wind move through branches her mother had planted and her aunt, it seemed, had never forgiven her for keeping. Whatever the truth of it had been, she understood now that she had not come back to Ashcombe merely to close up a house. She had come back to finish a conversation two sisters had left broken off, one letter short of an ending, thirty years too late for either of them to have the last word.