

Broken Promises

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Chapter 1

Broken Promises



It is night and winter is old. As the howling wind rustles, the windows shake and a piece of tin bangs against the roof, as the wind whips across the quirky and unassuming mountain home located near a quaint village in upstate Vermont.

The year is 1983, another lousy year in this house that holds no sweet memories. In a home ravaged by hatred, loneliness, and disintegration a young woman lives. Her life is not simple, but it is painted by a single brushstroke. Inside, greeted by the cozy warmth of the fireplace, Carrie Burns, twenty years of age, quietly sits at the piano, embracing the chance to play the jazzy tunes she hears when she secretly listens to the forbidden music on the radio.

Little does she know that the thin, wild-eyed woman who prohibits Carrie from playing what the woman calls “raucous, sinful songs” has unexpectedly entered the house through the back door. Silently, the woman stalks forward with one objective in mind, solely intended for the young woman who sits unaware as her fingers run the piano keys with a light-hearted, harmonious melody.

Without warning, the fallboard on the piano slams hard on Carrie’s fingers. Vibrations, stopped by dampers, are immediately silenced as the keys are dramatically released. Carrie’s

eyes well with tears, widen in shock, and squint in agonizing pain as she realizes her fate's inevitability. Nerves frayed, tilting her head upwards, she cries out as painful throbs radiate upwards from her hands to her shoulders. Gradually, the high-pitched shrill whine becomes a scream, louder than the sounds of the rolling thunder. As the pitch of it grinds into her eardrums and aggravates her soul, it fills the living room of the small two-story wood-framed house.

She groans with pain, but words will not come. Finally, her teeth clenched in agony, she manages to stutter "W... why... why?" The divide between the mother and the sheltered daughter only widens. Carrie knows her challenger's ears, deafened by any appeals, would never listen to her pleas. Still, she begs, "Mother, please stop with the insults. Stop with the criticism. Stop with the pain. I have had enough today." However, she chooses to keep those words to herself, realizing any conversation would be doomed from the start.

The ruthless woman, paunchy and gray-headed, stands behind the terrified young woman. Tight-lipped, arms crossed, the older one taps her foot on the wooden floor as she points a rigid finger at Carrie. As she yells, the sound of her voice seems to bounce from one wall to the other. "How many times have I told you! No lively music played in this house!" She grabs the hymnal on the piano, shoving it in the face of her daughter, who is shaking from the pain her mother inflicted. Emphasizing each word, the woman bellows, "You – only – play – these – songs! Only these! Do you hear me?"

Diminutive and powerless, the daughter of the raging woman crosses her arms and holds her hands underneath her armpits, protecting them from further harm. Gently, she rocks back and forth, moaning. "Yes, Mother. I hear you."

Tears of desperation trickle down her cheeks as she faces the prospect of what is next to come. She looks up at Margaret Burns' hard facial lines and cold, unyielding eyes. "I rule you

with an ironclad hand, Miss Carrie," they seem to say. Margaret yells and points to the door. "Outside! You know the routine."

Bruised and broken, Carrie feels hot tears flow unbidden down her cheek. Bent over with the pain, Carrie walks at a snail's pace to the coat rack. Careful not to injure her hands any further, she meticulously slips her long coat off the stand. Wrapping a scarf around her neck and placing a hat over her long, medium brown hair, she makes herself ready to battle the cold, frigid outdoors. At this moment, it is impossible to slide gloves over her swollen, bleeding fingers. Therefore, Carrie cautiously slips them inside her pocket. Sniffing back anguished tears, she opens the door. The sky is dark—not a ray of sunshine. Suddenly, a blast of cold wind and swirling snow bombard her soft, beautiful face. Fervent pleas mix with tears. "It—It's cold out there, Mother."

"You should have thought about that before you broke my rules," her mother shouts.

The bone-freezing Vermont winter wind whips the white slush into huge drifts outside the barn. Pushing her wind-tangled hair away from her face, Carrie, struggling to support herself, forces open the barn door. Finally, she prods the door ajar just enough to elbow her way inside the shabbily structured building—her prison, her doom.

Bundling up with a tattered old blanket, Carrie curls into a fetal position against a mound of hay and listens to the whistling winter wind blow across the mountain. In the distance, a lone coyote howls from the midst of the forest. It reminds her of being unloved, unsought, unknown, and bearing burdens more than she can bear.

As her thoughts turn to recall her mother's cruelty, the temperature outside plummets as huge snowflakes fall into a mounting pile. The north wind shrills around the corner of the barn as Carrie, listening to the growing blizzard outside, wonders why bad things always seemed to happen to her. She

asks herself, "What compels a mother to mistreat and abuse her child continuously? How can a mother be so cruel? Didn't she love her only child?"

She recognizes these are questions to which she might never know the answer. *Carrie, be calm*, she tells herself. After much thought, she declares out loud, "Tomorrow, I will run away. I have enough money saved for a bus ticket. I will get as far away from her as possible. Tomorrow." In the darkness, as she listens to the wind and her greenish eyes grow heavier. She soon drifts off into a deep sleep.

A couple of hours later, Carrie stirs. Jumping up, she runs to the door and slogs her way through the thick sludge to the house. Shivering, with broken words, with teeth clenched, Carrie chatters, "Two hours. That's the amount of time she allows for my punishment. Maybe, she won't yell if I come back to the house." As she eases open the kitchen door, the tea kettle on the stove is whistling. Quietly, she enters their abode, conscious there is no sign of her mother.

"Mother?" she calls out. "My time out is up. It's freezing outside. Do you mind if I come in the house?" A quick look around and still no answer. Upstairs she trudges. "Mother?" Softly, she knocks on her mother's bedroom door. Still, no reply.

Maybe she went outside to the barn looking for me. She probably went out the front door while I slipped in the back, she guesses. Chilled to the bone, she peels off freezing socks and glances at the clock. Hoping this horrendous day will soon be over, she says, "It's way past my bedtime. I am going to bed." Gradually, as her tense muscles begin to relax, she sorrowfully thinks sleep seems to be the only peace that ever comes.

Chapter 2

Truth Revealed



The sounds of the persistent knocking at the door cause Carrie to bolt out of bed and bring her crashing down the stairs. As she races to answer the door, she wonders why her mother didn't take the initiative. "I'm coming. I'm coming." Carrie continuously calls out, "Mother, Mother, get up! There's someone at the door."

As Carrie turns the knob and opens the door, Margaret Burns, looking frozen and barely alive, stumbles inside. With a loud thump, she hits the floor and lies motionless. "Mother!" Carrie cries out, kneeling by her unresponsive mother's side, gripping her arm, feeling for any signs of a pulse. "You are nearly frozen. Your heart is still beating, but only barely."

Panicking, Carrie grabs her mother underneath her arms and pulls her into the living room next to the warm fireplace. Quickly, she adds kindling to the dwindling fire. A small flame burns the edges and grows. As heat builds, it spreads. Soon, the wood crackles and pops, giving off added warmth to the cold room. Grabbing blankets and a pillow, she attempts to make the lethargic woman more comfortable.

"Hang on, Mother, I'm going to call for an ambulance." Quickly, she dials. "Hello, my name is... Hello! ... hello!" She shakes the telephone. "Please! Someone answer! Dang it! The

telephone has gone dead. The lines are probably down!"

Frantically Carrie looks around, head spinning, trying to think what to do. "I know! Uncle Lars! I'll go get Uncle Lars."

Back down at her mother's side, she whispers into the nearly frozen woman's ear. "Don't worry. You are going to be all right." She pats her arm. "I'm going to get Uncle Lars. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Outside, blustery and ice cold, the storm brews. Carrie nearly skids to the car shelter that houses an older model white Chevrolet. Uncle Lars lives nearly two miles away, and although Carrie's controlling mother has never taught her to drive, she has to give it a try. As she barrels down the washboard road, the car veers along an unpaved track, first to one edge and then to another. Just as she rounds the first bend, the car hits a slick spot. The horizon whizzes by as the car spins out of control, pirouetting, and inevitably launches into a snowbank, resulting in an off-road experience not of her choosing.

Shaken, Carrie feels helplessly minuscule in the vastness of her surroundings. "I have no choice but to walk," she says to the wind. Poorly dressed for the storm but determined, she plunks herself into the bitter cold. Bundling up as best she can, she begins her long trek down the road, plodding resolutely through the snow.

In a snowy clearing, just up the hill, she spots Uncle Lars' cabin at the edge of the dark and impenetrable forest. Just as she reaches the front door of Uncle Lars' house, the door flings open. A small man with graying hair and squinty eyes, about age fifty, stands before her.

"Carrie! What are you doing here? I thought I heard someone on the porch, but I never thought it would be you." Frantically, he looks around, searching for his sister Margaret. He continuously peppers the frightened young woman with questions. "Where is Margaret? What are you doing out in this storm?"

“Uncle Lars!” Carrie cries. “You have to help me! It’s Mother!”

Immediately Lars grabs his winter wear from a rack near the door. “Let’s go!”

“The road! It is too dangerous to drive on the road. How will we make it back to my house?”

“Maybe it’s too dangerous for a car or truck, but I have ol’ Mr. Reliable out there in the barn.” He smiles at Carrie, who is standing quietly, a confused look on her face. He explains. “My tractor, Carrie. My truck may not get us there, but my tractor will.”

The ride back to Carrie’s house is slow and steady but sure. The Massey Ferguson 35, with black smoke swirling out of the stack into the crisp air, putts its way along the barren road. It seems as if it takes forever to travel such a short distance.

As soon as Lars drives up to the front porch of his sister’s house, Carrie pounds up the steps, calling out to her mother. “Mother, I’m home! I have Uncle Lars with me. You are going to be okay. I’m here, Mother.” Kneeling, Carrie begins to shake the frigid, unresponsive woman. “Mother, wake up! It’s me, Carrie. Wake up! Uncle Lars is with me. He is going to help me take care of you.”

Lars moves closer to his sister. With one glimpse of her face, he spies the bluish tone of her skin. Kneeling beside her, Lars, holding her cold, lifeless hand, instantly knows the fate of his sister. He looks at Carrie and rubs his whiskered chin. “Carrie,” he begins. “I’m sorry, my dear, but Margaret is gone.”

The young woman looks at her uncle with questioning eyes. “What do you mean, she’s gone? She was fine when I left. She can’t be dead, Uncle Lars.” She eases her hand to touch the shoulder of the one whom she has always feared, but then retracts it, not wanting to feel her mother’s lifeless body.

Lars pulls the blanket over Margaret’s face. Slowly, he stands, reaching for Carrie’s hand. “Don’t worry, Carrie. Ev-

everything is going to be fine.”

Carrie looks down at the lifeless body of her mother. She wants to cry, but not a sigh or a tear comes. Emotionless, she stands, frail and unfeeling, watching for any signs of life from the pernicious woman who had victimized her for years. Yes, the person who had rebuked, scorned, and scoffed at her for as long as she could remember is unresponsive. She is dead!

Lars places his arms around Carrie and leads her to the nearest chair. “Sit down here, honey. I’ll go make us some hot tea.”

Suddenly, Carrie remembers the whistling teapot she had heard earlier. Pondering, she considers out loud, “My mother must have been outside at the time the teapot was whistling. Nevertheless, why? Was she looking for me? Maybe she fell and couldn’t get back to the house. Perhaps she was lying out in that cold air all night, hurt. And all this time, I was upstairs in a warm bed, asleep.”

Uncle Lars responds, “You don’t know that for sure, Carrie.”

“Yes, I do. It all makes sense, and this is my fault, Uncle Lars. I knew she was probably outside last night. When I called out for her, she never answered. She sent me to the barn, and I fell asleep in there on some hay. She must have gone out to the barn looking for me. I should have looked for her, but—”

Lars kneels beside his niece. “No. No. You can’t blame yourself for Margaret’s death. You are not responsible for...” He reaches for her red, swollen hands and stops abruptly. “What—what happened to you, Carrie?”

Carrie shakes her head as she turns away, avoiding his questioning eyes. “Nothing.”

Lars continues to probe. “Margaret did this, didn’t she?”

No answer from the young woman, who sits tight-lipped and rigid.

Lars stands up and walks over to the mantel, staring down

into the burning embers in the fire. "No child should have endured what you had to endure all these years. If there is any fault here, it's all on me, Carrie. I am the one that should have put a stop to this when she first brought you home. I turned the other cheek and walked away, pretending like nothing was happening." He turns back to face Carrie. "I should have been here for you. I should have had your back." He drops his head, avoiding the questioning eyes of his niece. "I'm ashamed. She promised me that it would stop, but Margaret never kept a promise."

A frown crinkles her forehead. Carrie asks, "You said, 'when she first brought me home.' Was mother abusive towards me when I was a baby?" When he did not answer, Carrie repeats her query. "Uncle Lars, look at me. Did my mother abuse me when I was just a baby?"

The distraught man sits down and holds his head in his hands. "I gave her my word that I would never tell you."

"Tell me what, Uncle Lars?" Her trembling finger points to the woman still lying on the floor with a blanket thrown over her lifeless body. "What other promises did she break?"

"She is not—" He pauses. Carrie notices that he is speaking as if the words are difficult for him to say. "I don't want to tell you this, Carrie, but now is maybe the time. Margaret is not your biological mother."

Carrie flops down in the nearest chair, shaking her head. "What? Is she not my birth mother? How is that?" Confused, she stares blankly at his face. "What exactly do you mean?"

He looks into her eyes. "I hope you will understand." Glumly, he mutters, "You are adopted, Carrie."

Carrie gasps. Her heart overflows with sadness as tears choke her throat.

He confesses, "You were not even born in this state."

Carrie's throat tightens, refraining from a scream. The information is more than she can handle, but she needs answers

and now. "So, you are telling me that my mother was nothing more than just a footnote at the bottom of my life? Tell me everything. I need to know it all—no matter how bad it might hurt."

Slowly, Lars begins to explain. "Margaret never married. I know she told you that her husband, supposedly your father, died right after you were born. There was never a husband, and your father, your real father, was killed in a West Virginia coal mine explosion in 1963 when you were two years old."

Lars rubs his forehead as if trying to ease the onset of a major headache. Slowly, he continues. "I always knew that my first instinct was to protect you." Bowing his head in shame, he sorrowfully adds, "But, I didn't do that. I didn't protect you. Sometimes you think you are doing the right thing, and it turns out to be the biggest mistake you ever made. What you are left with is that your moral compass is spinning." He shakes his head and asks Carrie, "What do you do?"

"How about doing the right thing?"

Lars continues. "I understand that you are in a challenging place right now, but I am glad that the truth is finally coming out." As he chokes back tears, he adds, "I hope you can forgive me for not telling you sooner."

Carrie's thoughts whirl as she tries to comprehend. "Forgive? Right now, Uncle Lars, I am so confused and so angry I can't think straight." Carrie shrugs and trudges back and forth across the room, wringing her hands. She noticed the sorrowful look on her uncle's face. "Forgive me. I need a moment, okay?" Finally, she explodes. "This explains so much! It explains why I act nothing like she did and why there were not any resemblances between us. I often wondered why I looked nothing like my mother—like Margaret."

Lars interrupts, "Although she had pernicious ways, she is still your mother, Carrie."

"No! She is not. If she were a mother, any mother, she could

never have treated me the way she did. Mothers don't do that to their children." She turns a circle around the room, shaking her head. "That's why I didn't look like her! That's why I didn't act like her! That's why she never loved me! Because I am not her child!" She glares at Lars. "How can you sit there and tell me she is my mother? How could you live with yourself, knowing what...?" She punches her chest. "... knowing what kind of home I was living in and only two miles down the road from you?"

Carrie looks upwards. "God, how, how could you have allowed me to live in the torment that woman put me through?" Her eyes fill with tears. "I cannot believe I have wasted my life on a completely disgusting human being! Why, Uncle Lars. Why?"

"For your pain, your anger, your hurt, I am sorry. I am truly sorry. I made a mistake by keeping silent. A big one! I am not the perfect person, and I do regret keeping my silence. I am sorry, Carrie, for not doing the right thing."

After an interval broken by Carrie's sobs, Lars continues, "I'm going to the kitchen to make us some hot tea. I'm going to tell you everything. I owe you that much." He looks down at his sister's corpse lying in the middle of the floor. "We can't bury her until the ground thaws, but just as soon as this storm slacks up, I'll take her body to the barn and build a make-do coffin to place her in. This storm has us boxed in, so we are not able to take her to the coroner, and he can't come up here, at least not until this bad weather has cleared. We need to preserve the body until someone can certify her death. That may take days. If we leave her outside with the temperature below freezing, her body will preserve."

Carrie watches as her uncle shuffles into the kitchen. Her eyes turn reluctantly to the corpse lying cold and lifeless at her feet. "No wonder I can't cry for you. No wonder there are no tears. Your actions have always been a mystery to me. But now,

I know." She glances around the cold, unwelcoming room. "I don't think I will ever feel happiness again. For so long, you kept me trapped in a place where I was all alone, and the pain was all I could feel. As soon as I bury you, I am out of here! And I will never darken these doors again."

From the kitchen, Lars calls out. "Come in here, Carrie. Sit at the table with me. Ask me whatever you want. I am going to answer all your questions."

The scent of the freshly brewed hot tea wafting out of the kitchen awakens Carrie's senses. She sits down at the table across from her uncle. Calmer now, and feeling as if she is a little more in control of her emotions, Carrie asks, "What is my real name?"

"Carrie. Carrie Stiles."

"Where did she find me? Was my real mother living at the time I was adopted?"

Bit by bit, Lars begins to explain who Carrie Stiles is, where she was born, and why she was put up for adoption. Slowly the mystery begins to unfold as he gradually exposes her mother's deception. "As I said, your father was killed in a coal mine explosion in West Virginia, where you were born. You were almost two years old and the youngest of eight children. Your mother had cancer and died soon afterward. No living relatives were willing to take all the children into their home. So, after your mother died, the state put all of you in an orphanage."

He sips his tea and leans on his arms. "Margaret and I were distant relatives of your real mother. When word got back to us about your mother's fate, Margaret decided to make the trip to West Virginia to see if the state would award at least one child to her. She always wanted a little girl, and I gradually saw why—she could train the girl to do all the work on this place. So, she took off to West Virginia. It was the perfect place for her—out of state and a long way from here. She brought you home and, from the beginning, began erasing all memories of a

family that you once had.”

Overwhelmed, Carrie says, “I never felt like I belonged here. I always felt like I belonged somewhere else and to someone else.” Tense muscles tighten as she chokes back tears. Her trembling voice softens. Nonetheless, she tries to let the expression on her face hide many feelings. “She never seemed to be a mother to me, especially a mother who was supposed to have been mine. She had no conscience, no morals, no soul. At times, I thought she was a monster. And, now I have proof!”

Lars slowly stands and places his empty cup in the sink. He swallows hard as he casts a look towards his baffled niece, his words continuing to plead for her understanding. He says, “I always told Margaret that no secret ever stays buried. It always comes out and hurts the people involved. I told her that lies only validate a person as someone not to be trusted.”

“What an understatement! Lying gets you nowhere.”

“Yeah, I know. But please listen to me. I understand your heart is broken, but your spirit is intact. Reach down deep, girl, and find a light in the midst of this darkness. In this world of gloom, there is always a candle that burns in the night.”

“My heart is broken, Uncle Lars,” she confesses as tears roll down her cheeks. “I’m not that sure I can. That has never worked for me. Besides, a broken heart can’t even begin to express how I feel. I feel like I have a hole in my heart.”

“I understand, Carrie. I know a few things about hurt and pain myself. And I recognize it hiding behind that pretty face of yours. But you’ve got to let it go before it consumes and destroys you.”

“I have good reason to hang on to this, Uncle Lars.”

“Yes, you have your reasons. That is understandable. But let me tell you something about bitterness. If you keep feeding that anger, it will consume you. When you wallow in pain, you become a victim for the rest of your life. Let it go.”

Eyes narrowed and forehead furrowed, Carrie yells out,

"Let it go?" She motions towards the living room where Margaret lies. "How can I let go of the fact that she abused and mistreated me for all of my life? My world was bleak and desolate. *Family* should be the apex of security, happiness, and love. In my world, there was never a day when I felt loved." She glared at her uncle. "Do you have any idea what I felt like navigating my way through childhood? I felt lost, afraid, and confused." Clinching her teeth, she adds, "I want revenge!"

"Revenge is sweet, but it does not fill your life with purpose. Besides, 'vengeance is mine,' says the Lord."

"I would love to leave vengeance to the Lord, but in my case, He never delivers. Where was He, Uncle Lars, when she whipped me with a switch until it drew blood? What about the days I couldn't go to school because of the bruises on my face? God wasn't there giving out punishment for her. He allowed her to hurt me, and I never even knew what I did wrong." Tears flow harder. "I don't want to feel this way, Uncle Lars. What can I do?"

"Continue to love her."

"Love her?"

"Because she is your mother, you shouldn't love her less."

"Because she never acted like my mother, should I love her more?"

For a moment, Lars was speechless. Then he suggested, "Then you must pray."

"Pray? Does God answer prayers?"

"Yes."

"Then why hasn't He ever answered mine? Maybe, it is because God and I aren't exactly on speaking terms. I stopped praying long ago for His infinite mercies when I finally realized there would not be an answer. I rebelled against such lies. I had to spend all of my life learning how to survive and fight for myself. It made me angrier. It didn't make me less. And I did it all without God."

Lars looks caught off guard at her unexpected bitterness. "Well, I am going to pray, and I am going to pray that you find a way to let go of your bitterness. I understand that following your faith is not always easy, especially when pain exists and you are wondering how long it will last. But you've got to find a way to deal with your grief, Carrie. I understand that all this is a lot to process. All grief is unique, and yet all grief is the same. It is how you work through it that matters. The more you hold on to your bitterness, the more power you give it."

"I can handle the hurt and the disappointment. It's just that I can't handle the fact that I will never receive the justice I deserve."

"Maybe you will. Is there anything else about your past you would like to know?"

"I don't know, and I realize that not knowing is not good enough. Maybe later."

He sighs. "If you need me, if you want to talk, I'll be in the barn building a coffin of some kind." Just as he places his hand on the doorknob, he adds, "I'm sure you can find any papers about your adoption and your real family upstairs. You should find everything in Margaret's mahogany chest in her bedroom."

For a long time, Carrie sits at the kitchen table, aching hands rubbing the warm teacup. There is so much to comprehend. She wonders, *where should I start?* "I know! I'll start upstairs in Margaret's bedroom – the one room in this house that I was never allowed to enter."

A tear falls as she sadly remembers all the times, lonely and afraid as a child, she would yearn to go into that bedroom to be close to someone who might comfort her. Slowly she climbs up the stairs, stopping momentarily in front of the door of Margaret's bedroom, the room she was never allowed to enter. Determinedly, she goes inside.

The lighting in the room is obscure and off-putting. Dark

and mysterious, it is not homely or peaceful. Her eyes notice an antique circular mirror she guesses has been hanging for decades over what she thinks is an antique bed, placed between a jumble of other inherited pieces. She can't help but wonder how Margaret perceived her face when she saw her image in the mirror.

Filled with tension and uncertainty, she lets her hands feel along the wall to find the light switch. Spotting the chest at the foot of the bed bid her to ease her way forward carefully. Kneeling beside the piece of furniture she was always forbidden to touch, she places her hand over her beating heart.

Amid sorrow and dull routine of her not-so-ordinary life, she embraces the opportunity to find out about all the secrets, lies, and broken promises neatly packed inside the mahogany chest. Heart racing, Carrie scans the documents. In this dark day of her life, as shadows creep in and menacing uncertainties cast pale visions, it becomes imperative that she find out the truth. Wild eyes dart back and forth as the young woman tears into one envelope and then another. The more she reads, the more complete the story of her life becomes as the truth unfolds. Crumbling, she sinks down onto the floor and drowns into an emotional heap as a flood of memories washes through her mind. Deep inside, anger stirs. Soberly, a single response encapsulates scores of emotions—heartbreak, despair, grief.

“So many broken promises.”

Suddenly, the night becomes darker.