


opening extract from

# Carrie's War

written by

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# Chapter One



Carrie had often dreamed about coming back. In her dreams she was twelve years old again; short, scratched legs in red socks and scuffed, brown sandals, walking along the narrow, dirt path at the side of the railway line to where it plunged down, off the high ridge, through the Druid's Grove. The yew trees in the Grove were dark green and so old that they had grown twisted and lumpy, like arthritic fingers. And in Carrie's dream, the fingers reached out for her, plucking at her hair and her skirt as she ran. She was always running by the end of this dream, running away from the house, uphill towards the railway line.

But when she did come back, with her own children, the railway line had been closed. The sleepers had been taken up and the flat, stony top of the ridge was so

overgrown with blackberries and wild rose and hazelnut bushes that it was like pushing through a forgotten forest in a fairy tale. The tangled wood round Sleeping Beauty's castle. Pulling off the sticky brambles that clung to their jeans, Carrie's children said, 'No one's been here for hundreds of years . . .'

'Not hundreds, *thousands* . . .'

'A hundred, thousand years. A million, billion, trillion . . .'

'Only about thirty,' Carrie said. She spoke as if this was no time at all. '*I* was here, with Uncle Nick, thirty years ago. During the war – when England was at war with Germany. The Government sent the children out of the cities so they shouldn't be bombed. We weren't told where we were going. Just told to turn up at our schools with a packed lunch and a change of clothes, then we went to the station with our teachers. There were whole train-loads of children sent away like that . . .'

'Without their mummies?' the little ones said. 'Without their *dads*?'

'Oh, quite alone,' Carrie said. 'I was eleven when we first came here. And Uncle Nick was going on ten.'

Uncle Nick was old. He had been old for years and grown so fat in the stomach that he puffed when he stooped. The thought of him being ten years old made

the children want to giggle but they bit the giggles back. Their mother was looking so strange: eyes half closed and dreaming. They looked at her pale, dreaming face and said nothing.

Carrie said, 'Nick and I used to walk from the town along the side of the railway. It was quite safe, not like an electrified line, and there weren't many trains, anyway. Only two or three a day and they came dead slow round the bend in case there were sheep on the track. When there were, the engine driver would stop the train and get out of his cab and shoo them off, and sometimes he'd wait so that everyone could get down from the carriages and stretch their legs and pick blackberries before they set off again. Nick and I never saw that, but people said it often happened. They were specially good blackberries here, easy to reach and not *dusty*, like at the side of a road. When they were ripe, Nick and I used to pick some to eat on the way. Not many, we were always in too much of a hurry to see Johnny Gotobed and Hepzibah Green.'

*'Gotobed?'*

'Yes, just like that,' Carrie said. 'Go-to-bed.'

She smiled. A remembering smile, half happy, half sad. Waiting for her to go on, the children looked at each other. Carrie was good at stories but sometimes she stopped in the middle and had to be prodded.

'People don't have names like that,' the oldest boy said, to encourage her. 'Not real life, ordinary people.'

'Oh, Johnny Gotobed and Hepzibah were real, all right,' Carrie said. 'But they weren't *ordinary*. Any more than Albert was. Albert Sandwich. Our friend who lived with them.'

'Lived where?' There were no houses in sight: the wooded mountain rose on one side of the old railway track and fell steeply away on the other. No sound of people, either: no cars, no aeroplanes, not even a tractor. Only a pigeon or two in the trees and sheep, baa-ing below in the valley.

'Druid's Bottom,' Carrie said. She looked slyly at the children and laughed when they laughed. 'It was really called The-House-In-The-Valley-Where-The-Yew-Trees-Grow, but that's a bit of a mouthful, even in Welsh. So everyone called it Druid's Bottom because it was at the bottom of the Grove.'

'No one knows about Druids really,' the oldest boy said importantly. 'All that mistletoe and human sacrifice stuff. That's just legend.'

'There's always a reason for legends,' Carrie said. 'It was certainly a Sacred Grove of some sort. Some old religion. Bad or good – I don't know. But it had a queer *feeling* – you'll see for yourselves when we get there. There's a spring that was supposed to have healing

powers and the remains of what might have been an Iron Age temple. At least, Albert said so . . .'

'D . . . ah . . .' The oldest boy made a wild, gagging sound, as if a fish bone had caught in his throat. Then turned bright red and mumbled, 'How much farther?'

What he had nearly said was, 'Dad would have been interested in the temple.' His father had been an archaeologist, and he was dead. He had died in the spring. It was August now, and the first time they had gone on holiday without him. They had been driving through Wales, to the sea, and Carrie had turned off the main road into a narrow valley and said, this was where she and Uncle Nick had lived for a while in the war, would they like to stop the night and see? They hadn't wanted to, very much; the little mining town was desolate and ugly and the only hotel smelled of stale beer and greasy chips, but Carrie had looked so different suddenly, so happy and ironed-out and eager, that none of them had said so.

Now, watching her, the oldest boy wished that he had. Her smooth, happy look was gone and she was screwing up her eyes and her mouth so that her whole face seemed crumpled. Like an old handkerchief, he thought. Perhaps it was only that the hot climb had tired her but it seemed more than that. As if she were, all at once, uncertain about something.

Her voice was quite steady, though. She said, 'Not much farther, I don't think. Of course it looks a bit different, places often do when you come back to them, but I *think* I remember . . . soon as you turned the bend and saw the tunnel – yes, there it is! *The first yew!*'

Between them, and the black, tunnel mouth, was a cleft in the mountain. A deep gully, dropping away from the ridge. No more ash and hazelnut trees with sunlight dancing and dappling between them, only the old, gnarled yews, growing thickly together. A dark green, silent place, where no birds were singing.

They stood on the ridge, looking down. The littlest ones pressed close to Carrie. She glanced at their faces and said lightly, 'A bit scarey? Nothing to be scared *of*, just a few old trees, though Uncle Nick used to be scared sometimes, on the way down. Oh, he *was* such a baby! He was even scared of the Skull, when Hepzibah showed him. And there was nothing to be scared of in that! Shall I tell you about it? It was the skull of an African servant who had been brought to England at the time of the Slave Trade. And it was supposed to scream if it was taken out of the house . . .'

The oldest boy resented her tone which was that of a grown-up amusing the children. He said, 'I know that sort of story! Screaming Skulls and all that! All rubbish, really.'

Carrie looked at him. 'Albert Sandwich said it was rubbish. He said the skull probably came from the Iron Age settlement. He said the British Museum would know. He wanted to take it and ask them when the war was over. He was interested in that sort of thing.'

She paused. 'Dad would have been interested too, wouldn't he? Albert and Dad were very much alike, in some ways.'

Although she was smiling there was something tight in her voice, as if she were holding her breath. Perhaps she was: she seemed to let it out in a long, gusty sigh, and walked away from the children, down the track to a place where a flat rock jutted out from the side of the bank. She stepped on to it and a little breeze caught her hair and lifted it behind her. She called out, 'There's the house. Come and see.'

They followed her and looked where she pointed, through a gap in the yews. Druid's Bottom was a long way below them: a doll's house with tall chimneys, tucked in a fold of the valley as if in the crook of an elbow.

'There's a path,' Carrie's daughter said. 'A bit slippy and slimy, but we could go down if you like.'

Carrie shook her head. 'There's no point. No one lives there. No one could live there now.'

They looked again. 'It's a ruin,' the oldest boy said.

'Yes,' Carrie said. She sounded flat and dull. As if she had known this all along but had hoped something different.

'We could go down, all the same.'

'Though it 'ud be a long way back *up*.'

'Lazy. Fat, lazy tyke.'

'Fat an' lazy yourself with brass knobs on. Come on, let's go down then, it's not far.'

'*No*,' Carrie snapped. Her own sharpness seemed to surprise her. Hand flying to mouth, she gave a queer, trembly laugh and looked at her children. They stared back and saw the colour come and go in her face. She took a pair of dark glasses out of her pocket and put them on. Eyes safely hidden, she said, 'I'm sorry, I can't. I really can't. Really.'

That odd laugh again. Almost like crying. 'Oh, I'm so sorry. Dragging you all this way in this heat. So silly, really. But I wanted to show you – and to see for myself just once more. We were so happy here, Nick and I. I thought – I *hoped* that was all I'd remember.'

The children were silent. They didn't know what she was talking about but they could feel she was frightened. Their mother was frightened and this frightened *them*.

She saw it. She drew a deep breath and smiled at them shakily. 'I'm so sorry, darlings. It's all right. I'm all right now.'

Far from all right, the oldest boy thought. He took her hand and said, 'Let's go back now. Let's go back and have tea.'

He drove the others on ahead with a look. Following them, Carrie stumbled, as if blind behind her dark glasses, but he held her hand tightly. It felt cold to his fingers. He said, 'Won't take us long to get back. Quicker, going downhill. And a nice cup of tea'll make you feel better. I suppose they will give us tea at that pub? Though it's not much of a place, is it? Neither the pub, nor the town.'

Derelict, he had thought when they drove through the main street. All those boarded-up shops and only old people about, dreaming on doorsteps or creeping along in the sun. Like a place that was waiting to die.

'Pit's closed,' Carrie said. 'They opened it up during the war but the seams were too deep. Not economical. I suppose once we didn't need the coal so badly they closed the mine down, then the railway. I should have known, really.'

She spoke as if she should have known more about more than the dying town. She sighed and he felt her hand shiver. She said, 'Places change more than people, perhaps. You don't change, you know, growing older. I thought I *had* changed, that I'd feel differently now. After all, what happened wasn't my fault, *couldn't* have

been, it just didn't make sense. That's what I've been telling myself all these years, but sense doesn't come into it, can't change how you *feel*. I did a dreadful thing, the worst thing of my life, when I was twelve and a half years old, or I feel that I did, and nothing can change it . . .'

Couldn't change what? He longed to know what she meant, what dreadful thing she had done – it sounded more interesting, to his mind, than Druids or Screaming Skulls – but didn't dare ask her. She had been speaking, it seemed, more to herself than to him; she might feel he shouldn't have listened. She would tell him in her own time. Or she wouldn't.

She was looking too tired to talk anyway. Tired to death, and so white. He thought – *I wish Dad was here!* And then, that if he could walk with his eyes shut all the way back to the town, it might magick him back. Crazy, of course – if he had caught any of the others doing such a crazy thing he would have laughed himself sick! But they were a long way ahead now, and his mother would never guess what he was up to. She might not think she had changed but she was too old for *that*! He would just walk on, holding her hand and letting her lead him, turning his head a bit so she wouldn't see his closed eyes and keeping the sun on his left cheek as an additional guide. The tricky part would

come when they had to leave the straight track and turn down through a gate and a field, but magic never worked if the thing you had to do was too easy. And if he managed to do it without her noticing, when they got to the pub his father would be waiting there. Waiting for them and smiling . . .

'What on earth are you doing? Grinning like an ape with your eyes shut?'

He opened them, saw his mother's face smiling down, and felt his ears burn. 'I was just playing a game.'

'At your age? You'd have had us over the edge in a minute!'

She was teasing him as if he were one of the little ones but he didn't mind because she was looking happy again. When she took off her glasses the sun caught her eyes and made them flash like green torches.

She said, 'Look, now! You can see the whole of the town from here.'

They had left the wooded slopes behind them and the valley had opened out. Springy, sheep-cropped turf, criss-crossed with dry stone walls, ran down to the back yards of the houses. Narrow, straight streets; one long, thin one, like a spine down the middle and short, stumpy ones leading off, steeply climbing the hillside. It was peaceful enough and the slate roofs shone in the soft, evening light, but it was still a hideous place, the

oldest boy thought: ugly houses and black pit machinery and smooth cones of slag, meanly dark against the green mountain.

Carrie said, 'See that slag heap? The one over there? We used to slide down on a tray, though we were in trouble if *he* caught us, mind! Wearing out our good clothes or wasting hot water to wash them!'

'Who's *he*?' the oldest boy asked, but she didn't seem to hear him. She was gazing down at the town and smiling her private, remembering smile.

'That's the pub where we're staying,' she said after a minute. 'The Dog and Duck. And that building there, the one with the green roof, that's Ebenezer Chapel where we used to have lessons some mornings because there wasn't room for us all in the school. It was only a small school, you see, not big enough to take all the extra children from London. And here, where we're standing now, this is the *exact* place where the train always whistled when it came round the bend. A simply enormous whistle that echoed in the valley. More like a volcano erupting than a steam engine blowing its top, Nick always said, but he was touchy about it because it made him sick the first time. Though of course it wasn't only the whistle. It was partly because he was tired and unhappy, leaving home and our mother for the first time . . .' She seemed to think about that for a

moment – how sad it had been – and then started to laugh. 'But it was mostly because he had eaten so much. He really was quite dreadfully greedy when he was young.'

'Still is,' the oldest boy said. 'What's new about that? Get on with the *story*.'

'I'm *trying* to,' Carrie said, so impatiently that she sounded, he thought, more like a cross girl his own age than his mother. 'But the story *starts* with Uncle Nick being sick . . .'