

# THE LAST PROMISE

By Mia Karr

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Nora has grown up with her father's broken promises to change from an abusive monster to a loving dad. When his actions finally send her over the edge, Nora decides to make a change for herself and her sister, Lucy. However, her plan ends in disaster and Nora becomes obsessed with honoring the final promise she made to Lucy, while struggling with the terrible question... did her choices cause Lucy's death?

## **CHARACTER**

1 FEMALE or 1 MALE

NORA or NATHAN

## **DURATION**

10 Minutes

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by  
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***AT RISE: On a bare stage, NORA or NATHAN, a teenager dressed in slightly dirty outdoor summer clothing.***

*“Nora!”*

I don't answer. I don't move. He can't find me, he can't find me! If he finds me, he'll take her away. I know he will. He'll make me let go of her hand, her tiny, cold, lifeless-- *(Pause.)* My baby sister's hand. I know she's gone, but some part of me thinks that if I just keep holding on it won't be true. Even if it really is true, I promised. I may be the reason she's lying dead in the woods, but I've never broken a promise to Lucy.

*“Nora!”*

My father's voice again. I can feel the familiar hatred wash up inside of me, threatening to rip me apart just like it does every time he says my name. This is his fault-- no, it's my fault-- no, I don't know what it is. We're both so guilty; we deserve to die, not Lucy.

Lucy was sweet as an angel and always saw the good in everybody, even our father. He was all we had. My mom left us after Lucy was born, when I was four. He drank, and when he drank he got angry. He would yell at my sister and me and throw things and threaten to kill us if we bothered him. He never touched Lucy, but sometimes he'd slap me. That would have been all right, I guess. I think I could have survived having a monster for a father, if he was consistent.

When he was sober he could be civil. Everyone thought he was a good man, “raising those poor little motherless girls.” In some ways that was true. When I was little, I used to climb up on to his lap and he'd bounce me on his knee and tickle me under the chin. Then the next night he'd be all hate and anger again, but he'd always apologize.

“I'm sorry, sweetie, let's go get you and your sister some ice cream. This'll be the last time, I promise,” he'd say, and just like that I would forgive him, even though we both knew the promise was a lie. And then one day I stopped liking ice cream. I don't know what happened. I just couldn't look at Dad the Nice Man and not see Dad the Monster. And Dad the Nice Man started to show himself less and less.

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I look down at Lucy's fingers, so perfect, even in death. She was so perfect. She never stopped forgiving my father even when there was more and more to forgive. She never stopped saying "I love you," even when she knew he wouldn't say it back. I would tell her she was being stupid, that she should just give up, but she would simply look up at me with her big, brown eyes and smile that broken smile that I will never, ever see again.

I had-- have-- enough hatred of my father for the both of us. When I was filling out a form for my English teacher at the beginning of this year, there was a question that asked me to list my strengths. "Hating" was all I could think of. I couldn't very well put it down, so I said "hiding." I was good at hiding, right here in the spot I now sit holding my dead sister's hand.

It's deep in the woods behind my house. I first discovered it after my father had been in a particularly awful rage one night. I was so upset I went into the woods and I just ran and ran, gasping and crying, until I was too exhausted to cry anymore. After I had caught my breath, I discovered I was in a clearing. It wasn't anything special, really, but it made me think of when my dad would watch Disney movies with me, and Snow White ended up in a clearing after the woodsman tried to kill her, and I became quite attached to it. The grass was soft beneath my feet and the light slanted between the trees in just the right way. It was perfect. So, I started retreating to my special spot whenever a wave of hate-- my father's or mine-- threatened to overtake me.

And I left Lucy alone. I felt bad, I did, but my sister was so good and so strong-- she should have been the older one. She was smart, too-- a little over two weeks ago she came home with a letter from her middle school announcing that she had earned some special award. It was the end of the year, and there was going to be a banquet. I had never seen her so proud.

"What's this?" My father had asked, taking the letter from her hand. He was having one of his now-rare moments of civility. Lucy shyly explained about her award and asked if he would come. I braced myself for his answer.

"I'm so proud of you," he said after a moment. "I'm coming, I promise." My sister and I gasped in shock. He hadn't spoken so affectionately for as long as I could remember. We were thrilled. After school on the day of the banquet, Lucy put on her nicest dress. I took her out to have her hair done and got her back to the school twenty minutes early. It was a

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really fancy affair, with nice tablecloths and everything. We sat down and waited for my father. And waited, and waited. When Lucy went up to accept her award, he wasn't there.

When we came home, he was passed out at the kitchen table, a beer in his hand. I tried to pull Lucy up to her room, but she wouldn't come. She woke him up and started questioning him, asking why he wasn't there, while he told her to leave him alone. And then, and then... he slapped her, right across the face. It was all right to hit hateful, angry me, but even my father had never laid a finger on Lucy. And it destroyed her.

I had never seen her so devastated. I held her as she cried and she was so fragile in my arms. Like... like now. It was the first time I truly felt like the older, responsible one, and in that moment I made a decision. We were leaving. We were leaving that night.

Lucy didn't want to go at first. She was scared, understandably so. I convinced her that everything would be all right, and I believed it. I felt so confident and invincible, like this was what I was always meant to do. I thought I was leading us toward a better life, not... not death.

We snuck out to my secret spot in the woods with all the non-perishable food I could gather from the kitchen, water jugs, a pocket knife, some matches, a flashlight, and two sleeping bags. The mosquitoes are itchy, yes, and it's almost summer time so it's hot, but for that first day and night everything seemed perfect. I didn't really have a plan, but Lucy and I were free from my father and for the first time I could remember, I allowed myself to feel okay. I did half-expect my father to come looking for us and kill us both, but he didn't... not at first... not until now.

This morning I went a little way from our makeshift campsite to go to the bathroom. Then I heard a scream. I ran back to see Lucy clutching her arm-- a bee sting. She had been stung by a bee once before, so I wasn't worried at first. Then I noticed she was gasping for breath. My mind returned to eighth grade health class. It takes two stings before you can be sure you don't have a lethal allergic reaction.

I whipped out my phone-- no battery. Crap, oh crap. Lucy was on the ground fighting for air, her brown eyes wide with fear. What had I done?!

"Nora... don't go. Just hold my hand. Promise," Lucy gasped.

"I promise," I whispered, tears welling up in my eyes. And I stayed. I held her hand. I kept holding it after she had stopped wheezing and became unconscious. After her heart stopped beating.

Why, oh God, why didn't I do something? Was it because I had promised and I refused to become like my promise-breaking father? Or was it because of my stupid pride and hate? Did I not run the mile home to get my father for reasons that had nothing to do with Lucy? Maybe I could have saved her!

But I promised. She trusted me enough to run away with me, and I let her down. I stroke her hand and I don't know what to do. All I want is to say I'm sorry, but I don't know how.

"Nora!"

He's closer now-- it took him long enough to sober up and look for us. I still don't answer. I don't want him, or anybody, to ever find us. They'll take my sister away and pry her clammy fingers from my hand and put her in a pretty dress, maybe the one she wore to that ceremony, and they'll put her in a casket and there will be a funeral. And I'll hate my father even more. So much more that I might burn up and die. Or I might become just like him, or maybe I already am.

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