THE SORROWS OF THE SIREN SISTERS

A NOVEL

A story of sisterhood, survival, and the complicated distance between justice and the law.

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PORTFOLIO READING SAMPLE

ABOUT THE NOVEL

When the law fails the people who need it most, two sisters build a code of their own. Kiya and Kimi Siren become fugitives after a desperate act of protection sends them onto the road. As they move from town to town, their crimes begin to blur with acts of mercy: money appears where it is needed, vulnerable women find help, and people who have been ignored by the system begin to see the sisters as something other than criminals. But every choice carries a cost, and a legend can become as dangerous as the violence that created it.

This sample includes the complete prologue and the opening chapter.

PROLOGUE

The Town That Wouldn’t Move

Copper Ridge, Colorado · October 1976

The first thing Kiya noticed was that nobody screamed. That bothered her. When things like this happen, most people scream. It’s not always loud. Sometimes it was just a gasp through a deep breath and clenched teeth, or somebody whispering “Oh God” to no one in particular. Sometimes an old timer would curse, mostly out of inconvenience. One thing always happens, valuables drop and hands go up but not this time. Once in El Paso, a teller had laughed uncontrollably for seven straight minutes after Kiya showed her the revolver.

Fear had its sounds, its motions and its unpredictable responses. Copper Ridge Savings Bank was silent, this was new. Kiya stood three steps inside the front doors with her father’s revolver in hand hanging loosely at her side and listened to the fluorescent lights hum. No panic. No crying. No trembling hands. Just the faint scrape of Kimi’s boots crossing marble behind her and an old ceiling fan clicking with every rotation.

Click… Click… Click…

The bank smelled like fresh floor wax, old papers, and stale coffee. The October sun cut through the front windows in pale yellow rectangles, leaving the shadows of the windows lettering displayed backwards on the floor. Dust floated lazily through the beams of light. Outside, Copper Ridge continued moving as normal, a woman pushing a stroller followed by a toddler on a bike pass by the bank window.

Kiya glanced toward the teller windows. June Bell stood behind window three. June just looked at Kiya, then to Kimi. She then glanced at the canvas bag hanging from Kimi’s shoulder, her posture relaxed and she looked right directly at Kimi.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake”

Kimi stopped and looked back to June.

“Good morning to you too, Ms. June” Kimi said with a warm smile.

June just folded her arms and smirked.

“You could’ve waited until after lunch?” June said.

Kiya nearly smiled, nearly. She lowered her sunglasses and placed them on the top of her button up. Her eyes winced from the bright lights, as she approached June.

“Busy afternoon I see”

“I haven’t eaten yet, I’m moody” June said with a crooked smile

“Neither have we” Kiya responded looking at Kimi waiting for a retort.

“Well that just sounds like poor planning, if you ask me. I thought you’d be in later”

Kiya shifts her attention to Kimi sternly. Kimi moved towards the counter.

“I told her.”

“You tell everybody everything.” Kiya said

“I’m a conversationalist.”

“You’re annoying.”

June rolled her eyes, as Kimi smiled and blew a kiss to Kiya. Kiya refused to acknowledge her gesture. Kiya looked down the counter, she recognized two other tellers. Neither of them showed any worry to what was transpiring.

“Some things never change with you two.” June said

“Well let’s not start with this withdrawal.” Kiya stated

Kiya watched Kimi make her way down to the next teller and drop her canvas bag with her. Kimi said something and both the teller and Kimi laughed. Kiya looked back to see the old security guard near the entrance sitting in a chair reading the newspaper. She caught him peering over the edge of the paper. His name was Harold Bennett, she recognized him because Kimi had once beaten him at a local card game played at the diner, Kimi refused to let him forget it. Harold saw the revolver in Kiya’s hand, slowly lowered his paper keeping his gaze on her, letting her know he wasn’t a threat. He carefully unfastened his gun belt and let it fall to the floor followed by a gentle nudge with his foot to give it some distance. Kiya nodded.

“Thank you, Harold.”

“If it’s alright with you, I’d prefer to remain seated, bad knees you know” Harold asked

“I remember.” Kiya said while giving a quick gesture with her free hand to remain seated.

“I’m not dying over somebody else’s money.”

Kimi pointed at Harold.

“See? Harold understands bank economics.”

“Kim.” Kiya said sternly, she only called her Kim when she was being stern.

“What?” Kimi lifting both hands going back to her teller.

Kiya gave her a look, a look that Kimi has both grown accustomed to and yet become oddly proud of. She knew it to be Kiya’s way to keep her in check, though she always found new ways to test her limits. Just then Kiya sees a deliveryman approaching the bank, she briefly gets tense. He stops outside and speaks to someone on the sidewalk before directing him across the street. He makes his way past the bank, and both parties continue about their day. Kiya brings her attention back to the bank. She’s comfortable with the stress but she prefers ordinary more than she would care to admit too. Ordinary meant nobody is bleeding, no running, nobody with a gun saying her name through a loudspeaker. She looks back to June just as June opens her drawer.

“How much would you like?” June asked.

Kiya hesitated “You’re making this very weird.”

June stares back with a blank look. “You came into my bank with a gun.”

Kimi slides over with her bag full of cash from the other teller, drops her bag on the counter to collect what June is stacking.

“Our bank.” Kimi corrected.

“You don’t have an account.” June replies.

June temporarily stops pulling money and looks at her with an inquisitive expression. Kiya is even taken back by her statement and feels the scene has gotten a bit too comfortable for all involved. Kimi turns her back and leans on the counter with both her elbows and looks out the bank window. Harold is back to reading his paper, while the other two tellers are just gossiping about their upcoming evening. Kiya feels even more uneasy from this complacency and almost feels guilty, as she feels she’s made everyone appear to be an accomplice to the robbery and less like the victim to the circumstance.

“Enough!” Kiya says sternly.

Kimi pops up, she knows Kiya is done with the banter and wants to move on. June’s expression changed as did the demeanor of the two other tellers. Harold drops his paper briefly but goes back to it seeing no threat, just a sister growing impatient of her younger siblings’ antics. What Kiya doesn’t know is that Kimi already told June where the money is going. Two women at Copper Ridge Memorial whose names were written

in Kiya’s notebook. One has cervical cancer, the other lymphoma and neither can afford treatments.

The shelter needed a roof before winter, and they’ve been turned down for support numerous times, which meant the sisters were their last hope. Kiya had already calculated what was needed to take care of everything three nights earlier, while Kimi slept with the television on. The numbers fit, barely but they always only took enough to cover the missions. They only kept enough for themselves to survive. After every heist meant disappearing for a while or moving on to the next place. This meant being very precise and frugal with the money they took. Gas, food, repairs, a room when the weather turned. Never luxury, never in excess. Kimi had a moment of weakness once in Las Vegas. She bought a designer coat with some winnings at the casino; it drew attention they both wanted to avoid. Kiya considered it evidence of moral deterioration, Kimi didn’t see it that way but agreed it was too much and returned it.

June was stacking bills, Kiya checked every stack before allowing Kimi to stash them in her bag. No dye packs, no alarms, Kiya watched regardless of knowing June. It was a habit. Trust was not the same thing as carelessness. June put another stack on the counter just as Kimi leaned into take it. Kiya stopped them, split the stack in half and gave half to Kimi to stash. The rest she placed in an envelope before putting it in her back pocket. She gestured to June to stop with the cash. Kimi shouldered her bag and leaned towards June.

“You still seeing Patrick?” Kimi said in a patronizing way.

“No.” June didn’t look up.

“Good”

Kiya stared at Kimi, “What? You hated Patrick.”

“Cause I was right about him.” Kiya snapped back.

“You hate everyone June has dated.”

“Well, I’ve been right twice.”

“Technically… three times.” June said.

“See!” Kimi quipped.

Kimi pointing at both June and Kiya and smiling. Kiya let out a deep breath out her mouth and took another deep breath through her nose. Kimi looks at June, they both smile. The only person stressing out during this bank robbery is the one leading it. This is why Kiya hated robbing banks in towns where people knew them and treated them like friends. It became social. Social was dangerous. Just then a door opened behind

the teller windows, the sound was small, but Kiya reacted immediately. Her revolver rose to meet who ever stepped out from that door.

Just then a man in his thirties, perhaps early fourties appeared from the door. His pressed gray suit and red tie looked too expensive for a small bank branch in Copper Ridge. He was soft around the waist, thick framed glasses, and his hair was parted meticulously to one side, not a single hair out of place. His demeanor seemed off, that was the first problem. The second was the way he stopped when he saw Kiya and Kimi. His gaze went to Kiya first, as if he was assessing the biggest threat first, he noticed the revolver with no immediate reaction, then he looked at Kimi. Recognition came slowly, Kiya watched every stage of it. Confusion, Acceptance, then Certainty.

June was the first to speak, as she closed the till drawer which drew his attention to her with the abrupt clang of the metal drawer locking closed.

“Mr. Dane,” she said softly.

“You…” he said, looking directly at Kiya.

“You’re them.”

Kimi looked towards June. The man barely raises his hands as Kiya has her revolver locked in on him.

“Who’s this guy?” Kimi asked.

“Our new manager,” June replied, “but he’s not supposed to start until next week.”

Kimi looked toward June then back to Kiya, considering what June just said.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Kimi said under her breath to Kiya, as Kiya nodded subtly.

Kiya kept her eyes fixed on the manager. His nameplate pinned to his jacket read Walter Dane – Manager. Just then Walter took a step backwards towards a desk. Kiya raised her revolver just a fraction, but it was enough to catch his attention.

“Don’t,” Kiya said sternly.

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Good,” Kiya said. “Keep doing it.”

“This bank has procedures, what…”

Walter was speaking, but the word entered Kiya like something cold and traumatic. Procedures. For an instant she wasn’t twenty-seven years old. She was seventeen again. A woman from the county child services department sat across from her at the

kitchen table while a fourteen-year-old Kimi squeezed Kiya's wrist with her cold clammy hand's underneath it.

"We have procedures, Miss Siren." The woman said.

Kiya remembers the gray skirt, the sensible shoes, the stack of paperwork. She remembered the way she spoke softly while dismantling what remained of her family. She remembered the suitcase, then Kimi crying standing on a stranger's porch. Kimi raising two fingers in a V shape sideways over her eye, saying goodbye. Just as Kiya returns the same hand signal, she blinks and the bank returns. Walter was still talking.

"You think you can walk in here and…"

"Walter," Kiya interrupted. Something in her voice silenced him. She stepped closer towards him; gun still locked on him.

"We are going to take what we came for. Nobody is going to get hurt. Then we are going to leave."

"You won't get away with this," Walter said with broken confidence.

Walter looked at the tellers, who all have removed themselves from the standoff Walter has created.

"Why are you all just standing there, nobody alerted the police." Walter said

"Walter, shut up," Kimi said firmly

"They won't hurt you just call the police."

No one responded or moved, they just ignored Walter. His face darkened and enraged.

"Shut… your… mouth, Walter."

"This isn't funny, all you bitches are complicit to this and I'll see to it," Walter yelled at the tellers.

"They're not complicit to shit, do you not see the gun you jackass," yelled Harold

"Your done too, what good are you, can't even stop two girls."

In that moment of chaos, Walter's right hand briefly disappeared behind the desk. Kiya saw the movement and brought her gun to his head. His hand slowly came back out, it was empty. He smiled, then looked at Kiya.

"You're too late, you stupid bitch, both of you, murderers deserve to rot in hell," Walter said.

In that moment the temperature in the bank changed, Kiya felt it. Beside her, Kimi stopped moving, she looked at the tellers, and she saw fear on their faces for the first time. That word always landed differently. Robber, criminal, fugitive, bitch they could laugh at those. Murderer had weight, because sometimes it was the truth regardless of the reason. Kiya kept her expression flat. Walter continued with his tantrum. June pleading with him to stop.

“You rob banks and throw money at what you call charity or good will, you can’t buy your way into heaven, you can’t save your soul. What you do with the money doesn’t make you some sort of saint.”

“We’ve never called ourselves saints,” Kiya said.

“No,” Walter said, “What did the paper say, oh self-proclaimed heroes.”

“Enough Walter,” June pleaded, “Please just stop.”

“You’ve been reading the wrong newspapers,” Kiya laughed.

“You kill people,” Walter said sternly.

“Yes… we have” Kiya said.

Walter didn’t expect that answer, nobody did. They all had known but to hear it directly from the source set a new tone in the room and their faces showed it. Kiya saw it on Walter’s face, his eyes showed concern for the first time. Maybe it was from the comment he wished he could take back, or maybe it was seeing tension forming on the trigger from Kiya’s finger. Her anger was taking over, and it was visible. Kiya saw Kimi looking at her, a glance that told her she knew and understood what she had to do. Walter swallowed loudly, his eyes moved towards Kimi. Kiya saw it.

“Don’t look at her,” Kiya said, “look at me.”

Walter turned his gaze back to Kiya, just then sirens could be heard coming from the distance. Kimi closed her eyes and lowered her head. Walter’s eyes perked up, he had a subtle grin come across his face.

“You’re all going down for this,” Walter said, pointing at the tellers along with Kimi and Kiya.

The thin wail of the sirens carried between the buildings got louder. Kimi quickly went to the windows and closed the blinds. She peered through while closing the last blind and saw a sheriff’s cruiser turn on Main Street so fast his tires could be heard chirping on the pavement. Then another turned followed by two black sedans.

“Feds, Kiya… we have feds,” Kimi yelled.

“Get away from the windows Kimi, lock the door. Harold, get away from the window and take a seat by that desk were its safer.” Kiya said sternly. Harold gets up slowly.

“Yes Ma’am, don’t have to tell me twice.”

Kimi picks up Harold’s gun he left on the floor; she checks it and confirms that its loaded. Kiya removes her focus off Walter for just a moment while she scans the space. Kimi notices Walter reaching and pulling something from his back, as she brings her sights on him, he reveals a gun and before she could say anything she fires and hits Walter in the head and lays him out immediately. Kiya turns around in panic and sees Kimi frozen with the gun aimed where Walter once was. The tellers start screaming, and one faints. June just covers her mouth and presses up against wall in shock.

“He… he… he pulled a gun Kiya, he had a fucking gun Kiya.”

“It’s ok, I got you. Let me have the gun,” Kiya said.

Kiya goes to check Walters body, she sees the gun by his side. She opens his jacket and searches the pocket. She pulls out a small black leather bifold. The wallet opens to a small gold-tone metal shield-style badge with an eagle and lady justice. The other side held an ID card with a name that read Dennis Mullen underneath large blue letters reading FBI. Kiya stands abruptly.

“This was a trap, we were setup,” Kiya said, waving the bifold revealing the badge.

“Explains why the feds showed up so fast,” Kimi said.

“Are you all ok,” Kiya asking the tellers and Harold.

The girl that fainted is sitting down and recovering. June is crying but she nods to Kiya that she is fine. Harold seems unfazed.

“You did what you had to do, I don’t fault you for that,” Harold said.

“What do you need us to do,” June asks.

“Nothing for now, just look after each other,” Kiya says.

Police cars swarm outside the bank. People gather on the other side of the street to see what’s happening. Car doors are heard opening and closing while bodies in police gear can be heard staging. The rachet of a shotgun seam to permeate the walls inside the bank. A man in a sharply dressed suit steps out of a black SUV and the static feedback of a bullhorn ring out loud. Kiya peers through the window. She recognizes him. Daniel Harlan, a tall slender man that looks like he lives on gas station food and coffee. He wears a long dark overcoat that matches his suit that clearly shows he’s a federal agent. He’s the federal agent who had followed the sisters through three states without

ever holding a press conference. Kiya recalls every article and seen photographs about him and his quest for the Siren Sisters.

Harlan never described the sisters as monsters or even painting them as villains. His desire to capture them alive also made him very dangerous as this had created conflicting emotions with the sisters' supporters. Men you hated were predictable. Men who tried to understand you could get close. Kiya would never allow that.

"That's him," Kimi stated.

"Yeah, it is."

"He looks tired."

"We tend to make certain people feel that way."

"Think we should tell him to get some sleep."

Kiya almost told Kimi to stop, but she noticed Kimi fidgeting and rubbing her thumb in the palm of her hand, then she did it again. Kimi had always disguised fear with humor. At fourteen she'd make jokes in hospitals to ease tensions. Now at twenty-four she made them while being surrounded by federal agents and local sheriffs. Kiya reached over and touched her wrist. Kimi's hand became still. Their eyes met. Kiya didn't need to say anything, neither did Kimi.

Static burst from outside. A loudspeaker just pierced through the walls with the same intensity of the gun Kimi fired moments before.

"Kiya and Kimi Siren, we know you're in there," Agent Daniel Harlan said.

"At least he said your name right," Kimi said.

"Kimi!"

"What? People say it wrong all the time."

"Kiya and Kimi Siren, this is Special Agent Daniel Harlan with the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Kiya peered through the blinds. There he stood, loudspeaker in hand, directing others to stage around the building. He wasn't even hiding behind a car. Kiya found this to be very interesting as everyone else was behind cover or using their vehicles as a shield.

"Kiya," Harlans' voice continued, "I want everyone inside that bank to walk out safely, including you and your sister."

Kiya thought, wow only her first name. She hated that. It made him sound less like law enforcement and more like somebody sitting across a dining room table sharing a meal.

Kimi leaned closer to the glass to get a look, but Kiya pulled her back down and away from the window.

“He sounds reasonable,” Kimi said.

“That’s how they get you.”

“I wasn’t going to turn myself in, he just sounds… nice. You are profoundly paranoid.”

“Free and alive Kimi.”

“Both things can be true.”

“You have nowhere to go ladies, your options are very limited. I want to help you end this peacefully,” Agent Harlan states through the bullhorn.

“A little late for that,” Kimi says.

Kiya nudges her with her elbow and smirks. Kiya sits up to peer through the window just in time to see residents congregating to a point that it was now causing a distraction for local law enforcement. Kiya can see Agent Harlan instructing the sheriff and the deputies to take control of the crowd, but they are becoming quickly out numbered. This is exactly why Kiya picks remote towns, law enforcement is extremely limited, but the new challenge is dealing with the FBI. This was a new situation all together and very unpredictable.

Just then a commotion started to unravel, the doors to the diner across the street opened with Mabel Jenkins walking outside wearing her apron screaming at the police to leave those poor girls alone, followed by her chef and multiple patrons of the diner. A pickup truck turned on to Main Street, forcing several officers to focus their attention and weapons on it. The driver stopped sideways in the middle of the road. Sheriff Avery recognizing him shouted orders to hold their fire and commanded the driver to leave immediately. Old Carl Mayview, a rancher outside of town in his seventies climbed out, proceeded to raise his hands and stood by his truck. Soon after another pickup arrived, then another.

Kimi pressed against the window, the June and the other tellers came to window to see what was happening.

“Kiya,” Kimi said.

“I see it, but I don’t know understand,” Kiya said.

“They’re doing it for the both of you,” June explained. “We all are.”

Kiya was flooded with emotions, but she had no time to sit with them, this diversion that the town was sacrificing their safety for could be for nothing. She quickly hugged

June, an action that both shocked June and Kimi equally, then grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

“I’m so sorry we got you into this, what do you need us to do,” Kiya asked.

“Just get free from all of this, run, hide, don’t come back… please. I need to know you two are free living your lives from all of this. We will be ok,” June said.

“Holy shit more are coming,” Kimi said

The bullhorn came alive and Agent Harlans once calm demeanor was now gone, his voice rang with anger and fear.

“Everyone clear Main Street immediately, you are interfering with a federal investigation.”

His voice was drowned out by cars honking, people yelling and soon law enforcement was overwhelmed. With only six federal agents, eight deputies and the Sheriff, they knew they were outnumbered. The Sheriff’s main concern at this point was to ensure his town wasn’t torn apart in the process.

More people showed up, from the pharmacy, the feed store, mechanics, nurses, a doctor. A large group of women walking and chanting down Main Street, the leader of them shouting.

“They saved my daughter.”

“Clear the streets, go back inside,” Agent Harlan screamed into the bullhorn.

“Save the sisters… Save the sisters… Save the sisters,” chanting was heard from all ends of the street.

Kiya stepped back from the window, the mob was consuming law enforcements attention. Her body felt weak, she felt horrible but validated, vulnerable but seen, appreciated. She couldn’t shake this feeling she put all these people in harm’s way just to save her and her sister. Kimi turned to her.

“Kiya?”

“No, this isn’t right.”

“What?”

“They shouldn’t be doing this, it isn’t safe.”

“But they’re helping us, same way we help them.”

“This wasn’t a part they’re supposed to play; this was never part of the plan.”

“This was not part of your plan Kiya, and that’s ok, this was their choice, you shouldn’t feel bad, we never had to ask for this, they’re just doing it.”

They gave money, they warned people, saved women and children from awful situations to difficult for victims to save themselves from. They frightened men who deserved to be frightened. Sometimes they did worse. In return, women and sometimes men forgot things. The car, a face, the gender, the direction two sisters had driven. That was how the world between them worked. Nobody had agreed to stand between Kiya and rifle, but they just did. Kiya looked outside again. The crowd grew.

“They’re going to get hurt,” Kiya said. Kimi stood behind her.

“They know what they are doing. This is their choice.”

“But this isn’t their fight,” Kiya said crying now. Kimi hadn’t seen Kiya this emotional since she was taken by child services when she was fourteen.

“It is their fight, this all started because the system was broken for way too many of them.”

“Kimi’s right Kiya, this was never a fight you two should’ve had to do alone for so long,” June said.

Kiya let that settle in her thoughts and feelings, though it was heavy and hard to accept, she knew what they set in motion went beyond what they started. For years she believed the story belonged to the two of them. Everything began with Evelyn. Thomas. Wren Street. The Brackens. Their House. Her pain. Kimi’s pain. Maybe that was the lie. Maybe somewhere along the road it had stopped belonging only to them.

A horn sounded outside, then another, then several in unison. Cars moving closer and piling into the street from both sides. Not a single person or car leaving, even with firm and direct orders from both Sheriff Avery and Agent Harlan. Both shouting at the residents, both severely distracted from the mission they came for.

Just then a flare was thrown but it wasn’t clear by who or if it came from law enforcement. Followed by another filling the area full of smoke. More smoke filled the area causing both the residents and law enforcement to cover for air and lose sight of the bank. People shouting in the clouds, cars are honking, law enforcement taking cover, they’ve officially lost all sight and control on the situation. They are blocked in and are at a standstill. Kiya now understood, nobody organized this. That’s why it worked. A hundred people were simply deciding, one after another, not to cooperate. No leader. No commands. No plan to confess afterward. Just an entire town preparing to remember badly. For years people forgot what the Siren Sisters looked like. Copper Ridge was about to forget they were ever there.

Kiya could feel more tears within all the chaos, she hated them for that. Her sister looked at her, then raised two fingers in a v shape across her eye. Kiya's mood shifted. It was such a small gesture. The two fingers. Meant nothing to everybody, but everything to them. She saw Kimi at fourteen, a suitcase by her side on Frank Bracken's porch. Fear hidden beneath an angry little girl's face. You and Me when one raised the two fingers over their eye. Always when the other did it back. Kiya raised her two fingers over her eye, for a moment they didn't move.

Outside, the smoke swallowed the windows, the crowds were still chanting save the sisters. Just as they decided to step outside through the door to make a break for it, June Bell and the others stopped them.

"Let us go first, just in case," June said.

"I can't let you do that June," Kiya said.

"You don't have a choice, thank you, to you both for giving me my life back."

Just then June and the other tellers ran out the front door. As they did one was grabbed and someone yelled, they got them. Kimi shut the door. The voice and the scuffle disappeared into the smoke. Kiya and Kimi looked at each other took a deep breath and went to step out just as Harold stopped them.

"You have to take me with you."

"Are you crazy, nobody goes with us," Kiya said.

"Well, if you get stopped, won't it be easier to get away with a hostage," Harold said.

"You better keep up,"

"This isn't how you win your money back Harold," Kimi said. Harold laughed.

Outside the town had become a wall. Kiya thought of every mile that had brought them there. Every motel, every hospital, every shelter, every woman's name in her book she protected. She had spent ten years believing she was keeping count of what they owed the world. Maybe she'd been counting something else. Kimi touched her back.

"Kiya, we need to go."

"I know." Kiya nodded.

Kiya threw open the door she looked at her younger sister. Twenty-four now, dark long hair loose around her face. A scar near one eyebrow. Fear hidden under that same crooked half-smile. Kiya suddenly remembered summer sunlight through maple leaves. A porch swing, comic books, and a girl reading while hanging upside down because sitting properly was to boring.

Before anyone called them dangerous. Before anyone called them heroes. Before anyone referred to them as “The Siren Sisters” as the named had become legendary. There had only been Kimi and Kiya. A house on Wren Street that leaned slightly to the left. Kimi reached for Kiya’s hand, they can hear the town shouting their names. Kimi squeezed her hand and they ran into the smoke. Kimi raised two fingers.

“You and me,” Kimi said.

“Always,” Kiya said raising her two fingers.

Ten years earlier, before the wanted posters and the federal files, chases and all the stories’ people would tell about the Siren Sisters. The sisters never looked back, they always told their own story. They disappeared into the smoke.

CHAPTER ONE

The House on Wren Street

Summer 1966

The house on Wren Street leaned slightly to the left. Thomas Siren insisted that it did not, the porch leaned, and there was a considerable difference between a leaning porch and a leaning house if anyone in the family cared enough to understand basic construction. The house was a minimal traditional New England style home built during the 1940's during war time material restrictions. So, the porch was an addition feature added on later. To Thomas's point the porch did lean but set the illusion that the house in its entirety leaned with it. Kimi Siren maintained that the entire house leaned because it was tired.

"Tired of What?" Kiya asked, looking over the top of the paperback she was reading.

"Us," Kimi replied.

"Houses don't get tired."

"You don't know that."

"I know enough, I know it's impossible to think clearly sitting like that."

Kimi, who was lying upside down on the porch swing with her legs hooked over the backrest, lowered a Superman comic she'd been holding above her face. Her long dark hair hung and brushed the porch boards with every sway.

"You've never been a house," Kimi said, "How would you know?"

"Well neither have you."

Kimi thought about that briefly, then shrugged before offering a quick retort.

"Not yet."

Kiya considered that for a moment, stared at her younger sister before returning to her book. That was usually how arguments with Kimi ended. Not because Kimi won them, exactly. She simply had a talent for saying something so ridiculous that continuing became more exhausting than admitting defeat. The porch boards were warm beneath Kiya's bare feet. June sunlight filtered through the two old maple trees in the front yard and broke into restless patches across the porch steps.

Somewhere down Wren Street, a lawn mower sputtered, recovered, then continued rattling along. A radio played through an open window a few houses away. Kiya thought it might have been The Byrds playing, though the music was to faint to be sure. A dog barked. A screen door slammed. A boy shouted something from the sidewalk, followed by the unmistakable sound of a bicycle crashing into a metal trash can. Summer sounded exactly as it had the year before.

That was the strange part. Everything inside the Siren house had changed, yet the neighborhood continued as though nobody bothered to tell it. Kiya tried to return to her book. She had been reading the same paragraph for nearly ten minutes, although she couldn't have explained what it said if someone asked. From inside the house came the sound of their mother coughing. Kiya stopped reading. The first cough was dry. The second was far worse. By the third, something wet had worked its way into the sound. Kimi lowered her comic. Neither sister looked at each other. The coughing stopped, for now. Silence returned to the house.

Kimi raised the comic again and turned the page with exaggerated carelessness. Kiya looked back at her book. She still couldn't read. The doctors had been using the word treatment for four months. Kiya had begun to hate it. Treatment sounded optimistic. It suggested that something was being done because, once it had been done long enough, a person would get better. A cut received treatment. An infection received treatment. Somebody broke an arm, a doctor treated it, and eventually the cast came off. Their mother kept receiving treatments and coming home smaller. There were other words and phrases Kiya had started hating too.

Specialist.

Results.

Appointment.

Doctor says.

Next week.

We'll see.

And the worst of all. Maybe. Maybe was saying no but doing so wearing a nicer dress. The screen door opened behind them. Kimi sat upright so quickly that the old porch swing groaned beneath her. Her hair fell in her face, covering the fact she was fairly dizzy from the abrupt upright movement. Evelyn Siren, a frail thirty-eight-year-old woman, pale and way to skinny for her age. She stood in the doorway wearing a yellow scarf wrapped around her head and one of Thomas's white button-down shirts over loose gray sweatpants. The shirt would fit Kiya's father neatly across his shoulders. On Evelyn it looked enormous, but it didn't used too. Kiya tried not to notice.

“You two planning to spend the entire day melting into my porch?” Evelyn asked.

Kimi immediately pointed at her sister. “She is.”

“Traitor,” Kiya said.

“I have plans,” Kimi said sticking her tongue out at Kiya.

“You’re reading a superman comic,” Kiya said throwing back a snarky look.

Kimi held up the comic. “Research.”

Evelyn stepped out onto the porch. “Research for what?”

“Emergency preparedness.” Kimi said confidently.

A smile pulled at the corner of Evelyn’s mouth. It was still her smile. That mattered more to Kiya than she wanted to admit. Cancer had changed nearly everything else. Evelyn’s cheeks had narrowed and the bones in her wrists seemed too prominent beneath her skin. Even on good mornings there were faint shadows beneath her eyes. The yellow scarf covered the hair chemotherapy had taken from her, but Evelyn wore it as though she’d chosen it for fashion rather than necessity. The smile, though it remained slightly crooked, as if Evelyn knew something funny about whoever she was looking at, it was still her smile and that could never change.

“What sort of emergency requires Superman?” Evelyn asked.

“All of them,” Kimi said.

“Sounds reasonable.”

Kiya closed her book. “You’re supposed to be lying down.”

Evelyn looked at her eldest daughter. Kiya recognized the tiny tightening around her mother’s mouth, as if she saying don’t start. Kiya started anyway.

“The doctor said you need to rest.”

“I have been resting,” Evelyn replied.

“You slept for twenty minutes.”

“That’s practically half an hour.”

“That isn’t how resting works.”

Evelyn stepped toward the wicker chair beside the door, and Kiya stood before she could stop herself. “Mom.”

Evelyn paused. “What?”

“Let me help you.”

“I am walking maybe six feet, Kiya.”

“I know.”

“Excellent, then we’ve finally agreed on something.”

Evelyn lowered herself into the chair without assistance. Kiya remained standing. Her mother noticed, of course she did.

“You know,” Evelyn said, settling back, “One of us is sixteen.”

“Yeah,” Kiya replied.

“And one of us is your mother.”

Kiay folded her arms. “That’s been debatable lately.”

Kimi made a strangled sound that was halfway between a laugh and a cough. Evelyn turned toward her.

“Something amusing?”

“No, ma’am.” Kimi said quickly.

“Coward,” Evelyn said with a smirk. Kimi grinned. Evelyn looked back at Kiya.

“You don’t have to watch me every second.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I was reading.”

“You book is upside down.”

Kiya panicked and immediately glanced down at it, it wasn’t upside down. When she looked back up, Evelyn was smiling. Both girls smiled back, there she was.

“That wasn’t funny,” Kiya said.

“It was a little funny.”

Kimi raised one hand. “I support mom.”

“Of course you do,” Kiya said.

“She’s sick,” Kimi said. “You have to be nice to her.”

The words fell between them, Evelyn’s changed first. Only slightly. Kiya saw it anyway. So did Kimi. There were moments like that now, little accidents when someone stepped

too close to the thing all four of them were pretending wasn't standing in the room. Kimi looked back down to her comic. Evelyn broke the silence.

"Get me a cigarette, Kimi."

"No," Kiya said.

Evelyn blinked at her. "I wasn't asking you."

"You're not smoking."

"I have cancer, Kiya."

"Exactly."

"I'm with Kiya on this one mom."

Evelyn glanced at Kimi. "See what you're going to have to live with after I …"

She stopped. Kimi's face emptied. Kiya felt something sharp twist beneath her ribs. Their mother closed her eyes briefly.

"After I get through all this nagging," Evelyn finished. No one spoke. Kimi suddenly pointed across the street, she mastered the art of deflection even at the age of fourteen.

"Mrs. Halperns's roses are blooming."

The change of subject was so obvious it hurt to acknowledge, but all participated. Evelyn turned her head.

"They are."

"They're very pretty," Kimi said.

"Yes, they are," Evelyn replied. Kiya was giving Kimi a look like she knew where this was going. Kimi tilted her head thoughtfully.

"Probably look better in here though."

"Kimi," Kiya said sternly

"What?"

"Leave Mrs. Halpern's roses alone."

"I didn't say I was going to do anything."

"You never have too."

Evelyn laughed at her daughters bickering, the laugh became a cough almost immediately. Kiya was beside her before she realized she'd moved. Evelyn raised her hand to wave her off.

"I'm fine."

"Mom …"

"Sit down, I'm fine." Kiya stayed where she was.

"Kiya."

Reluctantly, she sat. Evelyn took several careful breaths through her nose until the coughing passed. Kimi's comic was closed and had fallen on the porch. Evelyn looked from one daughter to the other.

"What?"

"Nothing," Kimi said. Evelyn raised one eyebrow, as Kimi looked toward the street. Kiya looked at Evelyn's frail hands. It occurred to her that the entire family had become too comfortable with lying and no one was good at it.

Thomas Siren always came home at five-thirty. Kiya and Kimi knew because the Cutlass turned on to Wren Street with a low, smooth growl of an engine. Thomas had spent the better part of a year bragging about it to anyone unfortunate to ask. The sunlight flashed across the chrome as he pulled beneath the maples and into the driveway. Kimi jumped to her feet.

"Dad's mistress is home."

Thomas stepped from the car, he looked tired, but he smiled towards his girls on the porch.

"I heard that."

From the porch Evelyn called, "She learned it from me." Thomas shut the driver door with exaggerated care.

"I'm surrounded by disrespect."

Kimi ran into the yard. Thomas caught her around the waist as she passed and he lifted her from the ground. He started to tickle her.

"Put me down!" Kimi shouted, laughing.

"You insult the automobile, you suffer the consequences," Thomas told her.

"Mom!"

Evelyn appeared at the edge of the porch smiling. “Your father outranks me in all automotive disputes.”

“Traitors. All of you.”

Thomas set Kimi back on her feet, and she scrambled away. Kiya watched from the porch with her mom, unaware of the smile she held. For a moment, her mother looked happy. Her father looked like his old self. He still wore his blue work shirt; the sleeves rolled to his elbows. His dark hair was flattened where his cap had been, and there was a streak of machine grease across his knuckles. When Kiya was younger, Thomas had seemed enormous to her. Not particularly tall, but solid in the way children believed fathers were supposed to be, like there was nothing in the world he couldn’t life if somebody needed him to.

Recently, his work shirts hung differently from his shoulders. He had lost weight too. Nobody mentioned that. Evelyn stepped back inside the house as she started coughing again. Thomas looked toward Kiya. His smile faded.

“How is she?”

Kiya hated this question, not because he asked it. Because lately he asked her instead of Evelyn.

“Okay, I guess,” Kiya said. Thomas waited, Kiya knew what he wanted to hear.

“The coughing was bad this afternoon. She’s tired but isn’t sleeping.”

“Fever?” Thomas asked.

“No.”

“Did she eat anything today?”

“Half a sandwich.”

His posture stiffened, and he rubbed his face. “Half?”

“Dad.”

“I’m only asking, hun.”

“I know.”

Thomas hugged her with one arm and rubbed her back. Kiya always felt safe when he did this. Thomas looked through the screen door of the house, Evelyn was no longer in view. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a cigarette. Kiya debated telling him Evelyn was asking for cigarettes again but decided best to withhold it. Kiya

watched him strike the match of the porch. The flame briefly illuminated the hollows of his eyes.

“You should go inside,” Kiya said.

“I will.”

“You always say that.”

Thomas inhaled long and slowly. “Long day, sweetheart.”

Kiya didn’t answer. Thomas worked at the machine plant outside of town. Long days were normal. Coming home and lingering beside his car because he didn’t want to walk through his own front door was not. Thomas rubbed his forehead, then looked back at Kiya.

“Want to learn how to drive?” She stared at him, confused by this offer.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Kimi appeared at his elbow as if she’d materialized from the air.

“I do!”

Thomas shook his head. “You’re only fourteen.”

“Age discrimination.”

“Who’s teaching you to talk like this, plus you can’t even see over the steering wheel.”

“Mom, and yes I can I’m just as tall as Kiya.”

Thomas smiled and pointed to the door. “Go help your mother please.”

Kimi narrowed her eyes. “You’re trying to get rid of me.”

“Yes, yes I am,” Thomas chuckled.

Kimi nodded approvingly. “Honestly, I respect it old man,” Kimi laughed running inside as Thomas lightly tapped her with his foot.

“Mom, dad said he’s trying to get rid of me.” Kimi is heard in the distance.

Thomas turns back to Kiya. “Now that the wild one is gone, what do you say?”

Kiya tried not to look as eager as she felt. “Now?” she asked.

“Yeah, before your mother decides I’ve completely lost my mind.”

“Dad, she pretty much decided that years ago.”

“Probably.” He dangled the keys in front of her, “let’s go”

For the next hour, there was no cancer. Thomas drove them to the empty parking lot behind the high school and switched seats with Kiya. The cutlass felt enormous from behind the wheel. Kiya stared over the dash and beyond the hood and wondered how anybody managed to keep something that large between two white lines. Thomas leaned over and adjusted the rearview mirror.

“Move the seat forward and make sure you have a clear line of sight with your rearview mirror.”

“Okay,” Kiya dragged he seat forward until she could reach the pedals. The steering wheel felt so close. She checked her rearview mirror, and it required a minimal adjustment. Thomas’s prediction was so close to being spot on. Thomas rolled down the window and instructed Kiya to do the same.

“Okay now we need to adjust our side mirrors,” Thomas stated. “You should only see a sliver of your car and a clear view of the lane next to you.”

Kiya starts to adjust her mirror.

“Use the parking spot to your left behind you to adjust to your settings,” Thomas instructed. “Now let me know when you have the same view setup for this mirror.” Thomas started adjusting the passenger mirror.

“Okay, umm, just a little more up… ok perfect,” Kiya said.

“Nice, so before you start the car, that is the brake and that is gas,” Thomas leaned over and pointed at the pedals.

“Dad.”

“What?”

“I know what the pedals do.”

“I’m teaching.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Must be a family trait.”

Kiya and Thomas both smiled. Kiya turned the key and the engine came alive. The vibrations moved through the steering wheel and into her palms. She felt it throughout her body, this was already a different experience from this seat versus riding as a passenger. She liked it immediately. Thomas could see it on her face; she couldn’t hide her excitement. Mechanical things just made sense to them both. A person pressed something and something happened. Turned something and something moved. Fuel

became fire; fire became motion. A machine could fail, certainly, but it didn't hide why. You could take it apart until found the reason, then you fixed it. Thomas showed her with his hands on the dash how to gently press the accelerator. Kiya pressed too hard at first, the cutlass lurched forward. Thomas grabbed the dashboard just as Kiya pounded on the brake.

"Easy now, she's got some power under there."

"I know, I got this."

"Clearly."

"Now you're making me nervous."

"You were nervous before you started."

Kiya glanced at him. "How do you know?"

Thomas looked amused. "I'm your father, trust me I know."

That answer had once been enough to explain everything, these days it was starting to feel a bit empty, but today, in this moment she felt it. Kiya looked forward again and pressed on the accelerator this time it was better. Thomas had her practice soft braking and accelerating before moving on to doing laps around the parking lot. Kiya was smiling ear to ear, she completed another slow circle around the parking lot. Then another. By the fifth lap Thomas stopped holding the dashboard.

"Better," he said.

"I told you, I got this."

"Well you haven't hit anything. Let's not get arrogant."

Kiya smiled.

"Feel the car," Thomas said.

"That sounds weird."

"Doesn't make it wrong though."

"How do you feel a car?"

"You listen; you absorb it."

"To what?"

"Everything sweetheart, to everything." Thomas gestured towards the windshield.

“The road, the engine, the steering wheel. The way it pulls when you turn. A car tells you what it needs if you stop trying to force it to work for you.”

For reasons she didn’t understand in that moment, but later she would. Kiya thought of her mother, in the second she pressed to hard on the accelerator, jolting her out of her thought. Thomas braced himself. Kiya braked quickly.

“Easy now.”

“Sorry.”

They made a few more laps with Kiya trying different things, parking, backing up, braking with faster speeds. Kiya had always learned quickly. Thomas often joked that Kiya needed to be told something once, while Kimi needed to be told six times and would later insist nobody had ever told her. Just before leaving Thomas decided to show Kiya what the car was capable of, he did donuts, drifted and spun the car and resumed forward acceleration. It was a moment of pure joy for both her and her dad, she hadn’t seen him this happy and laugh this much since Evelyn’s diagnosis. Just then he stopped the car, stepped out and gestured her to move over.

“You’re driving us home.” Thomas sat down in the passenger seat, closed the door and popped his elbow on the opening of the window and looked forward. Kiya smiled and accelerated out of the parking lot. Thomas didn’t even reach for the dashboard.

By the time they returned home, evening had begun cooling the summer air, fireflies can be seen sparking up all over the lawns. Kiya pulled carefully into the garage. Kiya stepped out and Thomas slid over to reset the seat and mirrors to his settings. He didn’t get out immediately. Kiya looked back, she could hear cicadas whining somewhere in the trees. Through the kitchen window, a warm yellow light spilled into the backyard. Evelyn moving slowly past the sink. Kimi followed behind her, talking with both hands. From the garage they looked almost normal. Thomas stared through the windshield. Kiya watched him.

“Dad?”

He placed both hands on the steering wheel; his wedding ring caught the garage light as he ran his hands across it.

“It’s a good car,” he said.

Kiya waited. “Yeah, I know.”

Thomas shook his head. “No. I mean it’s a good car.”

Kiya smiled faintly, “I believe you dad.” Kiya felt he wanted to talk so she asked. “Why is it a good car?”

“Any car can take you somewhere. A good car will you get you there too.” Thomas looking around the car and running his hand across the dash.

“But a great car, a great car takes you somewhere you didn’t even know you needed to go. There will be days when the world feels heavy sweetheart, too heavy, and all you can do is turn the key and drive. Somehow, mile after mile, the road makes things feel a little bit lighter. It never matters where you end up, only that it sets you free. So, when life gets hard kiddo, take the long way home. Roll down the windows and let the world pass you by, even for just a moment.”

She didn’t know what to say, she watched something change his expression. He exited the car and the only thing she could think of was to hug him. He hugged her back and they walked back to the house together. Years later, Kiya would remember every word he said that night.

Evelyn made spaghetti for dinner, though Kiya suspected she’d only done it to prove she still could, or to try and feel somewhat normal. She only ate five bites, Kiya was counting and continued counting without meaning too. Six. Then Evelyn began moving the same noodles around her plate. Thomas noticed too.

“Not hungry?” he asked.

“It’s wonderful,” Evelyn replied.

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“Thomas.”

“You need to eat.”

“I am eating.”

“You’ve been moving the same noodle around your plate for five minutes.”

Kimi’s gaze traveled slowly from her father to her mother; she noticed the same thing. Kiya just focused on her own dinner. Thomas set down his fork.

“You heard what the doctor said.”

Evelyn looked up. “Yes Thomas, I was in the room.”

“You need your strength while on these treatments.”

“And aggressively staring at my dinner is going help how?”

“Evelyn.”

“Thomas.”

Just then Kimi shoved an entire meatball into her mouth. Kiya kicked her beneath the table. Kimi's eyes widened then sent Kiya a glare.

"What?" she said with a mouth full of food.

Kiya couldn't help but smile as she saw Kimi's mouth protruding like a chipmunk. Thomas stood up and walked into the kitchen. He opened the cabinet above the refrigerator. Kiya dropped her eyes from watching him. Evelyn started rubbing her head and took a deep breath. Kimi was carefully cutting her next meatball while still chewing the last one she stuffed in her mouth. Kiya noticed her dad still had a full glass of water at his seat. He came walking back out with a new glass but this time the liquid was an amber color. Kiya could no longer remember when her father's drinking had become another thing the family agreed not to mention or acknowledge. Evelyn took another bite. Seven.

After dinner, Kimi snuck out and stole four of Mrs. Halpern's roses. Only four, which Kimi later insisted demonstrated considerable restraint. Rather than use Evelyn's door to enter her bedroom like a normal person, she climbed through the window. Kiya heard the screen scraping from the hallway and closed her eyes.

"You're going to kill yourself," Kiya yelled.

Kimi's voiced came through the bedroom. "Then bury me with the flowers."

"Can't, Mrs. Halpern will want them back."

"Cold, Kiya, that was cold."

Kiya walked into the bedroom. Evelyn was propped against the pillows while Kimi hung halfway through the window, clutching four red roses in one hand and pushing herself up with the other. Her pants got caught on the latch, and Kiya saw it. She started to make her way to Kimi.

"Don't help me," Kimi said.

"I wasn't going to."

"You're making that face."

"What face?"

"The stupid I'm responsible face."

"I only have one face."

"That's tragic."

Evelyn smiled from the bed. “Girls, be nice. Kimi, she can’t help it she gets it from her father.”

“My face?” Kiya replied.

“The responsibility,” Evelyn smirked.

Just then Kimi went flying into the room and collapsed on the floor. She managed to save the flowers. She poked her head over the window and yelled. “Thanks dad.” Thomas could be seen walking back to the garage with a glowing cigarette from his mouth as he waved back without looking.

“If he’s so responsible, why doesn’t he help you more?” Kiya asked.

The words came out before she could stop them. Kimi stopped messing with the flowers. Evelyn’s smile disappeared. Kiya immediately wanted to take back what she said. She hated feeling guilty for saying what she was feeling and bringing the mood down. Evelyn glaced around the room before saying.

“Your father is having a difficult time.”

“So are you mom.”

“I know.”

“So are we.”

“I know that too.”

“But he…”

“Kiya.”

Evelyn didn’t raise her voice, that made it worse. She just spoke sternly and gave a look. Kiya looked at the floor, she felt horrible, she didn’t understand why so much has changed in such a short period. Evelyn extended a hand. Kiya hated when she did that because no matter how angry or sad she was, she always went for it. She sat at the edge of the bed. Evelyn brushed a strand of hair off her face. Kimi sat down on the other side of the bed, for once she had the good sense to remain quiet.

“You’re sixteen years old.” Evelyn said.

“I know.”

“Do you.”

Kiya frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re allowed to be sixteen.”

“Somebody has to do things around here.”

“You don’t have to be responsible for the whole house Kiya.” Evelyn took her hand and cupped it. “You’re doing the laundry, cooking, cleaning, monitoring my medicine, and you count how many bites I eat.” Kiya went tense. “What you think I wouldn’t notice.” Evelyne squeezed Kiya’s fingers. “I’m still your mother.”

“I need you to get better,” Kiya said quietly. She could feel her emotions overwhelming her, she stood up and started to walk out. She didn’t want her mom to see her so upset.

“Kiya, come here.”

“I’m sorry I need a minute,” Kiya whispered. She walked out of the room took a deep breath and forced herself to stop crying. Kimi crawled over to Evelyn.

“What did I get from dad?” Kimi asked.

“His feral side.” Evelyn smiled and started to brush Kimi’s long hair.

Thomas walked into the kitchen grabbed another drink and sat down at the kitchen table. Kiya stopped at the doorway, her face looked flush, she just stared at him. Thomas looked up.

“What’s wrong.”

“Nothing,” Kiya said. She walked towards the back door.

“Kiya.” She kept walking past him.

“Kiya.” She stopped and turned around.

He watched her from the kitchen table, he knew what was wrong, he just wanted to hear it from her. Kiya just looked at him, looked at his drink and back to him. For one furious second, she wanted to scream at him.

“Go to her, talk to your wife, stop drinking, stop asking me if she ate, fix something, fix her, tell me it’s going to be okay and mean it.”

Instead Kiya said, “I’m going outside.” Thomas nodded, it wasn’t what he hoped she would say. He knew she was angry, but he also wasn’t ready to hear what she had to say. So, he didn’t push it. He took another swig of his drink as the back door closed.

Kimi found Kiya sitting on the hood of the Cutlass. Kimi climbed onto the hood beside her. The metal hood gave a soft pop under their combined weight. As she laid down next to Kiya, Kimi adjusted her freshly brushed and braided hair, so she would lay on it. Kiya thought about the days her mom would braid her hair, but she has since cut it shoulder length, so it was more manageable on her own. Kimi’s was still down to her rear even while braided.

“You know dad will kill you for sitting here,” Kimi said

“He can try.”

Neither spoke for a while. Fireflies blinked beneath the maple trees. Across the street, television light flickered through blue behind the curtains. Kimi held up on of the stolen roses and offered it to her sister. Kiya looked at the flower, then at Kimi.

“Peace offering?”

“You’re unpleasant when you’re angry.”

“Thanks.” Kiya took the rose. The thorns had been removed. Probably by Evelyn. Kimi sat up and swung her legs over the front grille. Then she asked, very cautiously and quietly, “Do you think mom is going to die?”

Kiya could hear the fear in her voice, she looked out at the yard. They had never said it to each other. Not in that way. This was direct, almost as if she already knew the answer and didn’t want to be the only one thinking it.

“You should ask questions like that.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

Kimi looked at her, “That’s not an answer.”

“Cause, I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do know. You’re all hiding it from me.”

“No, Kim, I don’t.”

“But you always know.”

Kiya sat up and turned toward her. In the darkness, Kimi suddenly looked very young, vulnerable. Fourteen. Kiya hated herself for thinking it. Kimi could always sense when people decided to treat her like a child, and nothing infuriated her faster. Kimi pulled at the loose threads from the new hole in her pants.

“I heard dad crying last night,” Kimi said.

Kiya looked toward the house, “Maybe it was just the tv.”

“I know what crying sounds like, Kiya.”

The upstairs windows were dark, where their parents once shared a room. A faint glow came from Evelyn’s downstairs bedroom, a room that was once an office, but more so

mom’s craft and storage room. It was small, but it meant she didn’t have to climb the narrow steep stairs while she recovered.

Kimi asked again, “Do you think mom is going to die?”

Kiya wanted to lie. She wanted to say “No” immediately and convincingly. She wanted to tell Kimi that there were doctors, medicines and treatments and that people survived cancer all the time. Instead, she recalled Evelyn’s narrow wrists, labored breathing, the cough and her loss of appetite. Their father choosing to work longer hours, hide in the garage or behind his alcohol, because he couldn’t make himself go inside, to see the love of his life dying in front him and feeling hopeless in the process.

“I honestly don’t know,” Kiya admitted.

Kimi nodded. It wasn’t what she wanted to hear but at the same time did. At least she didn’t accuse her of lying. Kimi went in for a hug, this felt different, this felt like Kimi saying she’ll never let her go, it was comforting and emotional. Kimi slid off the cutlass and walked inside. Kiya slid off the cutlass holding the stolen rose, one petal fell to the ground. She wanted to kick the car, instead she opened the cutlass and slid behind the wheel. The garage smelled like stale cigarettes and oil. Thomas left the keys hanging from the pegboard at his work bench. Kiya didn’t take them, though she thought about it. She wrapped her hands around the steering wheel. Listen. That’s what her father told her. The car will tell you what it needs if you stop trying to force it. Kiya listened. Cars didn’t tell you anything when the engine wasn’t running. Or maybe her father was full of shit.

Inside the house, Kimi stood in the hallway and pretended she wasn’t crying. Evelyn’s bedroom door was open. A warm lamplight stretched across the floorboards into the hallway. Kimi rubbed her hands over her face. She had inherited what she considered the worst possible crying face, a red nose, swollen eyes and absolutely no dignity.

“Kim?” her mother’s voice drifted from the bedroom. Kimi considered going upstairs. Instead, she stepped through the doorway. Evelyn looked toward her.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Evelyn sighed, “This family has developed a tragic relationship with that word.”

Kimi sat on the bed next to her mother. Evelyn noticed the rose she put in her hair was missing.

“What happened to your rose?”

“I gave it to Kiya,” Kimi said, “She was lying to me.”

Evelyn smiled, “So you gave her a flower?”

“I contain multitudes.”

“Oh, and where did you hear that.”

Kimi shrugged, “I dunno.”

“You absolutely know.” Evelyn poked Kimi with her foot. “Who said it?”

“Walt Whitman,” Kimi said smiling “Song of Myself.”

Evelyn studied her for a moment. Prior to Evelyn’s cancer diagnosis she taught literature at the local college and high school. She would always read to the girls and would take the time to explain what she was reading, as the girls got older, she challenged them to decipher the readings and to be confident with their interpretations.

“What did she lie to you about.”

“Nothing.”

“There it is again.”

“She acts like I’m stupid. Like I don’t understand things.”

“Kiya doesn’t think you’re stupid.”

“She treats me like a baby.”

“She treats you like a little sister.”

“Same thing.”

“Kiya is just scared.”

“So am I.”

“I know.”

“So, she gets to be mean because she’s scared? Dad gets to be a drunk because he’s scared?”

Evelyn’s face changed, “No. Kiya and your father love you.”

“I didn’t say they didn’t, I know they do. It just feels different now.”

“Sometimes people don’t carry fear gracefully.”

Kimi thought about that, “Is that what dad is doing?”

“I think he’s trying.”

Kimi wasn’t sure she believed that. Or perhaps she did. Trying seemed far less impressive than adults made it sound. Kimi looked at Evelyn’s hand. Blue veins showed beneath her thin skin. Her wedding ring had become loose enough to dangle around her finger. Kimi touched it.

“Are you scared?”

Evelyn looked at her, “Yes, yes I am sweetheart.” She grabbed Kimi’s hand.

Kimi hadn’t expected an honest answer. It frightened her more than the lie would have.

“Of dying?”

Evelyn drew a slow breath, “Sometimes.” Kimi’s throat tightened.

“But mostly,” Evelyn continued, “I’m afraid you girls are going to waste whatever happens next being frightened of it before it even gets here.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means tomorrow hasn’t happened yet. So, live for today and not for what tomorrow may bring.”

“Sounds like your poetry books.” Kimi smiled. Kimi laid down putting her head in her mom’s lap.

“Mom if you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?”

Evelyn thought about it, then smiled, “The Lake.”

“The lake?”

“Yes, the lake.”

“Why not Paris or somewhere like California?”

“I’ve never been there before.”

“That’s the point though.”

“I still choose the lake.” Evelyn started running her hand over Kimi’s head. “I know what it feels like.”

Kimi pictured the little quiet lake two hours north of where they would spend a week every year in August. Thomas burning hotdogs and hamburgers on the camp grill, listening to his favorite music. Evelyn wearing her enormous sunglasses floating on her back on a blowup raft. Kiya and Kimi splash around her in the water, occasionally using her as safety from each other. She thought about how August was coming up, and that

lake trip looked so far out of site, that's what she was now longing for now herself. Kimi shed a single tear and buried her face into Evelyn's lap.

Just then Evelyn started coughing uncontrollably, Kimi shot up quickly and grabbed the glass of water on the nightstand. Evelyn leaned forward and coughed into a handkerchief. Kimi handed her the water, as Evelyn reached for it, she revealed her handkerchief and Kimi saw specks of blood on it. Evelyn crumbled it up as fast as she could in her hand, but Kimi still saw it. Evelyn tried to brush past it as she sipped her water.

"Mom?"

"I'm fine."

Kimi turned to the door and shouted, "Kiya."

Evelyn grabbed her wrist, "No."

"But there's blood."

"I know. It's happened before."

Kimi's stomach dropped, "What do you mean, before?"

Evelyn closed her eyes and took a deep slow breath. "Sit down please."

Reluctantly, Kimi sat down next to her. Evelyn placed the handkerchief inside the nightstand drawer. As if hiding it could somehow make what Kimi saw disappear. Evelyn looked up at Kimi, her face so full of fear you could read it like a book.

"Please don't tell your sister."

"What, but why?"

"She worries enough."

"You want me to lie to Kiya?"

"Not lie just withhold certain details."

"But isn't that the same thing, since when did we all start keeping secrets from each other?" Kimi expressed. "What does Kiya know that I don't?" Kimi sighed. "I don't like this mom."

"I know honey, but can you do this, for me please?"

"Yes ma'am." Kimi's posture dropped, she felt defeated and confused.

This new development irritated Kimi more so than the request. Now she had to hide it, this didn't sit right with her. Kimi remembered the question she asked Kiya in the

garage. “Do you think she’s going to die?” For the first time, Kimi understood something she wished she hadn’t. Kiya didn’t always know. Sometimes nobody knew. Sometimes the person who seemed the most certain was simply the person trying the hardest not to fall apart. Kimi leaned over and kissed her mother’s forehead.

“You’re still a bad pirate.” Kimi declared.

This was their code for catching someone in a lie. Somehow, calling someone a bad pirate made betrayal a little easier to swallow, a little harder to take seriously. The tradition had started years ago, when Evelyn first introduced it to the girls as a playful way to handle their childhood fibs. Over time, it had become their own little language.

Evelyn flashed a shameless grin, “A glamorous pirate.”

“Debatable.” Kimi said, “Please get some rest.” Kimi turned to walk out the door.

“Kimi?” Something in her voice made her stop. She looked back.

“Don’t ever stop making people laugh.”

For a moment, Kimi couldn’t speak. Of all the things her mother could have asked of her, it was this, the one thing that only felt natural with her. She was asking her to hold on to the light, even when the world gave her every reason to let it go.

Kimi summoned a smile, “I promise.” Then she slipped out the door before Evelyn could see it crumble.

By midnight the house was quiet. Thomas was upstairs sleeping, Kimi hoped. Passed out, she suspected. Evelyn’s lamp was off, but the hum of the ceiling fan could be heard through the floor. Kiya had eventually come in from the garage and gone directly to her bedroom across the hall. Kimi lay awake listening to the tree branches creak and brush against the side of the house. It was surprisingly soothing.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

“Don’t tell your sister.” The request had seemed almost manageable in the moment. In the darkness, alone it became enormous. Kimi sat up. She crossed the hall towards Kiya’s room. Her door was closed. She raised one hand to knock. She stopped. If Kiya opened the door, Kimi would tell her. There was no question about it. Kiya would take one look at her face and know something was wrong. Then she would go downstairs, there would be questions and doctors. Thomas would wake up and Evelyn getting angry and another peaceful night would become entirely about cancer. Kimi lowered her hand. She returned to her bedroom. A car moved slowly down Wren Street, its

headlights swept across her ceiling. For a few seconds, the shadows of the tree branches stretched enormous across the room. Then the car passed. Darkness returned.