



SIRENS

BRADEN CAWTHON

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunlight streamed in through the windows, bathing the room in the warm orange glow of the evening. The TV was buzzing softly with sounds that fell on Joel's inattentive ears—he was half asleep on the couch, eyes closed, watching his little sister Ava's favorite cartoon with her. She was sitting next to him, leaning on his arm, absorbed by the chaotic happenings of the show.

Joel had arrived for the weekend visit about an hour ago, and a dull pain of a headache was beginning to creep into his head from the long drive. He had moved out for college a few months ago, but he returned to visit nearly every weekend to see Ava.

“Hey, you two get ready to go.”

His mom's voice snapped through Joel's mind, dragging him back into lucidity. He opened his eyes and, turning his head back, blearily replied, “Go where?”

His mom was bustling about in the room behind them, grabbing various things and stuffing them into her purse. She looked toward Joel for a moment and curtly responded, “We’re going out to see a movie, remember?”

Ava, upon hearing this, broke her fixation on the cartoon and, bouncing up from the couch with glee, grabbed Joel’s hand and began tugging on it, saying, “Yeah, we’re going to see a movie together! You can sit next to me!”

Joel turned back and smiled at Ava before rubbing his eyes for a moment and sighing. “Mom, I’m not feeling up for it right now.”

Ava continued tugging on his hand, pouting at him. Joel turned back to face his mom, who returned his gaze with pursed lips. After several moments she sighed, quietly saying, “Ava really wants you to go, Joel.”

Ava enthusiastically nodded in agreement, tugging on his hand again and chirping, “Yeah, please, Joey! It’s gonna be a really good movie, I promise.”

Joel was silent for a moment before sighing again. “Mom, I’m not going to be able to enjoy anything if I have a headache the entire time. You both go ahead; I’ll be here all weekend. I just need some time to . . . recuperate.”

His mom stared at him for a few moments and then, with an almost inaudible scoff, said, “OK, fine. I hope you feel

better when we get back. Ava, go get your shoes; we have to head out soon if we want to get there on time.”

Ava’s hands dropped and, as Joel turned back around to face her, she jumped up and hugged him, saying, “Come on, please?”

Joel hugged her back, saying, “Hey, I’m just not feeling good right now. You can tell me all about it when you get back, OK? And then we can watch it together here sometime.”

Ava sniffled but nodded her head and, mumbling into his shirt, said, “OK . . . I hope you feel better.”

“Ava! Shoes, now. We’ve got to get going.”

Their mom’s voice snapped through the air again, prompting Ava to bounce up and frantically run around, looking for her shoes. Joel closed his eyes, his head now throbbing with pain. After a minute of listening to the shuffling movements of his mom and Ava, he heard his mom call out, “All right, we’ll be back later tonight. There is food in the fridge if you get hungry. Ava, say bye to Joey.”

Joel opened his eyes and gave a half-hearted thumbs-up in response. His mom opened the creaky door, her hand on Ava’s back. Ava, smiling back at him, called out, “Bye! Love you!”

His mom guided her through the door. Joel smiled at Ava and, waving, quietly called out, “Have fun! Love you too.”

The door firmly closed behind them, leaving Joel alone in the empty house. He heard gravel crunching outside before the car engine roared to life. The car was briefly visible through one of the windows as it backed out of the unpaved driveway onto the country road. Ava's face was pressed to the window, waving enthusiastically toward the house. Joel wasn't sure if she could still see him, but he waved back.

Joel sat for several minutes in silence before reaching for his phone in his pocket. As his hand went down, it collided with a soft object lying on the couch. He picked it up—it was a small stuffed kitten toy. Ava usually brought it everywhere she went, lovingly referring to it as “Kitty.” He hoped she wouldn't miss it too much while they were out. He continued pulling out his phone and checked the screen.

6:08 p.m.

Notifications: 0

Joel sighed, rubbing his head. *I have classwork I need to do, but I won't be able to get anything done like this anyway. Maybe I should just go lie down and try to sleep off this headache.*

He slowly stood, grimacing slightly, before turning the TV off and shuffling through the empty house toward his room. He stopped by the bathroom momentarily and blearily stared at his own reflection. He was tall, physically fit from

regularly working out in high school. His hair wasn't out of control yet, but it was clear that he had let it get away from him after moving out for college, as the wavy brown hair crept toward his ears and down his neck. He reached a hand up and ran it across his face, still mostly smooth since the last time he had shaved. He leaned forward and turned on the faucet, using both hands to splash some water on his face.

He sighed and turned to rummage through the medicine cabinet, grabbing a couple of sleep-aid supplements before making his way to his room. He softly shut the door behind him and sat down on the edge of his bed.

His laptop was still open on the desk in the corner of the room, academic responsibilities beckoning, but Joel was determined to ignore them for now. Joel broke into the small packets and quickly downed the sleeping pills. He stood and, walking over to the desk, firmly closed his laptop. He took his phone out of his pocket again and, turning it to silent mode, plugged it in to charge.

His room, despite the lights being off, was ambiently lit by the orange glow coming from the window. He shuffled over to it and, firmly pulling the blinds closed, plunged his room into near total darkness except for small lines of light escaping through the cracks in the blinds.

Joel collapsed onto his bed and, gently pulling the blankets over himself to combat the chill of the late-autumn air, embraced the relief the darkness provided his eyes. After lying in discomfort for longer than he could keep track of, he slipped into sleep.

Joel jumped awake, drenched in a cold sweat. He didn't know what time it was, but the orange sunlight that had slipped through the blinds had now been replaced by the brilliant silvery-white glow of moonlight.

All was silent and still around him. Catching his breath, he threw the blankets off and sat up. His head was still foggy, but a sense of unease penetrated through his mind. Swinging his legs off the side of the bed, he stood, taking a cursory glance around his room—all seemed normal.

Joel walked to the window and, splitting the blinds with two fingers, looked outside across the dimly lit plains—there wasn't any movement except for the grass gently rolling in the breeze and the branches of the occasional tree swaying. He frowned, as if he somehow hoped his discomfort would be validated, before he firmly closed the blinds and, after a moment of agitation, made his way back into the living room.

Outside the confines of his room, his mind seemed to clear. After briefly scanning the room, Joel sighed and walked to the front door. Opening it, he stepped outside onto the porch, which was basked in shadow from the overhang.

The moon was hidden behind the cover of clouds, though there was still enough ambient light to see. Nothing disturbed the silence, nor broke the regularity of the breeze. The horizon was still very dimly glowing with the vibrant colors of the sunset, though the sun itself had vanished.

It can't be that late if the sun just set, then. Ava and Mom should be on their way home by now. After pondering for a moment, attempting to calculate how long it would take to drive to the city and back, he shook his head and dispelled the thought.

A sense of unease crept down his spine again as he looked out onto the moonlit plains. He frowned, quickly turning around and going back inside. He made his way back to his bedroom, now in complete darkness as his eyes attempted to readjust, and lay back down on the bed. As time passed, the lingering effects of the sleeping pills helped ease his restlessness and lower him into a fretful sleep.

By the time Joel finally woke, his room was shining with bright afternoon sun streaming in through the cracks in the blinds. He groaned, feeling stiff from the very long night

of sleep. *Maybe I shouldn't have taken two of those pills . . . I'm surprised Ava hasn't woken me up yet.* He reached for his phone to check the time, only to realize he left it plugged in on the desk across the room.

Swearing to himself, he forced himself out of bed and shambled over to the desk and sat down. Unplugging his phone, the screen turned on.

12:47 p.m.

Notifications: 20

Mom—Missed Call: 14

New Voicemails: 5

Emergency Alert: 1

Joel's eyes widened for a moment in shock, but he quickly regained his composure and, frantically tapping through the notifications, began listening to the voicemails.

11:33 p.m. "Hey, Joel, we might be late getting home tonight. There is some sort of storm blowing in, and sirens are going off all over the city. Ava and I are still at the movie theater; we got ushered into one of the auditoriums, away from the windows."

11:35 p.m. "The alarms are getting louder—I don't know what's going on. I can't see what's going on outside in this theater, but maybe that's for the best. Ava is scared, but I think we'll be OK. Could you call me and talk to her? You're really good with her; she would feel a lot better. Call please."

Joel could distinctly hear the high-pitched whine of what sounded like a tornado siren in the background of the message. His mom's voice had carried a small amount of panic in the first two messages, but in the next ones he could tell that she was on the brink of a breakdown.

11:54 p.m. "Hey, we're going to be stuck here for the night, I don't think this is going to blow over. Stay safe over there, OK? I don't know what it's like over there, but stay inside."

11:56 p.m. "Joel, don't come into the city. Whatever you do, stay out there, please. I'll bring Ava back safe, we'll come back tomorrow when this is all over. But please, stay home. Don't—"

The voicemail abruptly cut off mid-sentence. Joel quickly tapped on the last voicemail, which was marked as having been made almost two hours after the last, but heard nothing except for the unrelenting wail of the emergency alarms. He turned the volume up and pressed his phone to his ear, but still heard nothing other than the sirens.

He stood, looking at his phone in disbelief, his hands shaking. The only notification on his screen now was the emergency warning, which read:

Emergency Alert: 11:25 p.m. Severe weather alert in this area until further notice. Take shelter. Check local media for updates.

He shook his head, shutting out all thoughts for a moment,

and attempted to call his mom—to no avail. He tried to call a couple more times before letting out a strained yell of frustration. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, willing himself to calm down, before opening his eyes and checking his phone again, only to this time notice that he had no signal whatsoever. He scoffed and put his phone in his pocket, then stood still in his room for a few moments, his mind reeling. Joel quickly made his way out of his room to the TV, and turned it on, flipping through the channels to find the news.

His eyes darted back and forth across the lit screen as he clicked back through the channel's history—only to find that there were no broadcasts at all from the area since last night. Joel was overwhelmed for a second, and braced himself against the wall. *What the hell is going on up there?*

His panic passed in a moment, replaced with a steely determination. *It's already midday and they aren't back yet—I need to go find them. Mom might have stayed at that theater if she couldn't drive out with Ava, so that's where I need to head.* He quickly made a lap around the house, grabbing some necessities—a couple bottles of water, a flashlight, and some food—before swiftly making his way outside into the afternoon sun. He threw his supplies into the back seat before climbing into his car and beginning the long ride north to the city.

Joel's mind was chaotic as he drove, pushing his car as fast as he could. *What could possibly have been going on last night?* He couldn't conceive of any disaster that made sense. *It can't have been a tornado—there hasn't been a storm like that here in a decade, and there wasn't even a damn cloud in the sky yesterday.*

He shook his head, attempting to clear his mind. No matter what happened, he needed to make sure Ava and his mom were safe. And so, he continued driving, soaring down the lone country roads, stuck with nothing but his own thoughts and anxieties.

As time went by and he got closer to the more urbanized areas around the city, something else began nagging him—he had not seen a single car driving the opposite way. He had brushed it off before, as typically the farther out into the country he went, the less traffic there was in any direction, but by now there surely would be some, especially if there had been some monumental disaster. He pushed the questions aside again, trying to focus solely on getting to the city.

Eventually he saw the outskirts of the suburbs ahead of him. And with it, he saw a car in the opposite lane of the road. He sighed, relieved by the sight—until he went soaring past it. The car wasn't moving at all, and there was no one

inside it. He barely had a moment to think about this before looking back up and seeing a car stalled in his lane.

Adrenaline spiked through Joel as he slammed on the brakes, yanking the wheel to the right and veering off the road onto the shoulder. His car came to a screeching halt.

Joel's knuckles were white in a deadlock grip on the wheel, shaken by the very near full-speed collision. He breathed heavily for a few moments, not releasing his hold on the wheel, before finally calming down enough to act. He opened his door and stepped out, walking to the middle of the road before peering as far as he could see in either direction. There were more stalled cars for several miles ahead of him, some in either lane, some on the shoulder, and some even entirely out on the grass on either side of the road.

There wasn't a person in sight. *It looks like people tried to leave the city, but then just . . . abandoned their cars in the road.* After a moment of transfixion, he hesitantly walked back to his car and, scouting the road ahead of him, began slowly weaving between stalled cars. It was approaching evening now, the sun well on its way toward the horizon.

As Joel got closer to the suburbs, the streets were increasingly cluttered with wrecks—some were crashed into street lamps, others completely overturned in ditches, and still others smoking and stuck together from head-on collisions.

Eventually, Joel reached a point where the density of the cars and wreckage in his path made him unable to continue driving. He came to an apprehensive halt, parking his car along with the rest of them.

He was well within the suburbs now, and yet he still had not seen a single person. All the houses within his view were either shut, their windows covered, or even more disturbingly, left with their front doors open. Joel grabbed his few supplies from the back seat of his car before reluctantly locking it and leaving it there. *I'm going to be moving at a snail's pace on foot, but I don't have much of an option right now.*

He began walking down the street, the skyscrapers of the city center looming in the distance, though with his ability to drive stripped from him, they were now seemingly out of reach. Despite this, he continued walking with steely determination, weaving through all the obstacles in the road.

He had no clue how long he had been walking, but the sun was dipping closer to the horizon by the minute. He frowned—he wasn't particularly inclined to try to traverse miles of suburban area on foot at night, especially given how little he knew of the situation. As he stood there considering his options, his flow of thought was interrupted by a shriek.

“What're you doing?!”

Before his mind had even processed that another human

yelled this, something slammed into him from the side and began pushing him off the road toward one of the houses. “Get the hell off me!” Joel shouted, stepping to the side and pushing back at the unknown person. They stepped back, and Joel had a moment to look at whoever this person who rammed into him was. It was a tall woman, olive skinned with short, raven-black hair and a fierce look in her eyes. She appeared just a few years older than him and carried herself with confidence.

She raised her eyebrows at him in bewilderment before approaching him again, saying in a strained but measured voice, “Saving your life. I think. Come with me.” She grabbed his arm and yanked him forward, pulling him toward a house with an open door.

Joel opened his mouth to object to her dragging him along, but after a moment he decided against it. *Even if she seems a bit crazy, maybe she knows what’s going on.* Upon entering the house, she slammed the door behind them. Before Joel could even get a word out, she ran off into a different room of the house.

Joel followed her, unsure of what to make of her behavior. He caught a glimpse of her shutting the blinds in the room ahead of him before she darted off into a different room. Joel sighed, and then simply resigned himself to wait by the door

until she came back to explain herself. *Does she even live here? How did she know that there was nobody already here?* Before Joel could let these thoughts develop, she popped back into view in the room in front of him.

“This house has a basement; we can stay here. Come in here, away from the door. Do you have any idea how much I risked going out there to save your ass?”

Joel stammered as he walked into the room, unable to answer for a moment, before regaining composure and responding, “No, I was hoping you could explain. My mom and my little sister came into the city last night, and I got a lot of . . . disturbing voicemails from them last night. I came here to come find them and make sure they are OK, but I can’t even get there because of all the road blockage.”

The woman considered this for a moment, tapping her foot rhythmically against the wood floor, before responding, “You weren’t here last night? You don’t know what’s going on?”

Joel raised an eyebrow, saying, “Yeah, that was the implication. I assume you were here, though?”

The woman frowned before sighing and replying, talking very quickly.

“I can try to catch you up, but I don’t even know where to begin. I don’t know what’s happening *exactly*, but I know

enough to know that being outside right now is a very bad idea. It started last night, sometime after sunset. I think the power grid went down, because everything in my house turned off, and all the lights in the neighborhood turned off too. Then I heard a tornado siren, coming from somewhere downtown. It started as just one, then I think more of them started going off because it got louder. A bit after that is when the emergency alert went out about staying indoors, so I did. I was watching from the window of my room, though—there were people walking around, looking confused and restless. Some were talking to each other; others were making their way back to their houses. Lots of people got in their cars and started to drive away. The sounds of the alarms started getting closer—louder and louder as the night went on. They just kept getting louder. The longer I sat there watching, the more disturbed my head was. I felt like I couldn't think properly. And then . . . I . . .”

She stuttered, staring blankly at the floor, eyes wide open. After a moment she snapped out of it, shaking her head before apprehensively continuing her story.

“A siren started to go off in our neighborhood. I can't describe it. It sounded like it was coming from directly above us; it wasn't normal. It just kept going, and going—it never stopped. I got away from my window and tried to get as far

away from the sound as possible, plugging my ears with headphones and covering them. I don't even know how long I was there, but at some point, all the sound suddenly stopped. Every alarm turned off. I got up and made my way back to the window and took one look outside—I could see the sky just starting to get bright on the horizon as the sun was fixing to come up. But then, I saw someone who was still in the street, writhing on the ground and looking up into the sky. Then the sun came up, and they . . . stopped moving.”

She stopped again, seemingly frozen in recollection. After a moment of stunned silence, Joel cleared his throat and quietly asked:

“What . . . What happened to the person in the street? I didn't see anyone at all on my drive here, anywhere. No one in the streets, no one in any of the cars stalled in the road, no one in the houses. You're the only person I've seen.”

She looked up at him again, and after a brief pause, said very slowly, seemingly choosing her words carefully.

“They were gone when I looked again later. I don't know what happened or where they went, but they're gone.”

She looked down at her wrist, at an old-fashioned watch. She closed her eyes for a moment and let out a long, anxious breath before looking back up at him, and whispered:

“It's almost sunset. We need to get into the basement, now.”

She sprung up and began marching out of the room, before stopping for a moment in consideration. She walked back and grabbed a chair, then placed it firmly in front of the front door, blocking the handle. When she was satisfied with the placement, she walked out of sight again and called out, “Come on! Basement, now.”

Joel sat still for a moment, his mind reeling from her grotesque story. *How much of that can possibly be true?* He bit his lip in indecision, thinking, before wordlessly getting up and following her, giving the front door one panicked look before slowly descending the steps.

Joel closed the door behind him as he entered the basement. It was cramped and sparse, with nothing but a shelf with an assortment of old tools and a single light fixture hanging from the ceiling, which was burning dimly. The woman was rummaging through the items on the shelf, muttering to herself. Joel watched her for a moment, confused, before prodding.

“What’re you doing?”

“Looking for something to plug our ears with.”

“I . . . We’re underground, why is that—”

She cut him off with a glare.

“Just in case. I don’t know how loud it’s going to be down here. Do you have a light?”

Joel reached into his bag, rummaging around for a moment before finding his flashlight and presenting it to her.

“Good, we might need it. I’m not sure if it was related, but when it started last night, the power went out.”

She let out an exasperated sigh and gave up her search. She walked to one of the walls and, putting her back against it, slid down into a seated position. She looked up at Joel, clearly very anxious about their situation, and muttered, “So, what’s your name? We are going to be here for a while, might as well get to know each other.”

She looked down at her watch again, then up at the small light on the ceiling. Joel considered her behavior for a moment before responding.

“Joel. You?”

“Emily. Nice to meet you, despite the circumstances.”

Joel, following her example, sat by the wall opposite of Emily.

“So, have you seen or heard from anyone who was living downtown since last night?”

He asked this with a vain hope, knowing there most likely wouldn’t be. Emily bit her lip and shook her head apologetically, quietly saying, “No, not a peep. I . . . I think that if anyone farther into the city stayed put like I did and didn’t go outside, they’ll be fine for now.”

Both of them fell silent. The minutes ticked by, with Emily getting increasingly agitated. Joel eventually broke the silence.

“So . . . do you have any family in the city? I am going farther in tomorrow, no matter how dangerous it is. If you were heading that way too, we could . . .” Joel’s statement petered off, but the question hung in the air.

“No, but going *out* of the city is suicide. The roads are blocked so we would be going by foot, and it would be night-fall again by the time we made it anywhere. I am not taking a risk hoping that whatever is happening is only within the city. So . . . I’ll figure what my plan is tomorrow.”

Despite her not answering his proposition, Joel moved on.

“Well, we don’t even know if it will happen again. All we know is that *something* went down last night, but . . .”

The light above them flickered, then turned off.

They were in complete darkness and silence. Joel’s words got caught in his throat. He fumbled with his flashlight before turning it on, propping it up against a wall to provide a small source of light in the room. Emily spoke up, quietly muttering, “We are safe down here. Just block out the sounds. We are safe down here as long as we don’t go outside.” Joel wasn’t sure if she was talking to him, or herself.

“How did you make it through last night? Were you in a

basement, or . . . ?” Joel let his question hang, unsure of what exactly he was asking.

“No, but luckily I had something to plug my ears with right away. I don’t know what it will be like without that.”

Several more minutes passed in silence. Joel could hear Emily’s breathing getting quicker. From what little he could see of her in the dim, narrow range of light provided by the flashlight, she was huddled against the wall, her arms firmly hugging her legs against her.

As the seconds ticked by, Joel felt a sense of unease spreading through him, like his feeling from the night before. He didn’t hear anything yet, but something felt . . . *off*.

It has to be well past sunset by now. Maybe whatever happened last night isn’t going to happen again. Am I just sitting in this basement for no reason when I could be out there crossing more ground? Very soon after those thoughts passed through his head, he heard a distinct whine. It was very faint, but present. Joel was about to speak up, but Emily beat him to it.

“There’s the first alarm. Probably in the city center. More of them are going to start going off.”

“Why wouldn’t the officials make some sort of statement warning people if they knew it was going to start again? Why just set off all the alarms and freak people out even more?”

“I don’t know. Whatever the case, there has to be a reason

for them all being set off, and I know that we can't go outside. We are safe if we stay inside. We just have to stomach the noise."

As she was saying this, Joel heard another siren go off in the distance—still faint, but this one was perhaps closer than the last. Then another. The sound was compounding quickly—every few seconds a new one overlapped, making a distant wall of white noise in the background. It was getting louder, and closer.

Joel's stomach twisted into a knot as the sounds increased, his mind feeling hazy and muddled.

"So what's our plan? Are we just going to sit here for the entire night? Couldn't we—"

Emily cut him off mid-sentence, sharply saying, "Yes, our plan is just to sit here until the sun comes up. If you want any chance of finding your family, the night is not an option."

Joel didn't respond—the blaring sirens were getting loud enough to be disruptive to conversation at this point, despite them being underground. Then, abruptly, the noises got significantly more piercing—it sounded like they had started to go off in the neighborhood itself. He began to say something to Emily, but quickly realized there was no way she would be able to tell what he was saying.