

Mineko
[MEE-NEH-KO]

BOOK OF SISTERS
姉妹

RG Dillon

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For My Daughters—Amanda and Stephanie.

“Sisters Forever”

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PROLOGUE

The Katana lay very easy in her soft hands. The weight was no less than perfect. Every aspect, every detail of this magnificent sword had been created for her touch alone. Spending a week selecting the seven different carbon steels that made up the sword, each layer was folded, blended and hammered over the glowing hot coals by the master for no less than eighteen times each. Balanced to flawless perfection with a gleaming mirror polish, the curvature of the blade was tempered just for her striking motion. Purple silk threads were tightly bound around the hilt that separated the Soshu Kitae's razor edge from her slender fingers. Mineko stared at the reflection of her golden brown eyes, surrounded by the delicate strands of her straight black hair that were only the slightest bit distorted on the blade face. No ornate etchings and no vain designs adorned this special sword, with the exception of the master sword maker's simple mark near the hilt. This katana, Mineko's katana, had only one purpose to serve and that was to provide death to the deserving. Delivered as silent as a spring breeze, only Mineko's intense rage would decide how much pain her hapless target endured. If the person were fortunate, the end would come swiftly before they knew what was happening to them. If not, begging pathetically for mercy to end the extreme agony they suffered would be the only other option.

CHAPTER ONE — TAKEN

*In the time of Iris
from within their sleepless cocoons
came a strange new world*

Creeping slowly under the thin sliding door, the bright red blood began to take on a darker brownish hue as it edged closer to the little girl. Mineko tried to twist and turn, anything to keep the warm fluid, thicker than water now, from touching her tiny fingers. The weight of her sister, an arm wrapped tightly around her body, stifled every movement the frightened six-year-old tried to make. She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs but the hand clamped over her wet mouth prevented any sounds she tried to make. Instead, she squeezed her scared brown eyes shut as tight as she could get them. Her dripping tears mixed with the sticky blood that had finally reached her soft and delicate hand, staining the tips of her fingers a vivid red. What she could not do was stop her ears from hearing the last terrible screams that erupted from the outer rooms. The pleading and screaming, amid anguished guttural cries, came from the household servants and her loving family as they were brutally slaughtered in cold blood.

When the angry men had burst through the yellow painted front door, sixteen-year-old Ayameko was busy brushing her little sister's straight, ink-black hair while softly singing a child's lullaby. In a desperate attempt to defend his family, their father rushed towards the men, pulling a slim dagger from the sash around his waist as he ran. His yelling of strange words in protest at the intruders, words that Mineko had never heard before, was followed by a vulgar gurgling sound as the assassins sliced their tachi through the air, and his thick neck. The deafening high-pitched scream came from their mother's pink lips. Steel swords carved deep across her belly, ending her life with a thrust through the chest. She landed, mouth wide open, on the polished teak floor with a dull thud.

Jerking Mineko up by the arm to her sock-covered feet, Ayameko yelled at her startled sister to run, run faster, as she pushed her through the doorway into an empty adjoining room. Tripping over the finely-woven straw mat covering the floor, they tumbled down, Ayameko kicking at the door with her bare feet until it slammed shut. Mineko gasped for breath as she shook with fear. They could hear the crying and futile begging coming from their playful, twelve-year-old twin brothers, Hiroki and Harue, through the thin walls of the large home. Coarse laughter sounded from the large men as they ran their long knives into the siblings' rib cages, piercing their hearts and lungs then tossed them aside like rag dolls onto the over-turned and broken furniture. Blood dripped from open mouths and chest wounds, spreading across the floor to intermingle as one.

Dragging Mineko into her lap as she rolled quickly from off the top of her, Ayameko slid them both backwards until they were flush tight against the pale far wall. Pulling and squeezing her into a protective hug, she whispered, "*Hush, Mineko, hush*" in her tiny sister's ear.

The splintering sounds of teak and maple wood furniture, along with heirloom vases and pottery as they were shattered, could be heard echoing down the halls. Startled squawks of the two caged Java Sparrows, gifts from their father's travels to the China mainland a year ago, screeched out above the killers' mocking taunts.

As the bloodthirsty men burst through the paneled door to where Mineko and Ayameko were huddled together on the floor, gleaming tachi swords held high with fresh human blood splattered across their *ō-yoroi*, their leather battle armor, Mineko let out a shrill scream as loud as her childish voice would allow.

Ayameko did not.

Three of the foul-smelling men stood in front of the two wide-eyed children, breathing heavily from their murderous excitement. Revealing rough, cut and worn, battle-hardened faces, they all slowly removed their *mengu*, the protective leather facemasks all Samurai wore in combat. Stark, black, soulless eyes glared down at the girls with cruel intent. Clear fluid ran from Mineko's nose as she rubbed and hid her tear-stained face in her sister's white cloak. The towering men bellowed out, making crude remarks about whether Ayameko was "old enough" and what she looked like under her kimono. Mineko grabbed handfuls of material, trying to bury herself, leaving bloody fingerprints on her sister's clothing.

The beefy warrior in the middle, a callous, revolting Samurai by the name of Hisoka, began to moan and swivel his hips lewdly as he grabbed at his crotch. Shouts of encouragement from his conspirators erupted loudly.

"I will take the girl right here on this floor, you sons of dogs can play with the child as you wish," he said. Grossly licking his lips, he started to unbuckle the straps that held the body armor together as Ayameko, her face turning pale, shook her head rapidly.

"Hisoka." A thundering shout exploded in the room.

A startled Hisoka had barely managed to turn his head in response when a bloodied, leather-clad fist slammed into the side of his head. A dazzling burst of colors zipped past his eyes, sending him spiraling into the delicate rice-papered wall across from him. Before his staggering fall to the floor was complete, the bloodied tip of a tachi sailed to the long neck of the assassin Torao, an equally brutal Samurai, who was standing next to him. Since childhood, the two of them had acted as brothers who fought, played, and shared in the spoils of battle together. The razor edge grazed his throat, cutting a shallow line near his Adam's apple, freezing him immediately in his stance as he gritted his yellow teeth together.

The tall bold man stared at each of them intensely, one at a time, with sinister eyes that cut right through them, daring them to move or say a word. *"Unless you wish to share your pathetic blood with the dead around us, get out of my sight now. Search the house and grounds and make sure that no one is left alive. Go! Now!"* he roared.

Extending an arm out to Hisoka, Torao helped him find an unbalanced footing. Nodding to this giant of a man, they almost fell over one another in their attempt to get out of the room as fast as they could.

Her tear-marked face still half buried against her sister, Mineko watched through one eye as the stranger turned his attention towards them. She saw the round sweat beads roll down his red-toned forehead as he dropped down to one knee, jabbing the point of his tachi into the hardwood floor, his hand resting on top of the gold and black-wrapped hilt and studied the terrified girls' expressions. *"My name is Masao,"* he announced, the tone of his gravelly voice intimidating. *"Listen to me—you will do as I say. You will not cry out and you will not speak at*

all. If you try to run away, I will catch you and I will cut out your heart as you watch. Do you understand me?"

Ayameko nodded as her own tears began to form. Mineko was so scared she felt like she might pee at any second.

Saying that, he reached down with his large gloved hand and snatched Mineko from Ayameko's protective grasp, bringing the small girl up to his wide chest, and holding her there as a loving father would his own precious child. With his other arm, he seized Ayameko by the front collar of her kimono, pulling the older girl to her bare feet. Carefully squeezing her chin with his very large leather-clad fingers, he turned her face from left to right as if he was inspecting the girl for any damaging marks.

"Follow me and do exactly as I say if you wish to live. We are leaving now," he stated in a matter-of-fact voice.

Mineko had no choice but to wrap her little arms around Masao's massive grimy neck and hold on. Feeling the heat from his body through the coppery-smelling leather *ō-yoroi*, warm and clammy sweat from his face smeared against Mineko's arms. She felt hot and dirty just touching his rough skin.

Making their way through the ruined house, once so beautiful and cheerful, now filled with the reek of death, she saw splattered bloodstains everywhere. There was so much violent gore over everything; red streaks clinging to the walls and blood pooling on the once-gleaming floors, began to form into sticky clumps. Mineko saw the blood that had leaked from their butchered father and mother, now just lifeless mounds spread out grotesquely across the flooring. Still more crimson fluid had collected around the silent bodies of their brothers, Hiroki and Harue.

She wanted to turn away from it all, close her eyes and disappear, to wake up safely in her bed, far away from this horrible nightmare—but she could not. She stared. She stared with those light brown eyes of hers as they filled up with tears and horrific images she would never forget for however long she lived. There on the floor were the innocent, loyal family servants who only that morning had bathed her, fed her a warm breakfast, and dressed her in a favorite pale purple kimono. These were the same obedient servants who at night would place Mineko on a straw and feathered bed, brush her long, silky hair and then sing whispered songs until she fell fast asleep, her head filled with innocent dreams.

As they neared the front entrance of the sordid home, she spied the slain and mutilated guards sprawled across the wide gray stone steps. Their exposed flesh was torn and ravaged; their blood had caked upon each other and the soil beneath them. Every single one of the guards had been crudely beheaded, wholly or partially. The assassins had been especially brutal to them all in their rampage. Most had also been ripped open, their slimy guts spilling out unnaturally. These were the laughing guards, the serious guards, the once proud guards. The ones who were sworn to protect the girl's wealthy and land-owning father. The ones dedicated to protect him, here at home and as he traveled from city to city and through foreign countries. They were no match for this vicious band of savage assassins; the fight had been tremendously intense, but it did not last long. Each honor-bound man had given his life, fighting furiously for a family he had come to respect and love, each one to his very last breath.

A dazed and confused Mineko remained silent as she felt the long tears trickle down her flushed cheeks, mixing with the salty sweat dropping from Masao's tanned face as they slid past an ugly painted mark on his neck. The ugly mark was a crude tattoo of a yellow crescent moon with blazing red tips, no bigger than her little hand. It seemed to come alive as it pulsed from the

neck veins protruding from under it. Mineko did not understand any of what or why this was happening; much less did she know that in the future, that simple yellow moon would one day give her life purpose. Fatigue began to overcome her mind and body. She had no other choice but to lay her head down against Masao's broad shoulder, where she could see Ayameko's eyes, hollowed, empty, brown eyes, as her sister followed close behind them. Stepping over and around death-colored bodies, the three of them joined the trail of assassins leaving the carnage behind and heading west. Tucked under their arms, the Samurai carried the slaughtered family's jewels, gold, silver, and anything else of value that they could manage, haul, or toss into the waiting cart.

Sleep finally overtook Mineko and she gave into it unwillingly, her thumb finding its way to her mouth, a habit she had broken years earlier. With his heavy leather armor extending down his arms and chest, Masao did not feel the wetness as the small child's bladder released, soaking her pale purple kimono.