



CHAPTER 1: PROOF OF LIFE

French

I DREAMED ABOUT MY BROTHER.

In the dream, we were still kids—the same age we were the last time I saw him, gangly and uncoordinated. We were sitting on the wooden floor of a tree house, the walls buckled and thin, the same tree house he was stolen from all those years ago. I tried to speak, to warn him that the Recruiters would be coming and he was going to be taken and I would be left in a tree like a forgotten ornament. But I couldn't make a sound, just empty speech bubbles like an unfinished comic that popped around my head. Mitch was laughing as if I was telling the best jokes.

"Frenchie, you're hilarious," he said, his words swooshing through the air, shaped like paper planes folded out of weekly flyers.

Set between us on the floor was a small green figure of a plastic army man, one knee bent, a crooked rifle held at shoulder height. The swoop of the word *hilarious* tumbled to the ground and knocked the man over. That small violence of plastic on plank sounded like lightening bursting an oak to wood chips.

Outside, the world was sped up, the sun and the moon exchanging seats like a game of musical chairs set to fiddles. I saw us in the tree house, and then the tree house in a field, and then the field in the middle of a forest, and then the towns and highways beyond, haphazard like a snapped string of beads over green fabric. Water slid down mountains clotted with pines, and soil rushing after like black vomit. Hail the size of dinner plates bounced over cracked pavement and smashed into buildings. People blipped onto the land like faults in film and then disappeared just as fast, leaving shadows and holes. Lakes, poisoned useless, glinted like coins in the sunlight, then moonlight, then sunlight again. Icebergs melted, and everything warped as if the ice had been the solid frame of it all. Trash in the oceans was beached in tall waves, leaving deserts of water bottles and decorating the trees with the confetti of faded wrappers and pull tabs. Disgorged grocery bags spun down wrecked roads like the crinkly ghosts of tumbleweeds. This was the world now. And that wasn't even the worst part.

Then we weren't in the tree house anymore. We were outside, in a brick-and-vinyl suburb with dandelions to our knees poking out from cracks in asphalt like bristle on hide. I was holding Mitch's hand, and we were standing on a street in front of a row of emptied houses, their windows dark as punched-out teeth. People walked by us coughing blood onto their shirts, clutching their bellies and heads and sides, medical masks hanging from their ears

like hand-me-down jewelry. They had the plague. The trash cans at the end of each driveway were heaped with syringes, so many vaccinations and cures thrown out because none would work. The people stumbled into one another, knocking over cans and crunching through the needles. They had that look, the one that let you know they were dreamless, that they were halfway to crazy, that they were the most dangerous animals in the field.

Fear pinched my guts, and I squeezed Mitch's hand. Now the dreamless were starting to walk different, stooped, their fingers held strange, always in mid-grab. They had nowhere to go now. They'd stopped showing up for their shifts on rebuilding projects. They'd stopped loving their spouses. They hung themselves from the confetti trees like heavy ornaments. At the edge of my sight, I could see them now, bloated faces pointed down, sightless eyes like coins in the sunlight, then moonlight, then sunlight again. I heard their shoes hitting against each other, hollow chimes in the breeze.

The people on the street were starting to notice us, turning on awkward feet to amble over, fingers flexing open and shut. I closed my eyes and buried my face in Mitch's shoulder. I could hear his breathing loud in my ears, but I had no words to calm him or myself. They saw us now for what we were: dreamers, providers, fuel. I knew what they wanted. I'd watched a pack of dogs once, breaking bones apart in a parking lot and snarling over the marrow, chewing and growling through exposed teeth at the same time, a cacophony of glut. A woman in a beige sweat suit approached, her long hair pulled back tight in a high ponytail, head held at an odd angle, her face twitching. She took small steps toward us on white sneakers until I could feel her breath on my cheek. I closed my eyes. I could hear her teeth snapping open and shut and then the low rumble of a growl,

like a spool of ribbon uncoiling up her throat. That's when my voice returned and I screamed and . . .

My eyes opened.

There was no light. I lifted my hands in front of my face but couldn't make them out. I touched my arms, stomach, the front of my pants, wet down to the knees. A sting of humiliation when I realized I'd pissed myself, even now in the heavy dark, even through the massive weight of the headache, there was room for this small embarrassment.

Then pain swept in, cutting through my scalp and stabbing into my brain. I pulled my chin to my chest and slouched my shoulders, trying to back away from it. Eventually, it spread to a thud and pull, matching my pulse, and I knew that my heart was still beating somewhere under the dull throb of bruised ribs. Living, as it turns out, is the ability to ache.

What had happened? Where was I?

I sat up and assessed the back of my head. There was stuff stuck in my hair, like I'd been rolling around in the bush. I hissed through closed teeth, trying to untangle the mess. I grabbed what felt like a leaf and started to pull.

"Jesus Christ!"

There was a kind of tearing that I heard from the inside of my skull. It wasn't a leaf; it was dried blood and the beginning crust of a large scab. I dropped my hand to my eyes to look for evidence of the bleeding I knew was there, but there was only darkness.

Standing on wobbly legs, cold pushed through the holes in my socks. Where were my shoes? And why was the ground so even? There were always branches to step over, roots bubbling under the soil, making walking a careful dance. I'd been out in the woods and

on the run for so many years that my feet didn't recognize a floor. I shuffled forward, arms outstretched, the ground smooth under each step. Seven slow paces forward and my fingers crunched into a wall. I flattened my palms and followed it until it met another at a ninety-degree angle.

That's when the panic settled into the bottom curve of each throb; I was inside. I'd spent the last eight of my seventeen years outside, running, trying to stay on the other side of walls. Walls only slowed you down. Walls left you without options. Walls kept you still. And these days, stillness was death.

I called for the others. "Miig? Rose? Rose, are you there?"

I followed the wall all the way around, my shaking fingers, sticky with drying blood, making out the seams of a door, a sink, a toilet, my clumsy feet ramming into the metal frame of a small bed. I collapsed there on the thin mattress and whimpered, winding up like a kettle into shrill. The only thing that made capture more certain than walls was noise that would give your location away, anything from a heavy footstep to a loud cry. But I had no sense, not then, not trapped in this room in the complete blackness.

Hearing yourself fall apart makes it happen faster. Back when I was with my family—maybe hours or even days ago, who knows—we worked hard to hold each other up. Tree and Zheegwon, they had a special way of doing this for each other; maybe it was a twin thing, but something as simple as a glance or a hand on a shoulder and they were brought back to calm. It was dangerous to be anything but calm. Calm is strength performed. Weakness is like a loose sweater string caught on a nail and you're running in the opposite direction. Eventually, you unravel the whole thing and you're left naked.

Somewhere in the middle of the undoing, I fell asleep, curled fetal, my broken head resting on the podium of a knee bent like a plastic army man. And I dreamed; the other thing besides pain that assured me I was alive, truly alive, all-the-way-dialed-up alive.



I opened my eyes back into the black, scrambling to my feet before I remembered I was inside. The back of my messed-up head shrieked from the movement, and I sank back to the bed. I smelled wet rot and metal rust—the mineral waste of my own blood. Every muscle hurt, and I was cold. I didn't know if I was shivering or if the room was vibrating, as if a large vehicle were revving nearby. I folded myself so small my hands were sandwiched between the crescent bones of my ankles. All over, my skin was slippery. Had I pissed myself again? No, I was sweating. I could taste it on my lips, salt and sick.

"Not dead. Not dead," I reminded myself.

And then I knew where I was. There was only one place I could be. If I was with my family, Miig and Wab and the others, I wouldn't be inside, and I certainly wouldn't be hurt, and I would never, under any circumstance, be alone. I knew then that I was in the place we ran from, the place where Indigenous people were brought and never seen again—I was in one of the new residential schools, just like the old ones the government stole us away to, where they conducted experiments, where they tried to kill the Indian in the child. The realization hit me like a punch to the stomach, and I struggled to breathe, each gasp sending shards of pain into my head and down my neck.

Then I did something I hadn't done in years, something I really had no memory of ever doing: I called out for the one who had left so long ago, the one whom I hadn't seen since she climbed down from the roof beside the Friendship Centre looking for supplies. Leaving Mitch and me alone and hunted in the middle of a splintered city to run until we found the tree house, where only one of us would be left to continue that run.

"Mom! Oh, Mom. Pleeese . . ." It didn't make sense to try, and it did nothing but amp up the panic pouring into my lungs.

There was the sound of metal turning on metal and a click, loud and sure like fingers snapping. The solid air in the room shuddered; I felt it in my ears.

A slice of light appeared, so clear it made me squint, so electric and pitched I could hear it. It grew so massive I lifted an arm across my face and sucked in my breath. There were footsteps. I pulled my arm away and only opened my eyes enough to see that the door was swinging wide open.

My first response was shock, then an almost hysterical relief. I could see!

And then a dark figure appeared in the light, a hieroglyph of a man blocking the way out. His shoulders were broad, the hair on his head short and bristled, and the outline of a holster at his hip came into focus. And I understood that not being dead could be a very temporary state after all.

I wanted to sit up, but I had no way to operate the joints and muscles needed to move. Then a voice, unmistakable, one I'd heard since the very beginning, whispered from somewhere close to my head, as if I had tucked her under my pillow like a worry doll.

"Without the magic in the marrow, we're just machines," my mother said. "And you can't reason with mechanics."

I tried to call out but only managed to exhale all the breath out of my body. I closed my eyes, eager to get back to the certainty of the complete darkness. It came right away. And this time, there was no dream.