



CHAPTER 2: LOSING THE FINDER

The Family

THE FIRE WAS SURROUNDED BY THE TIRED AND HYSTERICAL, all of them breathing heavy from exhaustion or frustration, each of them finding it hard to keep their eyes focused without jumping to the trees all around them. Not one of them had slept.

"What in the hell happened?" Miig sat as close to Isaac as possible, their arms threaded, fingers braided at every bend. Even now, the spots where their skin connected was electric distraction. But he was a leader, an Elder in his group, and he needed to stay focused, now more than ever, even with his newly returned husband, someone he had thought long dead in the schools, beside him.

"Not sure. He was there, and then he just wasn't." Bullet, a long-time member of the resistance camp Miig's group had found weeks ago, rubbed her palm across the top of her shaved head. "I

saw him in the grass, and then everyone came out of the camp, and then . . ." She motioned with the same hand, lifting it to the sky with her last words. "And then he was just gone." She was crouched in the grass, bouncing slightly against her heels. She hung her head, pressing her fingers into the back of her neck.

"I should have been paying attention. I should have noticed French was missing before we left the clearing." Miig was beating himself up, the dark bruises on his face from the absence of sleep like black eyes. Frenchie had been in his family since they'd found him in the woods at ten, half starved and all alone after his brother was taken. How could he have lost him? The weight of his guilt was almost unbearable. If he hadn't been so distracted by finding Isaac—by Frenchie finding Isaac for him—he would have been paying more attention.

"We all should have been more careful." Wab was pacing, a hand on her lower back, her swollen stomach pushed forward.

Chi Boy, always the doting partner, shuffled down the log and patted the space beside him for her to sit. She shook her head and paced. He kept his mouth shut but his eyes open, taking in each line on her face, every falter in her step. Not that he spoke much to begin with. This last month had been difficult now that the baby was asserting its presence. He wasn't sure she'd make it to full term, not with all this stress: the regular day-to-day stress of being hunted in a broken world, and then this new anxiety over a missing relative.

"But what are we going to do?"

Rose was frantic, had been since the scout had jogged back with news of a Recruiter van sighting and they'd realized French hadn't made it back to the camp. They had all been laughing, dancing

almost, at Miig's miracle, the return of his Isaac, and what that meant for all of them, the beautiful possibility of it all. Now she was rushing around the outside of the circle, all twitch and adrenaline, checking and rechecking the sharpness of the blade on her belt knife with her thumb. "We need to do something . . . and now!"

"No, that is exactly what we shouldn't do," Wab answered. "That's how we make mistakes."

"Oh, like misplacing a whole boy, you mean? That kind of mistake?"

Her black eyes flashed, her curly hair bouncing at her shoulders with each movement of her head. Rose was always quick to any emotion. It was one of the things French loved about her, this intense and deep ability to feel, even when every hour was filled up with just getting by. She was just sixteen, but she'd already lived a life made long with grief. She switched directions, exasperated at her own inability to do anything of use. Her heart was breaking at the potentials of what might have happened. They had been ready to be a real couple—finally, after all the careful dancing around each other, all the running that stopped conversation short. And now he was gone.

"It's no one's fault, Rose." Chi Boy spoke just louder than a whisper.

"It's everyone's fault!" Rose shouted back. "Every one of us."

She'd unsheathed her knife in one quick motion and used it to point at the group around the fire—Miigwans, Isaac, Chi Boy, Wab, Bullet, Derrick—pausing at each one so they understood they had been implicated. She placed the tip of the blade over her own heart to include herself in the accusation before pushing it back into its case.

"French would never have left one of us behind. He never did. Ever!" Tears broke loose and made tracks down her cheeks, cutting through the dust and dirt of a frantic search.

She swiped the back of her hand across her face. There was no time for tears. There was never time for tears. Not out here.

"Things don't happen right away," Isaac spoke up. His voice was melodic, made deeper by fatigue. "In the schools, I mean. If they have him, he should be okay . . . for a while." He shivered, and Miig rubbed his arm. The school would probably never leave him, even though he had escaped with the help of a network of nurses for whom harvesting humans was just not an option.

"Has anyone told his dad yet?" It was Rose's turn to almost whisper. When his makeshift family had found the camp, French had been reunited with his father, a reunion neither had dreamed was possible after so much time. And now, in one moment of dropped defense, there were miles and maybe the boundary of death between them again.

"I did," Derrick answered. Like Bullet, Derrick wasn't a part of the original family who'd wandered into their camp, but he, like Bullet, felt close to them. He felt especially close to Rose—or at least, he was hoping to get closer. "He's lying down. Spent the whole night in the bush, looking."

During their time apart, French's dad had lost a leg after taking a bullet from vigilantes. That, coupled with age, diabetes, and life on the run, meant he had to rest often. Put grief on top of all that, and the group wasn't sure he'd ever leave his cot again. And for a moment, that seemed to Rose like a perfectly reasonable response. Maybe she should just lie down . . . just for a moment, or maybe until this was all over, regardless of how it ended.

"Fuck this." She slapped her hands against her thighs and spun on one boot, stomping off into the trees.

"Where're you going?" Derrick looked up from braiding his hair. Chi Boy held Wab by the forearm lest she get any ideas about following the girl. Rose had joined them years into their never-ending journey to evade capture, but she was, without a doubt, one of them.

"The road," Rose tossed over her shoulder, moving fast.

Derrick sighed, let his hair fall down his back, the thick strands loosening from the design, and picked up his rifle. He spoke to Miig. "I'll keep an eye on her." Then he jogged into the shadows, leaving the depleted group to their worry. Derrick's concern was amplified by his feelings for Rose, even though it had become clear she and French had a thing.

"Rose . . . Rose . . . wait up!" he called out to her, but she didn't slow down. Finally, he reached out and caught her shoulder.

Her round face was dark, all angles with anger. "Don't try to stop me, Derrick. I don't expect you to understand."

"I don't understand? Just because I wasn't with your little crew until you stumbled into our camp doesn't mean I don't understand family." He refused to let her go, making her stop for a moment. "Rose, you've gotta calm down a bit."

"Don't tell me to calm down! I need all this—all of this." She patted her chest and her arms to show the twitch and tightness of her muscles. "This is how I get shit done."

"Yeah, and it's also how you get caught." He looked at his feet. "Or worse."

She paused. Derrick had been there when they'd tried to rescue their Elder Minerva, the one who carried the language, the one who had burned down an entire school with her words. That had ended

in the old woman bleeding out in the road from a Recruiter gunshot. Things hadn't been the same since. Rose just couldn't find the right ways to mourn. She cried, she cut her hair, she spent hours focusing on everything Minerva had ever told her, every word she'd pushed into her vocabulary, but it wasn't enough. A loss like Minerva was monumental. A loss like Minerva these days was unimaginable.

Still, maybe Derrick was right. Maybe rushing headlong into another confrontation with the Recruiters would only mean another one of them—maybe her this time—lying in the road, failing lungs grasping at breath like a fist already clenched.

He took the pause as an opportunity to continue. "Just sit for a minute. After that, if you really want to head off on your own with no direction and no backup, well, then, I'll let you go." Still holding on to her, he directed her to a tree trunk snapped near the ground and lying horizontal by moss and splinters. She allowed herself to be lowered, and their weight pushed the wood to creak.

Sudden rest filled her limbs with fatigue, and she couldn't hold out anymore. She leaned over and put her forehead on Derrick's shoulder, the tradecloth of his jacket rough against her skin. And then she began to cry. He put his arm around her and pulled her closer, eyes trained on the expanse of forest around them, just in case.

With this beautiful, broken girl finally soft against him, Derrick couldn't help but wonder if maybe French leaving wasn't such a bad thing, an opportunity instead of just a loss. He'd been out here on the run with other Natives since the government had started hunting them, since people had gotten raddled enough by the Plague sickness and the inability to dream and started believing that Indigenous people were the answer. And he'd been alone,

even in the increasingly crowded camp. There had never been someone who had moved him the way Rose did, who had reminded him that life in this apocalypse was more than just survival, or at least it could be.

He shook his head, swearing to himself under his breath. No, that's not how he should be thinking right now, not ever. It was them against the world, and every man counted. Every man deserved to be found. But still, Rose's body against his made thinking . . . complicated.



The last flames were flickering orange in the mid-morning grey. Chi Boy put an arm at Wab's waist and guided her back to their tent to rest. She shouldn't have been up all night, walking around, but Wab was not the kind of person you directed. She was always in charge, especially of herself. When he'd suggested she lie down, she'd fidgeted with the beaded patch covering her permanently closed eye, then run her finger down the heavy brocade of a keloid scar that split the side of her face. She should organize another wave of searchers. She should find those who could climb as well as French could to take to the trees to get a better look at the landscape. It was foggy, but there might be something. Maybe she should gather the Council again to see if they could call in their informant. It'd been a long night, and many were just now grabbing some sleep, but she could rouse them. Finally, though, the baby made the decision for her, sucking the last bit of energy from her muscles, and she allowed herself to be led away, back to camp. She'd rest, but only for an hour, and then they'd set out again.

Bullet took over pacing when Rose left. She was uneasy in her skin. As one of the founders of the resistance camp, she felt responsible. Years ago, at the height of the hysteria, she'd traveled across the border from her Menominee community before the schools had started opening. Back then, she knew only that she had to get to family, and that meant finding her partner in southern Ontario. She had arrived too late to save Olivia, but she had stayed once border crossing became impossible, and by then she had found others who were building a place of safety. It was empowering to have a plan and likeminded people to carry it out. Now she felt diminished. Not quite weak, but less than she should be. Once Miigwans and his small group had been welcomed into the camp, they'd become her responsibility. It was one of the most important teachings, that they all looked out for one another without hierarchy, without question. And now one of them was gone. It had been hard enough to lose an Elder after the failed rescue mission, let alone one who carried an Indigenous language in a time when so much was lost or in danger. But now a youth? It was almost too much.

She sighed. "Gonna do another perimeter check, then grab some supplies and recheck where we last saw him." She turned into the trees, leaving just Miigwans and Isaac at the fire.

The men sat quietly for several minutes, watching the embers, holding on to one another in this small, damp clearing. It was the first time they had been alone since the night before, since Frenchie had brought them back together. The group Isaac was travelling with had set off an alarm, and French set out with the scouts sent to find them. He was the one who had recognized Isaac's tattoo from Miigwans's stories. He was the one who had run back to tell Miig that his love wasn't dead after all, that he was right here. And any reunion

in this time was a miracle for all of them. If Isaac was alive, anyone could still be alive, could still be out there breathing, searching.

"How long since you got free? How long have you been out here now?" Miig needed to know more, needed to get caught up on the time since he'd last seen his husband being dragged out of a Recruiter van and into a school while he sat, zip-tied and frantic, under guard in the cargo section until it was his turn to be "enrolled."

"A few weeks, maybe. Hard to say."

"Time is different now, eh?"

"I'm not sure it exists anymore." Isaac sighed, dipping his head to fit on his partner's shoulder. "But we exist. At least there's that."

Miigwans turned his face to the side, and Isaac lifted his head to meet his gaze. "Do we?"

"Yeah, baby. We do. And we're together. And I'm going to take whatever minutes we have to be grateful for them."

They leaned together and kissed, breaking apart only to gasp at the power of that small act of resistance: love despite it all, love because of it all.

Eventually, they walked back to camp, to Miig's small tent set at the far side of the circle, to lie, grateful, in each other's arms, but only for a few hours. Only long enough to give their bodies the sleep they needed to search again.