



CHAPTER 3: PRISON

French

I WAS BACK WITH MY FAMILY.

Miigwans lit a sprig of white sage and placed it to burn on a rock in front of the small fire. White sage was precious because it wasn't from this territory. It was one of the ways we knew how important we were, even now, especially now. We were worth that cumulous smoke. We were as necessary as this medicine. We leaned in closer, our shoulders touching, reminding us we were a circle, no matter how much smaller that circle had become.

"It's time for Story."

I sat beside Rose, the only girl who'd ever made my chest expand so much I could breathe bigger, which meant I could be bigger. Maybe even better. I pushed my knee up against the outside of her leg.

She kissed her teeth. "Move, na?" Her father was from Barbados, and in some moments she borrowed his cadence. She was missing him, and his words brought him a little closer. It was a luxury for her.

Beside her, Slopper slouched, his chin resting on his chest. He drew foliage in the dirt with the tip of a branch. He was still a child, but he was working to carry language, and the words he had memorized made him taller. He was becoming a giant and deserved the respect one affords a giant.

Wab rested her head on Chi Boy, who rubbed her pregnant stomach while staring into the flames. She absentmindedly stroked the lines on the ruined side of her still-beautiful face, feeling the memories raised and scored into her skin.

Tree and Zheegwon, identical in every way save the hand-me-down clothes they wore, kept all four eyes on the near distance, on the trees where they turned to shadows and sway. They were posted lookouts for the next five hours, and that job didn't end, even during Story. Their fifteen-year-old bodies were lean to the point of sharp beauty. You had to look close to see that one of them was missing the outer shell of an ear, or a pinky finger, or to make out the dents in their legs, the painful movement of a badly healed elbow, all injuries suffered at the hands of people looking for a cure, trying to dig one out of these remarkable boys and their fragile skin.

Miigwans was elegant even in mourning, even in dirty pants, even without adornment. He was our Elder, the only one we had left in this found family, though there had once been two. He was elegant in his rupture and repair. He spoke now:

"Story is a home, it's where we live, it's where we hold everything we'll need to truly survive—our languages, our people, our land. And

you could say, but we're out on the land, now more than ever. So why worry about it? Because we are not all one people, and this land that we walk, we are so often guests in these territories. We are different people. Even though now we are one group—Dreamers—we are still also separate nations. Lumping us together makes us easier for the outsiders to catalog, easier to dismiss, to devalue, until we are only single-colored containers for the thing they want the most. We are one box to check and stack.

"Like any home, Story has to be renovated—extended or repaired or even torn down from time to time. For us, the repair and renovation is not always pretty. Sometimes it's unsound, but we do it the best way we can when the time comes. We do it with sticks if we have to. We hold them together with blood when we have to. Now, here are those sticks, and to it we add our own blood."

I stretched my arm behind Rose, not holding her exactly, but just letting her know I was there, that I had her. In truth, I may have needed her more than she needed me right then. All I saw was Minerva's blood on the road. My mother lying facedown in a ditch. My favorite uncle bleeding from the ears and nose, alone on a cot.

"Earthquakes in fracked landscapes. Tornadoes through pipeline-riddled fields. Tsunamis across poisoned waters. The coasts broke and sank. The weather turned manic. And the sicknesses were released. A virus, a pandemic of plague, a cure, and then another would step up to replace it. Depression as the markets crashed. Despair as the young and old died. Desperation when they could no longer rest at night with no dreams to hold them together. Madness, madness everywhere, and not a dream in sight. Until they saw us—maybe for the first time in a long time, *really* saw us. And suddenly, we were needed. Or rather, the marrow where they thought

we kept the dreams. That was what they thought they needed. The very marrow from our bones. The very dreams from our heads."

He turned to me, quiet but louder than I'd ever heard him speak out here in the green expanse of our world. "Don't let them take them, French. We're counting on you."



Something tickled my face, like I was walking through a spider-web. I couldn't lift my arms to brush it away. I heard an electric buzz and felt a weight being dropped and pulled against my head. Each time it was lifted, more webs fell on my face. It took a minute before I realized it was my hair. Someone was cutting my hair. I fell back asleep.

I woke up with tears in my eyes. Had I fallen asleep crying? I tried to speak, but there were no words. My throat was too dry to drag one up. There were voices. Then I was gone again.

I opened my eyes. A man in a white lab coat stood at the foot of the bed. He glanced up once to regard me, then went back to scribbling on a clipboard.

The next time I came round, there were two men. One of them was hanging an IV bag of clear liquid from the pole at the side of the bed. I moved my head, trying to shake the sleep off, and he spoke.

"Don't fuss. You'll loosen the bandages," he said, his voice small and tight, the words too close together. I had to concentrate to force them into sequence so I could make sense of the message.

Everything was soft around the edges, like the room was backlit by moonlight. I smiled, then closed my eyes again, remembering a yellow moon cut through with pine lace.

I finally woke up, back in the dark.

"No." It was a croak. I felt the shape of my body tucked under a rough woolen blanket. "No!"

I was back in my godforsaken room, back on the small bed, back in the dark. Had I ever even left? I reached up and felt the stubbly contours of my shaved head. My skull, just above the neck to the top curve, was covered by a large padded bandage. My hand was sore; I felt the edges of a smaller Band-Aid above my knuckles. I remembered the IV needle, now gone. So I had been out of this room—that much was true. How long had I been here? And then I wondered if I was the only one here. Oh, holy shit, had the others been brought in? That pushed adrenaline into my veins, and I jerked into full consciousness.

I yanked the blanket off, the cool air rushing to replace it. I was wearing a T-shirt and loose cotton pants with a drawstring waist. There were different low socks on my feet, ones without holes. I felt like a baby learning how to control my movements as I swung my legs off the side of the bed and stood. I turned to the right and, with arms stretched out, felt my way to the door. I knew it was delusional, but I tried the handle.

Locked. I pushed and pulled, and there wasn't the slightest give. Then I knocked.

"Hello?" I coughed a few times and tried again, louder. "Hello, is anyone out there? I need to speak to someone."

Hearing my voice, small and beseeching, just made me angry. What if my family was here—Chi Boy and Slopper and Rose . . . oh god, Rose. I had a quick vision of her in a dark room with a faceless man in the doorway. I banged again with my fist, then two fists.

"Answer me, goddamn it!"

Anger decanted into my limbs, thick and powerful. It made me slam into the metal, to kick and yell. "You cowards, you fucking cowards! Why don't you show yourselves?"

And that's when my mother came back.

"Oh, my boy. What is all this yelling around?"

The sound of her voice shoved me to the ground as sure as if it had grown hands to push me. "Mom?"

"You know what marrow looks like under the microscope? Like the entire universe, just full of planets."

"Mom? Where are you?"

I stretched my arms out and rushed around the space like a frightened bird in a cage, crunching numb fingers against the walls, slamming toes against the toilet. I was frantic.

"I am right beside you, my boy."

After scratching the paint off the bricks, crawling around on my hands and knees and searching the ground, I knew she was being figurative. She meant "beside you" the way other people said "I'm behind you." They were rarely ever at your back, even when they said they had your back.

"Mom, I can't find you!" I was sweating, and I couldn't get on my feet, so I sat hard and leaned against a wall, trying to even out my breath. Lethargy was pouring cement over frustration. I must have been concussed or drugged . . . maybe both.

"Here. I'm right here."

"Where?" I couldn't stay awake, my sore head tipping toward my shoulder.

"I'll reach for you. Reach back."

I slid down until my cheek was on the floor. I turned to face the wall and stretched out my hand. And there she was. She grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. There must have been a vent between rooms, hers and mine. Maybe that was how she'd found me. I brought her hand to my face and rubbed my lips against the cold metal circle of her wedding band.

"Why are you here? Where's Dad? I found him, you know. He's alive. We're alive. We're alive, right?" I couldn't project past a whisper, getting softer with each word.



In what I can only assume was morning—there was no way to tell time and no sunlight to suggest an hour—I woke up knowing she wasn't really there, that there was just me and the memory of her, the massive want of her. Cold and stiff on the ground, I woke up holding my own hand, one inside the other, under my cheek. I dragged myself back to the bed, pulled the blanket up to my chin, and understood that until now, I had never truly been helpless. Out in the bush, I could hunt if I was hungry, I could run if I was being chased, I could stand my ground and take a life if that's what was necessary. I had done all of those. But in here, what could I do? For now, I just closed my eyes and counted the stars that bloomed and arced across my lids, praying on each one that I was really alone, that no one else from my family was locked in here.

My mother returned every now and then in the innumerable dark hours. Eventually, her voice stopped breaking my heart.

"Hey, Frenchie, did you know there are eight hundred billion more cells in your body than there are galaxies in the known

universe? Can you imagine that? You're bigger than everything we know."

"You're dead," I told her for probably the tenth time since we'd started this broken conversation through the wall.

"I was just lost."

"Where am I?" I'd asked this so many times now, first with a frantic screech to the words. Now it was more of a challenge to her voice. It always went unanswered in any real way. It was like trying to map a forest without true north.

"With me, Francis. You're with me."

"Yeah, yeah. A lot of good that does either of us. And why is it you right now? Why couldn't it be Dad? At least I know he's still above-ground." Oh god, I hoped he was still aboveground. Who knew what had happened out there.

A darkness like this was a place full of lost and found. Every fear you'd ever had found you, and you lost your entire mind in return. I counted my fingers and toes over and over as a way to know I was actually real, because I was worried that maybe I was not. I tried to piece it all together, to remember every detail that had brought me here, to this non-place where my mother was now singing an old song about a girl sleeping in the pines.

The last thing I remembered was going on a mission to intercept strangers who'd come near the camp. I'd slung the rifle, pulled my courage out like a prayer ribbon, and run toward the danger. But instead of Recruiters or those Natives who pretended to be refugees but who turned out to be school informers, we'd found real community. And among them, there was Isaac, long lost to the schools. Those last starlit moments outside of this dark cell had been in the clearing where Isaac and Miigwans were finally reunited.

That night, I had sat in the grass and cried. At that moment, there was only Miigwans and Isaac in the entirety of the broken world. I saw joy and the hope for more. I had laughed when they embraced, each searching the other's face with hands and mouths, because I'd needed to feel the biggest I could, and that was with laughter, especially out here, right now. Laughter made space. And after a while, when they'd gathered enough sense to return to camp, I'd stepped out of the clearing for just a moment to relieve myself in the woods. Just one moment—alone and caught up in that elusive joy . . . and then a sound, like a cedar trunk being hit with a bullet, and then nothing. Everything went away. I remembered only the feeling of my limbs folding up like cracking knuckles, and I'd woken up here, in this place, in this impossibly dark room, more alone than I'd ever been in the bush.

I thought maybe it had been a bullet after all. Again, I considered that maybe I was dead. That would explain Mom being here.

"The magic of the entire machine is in the marrow; that's where cells snap into existence and can become anything to anybody." The voice sounded dry, so the words were like a coughing hacked up a parched throat.

"Shut up, please." I turned on my side and toward what I knew was the wall only because my fingers had traced it so many times. My breath was sour in that space. I used a ragged nail to scratch plaque off my fuzzy teeth.

"A tooth is not a bone. Did you know that?"

I paused, hand near my mouth. Could she see me in here? I pulled my knees up toward my chest. No. No one could see anything in here. And she wasn't real, I reminded myself. "You're not real." I said it out loud so the facts would stay straight.

I opened my eyes, slow and without hope, and besides the physical push of air against eyeball, there was no change in sight.

"A tooth can't be a bone. It's just a sharp thing that tears and rips. Because it has no marrow."

"Neither do you." It came out weepy, wavering under another surge of panic. I tried to breathe through it. "Your marrow is gone, s'been sucked out. So all you can do now is rip me to bits."

Tinny laughter from the corner of the room. I stood up and paced. It kept my mind off the hunger. I had water from the sink and a toilet, but so far, there'd been no food. It was getting desperate. The last time I'd bitten a broken fingernail off, instead of spitting, I'd swallowed it.

"Hey, Ma, you got any grub up there in my head?" I laughed at my own joke. There was no answer, which was even funnier to me. I laughed until tears squeezed down my cheeks, until there were no sounds coming out, until I had to hold my sides to keep from busting wide open.

I was losing my damn mind. And then it hit me: the only people I knew who couldn't control themselves, who did things like scream at nothing and have conversations with the dead as if they were sitting beside them, were the ones who couldn't dream. I tried to remember the last time I'd had a dream, but everything was one continuous sigh in the dark. Then I remembered waking up in the bed, getting my head shaved, the man in white writing on the clipboard, the man hanging that bag, tubes going into my arm. Maybe the liquid wasn't going in . . . maybe it was being sucked out . . .

"They took it." I was sure of it. They'd taken my marrow. And without my marrow, how could I dream? That's where they said it was hidden, in our bones, like sleepy bees in a hive. "I'm empty."

I had to go, one way or the other. I had to get out. I searched the room again, looking for anything loose or sharp—a broken brick, a bed spring, a cup I could smash into a cutting edge. All the while, the tears I'd laughed loose kept falling. I would get out of here, even if it meant leaving in a body bag.

After a while, I lay down, hugging myself and pretending my arms were someone else's. "It's okay, Frenchie," I whispered into my pillow. "It's okay. You'll be okay."



There was a fire, the kind of fire that we never would have made—high and hot. We built Dakota-style fires in holes with tunnels underneath so the smoke was pushed away from the camp and no bark on the wood so it burned cleaner. I watched the flames jump and fume. The abandon was beautiful. I walked toward it, waiting for the waves of heat against my skin, but there were none.

Stepping over the ground, my feet made no noise. Noting its absence, I listened for the cracks and hum of the fire eating wood. Again, there was nothing. I tried my voice. "Hello?" It echoed around the clearing.

"Hello." This time I was louder, almost yelling in the comparative silence of everything else.

I was at the edge of the fire, bright orange and burning tall. Still, no heat. I tipped forward, pushing my face closer. Nothing. I reached out, tentative and ready to pull back as soon as the heat jumped against my skin. Eventually, my fingers were directly in the flames. It was as if it wasn't there, like the whole thing was a

projection. I put my other hand in, then sank them up to my elbows. Finally, I pushed my head in.

Not a sound or a change in temperature. What kind of fire was this? I looked up; miles away, the sky blazed blue. I looked down. Beyond the top flames in shades of yellow and orange, the bottom burned blue, as if reflecting the sky itself. And below the blue was the fuel—wood chewed to solid grey ash, and there, in between the branches and burn, was something else. What was it?

I crouched down, getting on my hands and knees, still submerged in the pit from the shoulders up, nothing but my own breath in my ears even though the flames were jumping and the wood was breaking apart. What was it?

Something round and charred black, almost carved with dark filigree. I grabbed it—it was light—and turned it around in my hands. On one side it was like an egg where the fire had eaten it smooth. Then it got bumpy, and then there were odd formations. It was a skull, a human skull, the teeth and orbital holes intact. In my shaking hands—I couldn't drop it—the clotted mess stuck on the front started to grow back and reshape: a nose, then a chin, then lips to form a smile around the edges of the teeth.

"No." It was becoming familiar. "No, please, no."

Eyes molded themselves back into the holes like blown glass, so dark they shone maroon.

"No!" I stood, the skull fused into my palms.

The ears spiraled out like seashells. Hair—loose dark curls—pooled out of the restretched scalp like vines.

"Please stop!"

Finally, I was left with the head of Rose, my beautiful Rose,

staring up at me. Her eyes found mine, focused in and glinting with life, and for a second, I was happy. And then her eyes changed, her brow pulled up, her mouth opened wide, and she began screaming. And that's when the heat returned to the fire, and I was consumed.



I sat straight up in bed as if I'd heard a gunshot, covered in sweat.

"Oh god, oh good frigging god." I put a hand on my chest and tried to slow my breathing, throwing myself back against the damp pillow. "Good god, no."

There are images and words and memories you can't recall without getting gut-punched. They're the things that haunt you for years, the feelings that get trapped despite your best efforts to set them loose so you can run away from them. They are the most horrid things, because they come from inside you. This—Rose being burned alive, nothing more than a piece of herself, in pain—this was as bad as it could get, and I couldn't find a way to shake it off.

And then I realized what it really was. I clasped my own forearms where the veins were the bluest. They hadn't taken it, not yet. After all, a nightmare is still a dream, isn't it?

Click.

I spun to face the door, and sure enough, a line of yellow light appeared. I should have jumped to the side, ready to spring out at whoever came through. I should have been exercising, keeping limber, pumped up for action. I could hear Wab—"Stay ready, Frenchie. As a wise sage once said, if you stay ready, you ain't gotta get ready." But the sad truth was, I was grateful—grateful that someone was

coming, that someone was even out there, and hopeful that they had a granola bar in their pocket. So I cupped my hands over my brow to shield my eyes from the harsh light and waited.

Once the door was fully open, I had a hard time looking up, so I took in as much of the room as I could before hands grabbed me.

I was dragged down a hallway. Not that I didn't want to go just about anywhere if it meant being out that room, but the lighting out there was too bright, and I couldn't see past a squint and blur and needed to be held up and pulled ahead. Toward what, I couldn't have imagined. And that was saying a lot, since I had been imagining my long-gone mother in this place.

What did I know at that point? I knew from the small glimpses I'd seen before leaving that my room was white—white walls, white bed, white sheets, white toilet, white sink. Only the blanket had color, a soft blue that didn't match the rough scratch of its texture. And fingerprints of dirt and old blood smeared on the walls.

I knew that the hallway was painted a light grey, that ahead, every ten feet or so, there was a bright fluorescent light buzzing on the ceiling, and that the floors were cement buffed to a high polish. I knew that my escort was not a Recruiter. He was some kind of new danger we hadn't named yet. Instead of shorts and a windbreaker, he wore a black coat and dress pants in the same material. His shoes were black and low heeled. I couldn't keep my eyes focused long enough to consider his face.

"Aaniin." I tested out my rudimentary Anishinaabemowin on him. Nothing. It was a long shot, but even now, hope forced me to try.

"Where are we going?"

Again, he didn't answer. He just tightened his grip on my arm as he picked up the pace.

I tried once more, this time low and quick, because I didn't want to know the answer. "This is a residential school, isn't it?"

He straightened his arm so suddenly that I banged into the wall, my head, already tender from the earlier injury, connecting with the frame around a door. Then he yanked me back to his side, never pausing or slowing down.

I hung my head and tried to keep pace. Looking down, I saw that I was wearing a white shirt and socks and that my pants were light green with a yellow logo on the right thigh. I couldn't make it out with my legs moving and my eyesight wonky. So I concentrated on paying attention to the directions we turned, the length of each hallway, the closed doors we passed. I wondered if there were more Native kids behind them. I wondered if I knew any of them, loved any of them.

There was a smell in here like wet metal and chalk. It brought back the outside world to me, not the woods, but the before time, when I was in abandoned towns and cleared-out cities. It was the smell of industry, of more structure than flesh; it was the smell of a new kind of decay as we inched back through the Industrial Age. It made my stomach hitch up like I had to use the bathroom. Because I knew it as the scent of dark change and brutal theft.

Two right turns, each new hallway the same as the last—empty and lined with closed doors. Then a left into a large space, skylights up top, concrete pillars spaced throughout. I stared up. It was grey out, the kind of grey that falls at midday this time of year. There were no trees in that small section of sky, no birds flying over, no obvious way to escape. There were a couple of brown couches pushed against

the walls and a low coffee table in front of each. It felt lived in, but in that way waiting rooms feel lived in: temporary and impatient. In the corner, on the floor, was a ragged teddy bear, one eye missing. It watched us pass with his mouth stitched shut.

We walked through double doors at the other side of the room and into a smaller area. There was a booth with two security guards sitting behind glass. We turned right again, and my escort swiped a card in front of a small sensor on the wall, and a door without a knob slid aside.

We were in a stairwell with white metal railings going up and down. We took the upward set; I almost fell on the first few steps until the man in black decided I'd move better without broken legs and slowed down.

"Thanks," I told him. I was genuinely grateful, but then immediately angry with myself for feeling gratitude. I should be fighting him, pushing him, tripping him down the stairs; Wab would have, and Chi Boy probably would have snapped his neck already. But here I was, meekly being led without so much as shrugging off his grip, with a "thank you," even. The shame of it made me timid.

Two flights, and then through another door, opened with the same card, into another area watched over by two security guards behind glass. I was sluggish, weaving a bit with every step. We took a left and walked down a hallway wide enough to have little sitting areas outside the rooms, one chair and a round table each. We stopped in front of a closed door with a small plaque on the front: MEETING ROOM 3.

My escort rapped on the door, and we waited. I started seeing spots and shifted my weight from foot to foot. I needed food or I was going to pass out.

"Come in," a voice called out.

Even if I hadn't been guided through the open door, even if I wasn't under guard and too weak to make any sudden movements, I would have gone in. Something in that voice hooked itself under my ribs and pulled me toward it.