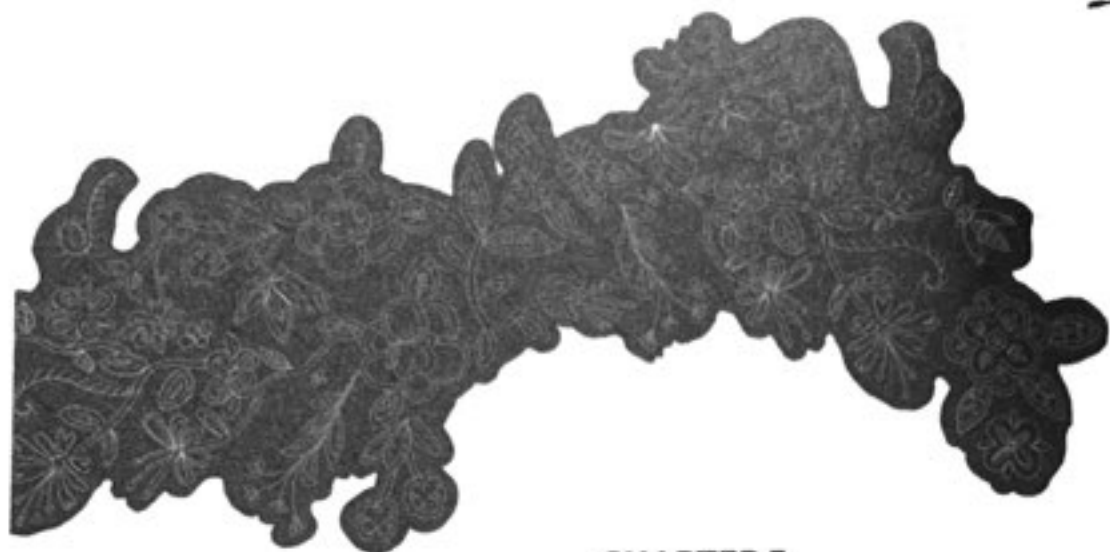




CHAPTER 5:
CHI BOY'S COMING-TO STORY

Chi Boy

CHI BOY DIDN'T HAVE TO DO MUCH CONVINCING TO get Wab to lie down. She was tired all the time now. The women kept saying that soon enough the nesting instinct would kick in and she'd be up all hours moving, so they'd better enjoy this time of rest, both of them, while it lasted.

He sat near the doorway, which he zipped up to try to give her some quiet. It was never loud here; the people knew they needed to remain as soundless as they could. They reserved their noise for important things like hunting and drumming, and the rest of the time they communicated mostly with gestures and carefully placed wood and supplies, as if everything were fragile. He put her swollen feet in his lap and rubbed them. He felt useless these days, so when there was something he actually could do to help, like massaging her

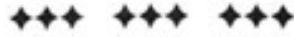
feet, he did it. Right now, this new life was Wab's burden to carry. All he could do most of the time was watch over her, but not too closely, or she'd get antsy.

A gauzy sun filtering through the blue tent walls cast her in a somber light so that she resembled a statue. He took her all in, in these moments of stillness, the curved beauty of her. When her breathing was steady and even, he lay down next to her so that his head was at her distended belly. Carefully, he ran the palm of his hand over her stomach. Her belly button had recently started to protrude, and he smoothed the fabric of her shirt over it. Without putting any more pressure on her skin, he leaned forward and placed a kiss just above that button, where he imagined his child's head to be.

What world would welcome this baby? How would they survive? What could he possibly give to ensure that survival? He would give anything. In time, he could teach them to shoot and run and deliver messages without words. He could share trapping skills and how to get clean water and the best ways to hide. But for now, in these early days and the ones to come, what could he possibly do?

The first thing anyone needed to make the right moves toward survival was the truth—the lay of the land, the history of the place, the people they could trust and the ones they had to run from. This generation would be the first one born during this new epoch. So it was his responsibility as a father to give his child the map to find a way forward. There was no forward movement without truth. So then, that was what he had to give, as hard as it was, as much as he wanted to keep the darkness at bay.

Taking one last look at Wab's sleeping face, he lowered his lips again and started to tell his story for the very first time.



I tried to get help. I tried to get them to help me. And then they reminded me of who I was. What I was.

People called me quiet, or sullen, or stupid. But when you're alone, it's easier not to talk. Why start a conversation when it's going to be one-sided? Why get to know someone if next week they'll be replaced by someone else? My life didn't have a soundtrack, you know? Because it wasn't a movie. It was more like a bunch of scenes stitched together.

Scene one: Eating corn syrup on white bread from a paper bag. Sitting at a Formica table. My feet don't touch the floor, which is good, because this home has a dog that wants to sink its broken teeth into my bare legs. I keep as immobile as I can and still be chewing.

Scene two: Carrot sticks rolling around on a Styrofoam plate. From the back porch, I watch two boys who belong there play badminton with loose-stringed rackets in the yard. One of them looks over, sees me, flips me the finger, and goes back to playing.

Scene three: I am so grateful to be back in the group home, because this one has bedroom doors that lock. I lie flat on my back and watch the car lights draw stripes up the white walls. An average of ten cars an hour pass down the street. I keep as quiet as I can and still be breathing.

Scene four: Things have gone weird, and kids are disappearing, but no one is looking for them. I wander off after school and never go back. Soon, one of the straps on my backpack breaks. I tie it together with a shoelace and keep walking.

Scene five: Outside a small town, there are farms. Their fields lie against one another like patches on a quilt, smoothed out and equally divided. I like crossing their boundaries from the road. I disrupt their polite geometry. A truck rumbles behind me, slowly passes, and then pulls into the ditch in front of me. Both doors open, and men in old hats and new sunglasses get out. One of them has a knife in his belt. But it's the second one who scares me; he's smiling real big. I jump over a low fence and into the field. They're shouting, calling me a dream smuggler, calling me a coward, calling me an Indian, and closing in behind me. I run so hard I have to close my eyes. I run so hard I can't hear anything but my heart in my head and the wheat at my knees. I run until the only thing left in my body is burn. I run as fast as I can and still be thinking.

Scene six: I'm at a house after so many fields. I know the men aren't behind me anymore, but I don't know where they've gone. Maybe they went back for the truck. Maybe they are hiding. Maybe the knife is in a hand and not a belt now.

On the front stoop is a small mat that says WELCOME TO OUR HOME and a large red planter full of bright daisies. I lean on the wood cut-out of an old woman in a blue polka-dot dress who's holding an apple pie. A sign hanging around her neck on a brass chain reads, THE LORD PROVIDES. FOR EVERYTHING ELSE, THERE'S GRANDPARENTS. I catch enough breath to knock on the door and tell the woman who answers that I am scared and I am being chased and I need help. She tells me to sit on a small bench beside the cutout and goes back in to get her husband, says he can help me.

I sit on the narrow bench and put both hands flat on my chest, convincing my lungs to slow down. A minute passes. I rub my legs to

ease the ticks. Another minute. Then the door opens again, and this time it's the husband, only I don't see him, I just see his handgun. He tells me he knows what I'm up to and I better get the hell out of there before he puts a hole in me.

I stand and fall back down on my butt. I try to say I'm not up to anything. I stand up again and start backing away. I tell him I'm scared.

He tells me he knows all about "you people," that I'm only there to rob him. That I'd better get my buddies and hit the road.

I'm alone. And I'm scared, I say, and hear myself getting quieter. *Scared* is barely a whisper.

He takes a shot. The bullet lands beside my foot. The wife yells from inside, "Don't go getting dirty blood all over the front walk, Harold."

"Sorry, dear," he says to her over his shoulder, his voice full of the kindness I was searching for. He turns cold eyes back to me. Tells me to move . . . now! To grab the others and take our party somewhere else. He knows how we are, what we do to poor farmers like them.

I tried to get help. I tried to get them to help me. And they reminded me of who I was . . . what I was. And I ran.

I'm not sure if it was an accident, or if he was too full of adrenaline, or if he just hated me that much, but I was at the end of the front walk when the bullet tore into my calf. Maybe he was going to shoot me all along and was just trying to respect his wife's pressure-washed cobblestones.

Scene seven: Trees. Blood. Ache. At least the bullet went straight through. More trees. So much time passes that eventually I forget to run. Then I find an old trailer, all rusted out and quiet, a fifth wheel

without a truck to pull it. It's leaning a bit to one side, but all the windows and the door are intact. I think it's a fine place to rest up, to give my leg a chance to really heal. I'm too loud in the bush with a limp. I sit in the low brush and watch the trailer all night, waiting to see if anyone comes out or goes in. Once I think someone must be inside because it starts to shake, but it's just a massive raccoon lumbering over the roof. His nails scratch into the vinyl top when he rears up on his hind legs, sniffing me out. But he's not afraid that I'm there. I'm bleeding. And just a boy.

At first light, I cross the ferns and rocks to the trailer and open the door. Once inside, it's the first time I notice the forest is full of noise—leaves, bugs, wind, birds—because it's suddenly gone. It's all muffle and hush in here. When the door closes behind me I let all the air out of my body and feel light.

Scene eight is really a bunch of scenes. I took it all in—the dirty shelves; a stack of plastic cups stuck one inside the other; the floor, crunchy with old leaves; a mattress covered in messy sheets and a blanket with a yellow cartoon bird on it—all so filthy they practically crack in half when I move them.

I sleep on a lawn chair pushed into the corner.

I eat a box of stale raisins from my bag.

I piss out the window.

I sleep again.

It doesn't occur to me that I am alone. Until I realize I'm not alone.

I push the mattress up and against the wall, planning on cleaning up a bit, settling in for a few nights. But underneath the mattress is a hatch cut into the floor. An old storage space. I lift it. And there's a body.



I don't scream. I don't think I ever have, even when I should have. I back away, stumble, even, but I make no sounds. Then, eventually, I creep back over. It's a woman, an old woman. Her hair, where it peeks out from around the folds of a flowered kerchief, is grey and matted, her face lined with dirt. I can only see her from the chest up. She's wearing like three different sweaters with a brown turtleneck underneath. I should be scared, or maybe grossed out, but I'm just sad. So sad, I reach out and touch her cheek. It's warm.

Her eyes open, all big and at once. And I fall back on my ass. And then, if you can believe this, she laughs. Laughs so hard she starts coughing. Laughs so much I have time to get back up on my feet.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

She takes a minute to shimmy and groan and sit up so that she's halfway up into the trailer. "Hiding."

Then she holds out a hand so I can help her up.

That's how I met Minerva. She was already pretty old when we found each other, but not as old as when the Recruiters did her in. She could still follow a conversation. She could still remember where she was most of the time. She didn't slip between Anishinaabemowin and English without warning so much. We stayed in the trailer for a week, then left together. She said we needed to keep moving because sitting ducks never make it out of hunting season.

We traveled together after that, collecting more of us along the way. Miig was the first one we found together, then the rest kind of fell into place while we were on the move. I guess this story can end on scene nine. This is my favorite one, anyway, scene nine.

I have never seen a beaver lodge before. It doesn't look like it was made by animals as much as very smart children. We're hunting, so we've split up, and I am alone, standing on the bank of a creek with a

sharp stick. That's all I have, no gun, no bow, but it's enough to make me brave. Because I am eleven years old now, and I am brave, I tell myself. I tell myself this a lot.

I leave my shoes on the bank. Wet feet are too dangerous out here. Catching cold could be the end. I wade in, holding the stick above my head, the water reaching to my ribs. If there's a beaver in there and I can kill it, we'll eat well. We don't trap out here, so it's hard, but if anyone can do it, it's me. Minerva will tell me she's proud of me and call me her boy. I'll do just about anything to be her boy.

This lodge is small. Probably a young beaver's first digs. I'll have to dive to get inside since the doorway is underwater. That makes me nervous. It means my head will pop up in the dark before anything else. It means I'll be in a vulnerable position. Miig tells us we are already vulnerable out here, so don't take chances. I circle the structure, listening. The creek is low, and the lodge is sticking up pretty high. On the far side, there's a crack in the dome. I push the sharp end of the stick into the soft ground around the lodge, pull myself up, hook fingers and toes into the branches, and climb. I get to the crack and stop. I look up; the sky is bright blue, the sun is full and blurry behind a haze. I take a deep breath, like I'm going underwater after all, and look down and inside.

There's a girl. She's curled up, her face turned toward the ground, limbs over bones, bones stacked over curved muscles, a dark bud in a streak of sunlight. And then, as I'm watching, she starts to pull apart, stretching until her fingertips hit the muddy wall. She's on her back, and I can see her entire face, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. She's soft like that, looking up at me, for a few seconds, and then she pulls it all back and in and gets

hard, like she can do so quick. She cups one hand over the side of her face and puts the other one on a cleaver by her side. Then she kind of smiles, no fear at all, and says:

"What the fuck is this, now?"

I feel something in my chest start to unravel. It's a new space, and it opens quick. My heart gets real wide, so big. As big as it can go and still be beating.

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Chi Boy pushed his lips right up against Wab's belly so that his words are a tickle over tight skin. "That's the day I met your mom. The day I started dreaming you into existence. Nothing matters before that. This is where the story really starts."

Eyes still closed, pretending to sleep, Wab turned her head slightly into the pillow so the tears would have somewhere to fall.