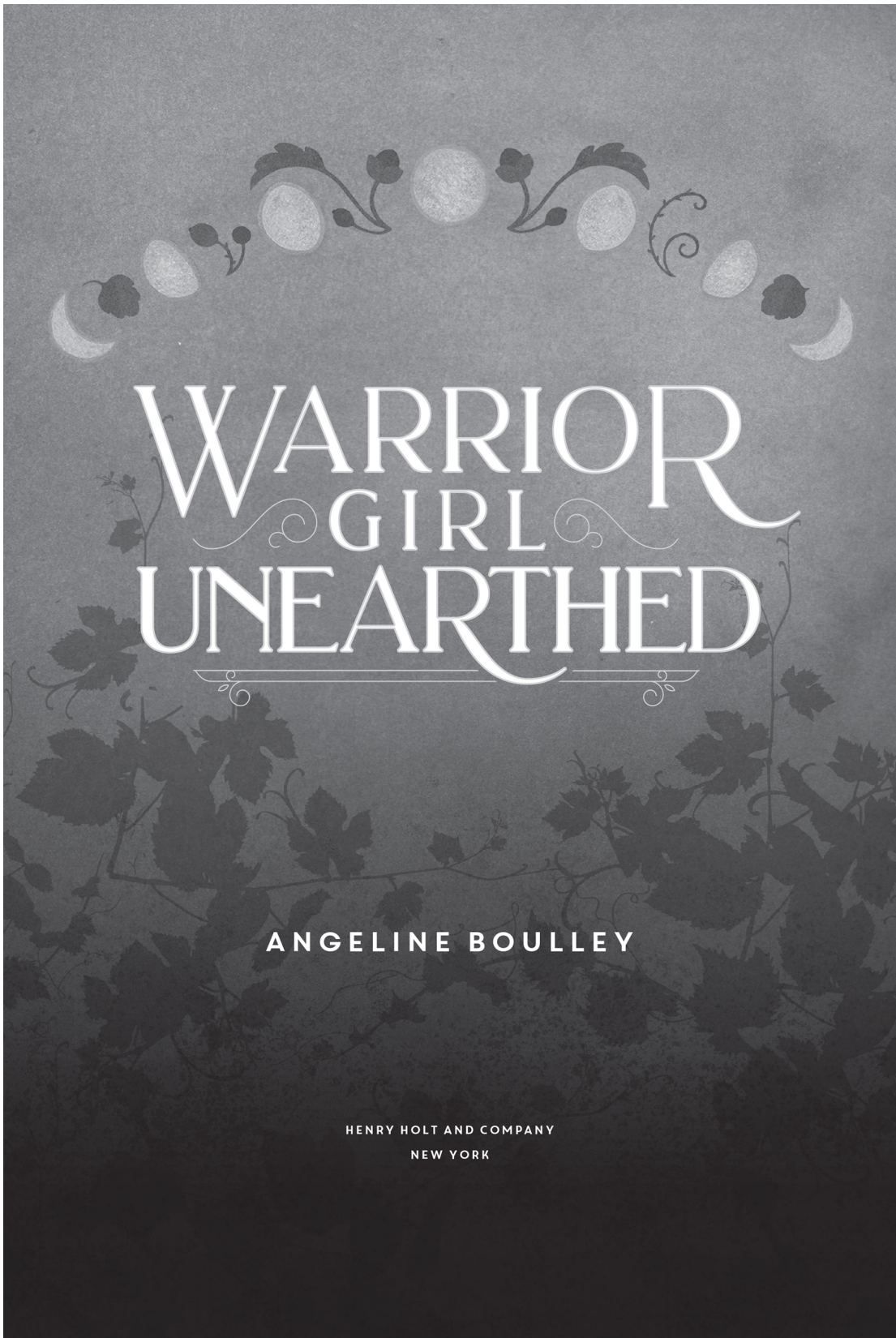


FROM THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
FIREKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

ANGELINE BOULLEY



WARRIOR
GIRL
UNEARTHED



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GIRL
UNEARTHED

ANGELINE BOULLEY

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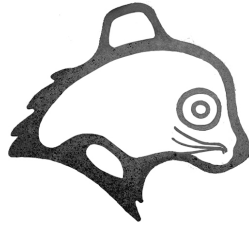
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*For the 108,328 ancestors still held by institutions, and those working to bring
them home*

WEEK ONE



[W]hen questioned by an anthropologist on what the Indians called America before the white man came, an Indian said simply, “Ours.”

—Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*

CHAPTER 1

MONDAY, JUNE 9TH

I speed across Sugar Island in the Jeep I share with my sister. The rising sun escapes the tree line to my left. I adjust the sun visor against the blinding brightness. It's what good drivers are supposed to do: minimize distractions.

Focusing on the road ahead, I watch for cultural-camp signage. Next to me, Pauline makes a production of craning her neck to check the speedometer, shaking her head, and sighing. I take it as a challenge, smoothly shifting into fifth gear while rounding a corner. The tires squeal.

"Remember what Auntie Daunis said," she warns.

"About our birthday gift that came with a bonus scolding?" I say.

"Happy Sweet Sixteen, my girls." Pauline imitates Auntie's slightly deeper voice. "Enjoy this good pony, but—"

I interrupt, practically growling, "But hear me now. I will repossess her and kick your asses if I catch you being foolish."

We laugh in twin harmony.

I don't mention Auntie's next words, directed solely to me: *And that includes speeding.*

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Pauline says. "It's not like *you* have anything going on."

My sister irritates me like nobody else. I glare at her.

"Hold up. You're still mad about last week? Seriously? A week of touring universities was torture for poor Perry? It was supposed to *inspire* you." She drags out the word: *in-spy-yer*.

"It cost me a week of fishing!"

She huffs. "Well, I wish you hadn't come. Then no one would've suffered Elvis Junior's atomic farts."

I for sure weaponized our stinky dog, who gets hella gassy from people food. I hide my smirk while checking out a faded sign announcing that the Sugar Island

Ojibwe Tribe's cultural camp is a quarter mile ahead.

"Oh my *God*," Pauline continues, still sensing my annoyance. With an extra syllable and some shade, it sounds like *Gaaw-duh*. "It was just a few schools."

"Nine universities." I repeat the number in Ojibwemowin. "Zhaangaswi!"

She startles at my sharp tone. I feel her eyes on me even without looking over. My voice softens in tandem with slowing down for the coming turn.

"Pauline, it was nine places I'd never get into even if I wanted to go. Which I don't." I tap my brakes while using my left turn blinker, because you never know who's watching and reporting back to Auntie. "I don't want to be anywhere except Sugar Island."

"Never leave Sugar Island?" she asks, in that same surprised and judgy way she uses. "Like, never *ever*?"

"Never ever sounds good to me," I say, making the turn.

"There are other schools you might like, you know. Mackinac State College is my safety—you could apply there."

"Nah, all the statues there are old Zhaaganaash dudes. Non-Natives. Colonizers. You really wanna study where women and people of color are invisible?"

Ignoring me, Pauline checks for any strands that might have escaped her tightly wound bun of jet-black hair. She pauses a hand at her ear, smoothing the area.

"You look good, Egg," I assure her.

She rolls her eyes at the private nickname, but allows the tiniest smile to break through.

The narrow dirt road is an obstacle course of curves, dips, and bumps that continues for a half mile. It ends in a loop at a dilapidated log building where our tribe used to hold camps for learning stuff, like how to smoke whitefish or make maple syrup.

"Why's the Tribe having the summer interns come here for orientation instead of the bougie new camp in town? Isn't this place condemned?" I ask while pulling up to the entrance.

As usual, my sister knows the answer to everything.

"No Wi-Fi. No decent cell-phone signals." She uses the visor mirror to apply the coral-pink lip gloss that pops against her blemish-free dark complexion. "To immerse us in culture without distractions."

"More like immersed in mosquitoes." I grab the can of bug spray from the center console.

Pauline takes it before reaching for the door handle. She waves to a group of friends dressed like her, in short floral-print rompers and wedge sneakers. They hug as if it's been a year instead of a week since they last saw each other.

My sister offers mosquito repellent and is praised for her smart thinking. She stretches a long, slender brown leg coated in shimmery body lotion for someone to spray with the bug dope.

A loud bang jolts my attention.

Lucas Chippeway stands in front of the Jeep, palm raised over the dark green hood; he follows up with another crisp beat. Before he can launch into a drum solo, I tap the horn and roll down the window.

"Move it along, Luke-Ass," I say.

He breaks into the lopsided grin that makes him a certified hottie to everyone except Pauline and me.

"Woke you up," he says. "Hey, sorry I couldn't give Pauline a ride this morning. Had to stay at Granny's last night and didn't think I'd get back on the island in time."

Lucas nods hello to a trio of girls taking selfies they won't be able to post until later. They giggle before turning their backs to him. He pretends not to notice when they angle their phones to include his mischievous smile and compact, muscular body in the background.

"You regret not getting an internship?" He struts over to my window. "Four hundred a week for ten weeks. That's serious bank."

"Do I regret skipping the interview to go fishing?" I laugh at my own joke before faking stone-cold seriousness. "Guess what, hey? Pauline got assigned to intern with Tribal Council. The *only* high school student to *ever* get placed with them in the history of the Kinomaage Summer Internship Program."

I delight in making fun of my sister, but I'd never do it in front of anyone but Lucas.

"I may have heard. Should I ask her anyway?" He absent-mindedly flicks away a mosquito that dares to land on his bronze skin.

"Please do. Tell her you heard that interns were selected on grades. It's what I told Mom and Pops, so they'd stop asking me about it."

Pauline shouts for Lucas and motions toward the building entrance.

"Gotta go, Pear-Bear. Sorry you ain't me." He flashes his trademark grin.

"Too bad. So sad. Gonna fish with my dog and my dad," I riff to the tune of M.I.A.'s "Bad Girls."

Back on the road, I floor it for the best possible reason: just because. Just because the Jeep is mine while Pauline is at her internship orientation all day. Just because I can already taste the fish I will catch today and fry tonight. Just because I survived last week's college visits, which stole the first precious days of my summer vacation.

I trill a fierce, high-pitched lee-lee to begin the Perry Firekeeper-Birch 2014 Summer of Slack. My loose hair whips around my face like a tornado. I crank the music and sing along with M.I.A.:

"Live fast, die young. Bad girls do it well."

★ ★ ★

Up ahead, someone crosses the road. I recognize the thin, long-limbed guy dressed in black. Stormy Nodin used to be my uncle Levi's best friend. I tap the brakes and dial down my music.

"Aaniin," I greet him.

He raises his chin in acknowledgment.

"Ando-babaamibizodaa," I offer, though he has never accepted a ride from me.

He declines with a quick hand motion.

I try with another invitation, this time for fish dinner tonight.

"Onaagoshi wiisinidaa. Giigoonh gi-ga-miijimin."

He immediately accepts with a head nod. My best fishing spot better come through because, as skinny as he is, Stormy Nodin has an enormous appetite.

"Baamaapii," I say with a wave.

My tires kick up roadside gravel as I race home.

★ ★ ★

The fat black dog comes out of nowhere. Not a dog. A bear cub. Dashing across the road.

Sick dread jolts through my body. In the instant it takes for my foot to reach the brake pedal, I am already following my parents' repeated instructions.

Tap. *Slow down.*

Tap. *Don't swerve.*

The cub disappears into the ditch.

Tap. *Where there's one, there's two.* My parents echo in unison.

I blink and the mama bear is there, rushing after her cub.

My heart skips a beat when she halts in my path. I swerve before my parents can repeat themselves. The Jeep shoots across a gravel driveway. I aim for lilac

bushes but skid toward a metal gate instead.

I close my eyes as metal grinds against metal and something explodes in my face.

★ ★ ★

The deployed airbag blocks my view. My heart thumps at triple pace. I take a deep breath. The cross-body seat belt is tight against my chest—uncomfortable but not painful. I can move my arms and legs.

I'm okay.

Grab your phone, begin recording, and get out of the vehicle as quickly as possible, Pops's voice instructs. Use the three-in-one tool tied to the door handle to cut through both straps of the seat belt. Don't forget to take the emergency cell phone from the center console. Get a safe distance away. Continue recording your surroundings and the vehicle.

I aim the phone camera at the steam rising from the hood of the Jeep as I back away.

Use the emergency cell phone alert button so that me, Mom, Aunt Daunis, and your sister get a call and text with your location.

I pause before pushing the alert button. My heart rate is back to normal. The radiator is damaged, but I think that's all. This was more like a fender bender than a major accident.

Pops is on his way downstate for something he bought on Craigslist. Pauline is at orientation. Mom is at work. Auntie? No way. I hear her warning again about being foolish.

But I wasn't being reckless. It was a bear. Everything happened so quickly.

I could walk back to Stormy Nodin, but unless prayers in Ojibwemowin will fix a radiator, the traditional healer won't be much help.

I need to get the Jeep off Sugar Island and into a repair shop. Although Pops can fix anything, Auntie wanted Pauline and me to be responsible for the cost of upkeep and repairs. With the birthday and babysitting money in my bank account, I can cover a wrecker.

Jack's Towing has a radio ad with a deep-voiced guy repeating their phone number and saying, *Anytime you call, I'll come for you.* Once when I was in Auntie's car with Granny June, the ad played on the radio. Auntie mentioned wanting to file a complaint. Granny yelled, *The hell you will! Cheap thrills are all I can afford.*

I use the emergency phone to call the number I know because of their radio ad. I keep recording while I wait for Jack. Since I don't need the bulky emergency phone for anything else, I shove it into the back of my jeans. Storing a phone near your butt crack isn't as funny as it might seem. Pops wants us to take every situation seriously. Dark-skinned men, whether they're Anishinaabe or Black—or both, like Pops—do not fuck around with their kids' safety.

I pass the time trying to envision a scenario where Auntie doesn't get mad about the Jeep. Thirty minutes later the wrecker truck barrels down the road, and I have yet to come up with anything. When Jack gets closer, I see a Tribal Police vehicle following the wrecker.

Jack pulls over just beyond the private drive. The cop car stays a few yards behind the accident scene. I recognize the cop getting out of the vehicle and shut off the recording.

Officer Sam Hill is harmless. Everybody calls him What-The, as in *What the Sam Hill?* It's an old-timey saying that I don't understand. But I do get how nicknames can be weird. He used to be the safety officer at the tribal elementary school. What-The heads over.

"Miigwech, Jack." I get to the point, handing over my debit card. "Can you take it to your brother's body shop?" If Jack and Zack are twins, I'll ask for a twin discount.

"He know it's coming?" Jack's voice doesn't sound as deep as it does on the radio ad.

"I'll call from your truck."

What-The chimes in. "How'd it happen, Perry?"

"Bear." I cheese a huge smile. There's no reason to question anything. I wasn't at fault. No need for a ticket. No need to search me. And no need to inform the Tribal Police captain.

Jack hooks the Jeep's tow hitch to the wrecker. Officer What-The leaves with a wave. Still smiling, I climb into Jack's truck for the ride to Zack's Body Shop in town. My ears ring with Pauline's familiar beef about me.

Must be nice to stroll through life with no worries.

My reply always pisses her off.

It sure is.

★ ★ ★

One look at Auntie Daunis ruins my fried perch feast. She stomps toward the campfire with her huge dark eyes blazing. Her messy brunette topknot adds three

inches to her already considerable height. And with the stacked heels on her black ankle boots, she is halfway between six and seven feet. Auntie could be the medicine man's twin, dressed in black jeans and a black Henley. Her slash of red lipstick is pressed in a disapproving glower.

I silently curse whoever snitched. Jack. Zack. Officer What-The. Anyone on the ferry to the mainland. Everyone except Stormy Nodin, because he speaks only to pray.

Conveniently, Mom and Pops go inside the house for more potato salad. Pauline is as mute as Stormy, who's filling up on perch like it's his last meal. Even Elvis Junior goes silent.

Closing my eyes, I brace for impact.

"Were you speeding?"

"It was a bear and her cub—"

"Were you speeding?" she repeats.

"A bit."

"You speed like that with my kid in the car?"

"No."

"Zack says thirty-two hundred in damages," Auntie says.

Pauline looks like she's gonna burst into tears. Screw that. I ain't scared.

"I'll work out something with him," I say evenly.

One of Auntie's eyebrows arches. Now I'm scared.

"I paid Zack. You owe *me*," she says.

Shit. His terms would've been better. Zack said he'd accept an IOU with two years of interest for when I turn eighteen and start getting per cap, the profit-sharing dividends that our tribal citizens receive from the Superior Shores Casino.

I'm tempted to mention that the Jeep's bumper was duct-taped to the frame a long time ago. The metal gate was not its first battle. That good pony has seen some shit.

My sister is a genius, but I am not an idiot. I await Auntie's sentencing.

"The Kinomaage program has one internship spot still open. You start tomorrow at nine a.m. Every paycheck will be turned over to me until your debt is paid in full. You don't drive it until then. Show up at the tribal museum. Your supervisor is Cooper Turtle."

Pauline gasps loudly, but I feel the sharp intake in my own lungs.

And with that, my Summer of Slack goes up in smoke. Just because.

CHAPTER 2

TUESDAY, JUNE 10TH

Pauline and I have a system for who gets to ride shotgun when Mom or Pops drives us someplace. She gets the front seat on the way there; I get it on the ride home. So, when we hitch a ride with Mom to our Kinomaage internship assignments, I'm momentarily surprised when my twin chooses the back seat.

Not one to turn down an unexpected gift, I sit in front and release a huge, maple-flavored burp. Mom made pancakes this morning, which she never does on a weekday. Their actions must be part of an unspoken agreement: *Be nice to Perry because she's working for a goofball*. The realization makes my next burp taste more sour than sweet.

I should be fishing with Pops and Elvis Junior instead of heading into town.

While we wait to board the ferry, I take the bag of pipe tobacco from the center console. I offer a pinch of semaa to both Pauline and Mom before taking twice as much of the aromatic, loose flakes for myself. The semaa is for our offering when we cross the St. Marys River.

The deckhand waves Mom on board. I roll down my window before she shuts the engine off. The cool breeze carries the smell of fish and engine exhaust.

"Why aren't we taking off," my sister yells over the punches and wings noises coming from her phone.

"St. Marys traffic jam," Mom says, referring to the humongous ship downriver. "And turn down that Floppy Birds game."

"Flappy Bird," Pauline corrects.

I braid my long black hair over one shoulder while we wait for the iron-ore freighter to pass by on its way toward the Soo Locks and, from there, to Lake Superior.

Pops worked on the freighters as a young man. I cannot imagine him working belowdecks in an engine room, because his favorite place to be is in our garden. Or tending a fire for ceremonies. Or on a fishing boat. Anyplace outdoors, really.

Just the thought of working somewhere with stale air and no windows gives me hives.

With a single, long toot of the ferry horn, we head out. Mom chuckles at something in the rearview mirror. I stick my head out the window and look behind at the familiar figure.

Cooper Turtle stands at the back corner of the ferry, gazing upon Sugar Island. His clothing—a navy golf shirt and khaki pants—is the only normal thing about him. One walnut-brown arm is bent in a salute as he poses like an old-timey cigar-store Indian statue bidding baamaapii to the island of our Anishinaabe ancestors.

He's been doing this silent protest for a few years, ever since Tribal Council voted to relocate the Sugar Island Cultural Learning Center—which included the library, genealogy archives, and museum—from the island to downtown Sault Ste. Marie. Lots of tribal citizens were upset, Mom and Auntie included. But Kooky Cooper Turtle is the only one still protesting.

I give thanks to Creator for the river before releasing my semaa out of the window to the water. I tack on an additional prayer. Pauline gives me a sympathetic look before continuing her own prayer. She's probably echoing my plea for help in surviving the summer.

Mom drops us off in front of the Tribal Administration building. The Cultural Learning Center is next door. Her mouth twitches, so I wait for her words of wisdom.

“Well, it'll be interesting,” she says before driving away.

Pauline hangs back. She was probably told to keep an eye on me. *Make sure Perry enters the museum.* As if I'd risk skipping work and having Auntie's spies track me down.

“Go on, den,” I shout.

With a huff, Pauline yanks open the glass entrance door.

I should be kinder to my sister. The Jeep is half hers. She hasn't bitched about this major inconvenience. Had the tables been turned, I would not have reacted the same way.

There is a good reason why people call her the nice twin.

I sigh before walking next door. The Tribe renovated the building, intending it to be a small indoor shopping mall. Mom said they over-improved the building, and no entrepreneur could afford the rent. It remained empty for a year before Tribal Council decided it would be “forward thinking” to relocate the Cultural Learning Center here. Their rationale was that a downtown location would be convenient for everyone who wanted to learn about our history and culture.

For an instant I imagine Kooky Cooper adjusting the straps on a sandwich board he makes me wear like a sleeveless wooden tunic around town to advertise the tribal museum.

I enter a wide hallway, which runs the length of the building. The cultural resource library is on the left; the museum is on the right. A sign directs museum visitors to check in with the receptionist at the library across the hall.

“Aaniin,” I greet the receptionist. “Perry Firekeeper-Birch reporting for work.”

The sour-faced lady makes a show of looking at her watch.

“You’re early.” She says it as if I’m three hours late.

I smile and peer at her name tag. “Won’t happen again, Miss Manitou.”

The receptionist picks up the phone handset, presses a button, and monotones, “She’s here.” After a moment, she hangs up without so much as a baamaapii.

“He’ll meet you in the museum. Wait at the door until I buzz you in.”

“Mino giizhigat,” I say, wishing her a good day.

She responds with “Hmph.”

“Hey, um ... Miss Manitou? I need a minute before you unlock the door. I’ll be right back.” Without waiting for her response, I dash out of the building.

There is a tiny park next to the administration building. I find a cedar bush behind a bench. I whisper a prayer and offer the semaa from my pocket before breaking off two flat sprigs from the bush. Giizhik offers protection and strength. I kick off my sneakers, place the medicine on the insoles, and gently slide my feet back in. Now I’m ready.

“All set,” I call out while standing at the museum entrance.

A buzzer goes off, and I hear the tiny click of an electronic lock being disengaged. I’ve been here for field trips, but never with the lights off. The spooky lobby spans the width of the space. One archway leads visitors to follow a winding U-shaped path through the museum before exiting through another archway at the other end of the lobby. Gift-shop shelving runs the length of the wall between the two arches.

I use the flashlight on my phone to check the admissions desk for any notes my supervisor might have left for me. Seeing none, I start on the path to the exhibits. The first room is round, with seating along the perimeter. In the center of the room is a thick, dark column extending from floor to ceiling. My sneakers interrupt a barely visible red laser light across the threshold. The motion detector activates the first exhibit—our creation story. The domed black ceiling becomes a night sky filled with twinkling pinprick lights. The column is actually an LED cylinder screen, now displaying a realistic-looking campfire surrounded by rocks and with

wisps of smoke rising to the sky. A crisp drumbeat reverberates around the space. An Elder's voice speaks first in Ojibwemowin and then in English.

Does Cooper Turtle expect me to walk through all the exhibits?

Rather than continue, I return to the museum entrance. I'd ask Miss Manitou if Cooper mentioned a specific meeting spot, but she doesn't seem the helpful type.

Light from the end of the exhibit spills into the far end of the lobby. Someone must have turned it on a moment ago or I'd have noticed before. I follow the light like a moth.

Since the museum tells our story from past to present, the final section is about how—today—we are a bridge between our ancestors and those still to come. Examples of contemporary art are next to older pieces to show the inspiration from previous generations.

The large room has recessed lights on their dimmest setting. Across the room, a single spotlight shines on a dozen black ash baskets on top of a display case across the room.

I make my way toward them. My breath quickens at the largest basket in the center, directly beneath the spotlight. Something about the shape is familiar. It calls to me.

Nokomis Maria's weaving technique was as unique as her fingerprint. My maternal great-grandmother used flower petals to create vibrant dyes for the thin strips of ash splints. She layered two different colored strips to use as a single accent ribbon twisted into a curl between each weave. The second color peeked from inside each curl.

Trembling, I approach the display case.

Nokomis signed baskets with her name, the year, and a symbol for the month. A maple leaf with a liquid drop symbol, for example, meant Ziisbaakodoke Giizis, the Sugar-Making Moon.

I glance around the room, suddenly crept out as if I am being watched. There's no sign of Cooper. I reach for the basket, needing to see my great-grandma's signature.

"Do. Not. Touch," says a gravelly voice.

I spin around. My heart races.

"Mr. Turtle?" I call out, looking for Kooky Cooper. There is no reply. I scan for security cameras and speakers. After a moment, I turn back to the display case. Keeping my hands behind my back, I lean closer to inspect the inside of a curl.

Something beneath the basket catches my eye. A hand. Inside the long glass case. Attached to a brown arm. I step back to eyeball the full-length statue inside

the case.

It blinks.

“What the fuck!” I shriek.

Cooper Turtle rolls out of the coffin-size display case, its back panel lifted like an old garage door, and lands in a heap behind the case. His laughter is a wheezy *heh-heh-heh-heh* that goes on so long I wonder if he’s having an asthma attack. He waves me away when I check on him.

“That was not cool,” I say when he finally stands up. He’s layered another shirt over his navy one. Black letters on a white T-shirt read: THIS IS A REAL INDIAN.

“I’m sorry, Little Sister.” Cooper bends over to catch his breath. He wipes tears of laughter from his eyes. “I couldn’t resist. You know why?” His pause is a single beat. “When I was born, my ma got real sick. She didn’t have any sisters or cousins nearby. So, my dad gave me to a Zhaaganaash lady to nurse. I fed from her till my mom got better. Years later, I met my wife’s relations at a family reunion, and her aunt said I was the Indian baby she saved from starvation.”

I have no words. But Cooper? He’s just getting started.

“Everything is connected, Little Sister. The past. The future. The beginning and ending. Answers are there even before the question. You’re supposed to go back to where you started. And if you step off the path, you better keep your eyes wide open.”

I want a different job.

★ ★ ★

My first assignment is to clean the outside of every glass case in the museum. Cooper demonstrates on the display case he used for pranking me.

“Start with a clean cloth. Spray the cloth, not the glass.” He pulls a microfiber cloth from the pile in a laundry basket and sprays from a bottle of purple glass cleaner. “You want to wipe back and forth on the inside but wipe in a circular motion on the outside. That way if you see a streak, you’ll know which side of the glass it’s on.” He provides a way to remember. “Inside—straight lines like a cage or a jail cell. Outside—swirls like clouds.”

Cooper motions to the laundry basket. I grab a cloth and accept the purple spray bottle he hands me. He puckers his lips to point toward the next glass case. I get started, mimicking his swirling motions.

“That’s it, Perry-san. Wax on. Wax off.” He cracks himself up quoting from the *Karate Kid* movie. His laugh is the same *heh-heh-heh-heh* as before, minus the wheezing.

My new boss leaves me in the large exhibit room. He must reach a light panel somewhere, because a shock of bright light fills the place. There's probably a hundred display cases.

I want—no, I *need*—a different job.

★ ★ ★

I know the exact instant my lunch break begins. Dropping the cleaning cloth in my hands, I make like a bank robber and flee the building.

“Hoolaay,” Pauline exclaims from the park bench. “That eager for lunch?”

I halt. Eager? Yes. For lunch? Chi gaawiin. Big no.

Pauline rises. After a quick glance toward the building, she rubs a finger behind her ear.

“What’s up?” I ask as she looks at the brick wall again.

“Um ... Tribal Council bought us lunch, and...” Her hand remains at her ear.

Why is she getting worked up about lunch?

It dawns on me a second later. She doesn't mean *us* as in her and me. Tribal Council is treating their interns. Pauline feels guilty about not joining me for lunch.

“No worries,” I say easily.

“I could sneak a sandwich out to you,” she offers.

“Nah. I got something I need to do, hey?” Her brow furrows, so I add, “It’s all good, Egg.” Her face brightens. “Talk later,” I yell while continuing down the sidewalk.

I dodge tourists meandering by the many gift shops across from the Soo Locks. The sunshine feels warm against my neck, but I can't savor it. It doesn't take long to reach one with a HELP WANTED sign in the window. Catching my breath, I check out my reflection in the glass. My single thick braid falls over one shoulder. I swat something dive-bombing my head before practicing a toothy smile. I'm glad Mom made me change my shirt this morning. Wearing a MERCILESS INDIAN SAVAGE T-shirt would not have created the best first impression while job seeking.

Every surface of the store is covered with tchotchkes for tourists. Mugs, photo frames, and hand towels feature the Mackinac Bridge, freighters, bears, or fish. Oversized cribbage boards are hand-painted with mosquitos and the header OFFICIAL MICHIGAN STATE BIRD.

I stand at the checkout counter for a long minute before the store lady makes eye contact.

“Hi. My name is Perry and I’m interested in working here. I’m available right away.” I smile the same way that Pauline looks at her teachers.

“We already hired someone.” Her eyes do not match her polite words.

Oh, so it’s like that, I say in my head.

Pauline’s voice chimes in. *It’s not always about skin color.*

“Would you like me to take down the sign from the window?” I offer in a syrupy voice that crystallizes into something gritty between my teeth.

Her cheeks go scarlet. I don’t bother waiting for her to stumble over an excuse.

Back on the sidewalk, I take a deep breath and continue walking. The next HELP WANTED sign is in an ice cream shop window. I recognize the employees as some of my former classmates. They would vouch for hiring Pauline, but not me.

Turns out that fighting back when kids call you any number of racial slurs in the school hallway gives you a reputation as someone to avoid. Posing as my well-liked twin is not an option either. We may have started out identical, but, according to Mom and Pops, sixteen years of my living life “full throttle” has left visible distinctions. My left eyebrow is nicked by a scar. At nine, I hid a broken pinkie so well that by the time anyone found out, my fingertip had healed at an odd angle. Basically, my body is a road map of adventures that my more cautious twin has avoided.

I stop by the front office of a nearby motel. It’s one of the few that hasn’t been torn down and is now considered retro cool. The sign reads NEW OWNERS instead of HELP WANTED, but it’s worth a try. I ask the scruffy-looking boy if I can talk to the manager about a job.

“How old are you?” His abnormally deep voice is unexpected. I thought he was younger than me, though it’s hard to tell with light brown hair obscuring everything above his shoulders.

I answer, “Sixteen.”

“Dude,” he says. “They don’t hire minors.”

“To clean rooms?” I raise my scarred eyebrow.

“Juvenile records don’t show up on a background check.”

“But I don’t have a record.”

“Congrats.” He claps his hands unenthusiastically.

Well, shit and strike three. I check the time. If I run, I can get a sandwich and make it back to the museum.

I decide to mess with him. “Hold up. *You* passed a background check?”

He laughs, which sounds more like rumbling thunder.

“They don’t hire smart-asses either,” he says.

I call over my shoulder when I reach the door, “Sure looks that way to me.”

★ ★ ★

Mom pulls up in front of the park bench where I’ve been since 5:01 p.m. and Pauline only just arrived.

“Ambe.” She motions for us before pointing to her watch. “Wewiib.”

The ferry leaves the mainland on the quarter hours, so we either hurry to make the 5:15 or drag ass and end up on the 5:45. I intend to be fishing by then.

I take the front seat. Not only is it my normal turn, but it’s three feet closer, and I hurt all over from hours of cleaning glass. Reaching for the door handle, every muscle burns.

“Gichiwipizon.” Mom reminds us to put on our seat belts while running a yellow light.

Pauline launches into a recap of every super-awesome thing Tribal Council had them do.

“We spent all morning in a talking circle, listening to each Tribal Council member tell stories. We each had to answer questions about ourselves, but they did it like a game show. Oh, and guess what!” she says, without waiting for us to guess. “Four Tribal Council members each get to select an intern to shadow them. Since I’m the only high school student, I probably won’t get selected by any of the Executive Council members. I hope I get Wendy Manitou. She travels to Washington, DC, all the time for public hearings. But she’d probably pick one of the prelaw interns. Mom, who do you think will pick me?”

I do my best to tune out the discussion. My plans are to change clothes and grab my backpack, tackle box, and pole. The best spot for yellow perch is the shallow water along the north shore, about a half mile from our property. Plenty of grasshoppers, minnows, and wigglers around for bait. I can fish all evening.

“Earth to Perry,” Mom says with a laugh. “I asked how your day went.”

“I spent eight hours cleaning glass displays,” I grumble, leaving out the job-hunt part.

★ ★ ★

Mom turns into our half-circle driveway. Elvis Junior, tail wagging, dashes toward the SUV. Pops sits on the front steps next to a small boy enjoying a homemade lemon ice.

“Oh, I forgot,” she says. “Daunis is hoping one of yous can play with Waabun. She needed to run an errand and didn’t want him in the car for three hours when he

could be outside.”

Our little cousin is chill and enjoys fishing. But bringing him along changes how much I’m able to relax. Waabun is a five-year-old who is too quick and quiet for his own good. He’s taken off before without a sound.

On the other hand, doing a favor for Auntie might help make amends for the Jeep.

“Hey, Waab, race you to the monkey bars,” I shout.

In a flash he’s halfway to the enormous jungle gym and tree fort spanning several trees at the edge of the front yard. Waabun bypasses the castle-like tree fort and heads to the woods. His single braid of dark brown hair bounces rhythmically against his shoulder blades. Junior, running next to the boy, nudges him back to the yard.

Somewhere in my rez dog’s lineage is a sheepdog ancestor.

I didn’t think it was possible for my body to feel worse than when I climbed into the SUV. Every muscle tightened during the ride home. Even hobbling over to the castle is an ordeal. But playing with my little cousin helps. He’s so quick and unpredictable that I react without thinking about how much each movement will hurt.

It takes an hour of playing to feel somewhat stretched out. After a break for dinner, I grab our fishing poles and make Waabun carry the tackle box down to the water.

★ ★ ★

There are so many things I love about my cousin. Right now, I appreciate his willingness to bait his own hook. Pauline still gets squeamish and makes me do hers.

“How did you get so good at fishing, Auntie Perry?” Waab asks as the fish I reel in spins like a ballerina. His sparkly light brown eyes are wide with awe.

I also adore his adoration.

“When I was a kwezans, even younger than you, Pops took me and Pauline fishing for the first time. She cried for the worms, even though we offered semaa to say miigwech for their lives. I kissed each worm before I put it on my hook. Pops said that was good thinking.”

Waabun gives me his full attention.

“I caught a fish right away. Pops said I had a gift. I could sit still and listen to everything. The water, wind, trees, birds, critters ... they all speak if you pay attention. They leave clues for you to figure out.”

“Does Auntie Pauline listen too?”

“She hears some things, but not everything,” I say.

“But she reads more books than you,” he points out.

I’m known for saying exactly what’s on my mind. But when I’m talking with my little cousin, I choose my words carefully. He’s a deep thinker, and I don’t want to warp him.

“Waab, books are wonderful. But so is learning directly from Gichimanidoo. Creator gave us helpers to teach us things even before books were invented. We learned from stories told from person to person. And we learned that we are helpers too. We are connected to every creature, tree, and river. Fishing teaches me that. Every time.”

I pick up another worm.

“Gichi miigwech, akii-zagaskway.” I kiss the squirming worm. “You know what I said?”

“Big thank you ... worm?”

“Yes. Earthworm. *Akii* means ‘earth.’ *Zagaskway* means ‘leech,’ a bloodsucker.” I have him say each syllable with me. “Those are the stubby worms that clamp onto your toe if you let your feet stay in the water too long.”

“Is *bloodsucker* a bad word?” He whispers the word, just in case.

“No,” I assure him. “Bloodsuckers are good helpers. Your mama taught me about its medicines. *Zagaskway* has medicine in his mouth that keeps blood from clotting. Sometimes that’s a very helpful talent to share with us. Everything and everybody has gifts to share.”

“Is your gift talking to fish?”

I laugh. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s listening to them.”

Waabun heaves a big sigh. “You’re so smart, Auntie.”

He’s still holding his rod, so I whisper something in his ear instead of squeezing him tight.

“What did that mean?” His alert eyes are the color of a fawn.

“You have my heart, Little Cousin. I am an earthworm wrapped around your little finger.”