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DAUGHTER

ANGELINE BOULLEY



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*For my parents, Donna and Henry Bouley Sr.,
and their love of stories*

I am a frozen statue of a girl in the woods. Only my eyes move, darting from the gun to their startled expression.

Gun. Shock. Gun. Disbelief. Gun. Fear.

THA-THUM-THA-THUM-THA-THUM.

The snub-nosed revolver shakes with tiny tremors from the jittery hand aiming at my face.

I'm gonna die.

My nose twitches at a greasy sweetness. Familiar. Vanilla and mineral oil. WD-40. Someone used it to clean the gun. More scents: pine, damp moss, skunky sweat, and cat pee.

THA-THUM-THA-THUM-THA-THUM.

The jittery hand makes a hacking motion with the gun, as if wielding a machete instead. Each diagonal slice toward the ground gives me hope. Better a random target than me.

But then terror grips my heart again. The gun. Back at my face.

Mom. She won't survive my death. One bullet will kill us both.

A brave hand reaches for the gun. Fingers outstretched. Demanding. Give it. Now.

THA-THUM-THA—

I am thinking of my mother when the blast changes everything.

PART I

WAABANONG

(EAST)

IN OJIBWE TEACHINGS, ALL JOURNEYS BEGIN IN THE EASTERN DIRECTION.

CHAPTER 1

I start my day before sunrise, throwing on running clothes and laying a pinch of semaa at the eastern base of a tree, where sunlight will touch the tobacco first. Prayers begin with offering semaa and sharing my Spirit name, clan, and where I am from. I always add an extra name to make sure Creator knows who I am. A name that connects me to my father—because I began as a secret, and then a scandal.

I give thanks to Creator and ask for zoongidewin, because I'll need courage for what I have to do after my five-mile run. I've put it off for a week.

The sky lightens as I stretch in the driveway. My brother complains about my lengthy warm-up routine whenever he runs with me. I keep telling Levi that my longer, bigger, and therefore vastly superior muscles require more intensive preparation for peak performance. The real reason, which he would think is dorky, is that I recite the correct anatomical name for each muscle as I stretch. Not just the superficial muscles, but the deep ones too. I want an edge over the other college freshmen in my Human Anatomy class this fall.

By the time I finish my warm-up and anatomy review, the sun peeks through the trees. One ray of light shines on my semaa offering. Niishin! *It is good.*

My first mile is always hardest. Part of me still wants to be in bed with my cat, Herri, whose purrs are the opposite of an alarm clock. But if I power through, my breathing will find its rhythm, accompanied by the swish of my heavy ponytail. My legs and arms will operate on autopilot. That's when my mind will wander into the zone, where I'm part of this world but also somewhere else, and the miles pass in a semi-alert haze.

My route takes me through campus. The prettiest view in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, is on the other side. I blow a kiss as I run past Lake State's newest dorm, Fontaine Hall, named after my grandfather on my mother's side. My grandmother Mary—I call her GrandMary—insisted I

wear a dress to the dedication ceremony last summer. I was tempted to scowl in the photos but knew my defiance would hurt Mom more than it would tick off GrandMary.

I cut through the parking lot behind the student union toward the north end of campus. The bluff showcases a gorgeous panoramic view of the St. Marys River, the International Bridge into Canada, and the city of Sault Sainte Marie, Ontario. Nestled in the bend of the river east of town is my favorite place in the universe: Sugar Island.

The rising sun hides behind a low, dark cloud at the horizon beyond the island. I halt in place, awestruck. Shafts of light fan out from the cloud, as if Sugar Island is the source of the sun's rays. A cool breeze ruffles my T-shirt, giving me goose bumps in mid-August.

"Ziisabaaka Minising." I whisper in Anishinaabemowin the name for the island, which my father taught me when I was little. It sounds like a prayer. My father's family, the Firekeeper side, is as much a part of Sugar Island as its spring-fed streams and sugar maple trees.

When the cloud moves on and the sun reclaims her rays, a gust of wind propels me forward. Back to my run and to the task ahead.



Forty-five minutes later, I end my run at EverCare, a long-term care facility a few blocks from home. Today's run felt backward, peaking in the first mile and becoming progressively more difficult. I tried chasing the zone, but it was a mirage just beyond my reach.

"Mornin', Daunis," Mrs. Bonasera, the head nurse says from behind the front desk. "Mary had a good night. Your mom's already here."

Still catching my breath, I give my usual good-morning wave.

The hallway seems to lengthen with each step. I steel myself for possible responses to my announcement. In my imagined scenarios, a single furrowed brow conveys disappointment, annoyance, and the retracting of previous accolades.

Maybe I should wait until tomorrow to announce my decision.

Mrs. B. didn't need to say anything; the heavy scent of roses in the hallway announces Mom's presence. When I enter the private room, she's gently massaging rose-scented lotion on my grandmother's thin arms. A fresh bouquet of yellow roses adds to the floral saturation level.

GrandMary's been at EverCare for six weeks now and, the month

before that, in the hospital. She had a stroke at my high school graduation party. Visiting every morning is part of the New Normal, which is what I call what happens when your universe is shaken so badly you can never regain the same axis as before. But you try anyway.

My grandmother's eyes connect with mine. Her left brow raises in recognition. Her right side is unable to convey anything.

"Bon matin, GrandMary." I kiss both cheeks before stepping back for her inspection.

In the Before, her scrutiny of my fashion choices bugged the crap out of me. But now? Her one-sided scowl at my oversized T-shirt feels like a perfect slap shot to the top shelf.

"See?" I playfully lift my hem to reveal yellow spandex shorts. "Not half-naked."

Halfway through her barely perceptible eye roll, GrandMary's gaze turns vacant. It's like a light bulb behind her eyes that someone switches on and off arbitrarily.

"Give her a moment," Mom says, continuing to smooth lotion onto GrandMary's arms.

I nod and take in GrandMary's room. The large picture window with a view of a nearby playground. The dry-erase board with the heading HELLO! MY NAME IS MARY FONTAINE, and a line for someone to fill in after MY NURSE. The line after MY GOALS is blank. The vase of roses surrounded by framed photographs. GrandMary and Grandpa Lorenzo on their wedding day. A duo frame with Mom and Uncle David as praying angels in white First Communion outfits. My senior picture fills a silver frame engraved with CLASS OF 2004.

The last picture taken of the four of us Fontaines—me, Mom, Uncle David, and GrandMary—at my final hockey game brings a walnut-sized lump to my throat. I went to sleep many nights listening to Mom and her brother laughing, playing cards, and talking in the language they had invented as children—a hybrid of French, Italian, abbreviated English, and made-up, nonsensical words. But that was before Uncle David died in April and GrandMary, grief-stricken, had an intracerebral hemorrhagic stroke two months later.

My mother doesn't laugh in the New Normal.

She looks up. Her jade green eyes are tired and bloodshot. Instead of sleeping last night, Mom cleaned the house in a frenzy while talking to Uncle as if he were sitting on the sofa watching her dust and mop. She

does this often. I wake up during those darkest hours, when my mother confesses her loneliness and regrets to him, unaware that I am fluent in their secret language.

While I wait for my grandmother to return to herself, I retrieve a lipstick from the basket on the bedside table. GrandMary believes in greeting the day with a perfect red smile. Gliding the matte ruby over her thin lips, I remember my earlier plea for courage. To know *zoongidewin* is to face your fears with a strong heart. My hand twitches; the golden tube of lipstick a jiggling needle on a seismograph.

Mom finishes with the lotion and kisses GrandMary's forehead. I've been on the receiving end of those kisses so often that an echo of one warms my own forehead. I hope GrandMary can feel that good medicine even when the light bulb is off.

When my grandmother was in the hospital, I kept track of how many times she blinked during the same fifteen-minute window each day. Mom didn't mind my record keeping until she noticed the separate tally marks for LIGHT BULB ON and LIGHT BULB OFF. The overall number of blinks hadn't changed, but the percentage of alert ones (LIGHT BULB ON divided by total blinks) had begun to decrease. My mother got so upset when she saw my tally that I keep the blink notebook hidden in GrandMary's private room now, bringing it out only when Mom isn't here.

It happens. GrandMary blinks and her eyes brighten. LIGHT BULB ON. Just like that, her focus sharpens, and she is once again a mighty force of nature, the Fontaine matriarch.

"GrandMary," I say quickly. "I'm deferring my admission to U of M and registering for classes at Lake State. Just for freshman year." I hold my breath, anticipating her disappointment in my deviation from the Plan: Daunis Lorenza Fontaine, MD.

At first, I went along with it, hoping to make her proud. I grew up overhearing people whisper with a sort of vicious glee about the Big Scandal of Mary and Lorenzo Fontaine's Perfect Life. I pretended so well, and for so long, that her plan became my plan. Our plan. I loved that plan. But that was in the Before.

GrandMary fixes me with a gaze as tender as my mother's kisses. Something passes between my grandmother and me. She understands why I had to alter our plan.

My nose tingles with pre-cry pinpricks from relief, sadness, or both. Maybe there's a word in *Anishinaabemowin* for when you find solid

footing in the rubble after a tragedy.

Mom rushes around the bed, pulling me into an embrace that whooshes the air from my lungs. Her joyful sobs vibrate through me. I made my mother happy. I knew I would, but I didn't expect to feel such relief myself. She's been pushing for me not to go away to college, even encouraging Levi to pester me about it. Mom pleaded with me to fill out the Lake State admissions form back in January as a birthday gift to her. I agreed, thinking there was no way anything would come to pass. Turns out, there was a way.

A bird thuds against the window. My mother startles, releasing me from her grip. I only get three steps toward the window when the bird rises, fluttering to regain equilibrium before resuming its journey.

Gramma Pearl—my Anishinaabe nokomis on my Firekeeper side—considered a bird flying into a window a bad sign. She would rush outside, one leathered brown hand at her mouth, muttering “uh-uh-oh” at its crooked neck before calling her sisters to figure out which tragedy was just around the corner.

But GrandMary would say it was random and unfortunate. Nothing more than an unintended consequence of a clean window. *Indian superstitions are not facts, Daunis.*

My Zhaaganaash and Anishinaabe grandmothers could not have been more different. One viewed the world as its surface, while the other saw connections and teachings that run deeper than our known world. Their push and pull on me has been a tug-of-war my entire life.

When I was seven, I spent a weekend at Gramma Pearl's tar-paper house on Sugar Island. I woke up crying with an earache, but the ferry to the mainland had shut down for the night. She had me pee in a cup, and poured it into my ear as I rested my head in her lap. Back home for Sunday dinner at GrandMary and Grandpa Lorenzo's, I excitedly shared how smart my other grandmother was. *Gramma Pearl fixed my earache with my pee!* GrandMary recoiled and, a heartbeat later, glared at my mother as if this was her fault. Something split inside me when I saw my mother's embarrassment. I learned there were times when I was expected to be a Fontaine and other times when it was safe to be a Firekeeper.

Mom returns to GrandMary, moving the cashmere blanket aside to massage lotion on a spindly, alabaster leg. She's exhausting herself looking after my grandmother. Mom is convinced she will recover. My mother has never been good at accepting unpleasant truths.

A week ago, I woke up during one of Mom's cleaning frenzies.
I've lost so much, David. And now her. When Daunis leaves, j'disparaîtrei.

She used the French word for "disappear." To fade or pass away.

Eighteen years ago, my arrival changed my mother's world. Ruined the life her parents had preordained for her. I am all she has left in this world.

Gramma Pearl always told me, *Bad things happen in threes.*

Uncle David died in April.

GrandMary had a stroke in June.

If I stay home, I can stop the third bad thing from happening. Even if it means waiting a little longer to follow the Plan.

"I should go." I kiss Mom and then GrandMary goodbye. As soon as I leave the facility, I break into a run. I usually walk the few blocks home as a cooldown, but today I sprint until I reach my driveway. Gasping, I collapse beneath my prayer tree. Waiting for my breath to return.

Waiting for the normal part of the New Normal to begin.

CHAPTER 2

Lily's Jeep screeches into the driveway. Wearing all black as usual, my best friend hops out so I can climb into the back seat. Granny June sits in the passenger seat, headscarf tied under her chin, dark brown eyes barely peeking over the dashboard. Between tiny Lily and her great-grandmother, it's a wonder either can see the road.

Lily's been my best friend since sixth grade, when she came to live with Granny June. We look like opposites, and not just because of our height difference. I am so pale, the other Nish kids called me Ghost, and I once overheard someone refer to me as "that washed-out sister of Levi's." When Lily lived with her Zhaaganaash dad and his wife, they kept her out of the sun so her reddish-brown skin wouldn't get any darker. We both learned early on that there is an Acceptable Anishinaabe Skin Tone Continuum, and those who land on its outer edges have to put up with different versions of the same bullshit.

Lily's smile is outlined in glossy black lipstick. It grows wider as she takes in my outfit—jeans paired with one of my dad's hockey jerseys extending to mid-thigh.

"Lady Daunis in her finest gown. It's my pleasure to drive thee." She bows.

I grin, and it feels like when I slip off a backpack loaded with all my schoolbooks.

"I should sit back there. Too much work for you," Granny June says, watching as I flip the driver's seat forward and wedge my nearly six-foot-tall frame into the back. "Like seeing a baby crawl back into the womb." She says this every time we both hitch a ride with Lily.

"No way, Granny June, you're the best copilot."

You do not make an Elder accommodate you. You just don't.

We often drop Granny June at the Sault Senior Center on our way to work, depending on what's for lunch. She compares the monthly menus for the two senior-citizen lunch programs, monitoring them as closely as

bingo cards during the cover-all. If Granny June thinks the Zhaaganaash are getting a better meal, she makes Lily drop her off at the Sault Senior Center downtown. Otherwise, a tribal van picks her up for the ferry ride to the Nokomis-Mishomis Elder Center on Sugar Island for lunch and social activities.

“Did ya do it?” Lily gives a knowing glance in the rearview mirror.

“Yup.”

“Did ya use protection?” Granny June says. We all laugh, and as Lily turns a corner too quickly, even her tires add a squeal.

“No, Granny,” Lily says. “Daunis told her ma and grandma about not going to U of M. It’s official ... Lake Superior State University, baby!” She does a high-pitched trill out the window, which startles a few tourists on the sidewalk. Lily’s tried and failed to teach me how to lee-lee, which some Nish women do to call out an accomplishment.

Granny June turns to look at me and scowls. I wait for her to tell me to sit up straight. It’s what GrandMary would say.

“My girl, some boats are for the river and some are for the ocean.”

I think Granny June is right. I just don’t know which one I am.

Lily gives me a sympathetic look in the rearview mirror. In science, a mixture has two or more components that don’t join chemically. Like oil and vinegar. Lily knows it’s how I feel: sad about not being in Ann Arbor, yet glad to share freshman year with her. Both feelings existing separately but swirling around together inside me.

We drive past gift shops along one side of the street. The other side follows the river, where a crowd of tourists watches a thousand-foot-long freighter pass through the Soo Locks.

I remember when we went to downtown Ann Arbor and took the campus tour last fall. GrandMary’s enthusiasm contrasted with Mom’s annoying questions about crime rates. Uncle David—who rarely sided against my mother—insisted that I needed to earn my degree far from home. But to me the University of Michigan meant more than just an education. It was freedom from the gossip that has surrounded me my whole life.

Daunis Fontaine? Wasn’t her dad that hockey player, Levi Firekeeper? He was one of the few Indians from Sugar Island with potential.

I remember when he knocked up Grace Fontaine. Richest, whitest girl in town.

Didn’t he booze it up at a party on Sugar Island and crash his car with