



F*KTORY

VOL. 1

A NOVEL

For a star to be born,

there is one thing that must happen:

a gaseous nebula must collapse.

So collapse.

Crumble.

This is not your destruction.

This is your birth.

—Noor Tagouri

PART ONE

The Nebula

{ Spring }

CHAPTER ONE

MY GAZE WAS FIXED on the barrel of the gun.

The hollowness of it.

The rim of its mouth.

Chrome silver, smudged with dirty fingerprints.

Although I'd gotten used to the name-calling and the smacking around, being held at gunpoint by my own flesh and blood was a bit of a shocker. *Good ol' Frank*. My dad. The fat fuckbag. His violent ogreish demeanor was the norm. Five days out of seven, I would arrive home ten minutes too late (or early) and step into his bubble of drunkenness, ticking him off to beet-red-faced, bottle-smashing extremes for no apparent reason. Everything promised to propel the fat turd into explosions of Vesuvian magnitudes. By year fourteen I'd come to expect a lot from being on the receiving end of such combustions: bruises, black eyes, swollen lips. But I'd never expected *that*. Not once had he waved that *thing* at me. Not once a gun.

"Put him down." The words slurred out of his crooked mouth.

Him is my baby brother, Phil. One year old, his entire life ahead of him, currently unconscious in my thin arms. His gaping blue eyes rolled white, half-open, as faint seizures sporadically took over his tiny body. Phil is not prone to seizures. Phil doesn't have seizures. He's as healthy as a one-year-old can be. This was not normal. This

was Frank's fault. But I was practically being held hostage. No dialing 911, no running into the ER. Oh, no. The fat fuck had me locked at gunpoint. Sweat glistened down his unshaven fatty chin.

Phil convulsed one more time before his tensed muscles relaxed; drool dripped down his thin lower lip.

That's it, I thought. I'm saving my brother.

I took one step toward the front door, and then I heard the weapon click—Frank pulling back the slide on the automatic; the chamber loading.

By the time my right foot had made it in front of the left one, the blast had already echoed inside the cramped room, and the bullet had grazed my calf like a serrated shard on fire.

Fire.

I immediately thought of the stars.

Stars.

Heavenly bodies formed by huge clouds of dust and gas bumping into one another, getting bigger, their gravity getting stronger. Once hot enough, nuclear fusion occurs. And then a star is formed.

People are shaped in a similar way—just like stars—excessive amounts of dust and hot gas. And like stars, everyone's life has a turning point prior to their big bang. The shit show before the creation. Y'know, one of those moments that can fuck you up.

Cleopatra's was when her father named her joint regent at fourteen. Fucked-up.

Bruce Wayne's when he witnessed his parents get murdered. Fucked-up.

Charles Manson's when his mother sold him for a pitcher of beer. Fucked. Up.

Not to mention "Helter Skelter."

What is life but a fucked-up factory fabricating fuckups?

That, right there—bullet kissing my skin, me painfully attempting to maintain my balance while holding on to Phil—is my life. An intricate cornucopia of fucked-up. A full-on fuckathon. Every second. Every minute. Every hour.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. There was a time before the bullet, a time before Phil in my arms, a time before Frank's attempt at infanticide. A time before the drug. A time before Lumen.

Twenty-four hours.

One thousand four hundred 'n' forty minutes.

Eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds.

Rewind.

Go.

Ladies and gentlemen, sit back, relax.

Welcome to my fuckshow.

Everyone trusts a little girl. Fine, *almost* everyone. Fourteen, four foot ten, innocent smile—what's there not to trust? Dressed with a badge-encrusted sash and a tote bag overflowing with Samoas and Tagalongs, I easily blended in with all the other sun-kissed and primed Girl Scouts running around, knocking on strangers' doors like a Jehovah's Witness. Except I wasn't. Far from it. The only thing I had in common with a Girl Scout™ was that we were both in the sales business—both pushed to sell by our loving parents; my lard-tub father in my case. Of course the goods were different. They sold sugar; I sold *other* drugs. We both fed off addicts. I learned this when I was eight at a school-fair competition. Every student had a lemonade stand. We'd been promised that the student with

the most sales would win a bag of candy—*sugar*; they start them young. At first I wasn't doing very well. I quickly realized my stand wasn't as *nice* as the other kids'. I had no money. I quickly learned I had to adapt, forage, and outsmart them. The second day at the fair, I had a little something *extra* to destroy the competition. I've been surrounded by pills my entire life. Back when Frank was a small-time player (before the heroin, before the cocaine, before the ketamine), he moved buckets of barbiturates, low-key prescription drugs (the usual suspects: Xanax, Klonopin, Oxy, Valium, Vicodin) and—which was greatly popular back then—Ecstasy. I had Ecstasy. At eight years old I had no idea what the pill did; I just knew folks left and right kept coming back for it. So I snagged a few pills and crushed them into the lemonade. Genius, I know. The moment the first curious buyer bit, the tables were turned, and I had a line down the block. Luckily for me, there wasn't enough in the lemonade to raise any flags—just the right amount to get those happy-go-lucky parents hooked. That day, an entrepreneur was born.

Fast-forward.

T-minus twenty-four hours to the bullet grazing my leg.

The countdown begins.

At first I didn't believe the guy. He sat under a droning fluorescent light, tearing through his second box of Girl Scout cookies. It took me less than five seconds to profile him: he was at least twice my age, tall, wiry, had sweat seeping through his undershirt and bleeding through the one-size-too-large tweed jacket. He sat across from me, nervous. I'm sure I was his first sale. That's why he got the little girl. She's probably an easy target, he thought. That's usually how it goes. Present myself as vulnerable; turn myself into bait.

I'm good at reading people. They say you should always look for the best in others—I don't. I go straight for the meat. I look for the worst. It's easier that way.

Regardless of how seedy the transaction had been developing so far—shady part of Brooklyn; back hallways of a club; dim-lit, makeshift office, which resembled a broom closet... the usual drug-deal setup, which in a perfect world would've meant “legit” and “trustworthy”—I refused to believe anything the man in the tweed jacket was saying. I didn't believe the drug did what he said it did. The product hadn't officially reached the streets yet. It was a bunch of *he-said, she-said*—the drug that everyone had heard of and no one had witnessed. A synthetic drug engineered in high-tech labs, top facilities hidden underground. It didn't even have a name. I'd heard every single rumor, but I still didn't believe. The sweaty man in the jacket said he would show me. Leaving the blanket of flickering lights crowning us, he approached a young man. At first I saw only the back of his messy head. Sinking in a beanbag, his glazed eyes stared at a TV screen in front of him: Sunday-morning cartoons with no audio—his attention drifting, both looking and not looking. Was he aware of his surroundings?

Mr. Tweed Jacket removed a small, metallic white vial from his pocket and removed the cap: a needle—a portable injectable. The vial was plain, except for a faint and tiny hexagon branded on its surface.

“Each vial has about eight doses, give or take,” he said. Then, with a shaky hand, he injected the comatose young man on the neck. Nothing much happened at first. Glued to the beanbag, the guy blinked a couple of times and exhaled deeply. Then, without raising his arm, the tips of his fingers moved. I frowned. *Is this a joke?* Mr.

Tweed Jacket turned to me, holding out his hands, begging me to wait. So I waited. Turns out, I didn't have to wait much longer.

Following the rhythm of the young man's fingertips, a tennis ball lifted off the ground and hovered slowly midair, spinning on the spot. My jaw dropped. Mr. Tweed Jacket had been telling the truth. The drug worked. And just with a tiny prick.

I approached the tennis ball and moved my hand around it, verifying this wasn't some kind of trick. *No strings*. I wanted to reach out and grab it, but it dropped before I did. I turned. Beanbag guy was looking at me, but I wasn't able to read his expression through his bloodshot eyes. Perhaps he was screaming for help. Perhaps my presence hadn't even registered.

Standing before him, I was finally able to get a good look at the guy. His torn sleeveless shirt exposed a black-and-white tattoo on his chest; a hexagon orbited by six smaller hexagons. *Quaint*. His long skinny arms—the left one covered with intricate and vibrant geometric tattoos—were plagued with red dots frequented by drug-infused needles; what else were they shooting up his arms? An IV fed a transparent liquid from a bag into a vein.

“What's that?” I asked Mr. Tweed Jacket.

“Morphine. Helps enhance the effect while using less to achieve the same result. A little secret for test subjects. That way we keep the test doses low, y'know? Not gonna lie, it also helps that he's young. The juice seems to have a stronger effect with developing subjects.”

I turned to Mr. Tweed Jacket, intrigued by this surprising bit of knowledge.

“I'm quite the science enthusiast myself.” He chuckled. “But it's valuable information. I've only used a mere quarter of a dose on him. That way I don't waste more of the juice.”

“What would happen if you gave him more?”

He shrugged. “Crazy stuff, I s’pose. It’s still in the beta testing phase. But no matter,” he added, “this lil’ bugger is cruising through space.” As if to confirm this, he slapped the young man’s cheek a couple of times. He was a breathing corpse. His eyes were sunken in, resting over bags as big as plums. A faded strand of green-and-purple hair draped over his face, glued to his forehead with sweat. A Mohawk made way to the back of his otherwise bare scalp. The light of the TV bounced off his olive skin. He was young. Younger than what I had initially thought—maybe a few years older than me. *What brought him here: slouched on a beanbag, injected day and night like a lab rat?* Had he been pulled from somewhere? Snatched? From a different country perhaps? Well-dressed man telling you he has a job for you in America (“The land of dreams! Of opportunity!”), paying for your ticket, putting you up... Next thing you know, you wake up shackled to a bathtub without a kidney—or in this case, attached to a morphine drip—you know how it goes.

Drool dribbled down his inert lips. I wiped it off with his shirt almost instinctively. Babysitting habits. His purplish eyes turned to mine. *He’s aware.*

“See? It works,” Mr. Tweed Jacket said, oblivious of Mohawk guy’s glare.

It worked, all right.

And he wanted a ridiculous amount of money for it. That’s the part where he thought he was going to take advantage of me; outsmart the little girl. Except by that point in the transaction, he had already bitten the bait: he’d gorged an entire box of Samoas. Sugar addict; figures. To each his own.

I told him I wanted a dozen vials. Of course I didn’t have the

money, but he didn't know that. His face lit up instantly; yes, I was his first sale—no doubt about it. And for a dozen vials, that's a lot of green buck. I had to keep the transaction going. Just a few seconds longer. He hoisted up a large suitcase—looked more like a chrome toolbox—dropped it on the table, and inputted a serial code onto the single LDS screen.

Sweat beads crawled down his forehead and trickled down his cheeks before dropping like engorged raindrops onto the desk. *It's working.* He blotted the dampness off his face with the back of his hand. Then his stomach roared; a deep, visceral churning sound. His eyes widened as he released a faint gasp. *Almost there...*

Meeting my deadpan gaze, as if about to ask for help, he suddenly got up and squirmed out of the room without saying a word.

Gotcha.

His echoing footsteps grew quieter and quieter until it was back to complete silence. I zeroed in on the clock on the wall: Hello Kitty face. A bit past midnight.

I pulled a crumpled laxative box from my pocket. The instructions on the label were very clear: *"For full effect, wait fifteen minutes."* That was for a single dose. The box had five. *"For faster results, increase dosage."* I was on a schedule.

My mind wandered into the steaming pits of gastrointestinal havoc. *Five doses for a single cookie box.* And he'd eaten the entire box in one sitting. Good thing I wasn't able to hear the fireworks.

Spinning the chrome suitcase on the table, I faced it with anticipation. The latch was open. Perfect timing. Pushing the lid up, the suitcase's contents were revealed. Endless rows of metallic white vials adorned the inside. *This must be what a normal kid feels on Christmas.*

I carefully removed the vials, one by one, and packed them with ease inside the empty cookie box. I know, shameful. But I am not a thief. I may bump up the prices every now and then—stuffing capsules with fillers—but I don't steal. Yet in that moment, my actions were completely out of character. I was desperate. Even though his back was turned to me, I knew Mohawk guy sensed what I was doing; don't ask me how. Part of me felt sorry for him, felt somewhat responsible—as if it were my duty to get him the hell out of that place. But then I thought: *If he wanted to leave, he would've done so already...right?*

Right.

Swoooooosh! I was out the door; girl on roller blades, whizzing through. Mr. Tweed Jacket was sure to receive a serious beating—if not worse—for this. Did I feel bad? No. I didn't allow myself to go there. There was no point. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. Always be in control of a situation, no matter how small you are, no matter how big the other guy is. Always aim for control. That's how you survive. It was, after all, survival of the fittest.

T-minus twenty-two hours.

As I hid the cookie box-slash-vials container behind a vent under my bed—the only secret spot in the clusterfuck shit hole I have the joy of calling *home*—I spotted my rusty biscuit tin not too far into the vent, just where I had left it. I've saved money ever since I can remember. Part of me always knew that having enough meant leaving this hell behind. When I was eight, I used to sleep with five dollars in change under my pillow. All nickels and quarters. I wasn't able to fall asleep otherwise. It just made me feel... *safe*. Coins

eventually became bills. I stopped hiding them under my pillow when I was ten—the day I found the vent behind my bed. My piggy bank. Even then I remember thinking: *How do I escape this ogre before he eats me?*

Flipping through the contents in the rusty biscuit tin—wads of wrinkly cash—I quickly realized it wasn't enough to GTFO (*Get. The. Fuck. Out.*). I needed more. I was hoping my new precious acquisition would do the trick. I'd start selling tomorrow night, venturing toward the outskirts of Manhattan, veering as far away as possible from those (surely by now incredibly pissed) drug dealers. *Must stay away from their turf.* And then—with money in my pocket—my plan was to leave. Leave this nightmare behind.

Dawn's rays spilled through the tiny window grazing the room's ceiling. You'd swear this was designed to be someone's closet. Getting claustrophobic, I walked out. In the living room, I peered over Phil's crate. He slept soundly with his purple teddy bear, Mr. Stitches—I named him that due to the big stitch taking over his left eye. That's how you knew Mr. Stitches hadn't had a pleasant childhood. The scars of life, man.

Phil purred peacefully in his sleep. I grimaced. Peace sprouted out of ignorance. He was obviously unaware of the rotten pit he lived in: a beaten-down hotel room with no real furniture, just an uneven kitchen table crowded with cocaine bags separated into kilos and a fridge that never stopped humming; a fridge overstuffed with beer bottles and beer cans—and the occasional hiding spot for Frank's drugs (I never understood why, but he'd stressed repeatedly that it was the safest place to store valued goods). Alas, home. Frank kept the TV inside his room—a chamber locked at all times, off-limits

territory. Good. Who'd want to go in there anyway?

The putrid smell of piled dirty laundry seeped through the door, simmering perpetually with hints of nicotine and booze. The pig rarely showered, and he simply did not believe in doing laundry. I once caught sight of a rat squirming out of a pair of stiff-as-a-board socks. I retched at the memory of it. At that moment, the beast slept—predictable like a Swiss train: five a.m., wake up, have six cans of beer for breakfast; six a.m., wobbly stroll around Central Park (where he got most of his druggie tips from); seven a.m., back home, sleeping the booze off. The clock on the wall read 7:15. *Good.* His booming snores bled through the scratched-up door. The paint had chipped in all the wrong places. The same could be said about the room itself: cracking molding, moldy surfaces, and a wall-to-wall carpet, which was last cleaned: never. My home was an inhospitable environment that was never graced with housekeeping. You'd think the drug cash flow would've secured us a small home in Queens or even a tiny studio in Brooklyn—I mean, Frank was no Tony Montana, but still—but the fat turd simply refused to pay rent. It was the mere principle of it. Living for free, responding to no one—no matter how shady—as long as he was getting away with it. I guess it made him feel powerful, insignificant rodent that he is. But I didn't complain. The hotel did have its magnetic charm. The juxtaposition between the exquisite cherry chestnut finishes, the intricate iron-laced floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and the crepuscular layer of dust and spiderwebs blanketing everything, was both jarring and beautiful; like a forgotten relic, stored in the back of an antique shop. Or so said this one blogger who broke into the hotel last year and snapped a bunch of pictures for his website. He may have used fancy words, but he didn't know it as well as I did. It was my own little world. A

post-apocalyptic city where all its inhabitants had up and left for no reason, leaving it all behind.

To be fair, the hotel had never opened for business. It was scheduled to have an extravagant inauguration revealing its majestic atrium and the flawless glass pyramid encasing it sometime after the *Titanic* sank. I'm not sure if they were at all related, but shortly after the iceberg ordeal, the hotel's enterprise sunk with it. Since then, there have been promises of remodeling, flipping, and even demolishing, but every plan has fallen through. Good for us, I figured. Not sure how or when Frank found this spot, but it's been our home ever since I can remember. A home devoid of life: empty rooms and silent hallways.

Phil's pacifier was lodged between his lips. I pushed his ebony hair back and kissed his forehead. He smelled like baby powder. The smell soothed my nerves. Not sure why I'm still taken aback by the baby smell—I've been taking care of him since I was thirteen. Usually the smell rubs off on me, and I end up smelling like a toddler for days.

I was exhausted, but there was no time for shut-eye. Another all-nighter. *It is what it is*, I thought. I kissed Phil again, left a warm bottle of milk by his side, swiped a bag of Oxy pills off the counter, shoved it into my satchel, and was out the door.

T-minus eighteen hours.

Like any other fourteen-year-old, at nine a.m. I was to be found in school, but that didn't mean I was in class. I *attended* school, but I was never *in* class. The principal, Mr. Hardwick, and I had a little arrangement. *Tit for tat. Quid pro quo*. Big bag o' Oxy pills for the usual price. If I threw in something extra, he looked the other way

while I sold under the bleachers. All in the name of good business.

That morning was an exception.

“What’s this?” he said, holding the pill-packed ziplock bag in his palm with as much contempt as if he were holding a cracked egg; confusion and disgust.

I was a bit light on the extra. He noticed right away.

“The usual,” I said.

He squinted, peering from under his rectangular glasses. He scratched the polished bald spot on his head and dropped the bag into a drawer before slamming it shut.

Hardwick was a royal shitpouch, but whenever it came to business, our transactions disregarded age and size. Yet the pause that followed was unusual. I remained standing by the foot of his desk as he directed his attention back to a stack of documents and pretended to read.

I cleared my throat.

“Oh,” he said. “You’re still here.”

Oh...

“Are you looking for counseling?” he continued.

“Oh, yes. Except my counselor has Benjamin Franklin’s face printed on it.”

He did a weird thing with his lips. From inside his drawer, he pulled out the bag and dropped it on his desk. I repeat: this was not the norm.

We both stared at the bag for several seconds. Then my eyes wandered... Hardwick had two American flags standing on either side behind him—framing him. Because one wasn’t enough.

“It’s a little *light*, Evelyn.” That’s what he called me, *Evelyn*; my name. I hated it.

“Bullshit.”

He didn’t move.

I didn’t have time for games. I was about to snatch the bag back, but he slammed his hand on it. “Get out.”

“Pay me.”

“You think you can bullshit me? You can’t bullshit me. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter. I’ll pay you when you have the rest.”

My blood was boiling. I needed that money. *Really* needed it. “That’s not how it works, Hardwick.”

“Tough.”

“Pay me now!”

He slammed his hands onto the desk and sprung up. “Listen to me, you little filth. I’m doing *you* a favor. You’re nothing. I pick up the phone, and you know who’s on the other line? Social services. Or even better, I can have my friend, the commissioner, pay us a visit with his drug dogs and bust squad. I have that power. What do *you* have? *Nothing*. Not even an attempt at a decent education. So unless you want to spend your teens in juvie, get the hell out of my office.”

My fists squeezed tight, my nails burying under my skin. It hurt. But he was right: I was at his mercy. I instantly thought about Mr. Tweed Jacket and how this was karma dropping by to say hello, but I was like, *Come back later*. This wasn’t karma; this was the oldest law of the jungle: the biggest, the largest, the strongest—those are the ones who survive. Not always the case (Exhibit A: Dinosaurs), but more often than not. Resigned, I turned and made way to the door.

Before I slipped out, he added: “And God bless.”

God-*fucking*-bless, all right.

*

T-minus ten hours.

I spent the rest of the afternoon at Ricky's. He spun in endless pirouettes around me as I lay glued to the ground, defeated. His room was a pretty good place to think. The classical music blasting from Ricky's crackling speakers—a piece from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, his favorite—provided with a soothing tranquility, embalming me in a warm, welcoming liquid. It allowed my mind to wander, to seek solutions.

Ricky's elasticity added an unusual grace to his movements. The fluidity of the routine transformed his limbs; they had neither beginning nor end, morphing into a continuous flow of seamless movement. Or perhaps it was due to the angle I was witnessing it from—the floor. How he moved in such a cramped space (his room was practically a closet, just like mine, except he had it barricaded with dirty clothes and sneakers), was a mystery to me. His dark curls bounced to every beat, curling back into shape after every spin. Whenever we weren't selling, and whenever Ricky wasn't dancing, we spent most of our drab after-school hours sprawled on his floor, either stuffing our minds with reality garbage television expecting to numb our brains, or—as we carelessly flunked through our own English class—reading whatever new book Ricky had picked out of a freshman NYU Literary Interpretation class. We read out loud, him one page, me the next. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Camus's *The Stranger* were among our recent favorite discoveries. We read a lot—unexpected, right? We gave Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* a shot last month. Yeah. Can I get those hours of my life back, please?

Outside, his parents argued. That's all they ever did: scream, swear, and smash dishes against the walls. I'm sure the neighbors hated it, but in those parts of Harlem, there's no trustworthy landlord to

complain to. Dishes exploded against the wall outside Riky's room, marking the beat in their own dissonant way. Yet Riky remained composed; it was always this way when he danced, when they argued; his usual expression was replaced by something more intense—more removed, as if entire worlds were locked away inside him.

“Do they ever stop?” I mumbled.

“They do whenever the planet stops spinning.”

Once the music reached its crescendo, he dropped next to me, pressing his cheek against the floor. His deep brown eyes looked into mine. “What are you going to do, E? What are you going to do?” That's what he called me: *E*. That's what almost everyone called me. Except Hardwick. Except Frank.

“Secret savings?” I replied, playing with the idea in my head.

“Will that be enough?”

I knew it wasn't. There was only one answer to this pickle. And he knew it just as well. I saw it reflecting off the glimmer in his eyes. I had to sell. Sell. Sell. Sell. Until bunions sprouted like cauliflowers.

Do I tell him about the new drug?

He used a lighter to burn a mound of tiny crystals on the bowl of a small glass pipe.

Maybe later.

Riky filled his lungs... and then released the swirly mist. I hated it when he did that. The irony of a drug dealer who hates drugs, I know.

He offered me some. I shook my head. There was a time when we used to do it together. But I like to pretend that never happened. Sometimes I make things up. Sometimes I lie. It's the only way to cope.

“There's only one answer, E,” he said between coughs.

“I know... *Sell.*”

He winced. “No, you idiot. When will you learn? You have to *leave.*”

“Leave?”

“Get out of here. Leave this city while you still can. Manhattan is too small for you. Find a bigger pond. Get away from Frank. If you keep working for him... Well, you know. No good can come out of it.”

“Yeah? And where do I go?” I asked, resting my head on my elbow.

“Miami,” he said, as if he’d been planning the getaway for months.

“*Miami?* Really? And do what?”

“Find a job, something. You’ll figure it out. You’re smart.”

“What about Phil?”

“What about him?”

“I can’t leave him with Frank. He’d be dead in less than a week.”

Riky took a moment to think about this. “And he’s safe with you? A fourteen-year-old drug dealer?”

I punched his shoulder.

“Only *I* can protect him. As soon as I have enough, we will leave. That’s a fact.”

“Take me with you?” he asked, puppy eyes on full display.

“And you thought I was leaving without you? Please, you’re stuck with me.”

“Promise?”

“I would never dream of leaving you behind. Not with *them*, anyway.”

We both lay on our backs, staring at the ceiling as more dishes scrapped the paper-thin walls.

“We are pretty fucked-up, aren’t we?” I asked.

“Could be worse.”

Indeed it could.

And it was.

T-minus twenty minutes.

It was way past nightfall when I made it back to our abandoned hotel on Beekman Street. I crawled under the usual spot on the fence, crossed the graffiti-masked Art Deco lobby, and climbed up the dark, dirty stairs. Usually by that time, Frank was passed out drunk. Which, as I saw it, was heaven. It gave me enough time to spend a few moments with Phil—feeding him, snuggling him, cradling him to sleep—before diving into the Big Apple’s after-hours scene.

As I was toying around with a price range for the mysterious power drug, I heard an eerie indistinct wail. At first I thought it was a cat. A dying cat out in the street. But it was coming from down the hallway... and growing louder with every step. It wasn’t a cat.

“*Eviieee!*” The shriek echoed.

It was Phil.

My slow-paced walk turned into a fast dash in a heartbeat. My chest was pounding, rapid breath burning inside my throat.

I don’t even remember pushing the front door open. I don’t remember walking into the bathroom. Because when I got there, everything crumbled around me. I froze. The air getting pushed in and out of my mouth was dry and bitter, like sandpaper. *What is he doing? What is Frank doing to him?*

When I caught sight of the rusty biscuit tin—*my* rusty biscuit tin, *my* savings—sitting atop the sink, I knew it was bad. He’d found it. The ogre had found it. Which meant...

The vials.

As the beast took a step back, still unaware of my presence, drowned by Phil's pained cries, I saw an object sticking out of my brother's small arm: a needle. A needle attached to a white vial.

No!

My voice was stuck in the back of my throat. I was paralyzed. My mind kept screaming, but my body refused to obey. Suddenly my muscles jolted and a rush of air burst out of my lungs. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

Frank spun around, laying his contemptuous eyes on me, brows furrowing with confusion. Pushing past him, I snagged Phil, and in a failed attempt to subdue his cries, kissed his forehead, rubbed his back, and inspected his arm.

"Oh, well look who it is. Little Ms. I-come-home-whenever-I-please."

Ignoring him, I pressed Phil against my chest, nuzzling him.

"What's this stuff anyway?" he asked as he examined the white vial.

I picked up on the slur in his voice, noticed his heavy eyes and his puffy red cheeks. He was piss drunk. He put the vial down and grabbed the biscuit tin. His eyes narrowed, and then he directed them at me.

"Saving up for Father's Day?" he asked with a grin.

It was a trap. I had to get his attention away from the rusty tin and direct it to something else that would hold his currently dazed mind.

"You want to know about the vial," I finally said.

But he didn't lower the tin.

"Is this *my* money?" he asked, his voice an octave lower.

"No."

“Then what-is-it?”

“It’s *nothing*.”

He must have detected the desperation in my voice, because he pulled out a cheap lighter and sparked a flame. “Nothing?” With his free hand, he opened the lid and raised a crumpled bill. I gulped hard. The bill got closer to the flame. He was playing with me; he wouldn’t dare. He loved money too much. My eyes were fixed on the dancing flame as it licked the green bill, creating a thin trail of smoke.

I remained composed, dying inside. I refused to give in; that’s what he wanted: a reaction. Taking a deep breath, I buried my face into Phil’s neck, whose cries had decreased significantly. That’s when Frank dropped the burning bill into the cash-filled-tin, setting off a cloud of black and gray. My head snapped back up. All my efforts—the only glimmer of hope I had to move on from this towering troll—were falling apart; dissolving into ash right before my eyes. *He’s not going to take that away from me!* I snatched the can out of his hand, dropped it into the sink, and forced the handle until a jet of sputtering water exploded on it. The bills were soaked, instantly killing the flames. A black residue mixed with the water, creating a blackish liquid, a pool of ash.

Frank yanked me by the arm and steadied his burly face inches away from mine. His breath smelled of sweat and rancid beer. Straightening up, he towered over me; seven feet of pure aggression. He pressed his nose against my head and inhaled deeply as if savoring a pleasant aroma. Then he gently stroked my hair with his fingers. I shuddered.

“You’re nothing, Evelyn. I own you. Got that?”

I nodded, terrified, eyes locked on the dirty bathroom tiles.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes, Frank,” I whimpered.

“Yes...*Daddy*. Say it.”

My nose twitched. An involuntary reaction. I couldn’t stomach the words.

“Say *it*.”

“Yes—” I paused, breathed. “*Daddy*.”

“Good girl.” After patting me on the head as one would a stray mutt, he salvaged a few of the wet dollar bills in the sink. Then he left the bathroom, making way into his cave. That’s when I noticed Phil was no longer moving. His arms: rigid. His eyes were half-closed, showing only a strip of creamy white.

“Phil?” I shook him. “Something’s wrong with him.” My voice cracked. I fished out my phone, but Frank, back in the bathroom, snatched it out of my hand.

“I need to call 911!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“He needs a doctor!”

“He’s fine.”

That’s when the seizures began: weak at first, but rapidly increasing in vigor and frequency. There was no time to lose. I bolted to the door, but Frank blocked me with his heftiness.

“Where are you going?”

“To the ER! There’s something wrong with him!”

“No, you’re not.”

“FUCK!” I swerved around him and took two long leaps, leaving him behind, inching away from the front door.

“You’re *staying*.” And then I heard the click of the safety catch. That’s when I knew it: I was being held hostage by something more

than his massive physicality. I felt it. The air was denser, as if the pressure in the room had suddenly plummeted. I turned, and there it was, the eye of the gun, staring back at me. Who would've thought? Me held at gunpoint by my own father while my toddler brother convulsed in my arms. Too many surprises in a day, and being held at gunpoint was the last thing I'd expected.

That was, of course, until he shot me.

T-minus zero.

My calf burned as if it had just been sprinkled with acid and pricked with glass. No matter how hard I struggled, how hard I kicked. Frank ripped Phil out of my arms and threw me into the bathroom. *Click!* The door locked behind me. I banged at the door only briefly—Frank had already blasted the TV's volume, and who else was going to hear me? The rats and cats living in room 1314? Being loud wasn't going to get me anywhere.

I took a peek at my calf; it was bad, but not too serious. The bullet had only grazed my skin. Besides, that wasn't my biggest worry. I was terrified as to what would happen to Phil. I felt helpless. I surveyed the compact room. No windows, of course, just a small rectangular vent that led to a pitch-black shaft that cut through the building for ventilation. I climbed on the toilet seat to get a closer look. What options did I have? Crawling out of the vent and climbing up the shaft, hoping to reach another vent, didn't sound too promising; unless I was planning on growing a pair of wings or developing flying superpowers, because the leap was going to, without a doubt, leave me at the bottom of the shaft, broken bones and all. There had to be another way. I searched through my satchel: nothing but lint and a small makeup kit.

While doing another quick scan of the bathroom, my attention

focused on a tiny object on the sink: the white vial. *Superpowers*. A thought crossed my mind. There was no way Frank used the entire vial—*or did he?* As if grabbing onto a lifeline—Phil's life—I snatched the vial firmly and shook it by my ear. Nothing. It felt light on the palm of my hand. Still, I refused to give up. I gave the doorknob another chance, pulling on it. But just like before, it didn't budge. I hated the idea of injecting myself. *Don't shit where you eat?* But I had to draw the line somewhere. I was hoping—hoping there would be enough left to at least budge the door open. After that, I would manage without it. I held the tip of the needle against my neck, just as I had seen Mr. Tweed Jacket do to Mohawk guy. My hand faltered, shaking. *What the hell am I doing?* No. *What the hell am I waiting for?* Refusing to let Phil die, I perforated my skin and pushed the plunger on the vial. A sudden shudder took over my entire body. A chill, as if my veins had suddenly been pumped with a cool liquid. There was some left, all right. Not much, judging by the rapidity of the injection, but *some*. Dizzy, I collapsed into the bathtub, pulling onto the shower curtain with my free hand. Everything spun around me.

When, all at once, my thoughts reorganized themselves with steadfast fluidity. I was lucid. I was thinking clearly. My focus was spear sharp. It was *growing* inside me.

Tucking the white vial into my pocket, I knew what had to be done. With a tilt of my head, the bathroom door magically ripped off its hinges and landed flatly on the floor. Easy. As easy as knuckle cracking. I remember thinking: *This drug is going to revolutionize the world—or destroy it.*

Drowned by the loudness inside his room, Frank hadn't heard the bathroom escape. But I wanted him to. I wanted him to *see* what I could do. So I tore down *his* door.

Startled, he leapt off his old faux-leather recliner, frozen mid-motion—he'd been trying to light up a cigar. Phil lay unconscious at the foot of his bed.

“What the hell did you just do?!” Frank roared, moving his arms around like a ticked-off Italian—flaming lighter in hand. “What the fuck did you do that for?!” he hollered, motioning toward the ripped-off door.

I guess he was too drunk to acknowledge the fact that his tiny, eighty-pound daughter had just knocked his bedroom door down.

“You are in so much trouble, you little bit—” The word was never fully completed, as Frank flew across the room, smacking his back against the wall with a *crack*; all with a simple hand gesture. To be fair, he didn't exactly *fly*—I might have been exaggerating. But he did get *shoved* against the wall with a simple hand gesture of mine, which was way more than I could've accomplished with my tiny fists.

The lighter and cigar hit the musky rug. Frank rested his hands on his knees and released a pained groan. His eyeballs were about to pop out of their sockets. Then his gaze shifted; it landed on the gun on the dresser. With one quick hand swipe, I knocked it off before he reached it. It hit the floor with a dry thud. He locked eyes with me, and then leapt across the room, once again attempting to grab the weapon, but I made it skid across the floor just as easily—away from him. I soon realized this had become a fun game I wouldn't mind playing for a while. But I wasn't familiar with the drug's effects or duration; the last thing I wanted was for the drug to wear out, leaving me exposed and vulnerable to the boiling volcano that was now Frank. I had to be quick. I had to get it done.

I led him out of the room chasing after his revolving gun and *nudged* him once again, sending him *flying* (it's my story, bug off)

across the room and into the bathroom. He landed inside the bathtub, banging his head against the tiled wall.

Exploiting his momentary blackout, I snatched the remaining—dripping wet—bills from inside the sink, and shoved them inside an old diaper bag sitting by the toilet.

“You—you—” The words slipped out of his mouth with a wheezing mumble. “You’re mm-mine.” He smirked. I had briefly forgotten about my wounded calf, but the blood trickling down my ankle acted as a quick reminder. *He shot me.* Not only that, but he’d also injected Phil with an unknown substance—tarnishing his innocent self.

Seeding, my mental grip wrapped around his fat neck. His eyes bulged as his legs kicked the air erratically. Frank deserved to die. He was a disgusting specimen of a human being: deceitful, selfish, uncaring. He would have killed me. He would have killed Phil—when the thought hit me like a rib-crushing punch in the chest: *Phil!* Caught in my own anger, I had forgotten all about him. I released the disgusting troll, grabbed the diaper bag, Phil’s baby sling, and trotted back into Frank’s bedroom, but, upon arrival, I stopped.

A small patch of flames danced playfully on the dirty rug next to the silver lighter. *Son of a bitch.* Not wasting another second, I swiped Phil, Mr. Stitches, and my phone off the bed and bolted out of the room.

The fire crackled behind me. I turned to look. *Am I going to be able to subdue it? No.* It was already too late, and it was spreading fast—up the stained curtains the orange glow went. Thick black smoke had begun to materialize. Unaware, I began to choke. We had to get out.

Before I reached the front door, I heard Frank moaning in the bathroom. I stopped. Why wasn’t I moving? *Dammit.* I turned, facing

him in the distance. I motioned toward him with my hand, but his body barely budged. I tried again but got the same results. Was I getting weaker? I took a step forward but jolted back as flames shot out of his bedroom, creating a wall of fire between us. I stood there, Phil wrapped in my arms. When, with a nasty grimace tattooed all over my face, I motioned over to the bathtub's faucet, allowing the grimy water to flow onto him with ease. Then—with some mental effort—I plugged the tub, allowing it to gently fill. To be honest, I wasn't really sure what this would accomplish. At that moment—dying toddler in my arms, firewalls blazing around me—I, for some reason, believed it would save him, or at least protect him. Because water—and fire—you catch my drift. I wasn't thinking straight. The charcoaled smoke had made my eyes teary, burning as though they'd been heavily maced. There simply was no time to think. I swung the front door open, and before I knew it, I was skipping down the stairs—three at a time—at full speed, with nothing on me but my satchel, Phil's sling, Mr. Stitches, and the diaper bag. I ran faster and faster until I was past the hotel's side door and a good three blocks down the street. Only then did I turn.

Tentacles of smoke crawled out of five windows on the twelfth floor, and two on the thirteenth. And as the sirens blared in the distance, I ran, pressing Phil tightly against my chest. I ran and I ran and I ran, and I didn't look back. Not even once.