

Capricorn's Journal: My Family's Fight for Survival

The Munchkins

Part 2

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PROLOGUE

I sat on the cold, concrete floor, looking over Kitty curled up in a tight ball, and tried vigorously to shake her awake. Just moments ago, she cried out in her sleep again, and I wanted to wake her before her fitful cries became wails of terror.

"Kitty? Kitty! Wake up! You're having another nightmare. KITTY!" I grabbed her by the shoulders and literally pulled her from her dreams. Kitty teetered upright with half-closed eyes, appearing to be in a state of momentary confusion. After a few seconds, the fog cleared her head, and her eyes clouded over with that deep haunted sorrow as she remembered where we were.

I hugged Kitty close, being very careful to avoid pressing down on the wounds on her frail body. Kitty emitted the most pitiful mewling sounds as I rocked her in my arms.

"Shh, shh," I tried to soothe Kitty feebly. "Please don't cry, Kitty." I searched my head for any possible comforting words to offer her. "Shh, it's okay."

Kitty suddenly lifted her head and looked at me with her red, tear-filled eyes. Her once pretty blonde hair now laid limply in knots, matted and dirty. "No, it's not okay, Capricorn!" she sobbed angrily. "It's never going to be okay again!"

Of course, she was right. What was I thinking trying to hand her an empty platitude like that? Dummy, "it's okay" only works if everything will eventually be okay, I silently scolded myself.

The terrifying sound of familiar footsteps echoed as Big Boss entered the room, holding an open book in one hand, and a half-eaten apple in the other. My mouth salivated for the apple, and I automatically reached out for it in aching hunger. Big Boss was entrenched in his book, never taking his eyes off it as he walked through the room. It was only after I took my focus off the apple and onto the book that I noticed what he was reading: my journal.

When we were captured, I had few belongings in my backpack, including a mostly blank mini notebook with a few written pages. Something told me it was important to document what was happening to us. I started writing our story during the time Big Boss wasn't there and tried my best to hide the journal from him when he came into the room. One day though, Big Boss caught me writing, and demanded I hand the book over. That was the last thing I wanted to do, but I was forced to give it to him under threat of severe punishment, and I figured I would never see my journal again. Big Boss took it, looked over a few pages, and smirked in a scoffing manner when he realized what it was. I pleaded with him to let me keep it, assuming it was a lost cause, but then to my ultimate shock, he agreed.

"Sure, why the hell not, it's not like you're going anywhere," he laughed, throwing the journal back at me. "One condition though, Capricorn: I get to read it."

I continued to write in the journal whenever possible and got used to Big Boss taking it to read whenever he wanted. He wasn't going to stop me from telling our story. If by some miracle we ever escaped here one day, I'd find a way to tell our story to the whole world.

Now Big Boss, his eyes still on the journal, took a bite from the apple, and stopped to read in front of our cage. Instinctively, Kitty drew as far back to the corner of the cage as she could go.

“This is very invigorating reading material, Capricorn,” Big Boss said, still reading the journal. Then he abruptly looked up at me, his mouth bursting into a sadistic smile. “So when do you get to the part where I kill the little brats?” He slammed the journal closed with a flat thwap that resounded through the basement.

Big Boss took another bite of the apple and held up the journal. “You sure do talk about Allie a lot in this thing,” he said with a ridiculing grin. “You were really close to her, weren’t ya?”

“She was my s-s-sister and my best f-friend. I-I-loved her,” I said, my voice cracking. Don’t you dare cry, I thought to myself. Not now. Not while he’s here. Wait till he’s gone. Don’t give him the satisfaction of seeing you cry.

Big Boss clasped his hand to his chest. “Oh, be still my weeping heart, Capricorn,” he mocked.

I glared at Big Boss with pure hatred. I never wished more that the phrase “looks can kill” wasn’t just an expression.

In the corner of the cage, Kitty was trying desperately to make herself as small and invisible as possible. Every day I grow increasingly concerned about Kitty. She was always the meekest of our siblings to begin with, and these days she was looking downright weak, sickly, and broken. Kitty is fading away on me, becoming a living ghost of her former self. I’m terrified Kitty will continue to dissolve, each day becoming a little less visible, until one day I’ll look over and she’ll simply be gone.

Big Boss opened the door of the cage and threw my journal at my head. It hit my nose with a hard thump and fell to the concrete. I covered my nose and was somewhat surprised to find it was bleeding. I barely noticed the pain anymore.

“Keep writing, Capricorn,” Big Boss smiled. “I can’t wait till you get to the end. That’s the best part.”

Big Boss took one last bite of his apple and looked up at us. “Here brats! Don’t say I never gave you anything.” He tossed the apple core onto the floor of the cage, and slammed the door, leaving the room.

Kitty and I dived madly towards the apple remains with ravenous longing. I reached it first and held the apple in my hand to inspect it. Big Boss ate almost all of it and there was barely any flesh left on the core. Under normal circumstances, you’d consider it garbage and wouldn’t think twice about throwing it away. Starvation will have you fighting for even the tiniest of scraps. Don’t say I never gave you anything, sure, I thought bitterly. This is what he so generously gives us. My eyes burned with tears of hatred and anguish.

Kitty was next to me, her sad brown eyes refilling with fresh tears. “Kitty,” I said. “I’ll split this in the middle so we’ll each have half. We’ll share it.” I broke the core into two pieces and pressed one of them into Kitty’s tiny hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I gnawed on my half and Kitty started eating hers. Before she even took a full bite, Kitty broke into full-blown sobs again. I couldn’t hold it in any longer either. The tears came cascading down my face like a fountain.

“Kitty,” I cried, hugging her again. “We’re going to get out of here. I’m going to find a way to get us out.”

“There is no way out of here, Capricorn!” Kitty wailed.

“I’ll find a way,” I said desperately. “Just hang on, Kitty. Just hang on a little longer.”

Kitty only answered me in broken, heartbreaking whimpers.

“Kitty,” I cried. “You have to find a way to hang on. You have to stay with me! You can’t leave me, please! You’re all I have left! I promise you I’ll find a way out of here!”

Kitty looked up at me, and at that moment she looked more like a very old woman who had lived long past her prime than a small girl. “Please don’t make promises you can’t keep, Capricorn. I can’t take anymore dashed hope.”

Kitty crawled away to eat the rest of her apple core alone, quietly weeping. I, however, was suddenly overcome with fierce rage. I hated Big Boss for what he was doing to me and Kitty. Hated him even more for what he did to our family. I *will* get out of here if it’s the last thing I do. And when I do, I’ll spend the rest of my life getting revenge and making Big Boss pay for what he’s done. I *will* get justice for my family. For all my sisters and brothers. For Chase, and Kevin, and Ryan, and Ashley, and Allie, and Breezy and Hazy...Tears welled up in my eyes again. No, stop it. You’ll make yourself cry and you need to focus. Right now, your goal is to get this story finished. *Focus.*

I found my pen on the ground, grabbed my journal, opened it up, and furiously began writing.

Chapter 1

The school day was never going to end. As 3:30 dismissal approached, I compulsively looked up at the clock, my mind racing. Recently our next-door-neighbor Big Boss crossed the threshold from simple menacing threat to pure diabolical evil. Our father, Casey Munch, or as we call him, CC, decided that morning our lives would be in danger if we stayed here one more day. As soon as school was over, we were heading to the airport and leaving the country. We were to wait at the door for CC as soon as the last bell rang.

“Hey, Cap?” Allie said, leaning over her desk. The classroom was so noisy our teacher gave up and started summer vacation early, so there was no need to whisper. “If you stare at that clock any harder, it might grow a mouth and tell you to stop looking at it,” Allie said with a little smile.

I chuckled. “I know. It’s just the longest day ever. I can’t believe it’s not 3:30 yet.”

Allie sighed. “Yeah, it’s taking an eternity. Are you worried about what’s going to happen?”

“Yes, I can’t stop thinking about it,” I answered. “I have a million questions in my head. Like where are we going to go? What are we going to do?”

Allie twisted her pencil, standing it upright on her desk. “I know. I keep thinking about where we’ll go, too.”

Breezy gave us both a reassuring smile. “CC will figure it out, don’t worry.”

“Honestly, I’m just so relieved we’re leaving. I don’t care where we go,” Allie remarked.

Allie pleaded with CC weeks ago for us to run away, but CC wasn’t planning to until this morning, when, on our last day of school before summer, we found Big Boss waiting for us as we left the house. He used our stolen powers to nearly crush us with a tree.

Hazy pointed at the clock. “Only five more minutes. Thank God.”

The bell finally rang, and we made a beeline for the door with the other students. “Have a great summer,” our teacher called after us in a half-hearted tone.

We ran down the hallway to meet the rest of our siblings in front of the main entrance. Most of them were already there.

“How did you get out of class so fast?” I asked them.

“Are you kidding? I was literally standing in the doorway, ready to bolt as soon as the bell went off,” Chase answered me.

Ryan laughed. “Ms. Woodcheck kept saying, ‘Chase, sit down’, but he just wasn’t having it.”

I smiled. “CC’s not here yet?”

“Nope, not yet,” Ryan answered.

My other siblings filed in and within minutes, all thirteen of us were gathered. Looking at them, the events of the last few weeks washed over me like a tidal wave. With the help of our gullible

sisters, Twisty and Carlie, Big Boss orchestrated a huge plot to trap all thirteen of us and steal our powers for himself. He manipulated Twisty and Carlie into thinking he was helping them and got them to convince everyone to misuse and deplete their powers. He kidnapped Kitty and used her as bait, forcing us all over to his house to save her. Just as he planned, we were all defenseless and drained of our energy, so we couldn't protect ourselves. But we were compelled to go, despite Allie's desperate warnings it was a trap, because he threatened to kill Kitty if we didn't. As soon as we got inside the room where he held Kitty, he locked us inside and gassed us. When we finally regained consciousness, we discovered we were unable to use our powers, and Big Boss revealed he stole our powers while we were unconscious. And unbelievably, he did it by taking our blood and injecting it into his veins.

The other kids ran past us as they rushed out the door cheering. Billy Braton, one of the kids who enjoyed picking on us, nearly mowed me over as he tore out the building. "Watch it, Munch freak," he growled at me, and shot out the door before Allie had a chance to shout one of her snarky comebacks at him.

Allie looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Gee, I'm really going to miss Billy Braton," she said in a droll tone. "What will we do without hearing him calling us 'the freak family' ten times a day? We just won't cope."

I grinned. "Or telling everyone to watch out the Munch freaks don't cast a spell on you."

"Yeah, he told everyone we were witches," Kitty added quietly.

Becky lifted her eyes. "So that explains why people kept coming up to me all school year asking where my broom was! I thought they were telling me to sweep the floor!"

Allie and I sputtered with laughter.

"I wish I had decked him," Twisty said. "I wanted one good shot at him before he left."

"Yeah, I second that," Kevin nodded.

"That wouldn't have accomplished anything except getting yourselves suspended," Justin pointed out.

"It would have been worth it," Kevin said. "I hate that kid."

Twisty actually smiled at Kevin in agreement.

"Where's CC?" Ashley asked suddenly. "He's late."

"Yeah, he's usually here by now," Ryan added.

"He is *always* here by now," Allie amended. She peered out the glass door of the building, searching the street for any sign of CC's van. "In fact, he's usually early. What's going on?"

"Maybe he got held up," Chase offered. "Or he lost track of time."

Allie shook her head. "No, CC wouldn't do that. Especially not today. If I know CC, he was doing the exact opposite. Watching the clock all day like a hawk."

“He’s just running late,” Breezy reassured.

Several minutes passed and most of the kids had emptied out of the building, but we were still standing in front of the door. Ashley checked her watch and announced it was 4:00. CC was now a half-hour late.

Allie anxiously paced in front of the door. “He would never be this late,” she stressed. “Not today. Not the day we’re leaving. He just wouldn’t do that.”

“Allie’s right. CC wouldn’t do this to us,” Justin affirmed. “There must have been some emergency he had to take care of.”

“A bigger emergency than the one we’re already in?” Allie questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Justin nodded. “I don’t know, but I’m starting to get very worried.”

By the time it was 4:15, the building had cleared out, and the school had the feel of a vacant ghost town. The sound of our principal’s high-heeled shoes clacking on the floor came reverberating down the hallway. She rounded the corner, coming into our view, and our presence startled her.

“The Munch children! You’re still here?” she gasped. “It’s the last day of school! Isn’t your father picking you up today?”

“He’s supposed to, Ms. Walsh, but he isn’t here yet,” Breezy answered.

“Well, it’s already quarter after four,” Ms. Walsh replied. “I was planning on closing the building soon. Would you like me to call him for you and see what’s holding him up?”

“Yes, please,” Breezy said. “Thank you.”

“Why don’t one of you come with me and we’ll call him in my office,” Ms. Walsh suggested.

“I’ll go,” Allie immediately volunteered, raising her hand.

Ms. Walsh gave Allie a quick nod. “Okay, Allison, follow me.” She led Allie down the hallway.

A heavy ball of dread formed in my stomach. CC should definitely be here. Given we had decided this morning to flee the country, we were in full-on emergency mode, and CC would’ve been anxious to pick us up and leave as soon as possible. The fact that he wasn’t here yet told me there was something very, very wrong.

Allie came back down the hall with Principal Walsh, and I instantly knew by Allie’s face they were unsuccessful in contacting CC.

“CC’s not answering his phone,” Allie told us in a benumbed tone, her face rapidly losing all color.

“Did it go to voicemail? Did you leave a message?” Kevin asked.

“Yes, I left a message,” Allie answered robotically.

Ms. Walsh gave us a reassuring smile. "Well, I'll keep trying to reach him then and hopefully he'll show up in the meantime. Is there another number besides his cell to call?"

"You can call our home phone. It's a landline," Ashley said. She scribbled the number down and gave it to Ms. Walsh.

Ms. Walsh disappeared down the corridor, and my siblings became animated in frantic conversation.

"Where is CC? Where could he be?"

"You don't think he's hurt, do you?"

"What if he got in an accident?"

"What should we do?"

Allie stood in place, her face now completely ashen. Breezy and Hazy traded worried glances, then approached Allie and me.

"Allie, don't panic," Breezy said. "There's got to be some explanation for this. CC wouldn't just disappear on us."

Allie spoke in a strangled whisper. "That's just it. He *wouldn't* disappear on us. He said his first priority is keeping us safe. He would be here if he was able to." Allie's eyes grew as wide as a frightened rabbit. "Something terrible has happened," she trembled.

The minutes ticked on and still CC didn't show up.

Ashley, being technically the oldest, slipped into leader mode and stepped in front of us. "Let's just walk home. CC has got to be there. Maybe he fell asleep."

Kitty's brown eyes went big. "But...but Ashley, what about Big Boss? CC told us not to walk home anymore. What if we run into him?"

Ashley frowned and nervously pulled on the blue watch band on her wrist. "I think we have to risk it," she said, with a shake of her dark corkscrew curls. "It's almost 4:30. Ms. Walsh said she's closing the school. Let's just go."

"Okay," Breezy nodded. "But shouldn't we tell Ms. Walsh we're leaving first?"

"No. If we do that, she might not let us leave," Ashley replied. "If we just go, she'll likely assume CC finally picked us up, and we just didn't tell her."

That reasoning made sense, so we quietly moved to the exit doors. Kevin pressed his back to the push bar on the front door, and we stepped outside onto the cement stairs, the humidity of the summer air instantly wrapping around us like a wet blanket. We descended the steps and half-walked, half-sprinted home, praying CC was there waiting for us.

The first thing we noticed when we arrived home was our passenger van in the driveway, and both the minivan and CC's car sat in the open garage. The second thing was the fallen oak tree Big Boss crashed down this morning with a lightning bolt was gone.

“Wherever CC is, he’s not driving,” Justin observed. “Maybe that means he’s here.”

“Where did the oak tree go, though?” I asked. “How can a massive oak tree just disappear so fast? Did Big Boss get rid of it with the magic?”

“He must have,” Justin said. “Unless CC had it removed, but I doubt he could do it that quickly.”

We stopped in front of our house and hesitated to move any further, afraid of what we’d find when we went in. Ashley reached into her schoolbag and pulled out a key on a silver chain. She slid the key in the lock and turned it, and we carefully entered the house.

“CC? CC?” we all called out at once.

We went from room to room, calling CC’s name over and over. We ran upstairs and searched every room, even the closets and attic. There was no sign of CC anywhere. We even searched for a note or anything that would give us a sign of where CC went, but there was nothing to be found. It was as if CC disappeared out of thin air.

We gathered in the living room together, our faces long with grave dismay.

Hazy’s soft brown eyes welled up and tears fell down her pudgy, golden cheeks. Breezy’s soulful blue eyes instantly filled with compassion for her twin sister, and she cuddled Hazy close to her. Ashley slid her arm around Kitty as tears began gliding down Kitty’s pale face.

CC was gone. And we were all alone.