

# InGENEious

A Novel by: Julie Kushner

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*To my Mom and Dad, the two most Ideal Humans I know . . .*

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## Chapter 1

Danner Nash cured cancer today . . . Not for everybody, of course . . . but, for one special somebody. And, in this life, it is the special somebodies who make all the difference.

He arrived at the Leroy household around midnight. It was the last house on his route, and the one he had been dreading the most. The Leroy family lived in one of the many basement apartments of what had once been a leather glove factory. When the factory went out of business, a few years earlier, some greedy slumlord got it in his head to make a quick profit off of the place. So, he hastily erected a few boards across the long wide expanse of space, thereby deeming it acceptable for human habitation. As a result, the apartments in Neumann Complex looked more like ill-lit office cubicles, than any place a respectable working class family would ever want to live. But the rent was cheap. And for families like the Leroy's, it was the best they could hope for, under the circumstances.

Sharon Leroy met Danner outside, awkwardly exchanging the pizza box he held in his arms for a twenty dollar bill, which the latter surreptitiously slipped into his pocket. Then, after a few hasty glances around, to make sure that nobody was watching, she silently hustled him into a small one-bedroom apartment. She and her husband lived there with their three small children, all of whom were under the age of seven. In another lifetime, Mrs. Leroy might have been considered pretty. She was in her mid-to-late twenties -- probably just a few years older than Danner, himself -- and had intense cobalt blue eyes, long ash-blonde hair, and the kind of delicate features that make women pout with envy, and men drool with desire.

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But life had been hard on Mrs. Leroy. Her cobalt blue eyes were now sunken in, framed by puffiness from frequent crying bouts, and dark circles from lack of sleep. Her hair was tied up haphazardly in a messy ponytail. And her delicate features, once deemed wispy, were now floundering on the side of gaunt. Mrs. Leroy used to share the apartment's single bedroom with her husband. But when her eldest daughter fell ill, the couple moved themselves into the living room with the rest of the children, so that Hanna could have some semblance of privacy.

"She's back here," said Mrs. Leroy, in a voice that seemed to have had all the emotion drained out of it.

Danner nodded silently, and followed Mrs. Leroy into the bedroom, bracing himself for what he was about to encounter. Hanna Leroy had her mother's eyes, which, though half-closed, peered at Danner thoughtfully from beneath the white sheets. Her skin was so white, it was nearly translucent. At age six, she had the body of three year old, and was painfully thin, with the exception of the swollen growths on the back of her neck.

As Danner approached her, Hanna began to wheeze and cough uncontrollably. This caused her younger sister, who was standing at her bed side, to grab protectively on to her hand, as she had likely done many times before. The image made Danner shiver involuntarily, conjuring for him memories of his own mother, who had died five years earlier of the same disease. Barely 18-years old at the time, and having just lost his father two years prior, Danner too spent many an evening holding his mother's hand, as if the mere bodily contact could squeeze the pain away. Danner wasn't able to save his mother back then. But he, sure as hell, was going to save Hanna Leroy, now.

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“Hanna, I want you to turn your head away from me, and look up at the ceiling,” Danner began, trying to keep his voice as even-toned and cheerful as possible. “You’re going to feel a few small pinches, and then you are going to get very cold. Your body is going to start to feel a little strange. But whatever happens, I don’t want you to turn your head or move a muscle, do you understand?”

Having endured untold amounts of pain and discomfort throughout her young life, Hanna nodded resolutely, and stared up at the ceiling without a hint of distrust or trepidation in her eyes. With one hand on Hanna’s shoulder, Danner located the growths on the young girl’s neck, one by one. Into each, he injected an individual small syringe. Each time he pressed the needle into her skin, Hanna winced ever so slightly. But, otherwise, she gave no indication of being in pain.

*She’s tough . . . tougher than I’ll ever be.* Danner thought to himself almost enviously, as he watched the clear liquid gradually drip from the syringe into Hanna’s body.

There were tons of fakes out there. Unsavory characters who bilked the poor and uneducated masses out of their life savings, only to inject them with saline, sugar water, or much worse. Danner had even heard a story about a guy who made his clients drink cat piss, claiming it cured diabetes.

But Danner Nash was the real deal. He promised cures that sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars at a fraction of the cost. And he *delivered*. But Mother Nature had to play her part too. And she was known to be quite the fickle woman . . .

The air in the small room was thick with tension, as the entire family watched, and waited. Even Radley -- the Leroy’s youngest child, at just two years old -- seemed to understand

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the importance of what was occurring, as he peered out from behind his father's leg, observing the situation from a safe vantage point.

The effect was almost immediate. A flush of color moved itself across young Hanna's face. Then, the swollen growths on her neck began to gradually decrease in size, until finally, they were nearly nonexistent. Hanna's breathing, once gasping and wheezy, became easy and gentle. She was getting better, and she knew it. She smiled serenely, as her eyes fell closed for what was going to be the best night of sleep she would have in her entire life.

Mrs. Leroy put her hand over her mouth, as happy tears fell from her face. Her husband hugged her tightly to him. Though less emotive than his wife, he was clearly crying too. "Is Hanna better now? Did he fix her?" Hanna's younger sister inquired out loud, still holding on tightly to Hanna's hand.

"Yes, honey, I think he did," her father replied softly.

Danner finally allowed himself to breathe, having held his breath the entire time his needle was in the young girl's arm. "The genetic mutation seems to have been a success," he told the family. "You'll have to keep her hydrated, and watch her for the next few days to make sure there are no adverse reactions. But by all accounts, your daughter would seem to be cancer free."

Mrs. Leroy extricated herself from her husband and threw her arms around Danner. Never much for grand shows of emotion, especially from strangers, Danner just stood there awkwardly, enduring the embrace, with an uncomfortable smile on his face. After all, he hadn't really done all that much, had he?

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“Thank you,” the young mother whispered in his ear.

Danner nodded, as he exited the bedroom, closing the door behind him, so as to give the family privacy to celebrate their little miracle. The pizza box, Danner had handed to Mrs. Leroy was lying unopened by the front door. Of course, it was empty. Exiting the Neumann complex, Danner felt exhausted, but accomplished. He had made \$300 that night, in addition to his typical day wages, rendering himself that much closer to his goal.

The funny thing about Danner Nash is that he isn't a doctor or a scientist. He's never even set foot inside a college classroom. Danner is just your average 23-year old genomist. He's also a criminal.

