

Saker

Wink at the Moon-Excerpt

Hand in hand, Dad and Josie walked to the front door, and Dr. Bennett gave Josie an envelope, which she held before her on the silent drive home. When they pulled into the driveway at Magic Street, Dad chuckled.

"Damn it all," he said. "Those Bennetts, with those eyes."

"Tell me about it," Josie said.

Mom opened Dr. Bennett's envelope and pulled out a check payable to Josephine Morgan for five thousand dollars.

That night, Josie sat out on the back porch wrapped in a blanket, training the Binolux to stare at Jupiter and beyond. She swore to all the stars, over and over, *I will* go to college, *will* study astronomy, *will* meet the first man again, *will* make Mom and Dad proud again ... Then Mom appeared, folded up next to her, and hugged her.

"We *are* proud of you, honey," she said. "We love you. You will be OK. We all will be OK. But tomorrow, you have another hard job."

Calling Rob, hearing his voice, *holy smoke, Josie, where have you been?* she squeezed her eyes as her heart tightened. The next day, after school, he picked her up when he got off work at Kroger. They didn't speak until they were in a back booth at Frisch's and the waitress had taken their orders. Rob's face grew serious.

"What's going on, Josie?"

"I'm pregnant. Bucky is the father."

She may as well have punched him in the face. He gripped the table until his fingertips whitened. Josie could feel them moving apart, red-shift Doppler effect, at the speed of light. The waitress returned with milkshakes, hollered, here ya go, kids. Rob's face now turned pink, and Josie thought he might sweep the drinks to the floor. Her every organ twisted with sorrow for hurting her boy, for breaking the key and the lock. At last, Rob choked out a question.

"Are you going to marry Bucky?"

"No. I'm going to marry you."

Rob relaxed, a decision made, and his voice turned low and hard.

"Oh, no thanks. You're a pregnant slut."

She drew in breath so quickly, it almost hurt. Now calm, Rob pulled hard on his milkshake.

"Quite a sight, aren't you, Miss Two-Time Apollo Award winner."

Josie exhaled in a rush.

"That's really mean, Rob."

"And yet, really true," he said brightly. He drank back his milkshake, threw down a five-dollar bill, got up, left without her. She sat a while longer, stunned, until the waitress came back with sad eyes. Josie fled and walked the three miles home. She found Dad tinkering in the garage.

"Mom's working late at the library, Josie-Rosie, want to order a pizza?"

She stood wordless, shivering. Dad glanced up, approached, and hugged her.

"Rob called me a pregnant slut," she wailed.

"Yeah. I was afraid of that," said Dad, kissing the top of her head. "Look, sweetie, all our lives have changed now. We're still getting our bearings."

"He didn't have to be so nasty!"

"Honey, even your dim old Dad could see that you and Rob were *in like*. Maybe Rob thought he didn't have to say, don't have sex with my best friend."

Josie wept harder. No, Rob didn't have to, and she did anyway.

"It was a mistake! Couldn't he at least try to understand?"

Dad shook his head.

“Josie, you made Rob an unknowing participant in your experiment. No informed consent. He shouldn’t have called you a name, I agree, but he can walk away. It would be a remarkable young man who could say yes to this universe.”

Once again, Dad had refocused the binoculars for her. She stood up straight, wiped her cheeks, strangely calm, seeing things clearly.

“OK,” she said.

“The good thing is, you’re through the worst,” Dad said, hugging her again, “and we Morgans keep going. Now, double cheese and sausage?”

Over the next few weeks, Mom worked the phone to find accommodation for a four-point-since-first-grade high school junior in hard science with a pregnancy. The archdiocese had nothing but judgment. Belle Haven High was too small. Hamilton High tracked pregnant girls into cosmetology, not cosmology. Don’t panic, Mom said. Then one May evening at dinner, Grandpa called from Florida with an answer.

Mom’s end of the phone conversation sounded confusing. Dad kept eating as Mom talked to her parents. Her arm fell around Josie, then Mom dropped the receiver to her shoulder to explain.

“Grandpa has learned that Cocoa Beach High School, the closest to Cape Canaveral and all those NASA folks, runs a science curriculum that keeps pregnant girls on track for college. Apparently, there’s enough of them. The school has an open slot, but we need to decide by tomorrow. Plus, their parish has an adoption agent.”

“Florida?” Josie said, alarmed.

“You’ll get intensive science education right on top of NASA. Isn’t that great?”

“But ... you’re sending me away.”

“I can see that way,” Mom replied, “but that is not what is happening.”

Through the phone, Josie heard Grandpa, let me get Rosalind on the horn, and to Josie, the pause went on a little too long. Grandma was coughing when she spoke.

"Of course, we're glad to have her," Josie heard her say, without enthusiasm. Mom beamed. Josie swallowed hard. She couldn't speak, and shook her head. Mom told her parents she'd call back. Josie stood away from Mom's grasp.

"You're not giving me any time to think about it," Josie said. "You're making me leave. You're ashamed of me." Mom sighed and shook her head.

"We are not ashamed of you. We are trying to find the best way forward, and it looks like that will mean you live elsewhere for a short time. A school year."

"Florida?"

"This is the universe where"

"Shut *UP*, Mom."

"That's enough, everyone," said Dad, who drank off his beer and cleared his throat. He took Josie's hand.

"Gemini 8."

Josie stared at him.

"No, Dad."

"Yes, Josie."

"This is nothing like that."

"It's everything like that. You know this. The Commander docked Gemini 8 with the target vehicle, in space, then everything began spinning. He tried everything, until he was seconds from being marooned. So he shut everything down, turned it on again, and the spinning stopped. That saved the Apollo program, it's fair to say."

Josie said nothing because she couldn't argue.

"We need to regain command and control here," Dad said. "If Plan A doesn't work, try plan B, right, then plan C. Well, this is our plan D. Yes, it's a big decision to be made quickly. But that's where we are."

Waves of fear and sadness made Josie throw back her head and howl. Dad and Mom held her for several minutes. Then the thought came: Restart. In Florida.

She didn't show for a long time, and she still could beat Dad at horse. But one day at Mount Notre Dame, she walked into a stall in the girls' bathroom, closed the door, sat down and discovered the news alert, scrawled in black marker pen: JOSIE MORGAN IS PREGGO. She cried into wads of toilet paper then fled, said nothing to anyone. By the next day, the door had been repainted, but everyone stared at her, in class, in hallways, on the bus. The prospect of Florida now became the parachute opening for splashdown.

One afternoon before summer break, Josie ran across Belle Haven Road and doubled over, hands on knees, to catch her breath. As she stood again, a Mercedes-Benz sedan pulled to a stop, and a horn tooted. The window glided open to reveal Bucky Bennett's beautiful eyes.

"Hungry?"

Josie got in, and Bucky drove six blocks to a Wendy's drive-through for a double cheeseburger, fries and a large Frosty. Bucky steered into a parking spot, and Josie dived into her snack.

"Pregnant ladies are expensive," he said, smiling. "How are you, Jo?"

"Oh, just couldn't be better," as she dredged a french fry through a splash of ketchup. "Rob Davis called me a pregnant slut. Haven't heard from him since."

"What do you know, he called *me* a slut, too," and they smirked at each other. Josie swallowed a bite of burger.

"Plus, bonus, for senior year," she said, "I'm getting exiled to Cocoa Beach with Groovy Grandpa and Grouchy Grandma. It's my Gemini 8."

"What?"

"The first man's first space mission. Nearly killed him."

"Oh, yeah? Interesting. My parents know him, by the way. We see him at the Longworths' big Christmas party. Look I know you'd rather finish at MND –"

"Not so much anymore."

"I'm really, really sorry, Jo. But a school year in Florida is better than a shotgun wedding to me." Those eyes darkened. "Not to play who's got it worse, but after you and your dad left, Papa threw me out. I'm living with my cousin in Clifton. Happily, the Bank of Mom remains open."

"What a relief *for you*," Josie said, finishing the burger. Bucky shook his head.

"Yeah, that came out wrong. What I'm saying is, I want to share, with you. Because you will never know how grateful I am, Jo." He stretched out his hand, and his fingers opened for a fat square of folded, rubber-banded currency. Josie recoiled.

"Your dad gave me money."

"He wasn't the Bennett who knocked you up," Bucky started singing, "*and you're havin' mah bay-buh/What a lovely way to say how much you love me ...*"

"Ugh, stop. I hate that song."

"Take this. Go have fun in Florida, then come home. Just know that for what I owe you, you'll never be broke. And one day, we'll fix things with Rob."

"There's nothing to fix. It's over."

"I'm telling you, it's not. He's completely stupid about you."

Josie gave Bucky a long sideways glance. She shook her head.

"Well, anyway, thanks for the snack, and for this," stuffing the folded bills in her shoulder bag. She balled up the fast-food litter tightly into the paper sack, opened the car door, and got out. She shot her trash at a can twelve feet away, nothing but net. Bucky honked his horn, gave her a thumbs up.

She walked home, and in her bedroom, she pulled out Bucky's money, removed the rubber bands, and counted twenty fifty-dollar bills. She rewrapped the bundle and stashed it in her night stand with a note: For college.

On her sixteenth birthday, July 20, the night was clear, so she and Dad set up the Binolux for a meteor shower and a good look at *Mare Tranquilitatis*.

A month later, Mom and Dad drove Josie, two suitcases and the binoculars to Cocoa Beach. In the back seat, she passed the miles reading *The Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics* by Hugh Everett. Turning around from the front, Mom laughed.

"Dense stuff for a road trip."

"This is the universe where this happens, Mom," Josie said, cranky because she was hungry. Mom looked at Dad, at the wheel, and he nodded. She tried again.

"You know what road trips are good for? Long stories."

"Yawn," said Josie.

"When I was five years old, we got new neighbors, Josephine and John Morgan moved in next door to us. Their boy Danny and I fell in love immediately."

"You were *five*?"

"We did everything together every day. Same class through Sacred Heart School and Belle Haven High. Scholarships to Ohio State together. Then a month before we left for Columbus, a drunk driver going the wrong way on Interstate 71 near the Kenwood mall plowed into the Morgans' car. Killed them instantly."

Josie's jaw dropped. She knew something had happened, but no one talked about it, until then. Josie ran her hands over her belly. Pay attention, little one.

"Danny worried that going to college would mean he'd have to sell the house that his parents worked so hard to pay off," Mom said. Dad kept his eyes on the road. "Gave up his scholarship and took his dad's job on the line at the GE plant. He studied engineering on his own."

"What did you do, Mom?" Josie asked.

"Danny pushed me to go to OSU anyway, and I lasted one quarter. I didn't want a life without him. On Christmas Eve, we eloped, and I moved into Danny's house."

Now Dad piped up, with what was one of his favorite details.

"We had spaghetti with sauce from a jar for our wedding dinner."

"Best spaghetti I ever ate," Mom said. "Then seven months later, the moment that the first man walked on the moon, you arrived."

Her parents took hands and looked at each other. Josie did the math in her head. Mom was pregnant with Josie when she and Dad got married. Wow.

"How did Grandma and Grandpa cope with this?"

"Grandpa was happy for us," Mom said.

"Grandma, fair to say, was *not*," Dad said.

"But, they love the whole package now," Mom said. "Especially you."

Still holding hands, Mom and Dad got quiet in a heavy way. Josie didn't want to interrupt, so she tried to dive back into Everett. But her eyes flew away to the passing flats of Florida. So weird that she was here now.

At last, Dad steered onto South Atlantic Avenue in Cocoa Beach, to the Spanish-mission style townhouse community ten miles due south of Launch Pad thirty-eight F at Cape Canaveral. Josie realized she could watch space shuttle launches from the driveway. Grandma showed Josie to the spare bedroom with the window facing the ocean three blocks east. Josie opened the sash, and felt a caress of salt air. She relaxed. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

That night, Grandma and Grandpa threw a welcome party around the community pool, designed to look like a tropical tidal lagoon surrounded by a fragrant wall of hibiscus and sea grape and palms. The snow birds and newlyweds and NASA families celebrated Josie's arrival. Mom gave her a hug and whispered, this universe feels nice.

The coursework in the Cocoa Beach High program was as challenging as advertised. In a "Go Rockets!" sweatshirt and drawstring denims, Josie took the city bus to school and studied on a patio under a sun-bleached awning where she tossed popcorn to squawking seagulls. The humming little engine inside her turbocharged her classwork. She went to Sunday mass with her grandparents at the Church of Our Lady of the Sea Creatures, less for spiritual nourishment than for Grandpa's snickering census of who they'd outlived each week.

At first, Grandma was sweet, although she said weird things, like Josie was "getting a bit broad in the beam," which Josie didn't need to hear. Grandma also kept a List of

Rules, clean bathroom, make bed, do dishes, and she tracked infractions, many of which Josie didn't even know until Grandma scored them.

One night, Josie overheard bits of conversation from the main bedroom, between Grandma's hacking coughs.

"... I was supposed to *rest* ... a pregnant teenager. ... people in church talking ..."

"... Our granddaughter, Roz. ... what being a Christian means. ... could be good for you."

But Grandma found something amiss every time Josie came into a room. Then Josie made the big mistake of leaving a bath towel on her bedroom floor for one second. Grandma lost her marbles, screaming, pack up, go somewhere else, anywhere else. Finally, Grandpa jollied her into a ceasefire and put her to bed. Josie took the cordless phone out to poolside, sliding the glass door shut. That was a rule, too.

"Mom, this is a mistake."

"It's only been a month, honey. You need to make it work. I know Grandma is a lot. It can be uncomfortable. But this ride is for less than a year. This is in the baby's best interest. In your best interest, too."

"I need to come home now," Josie whimpered.

"You can do this," Mom, rock hard. Josie blew her nose.

"Can you at least make this the universe where she is nicer?"

"She's not well, Josie. How about a heart for *her*?"

Before sunrise the next day, Josie got up and took a long walk on the beach. She came back to the condo and scrubbed the bathroom top to bottom then washed all the linens including the shower curtain. Grandma inspected and actually handed Josie a little sticker of a gold star, which felt bigger than the Apollo Award.

That night, through the walls, Josie heard Grandma's hacking cough and Grandpa saying, Rosalind, take this, you'll sleep.

A week later, Grandpa's pinochle night at his VFW, Josie and Grandma made a lasagna with meat sauce from scratch. Their ceasefire was holding. Josie browned onions in a skillet, and Grandma chopped tomatoes. She seemed mellow, so Josie opened the conversation.

"Grandma, can you really tell if someone is having a boy or a girl?"

"Some people can. But as long as the baby is healthy, it doesn't matter. Why?"

"The adoption agent at church seems pretty certain I'm carrying a girl."

"Who knows, she could be right. We'll know soon enough."

Josie ran her hands over her swelling middle.

"Does the agent work for the family, or for me?"

"She works for the church, helping the family *and* helping you."

The reality landed, hard. Josie froze in place.

"I'm not going to see my baby grow up."

"No, dear girl," said Grandma, "This baby will go to that nice family in Titusville, a stable, loving home with a mother and a father and a big brother and a golden retriever. You can't ask for more."

"But ... but ..." Josie said, and Grandma took her hand.

"Dear girl, what's best for the baby is an intact family. What's best for you right now is something else."

A flaming sword of panic sliced through Josie.

"But what if ... am I, am I going to regret this, the rest of my life?"

"No," Grandma said. "That feeling is not regret. It will be awe, at the sacrifice you made for this child, for something bigger than you."

"But what if ...?"

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you’re exhausting! Like –”

“Who!?”

“Your mother, of course,” Grandma laughed, and turned to stir the pot of sauce. “So, so very smart, always questioning everything. I had her IQ tested when she was twelve. Off the charts. Harvard and MIT came calling. Had me thinking she’d win a Nobel Prize. But good Lord, so stubborn. She *loved* that Danny Morgan. ...” Grandma paused, chopped another tomato, tossed it in the pot.

“She said no to it all, for him, for you, and now for this,” and she patted Josie’s belly. “I’m more practical. I want you to do what you are meant to do, when you are on the other side. That’s why you’re here.”

Josie thought a moment, then she threw her arms around Grandma, who put down her spoon and hugged her back. Later, while Grandma napped through *Wheel of Fortune*, Josie took the phone outside, slid the glass door closed, called Mom, said they were OK, Grandma was going to go to the birthing classes.

The baby rode right up front, like a basketball, and with a November surge of energy, Josie took the lead to prepare her advanced physics class for a live questions-and-answers link-up with the next space shuttle mission.

One December day’s mail brought a letter from Mom with a story cut out of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of an American Legion essay contest for a five-thousand-dollar scholarship, deadline January thirty-first, 500 words on the subject, “American Youth Today.”

You should enter this, Mom wrote. Josie laughed on their next call. She was a pregnant unwed teenager. She didn’t think the American Legion wanted to hear from that segment of American Youth Today.

Mom said: Get them to listen. And five grand would buy a nice telescope.

So Josie wrote about navigating her crisis, inspired by her hero’s salvaging of Gemini 8: *My goal is first to ensure that the child I bear goes to a good home, and I will be a woman who learned early how to recover from big mistakes. I will spend my life in astronomy working to send the next generation into the next frontier.*

Josie dropped the essay in the mail. A telescope would be nice. The baby kicked.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’ll teach you how to use it.”