

BLACK KNIGHT

Sometimes it takes a while
to find your way back home

Matt Grandis

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Most of all though I dedicate this book to the generation of my nieces and nephews. May you always find your way home. And may you find peace in a better world than the one we left you with.

*

Juno fought to keep her eyes open and on the road. The cassette deck's auto-reverse click-clacked and the old, worn-out mix tape of Creedence Clearwater Revival's greatest hits began playing Bad Moon Rising for what felt to Juno was the hundredth time. She didn't mind. Some things never grow tiresome. A dark road stretching arrow-straight for hundreds of miles across the American Southwest wasn't one of them.

She softly sang along to the music, lyrics morphing into a drawn-out yawn. Juno leaned forward, peeking up through the windshield of the black 1971 Camaro, searching the sky for any kind of moon, bad or not. Her eyes fixed on the bright sparkling night sky, the car began to slowly drift from its lane, finally hitting the rumble strip.

"Whoopsie," Juno said, bringing her attention back to the road. "I'm awake."

Steering the car back to the middle of the lane, she reached for the Thermos on the passenger seat. Sticking it between her knees, she twisted off the cap with one hand.

Her bladder had already begun to send clear signals that any more coffee would go over less than appreciated, and for a moment she pondered whether it was better to fall asleep behind the wheel and die in a flaming car wreck or to stop for a pee in the middle of nowhere, most definitely getting killed by some wild animal or an axe murderer.

She shrugged, dropping the cap on the passenger seat and put the Thermos to her lips, downing a large and final gulp of lukewarm coffee.

"Ew," she said, putting the Thermos between her knees again and picking up the cap to screw it back on.

Juno managed to make it for about another five miles before her bladder told her in no uncertain terms that it was time to take a chance with the wild animals or axe murderers. She slowly let the car come to a halt by the side of the road and sighed.

I'm not afraid of the dark, I'm not afraid of the dark, she thought.

She opened the glovebox and took out a big, heavy flashlight that was just as capable of lighting up something as it was of knocking somebody's lights out.

I'm just afraid of the things lurking in the dark ...

Juno stepped out of the car, leaving the door open so the interior lights stayed on and she could still hear the sound of twangy rock'n'roll guitars coming from the car. She walked a few steps away from the road, swinging the beam of her flashlight across the surrounding desert. Looking around a few times, just to be sure, she finally dropped her jeans and panties, and squatted down, gripping the flashlight tightly.

Relief flooding her nervous system, she looked up at the sliver of the moon above her, smiling. Then her smile froze.

"What the ..."

*

This isn't really happening.

Juno slammed the door of her car shut and for the first time in hours turned off the cassette deck.

I'm just tired, that's all.

She glanced outside the window. By now there were six lights dancing in the sky above her, moving in circles, speeding up and speeding down in a way no satellite or airplane would.

"Holy shit. Holy fuck. No way. No fucking way."

She stepped on the gas pedal and the Camaro shot off down the road with screeching tires.

Juno tried to clear her mind from the fog of fatigue, fear and confusion. Heart racing, she forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply. Her panic began to subside. She checked the rear view

mirror and was relieved so see that the lights didn't seem to be following her. For a split second she thought about turning off her headlights to stay invisible to whatever was floating in the sky behind her, but reason prevailed. The idea of her crashing her car in the middle of nowhere, in the darkest of nights, with some strange lights hovering above her instantly raised her heart rate again.

I'm imagining this. It's not happening.

She swallowed dryly.

It never happened. I was just a child with an overactive imagination.

The Camaro raced down the road, passing a street sign that read *Roswell, NM, 50 miles*.

*

Juno squinted at the sign, lips silently moving.

"No ... U ... turn ...," she said after a moment. She nodded and looked at the plush tiger in her arms. "I guess that means there's no going back now!"

She looked at her toy as if listening to something it said.

"I know. We aren't supposed to go that far from home, but that's where the treasure is. We promised the queen we would return it to her. We have to keep our promises, Sir Cat. It is a knight's duty."

Despite having an imagination that put most other 7-year-olds to shame, Juno had never managed to come up with a better name than *Cat* for her favorite toy and constant companion.

She turned right and looked down the street. Biting her lower lip, she gazed back at the unassuming, small single-story house she had just left a couple of minutes earlier.

"Maybe ... we should consult with the queen before venturing any further. What do you think, Sir Cat?"

Again, she looked earnestly at the plush tiger, nodding.

“You’re right. We need to be prepared. We should go back and make a plan before fighting the evil pirates.”

She turned around and quickly began walking back to the house she had shared with her father and Cat for as long as she could remember.

Even though she knew exactly which of the houses lining the street was her home, she habitually counted each one she passed.

One ... two ... three ...

When she reached her home, she briskly strutted across the neatly trimmed lawn, walking around to the back of the house. She paused for a moment, looking across the seemingly endless desert stretching behind the house.

“No dragons in sight. That’s a good thing, Sir Cat,” she said and turned, pushed open the back door and walked inside. The air-conditioned room felt refreshing after just a few minutes outside in the blazing afternoon sun.

The back door led directly into the living room where a teenage girl of about 15 years, sporting a massive blonde perm and heavy eyeliner to match, slouched on the couch, watching American Bandstand.

“Hiya Mary,” Juno said as she passed behind the couch.

“You hungry or something, June?” the girl asked, eyes glued to the television screen showing a performance of Dance, Dance, Dance by Chic. “Want me to fix you some cereal?”

“No, thank you, we have to prepare an attack on the evil pirates’ hideout. We shall feast when we return victorious.”

“Sure, kid,” the girl said, twisting a strand of hair around her index finger, head bobbing to the beat.

Juno went straight past the kitchen and the bathroom into her small bedroom at the end of the narrow hallway, where she sat Cat on her desk, turning him to face her.

“Call me crazy, Sir Cat, but I think Mary might be under the spell of the pirate wizard. She seemed ...”

Juno thought for a moment, trying to remember the word from the big dictionary in the living room she loved to read.

“... hypothesized. We shouldn’t touch any food she’s giving us until we’re sure.”

She looked at Cat, brows furrowed.

“Yes, a bowl of cereal does sound good though.”

*

Juno felt an angry growl in her stomach. She sighed and looked at the clock on the car’s dashboard. Almost 8 o’clock. The sun had come up about 2 hours ago, which was when Juno had stopped checking the rear view mirror every couple of minutes. The lights had never returned. She decided to make a stop at the diner for some breakfast. Part of her was grateful for the chance to delay going back to her childhood home, even if it was just for another half an hour.

A few minutes later the Camaro passed a weather-worn sign welcoming her to the town of Hobbs End, NM, population 2893.

Feels like an optimistic guess, Juno thought.

She drove the car slowly past all those same indistinguishable flat homes that made up most of the town. But ever since she last saw them, they looked so much smaller and more worn-out. And so did the people she passed. Smaller. Older. Worn-out. Juno twitched a little when she physically felt her heart being stabbed by a sudden deep sadness. This was exactly why she had never wanted to return. She ran from this place as soon as was able to. And she had wanted to keep on running. But now here she was. Home.

Yeah. Home, she thought, feeling another stab at her heart.

Arriving at the diner, Juno pulled the car into the spacious parking lot and stopped next to the handful of trucks that neatly lined up along the lot.

She stepped out of the car and stretched with a loud groan. Then she reached back into the car, pulled out her leather jacket and pulled it over the white t-shirt with the colorful logo she didn't even know what it stood for. She took a hair tie from her jacket pocket and, walking over to the diner entrance, tied her auburn hair in a loose ponytail.

The inside of the diner looked like someone smashed the legendary Happy Bottom Riding Club with a traditional 1950s diner that bled Americana from every pore. Juno almost expected to find Archie, Betty and Veronica in one of the booths, sharing a giant milkshake with a perfect bright red cherry on top while Chuck Yeager chugged a beer at the counter. Instead, the diner was mostly occupied by truck drivers in different states of fatigue, and, surprisingly, a couple with a young boy. Juno hoped this was just a family passing through town and making a quick stop for pancakes.

If not ... I'm sorry, kid. I'm so, so sorry, she thought as she passed by the family. *This place might just be the death of you.*

Instinctively, Juno went straight for the counter, but then turned and walked to the farthest end of the diner instead, dropping herself into the booth, back to the wall. She picked up the laminated menu. Still the exact same menu she remembered.

Of course.

"Hi, what can I get you?" the waitress asked, putting down an empty cup in front of Juno and filling it with coffee from a cloudy jug.

Juno looked up at the woman. Blonde hair, clear blue eyes, neat makeup. She must have been in her early thirties.

"Dunno, is anything in this dump even edible?" Juno asked.

Despite probably having gotten used to a lot of abuse as a waitress in a place like this, the woman's eyes narrowed with anger. But when Juno cracked a crooked smile, recognition dawned in the waitresses eyes.

"June? June! Is it really you?" she exclaimed.

"Hiya Mary."

*

Juno pushed one of the kitchen chairs under the shelf carrying an assortment of jars, a box of Rice Krispies, and a roll of toilet paper that substituted for napkins in Juno's home. She climbed on top of the chair and raised herself on her tiptoes trying to reach the box of cereal. She barely managed to touch it and, biting her tongue, she scraped her fingers across the corner of the cardboard box, unsuccessfully trying to grab a hold. The box slid to the side, escaping her reach.

"This is a ... conundrum, Cat," she said, addressing the plush toy on the kitchen table.

She stepped down from the chair and looked up at the box of cereal, arms akimbo. Then she looked at the bowl and spoon she had prepared on the kitchen table. Grabbing both, she stepped back onto the chair and tried to move the box with the spoon. With the help of the spoon, she managed to slowly move the box towards the edge of the shelf. Juno grinned. Just another push with the spoon ... and she realized she had her hands full with the spoon and the bowl, no way of grabbing the box. That last push put the box just a little bit more than halfway over the edge of the shelf. She watched it slowly tilt, briefly wondering why she had even picked up the bowl in the first place. When the box finally tumbled over the edge, instinct took control of Juno and she dropped spoon and bowl trying to catch it.

"Oh no," she said, watching box, bowl and spoon falling towards the stone floor of the kitchen. With a loud crash the bowl shattered into a thousand pieces, mixing with the Rice Krispies spilling from the box.

“What ... the ... fuuuck,” Mary exclaimed from the kitchen door just seconds after the bowl had shattered on the kitchen floor. “I just asked you if you wanted some cereal!”

Juno, still standing on the chair, looked at Mary with big saucer eyes and an open mouth.

“Language!” she finally said.

Mary stared at Juno, slowly blinking.

“You’re the weirdest kid I’ve ever seen.”

*

“And now you’re all grown up! And look at you, you’re a babe!” Mary said.

Juno hated herself for actually blushing a little, but Mary didn’t seem to notice and continued her staccato train of thought.

“Wow, I ... I stopped hoping you’d ever come back. You know, after ...”

She stopped herself.

“Well. You know. Of course I heard what happened. Listen, I’m so sorry, really. I know it must be terribly hard for you, especially after ... well.”

She paused.

“Anyway, it’s good to see you. You look great. Oh God, I’m sorry. I totally forgot I’m working here. You want some pancakes? You still like them, right? It’s on the house of course. You know.”

Juno forced a smile.

“It’s okay, Mary. You don’t have to ...”

“No no, it’s fine. It’s on me. For old times sake and stuff. And ... you know. So, pancakes, right?”

“Yes, pancakes sound great. Thank you, Mary.”

Mary nodded, turned around and very quickly walked away.

Juno sighed.

She picked up the cup of coffee in front of her and took a small sip, her gaze wandering across the diner. A couple of booths further down, three young men had their heads stuck together, talking animatedly. One of them pointed towards Juno and the other two turned their heads to look at her.

Oh shit, please don't, Juno thought.

One of the men stood up and began walking towards her booth.

Fuck.

The man was in his late twenties, tall, fit and handsome. The kind of man who was probably used to walking up to about any young woman and wooing them without even having to put in any effort. A slightly crooked nose gave his otherwise smooth looks just the right amount of ruggedness, as Juno had to reluctantly admit to herself.

“You’re Juno Price, right? You’re back?” he asked when he arrived at Juno’s booth.

“Yeah, it’s me. Hello Adam,” Juno replied curtly.

“Hey, that sweet ride outside ... that really yours?”

“She is, but I really ...,” Juno began.

“Where you got it from? Boyfriend?”

Juno squinted at him.

“I won her in a bet,” she said.

“Oh yeah? What kinda bet was that?”

“I bet the guy who used to own her that I could fit my whole boot up his asshole. Didn’t believe me. Now she’s mine.”

“Jesus Christ, girl. I was just tryin’ to be nice.”

Mary, who had watched from the counter, quickly walked over and put herself between the man and Juno, who was glaring challengingly at him.

“Leave her alone, Adam. She’s been through enough.”

“Yeah, I bet she has.”

With one last dirty look, he turned around and began walking back to his buddies.

“That bitch is still a fucking freak,” he exclaimed loudly.

Mary visibly twitched at that and looked down at Juno.

“June ...”

What?! I didn't wanna come here, Mary. Not like this. Why would I, after all that shit this place has put me through?! Juno wanted to yell at her, but stopped herself.

Don't take out your anger on her. She did step up for you. She always has.

The sudden hot flash of anger that had gripped Juno when Adam had stepped up to her booth subsided and she looked up at Mary.

“Thank you for looking out for me.”

Mary smiled, the tension in her body easing.

“Of course. No problem. Always, remember? I’m gonna get you your pancakes now, okay?”

“Again, thank you for looking out for her. She can be a real handful sometimes.”

Juno watched from her bedroom, door ever so slightly cracked open so she could see Mary and her father down the hallway at the open front door.

“It’s okay, Mr P. I like taking care of that little weirdo,” Mary said, pocketing the ten-dollar bill Juno’s father had given her.

“Oh, and also thanks for cleaning up the mess in the kitchen,” he added, reaching for another ten-dollar bill and handing it to Mary, who quickly pocketed it as well.

“Hey, no big deal. Good night, Mr P,” she said, leaving through the front door.

Juno’s father closed the door behind her and visibly sighed. Then he turned and walked down the hallway towards Juno’s bedroom. Juno quickly moved away from the door and climbed into her bed, pulling the sheets up to her chin.

Her father entered her bedroom and walked over to the bed, sitting down on its edge.

“Juno, we talked about this. No climbing on the furniture. It’s dangerous.”

Juno looked up at her father.

“I know, daddy. But you know, Sir Cat and I had to find ... nourishment so we could attack ...”

“Juno!” her father interrupted sharply. “No more stories.”

“I’m sorry, daddy. We were playing ...”

“I know, honey. But you have to stop getting so carried away by your games. What if you had fallen from that chair? Or if you had cut yourselves on the bowl? What if Mary hadn’t been there?”

“But Cat is protecting me ...”

Juno's father looked at the floor, slowly shaking his head.

"Juno, Cat cannot protect you, he is a toy. You know that. It's just more games. Cat isn't alive."

"But daddy ...," Juno said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Her father looked at her, his face softening. He reached up and put a hand on her cheek.

"I'm not saying this to hurt you, Juno. I'm just trying to protect you. I know it's not easy for you. There's no other kids your age to play with right now. And school isn't starting for another couple of weeks. But we need you to stop living inside your head. It's not healthy. We need to find you some friends."

He looked at Cat, who was sitting next to Juno on the bed.

"Some real friends. You need to be around people more. If I could, I would move away to another place that's better for you, but I can't. My job is ... it's difficult. I cannot leave. So we both have to try. I promise you I'll try to make it easier for you. Can you promise me you'll try, too?"

Juno nodded, sniffing.

"Good."

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

"Now get to sleep, okay?"

Juno nodded again, and her father stood up and walked to the bedroom door.

"I promise I'll be good, daddy."

He turned around at the door and smiled.

"I know you will. Good night, honey."

With that he switched off the light and left, closing the door behind him.

Juno turned over and reached for Cat.

“We both will be, won’t we, Cat?” she whispered.

*

With a gasp, Juno shot up from her bed and looked around the dark bedroom.

When she had arrived at her childhood home, she went straight into her old bedroom and curled up on the bed, almost instantly falling asleep from exhaustion after driving all through the night. She fell into a deep but restless sleep, dreaming of things she thought she had locked away securely in the farthest corners of her mind.

Her heart was pounding heavily in her chest and she felt clammy with sweat. She must have slept all through the day. The dark house was completely silent. A sudden pang of fear gripped her and she hugged her knees against her chest.

Everything’s fine. Everything’s fine.

She remained sitting on the bed for another couple of minutes before finally getting up and turning on the light in her bedroom. Then she proceeded to turn on the lights in the hallway, the kitchen and the living room as well. She also turned on the old CRT TV and turned up the volume as if to drown out the silence that hung like a heavy blanket on the house. She sat down on the couch, but when she felt the sweat-soaked shirt sticking to her body, she got up again and walked to the bathroom, taking off her shirt and smelling it.

“Ew,” she said and tossed the clammy shirt through the open door of her bedroom, entered the bathroom and took off the rest of her clothes.

Please let there be hot water, she thought, stepping into the shower.

There was hot water, and Juno spent a long time simply standing unmoving in the stream, letting the heat of the water envelop her.

When she finally turned off the water and stepped from the shower, the small bathroom was completely engulfed in steam. She reached up to the mirror to clean it, but then stopped. She didn't want to look at herself right now. She quickly toweled herself, picked up the bundle of clothes and walked into her bedroom. She took a pair of boxers and a baggy shirt, her favorite bedclothes, from her suitcase and quickly put them on. She left on the lights in the house, left the bedroom door open and slipped into the bed again. Even though she didn't even feel tired after having slept all day, she almost instantly fell asleep again.

*

"Good morning, Juno," her father said when she entered the kitchen in her pajamas, Cat in her arms. Her father sat at the table, newspaper in one hand, coffee in the other.

"Good morning, daddy," she replied and climbed on the chair opposite him where he had already prepared a bowl of cereal waiting for her. She grabbed the spoon and began eating.

"Listen, Juno. Remember when I said I would try to make things easier for you?"

Juno nodded, chewing.

"It wasn't easy, my superiors weren't exactly happy, but I convinced them to allow me to bring you to work. You can watch the planes and maybe someone has time to show you around. Would you like that?"

Juno swallowed and nodded excitedly.

"Yes! That sounds like a real adventure! Thank you, daddy!"

"I promised, didn't I? It's important to keep your promises," he said, smiling at her.

"Daddy, can I bring Cat, too?"

“Of course, honey. But there’s one important rule. Don’t wander off on your own. Always stay with someone else or stay in my office. It’s really, really important, okay? I had to promise my superiors that you wouldn’t interfere with my work and that you wouldn’t get into trouble. Promise?”

“I promise!” Juno exclaimed.

“Good. Eat up and get dressed. We have to leave in 20 minutes.”

Juno devoured her cereal faster than ever before.

*

Juno and her father arrived at the airbase outside of Hobbs End about an hour later. Juno had been chatting excitedly about all the things she wanted to see for the whole ride, with her father nodding along and sometimes unsuccessfully trying to remind her that there were things she wouldn’t be allowed to see or go to.

Arriving at the gate of the airfield, a young soldier walked over to the car to check Juno’s father’s papers. When he saw Juno grinning at him from the backseat, he paused, confused.

“Sir, the girl ...”

“It’s okay, I’ve cleared it with the General. Please call him up.”

The soldier straightened up.

“Sir, I don’t want to disturb the General for nothing. Security regulations clearly state that no civilian ...”

“I am a civilian.”

The soldier glared at Juno’s father.

“Sir, you are a civilian *contractor*. And you have a security clearance.”

He pointed at Juno.

“I doubt she has.”

“Like I told you, call up the General. And believe me, he’ll appreciate you being this thorough.”

The soldier shook his head.

“This is highly irregular. Please wait here.”

He walked over to the small shack at the gates and, without taking an eye off the car, picked up a telephone and began talking with someone on the other end. A couple of minutes later he returned to the car, his face serious.

“All right, sir. You can go ahead. The General has cleared you and your daughter. But he asked me to reiterate that you are one hundred percent responsible for her. Any kind of indiscretion will be treated as treason against the United States of America.”

Juno’s father sighed and nodded.

“I am aware. Thank you.”

Juno, oblivious to the meaning of those words, pointed out the car window.

“Look, daddy, an airplane!”

Juno’s father slowly drove through the gate, the soldier looking after them, shaking his head.

“That’s great, honey,” he said, a barely contained tremor in his voice.

A couple of minutes later, the car pulled up to a flat building next to the tower by the side of the runway. Juno stared with an open mouth, eyes following an airplane that was just rolling down the runway, preparing to take off.

“Oh wow, that’s loud,” she yelled, clapping her hands over her ears as the jet shot down the runway and took off, nose

pointing up at the sky, quickly disappearing into the clear blue sky.

They entered the building and walked down a corridor with doors leading to offices on both sides, some open, some closed. Whenever Juno and her father passed an open door, the people sitting in that office looked confused at the sight of a child happily skipping along.

They reached the office of Juno's father a couple of doors down the corridor. Juno's father swiped a magnetic card across the keypad by the door and punched in a code. The lock clicked and he opened the door.

"After you, Juno," he said.

Juno entered the office, eyes gleaming. The office was clean and tidy. Just a desk that was completely empty apart from two picture frames, a potted plant, a filing cabinet, a sideboard with a pitcher of water and some glasses, some pictures of airplanes on the walls. The gleam slowly disappeared from Juno's eyes. This wasn't as exciting and mysterious as she had hoped.

"Oh," she said.

Juno's father smiled.

"I'm sorry if you expected more, but this is what an office looks like, honey. But look."

He pointed outside the big window behind the desk.

"You can see the airplanes taking off and landing from here. And ..."

He walked over to the desk, pulled open a drawer and took out a couple of blank sheets of paper and some highlighters.

"Here's something to draw. You like that, don't you? How about you draw the airplanes?"

Juno followed her father around the desk and climbed on the big office chair. She picked up a bright yellow highlighter

and struggled to remove its cap. When it finally snapped off she looked at the wide angled tip.

“Daddy, this is a weird crayon. I think the tip is broken.”

“Um,” her father said, scratching his head. “No, it’s not broken, it’s just not really a crayon. It’s ... like a crayon, but for adults. Kind of.”

Juno drew the highlighter across one of the sheets of paper and stared at the bright neon yellow trail.

“Wow,” she said. “I like adult crayons.”

Her father laughed.

“Good. Now listen, I can’t stay with you all the time, I’m not actually working from this office a lot. But I will come over and look after you from time to time, okay? I’ll send other people to check in on you, too.”

“But where are you working? There are no other buildings around.”

Her eyes grew big.

“Is there an underground lair?”

Juno’s father looked surprised, taken aback.

“There actually ... listen, Juno, it’s important. You’ve heard the man at the gate talk about security, right? If you hear or see something apart from the airplanes, you must never tell anyone. It is really, really important.”

Juno looked at her father with the gravest expression a 7-year-old was capable of.

“I understand. It’s a secret. Cat and I take secrets very seriously. I promise you I will not talk about anything but the airplanes.”

Her father nodded and opened his mouth to say something else when the door lock clicked and two men in uniform stepped

in. The man entering first was older than Juno's father, balding and of a slightly heavier built. The man following him was about the age of Juno's father, blond hair, piercing blue eyes and the square jaw of a 1950s Hollywood star. The older man looked at Juno and smiled.

"Well, you must be Juno. Your father told us all a lot about you. I'm General Wright, I'm running this little airfield. It is a pleasure to meet you, young lady."

He held out a big hand over the desk. Juno put her little hand in his and said, "hello Mr Wright."

Her father grimaced.

"It's *General* Wright, Juno," he said softly.

The General laughed a deep laugh and let go of Juno's hand.

"Oh, don't worry, Peter. I think we can eschew decorum in this case."

The blond man behind him rolled his eyes. The General turned around to introduce him.

"And this is Lieutenant Colonel Patterson. He's responsible for making things run smoothly around here."

Patterson bowed slightly in Juno's direction.

"Which sometimes can be a daunting task," he said wryly.

Wright winked at Juno.

"The Colonel isn't as fond of visitors as I am."

A flash of anger crossed Patterson's face.

"Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"Not in front of the young lady, Colonel. Outside. Peter, please join us for a moment."

Turning to Juno, the General added, “we’ll have to leave you alone for a minute, but your father will be with you again in a moment. And after that we’ll see to it that you’ll be entertained. Is that okay?”

Juno nodded.

“Thank you, Mr General Wright.”

The General laughed his deep laugh again and led the men outside, shutting the door behind him. Juno instantly jumped off the office chair and ran to the door, pressing her ear against it.

“I must protest, General. This is a breach of all security protocol. I frankly don’t understand how you could have ever agreed to this,” Juno heard the blond man say, the anger in his voice clear.

“Noted, Colonel. Again. Yes, it technically is a breach of security protocol. But please do tell, what danger can an 8-year-old ...”

“7-year-old,” Juno’s father interjected.

“... 7-year-old pose? First of all, she’s not going to get exposed to any security related material. And secondly, as Peter has already explained to us, she got into trouble for her overactive imagination multiple times before already. Who do you think would even believe her if she was to divulge any secrets? A kid that’s known to make up stories spilling the beans on things no one would believe anyway is the perfect case of plausible deniability.”

The General paused for a moment.

“But even more importantly, Peter has done a lot of important work for us. And he has always been a trustworthy partner. If he needs one small favor, he deserves getting it. Damn it, we’re the United States Air Force not some shadowy cabal. We help and protect our own and the people. You are a good officer, Colonel, and you are doing a fantastic job, but you must not forget that in order to be an exceptional officer, you also have to keep your humanity intact.”

A brief moment of silence followed, and then Patterson replied in an icy tone, “understood, General. Thank you for acknowledging my concerns.”

Another brief silence, and then the General’s voice.

“All right. Dismissed, Colonel. I’ll need to have another word with Peter.”

Juno heard footsteps moving away and after a moment the General’s voice returned.

“Peter, be aware that the Colonel isn’t the only one with misgivings about this situation. It’s not just about security. The base isn’t a playground. I owe you, and I consider you a good friend. I’ve lost some goodwill agreeing to you bringing your daughter to the base. It’s really important, for the two of us, that there’s no interference in our daily activities.”

“Thank you, Bill,” Juno’s father replied. “I ... I cannot thank you enough, honestly. I know you painted a target on your back with this. Patterson is just waiting for you to slip up.”

The General’s deep laugh.

“Let him try something, Peter. Don’t worry about me, I’ve seen enough actual battlefields in my days. I can deal with a small office feud. And also, it’s not just you I owe. I’m doing this for Natalie as well. She doesn’t get to see her daughter grow up, but if I can help in any way, it is my duty and my privilege to help the both of you at any time.”

Another moment of silence.

“And now get back to work,” the General finally said, his voice soft.

Juno ran back to the desk and climbed on the chair again, grabbing the yellow highlighter and started drawing. The door opened and her father came back in.

“Hi daddy,” Juno said.

“Hey honey,” her father said, his voice slightly croaky. “Look, I have to go do some work now. I will come back and get you for lunch at the latest, all right? The General said he’s going to send someone over to look after you in the meantime. They can contact me if there’s anything. I will come over right away, okay?”

“Okay, daddy.”

“Good. See you later, honey. Have fun watching the airplanes.”

After her father left, Juno jumped down from the office chair again and went to pick up her small backpack she had left by the door. She pulled out Cat from it and went back to the desk, sitting down and placing him on the desk, knocking over one of the picture frames.

“Whoopsie,” Juno said. She hadn’t looked at the pictures yet and noticed that the frame still standing contained a photograph of her, taken the year before during a barbecue in the backyard of Mary’s parents. In the picture, Juno grinned into the camera, holding a burger that looked gigantic in her small hands.

She reached for the frame she had knocked over and looked at the picture it contained. It showed a young woman in her twenties holding a baby. Deep auburn hair, a pale, freckled face, brown eyes and a goofy big grin. Juno put the frame back on the desk and continued to look at the picture.

“Hi mommy,” she finally said.

The door lock clicked and the door swung open, a woman in uniform stepping into the room. She was a couple of years younger than Juno’s father, black hair pulled back into a bun, olive skin and eyes of such a dark brown that they looked almost black. Her full lips spread into a wide smile when she saw Juno.

“Heeey,” she exclaimed. “You must be Juno. I’m Kathryn. Kate.”

“Hello ...,” Juno squinted at the woman’s name tag. “... Ms Gallo.”

She giggled.

“It rhymes.”

Kate laughed.

“It does! But drop the Ms Gallo, just call me Kate.”

Juno looked at Kate’s uniform.

“Are you a General too, Kate?” she asked.

“Oh my, no!”

Kate pointed at the single silver stripe on her shoulder flaps.

“I’m a Lieutenant.”

“Like Mr Patterson?”

“No no, he’s a Lieutenant *Colonel*. That’s ... a lot more than a Lieutenant.”

“This is very complicated,” Juno said. “How do you remember all of that?”

Kate laughed again. Juno liked her laugh. It was bright and honest.

“It comes with the job.”

“What is your job, Kate?”

“I’m responsible for communications and public relations.”

“Is that something like the commercials on television?”

“Oh no, we don’t do advertising like that. If someone wants to know something about our base, I give out the information. According to our security protocols of course. And if someone comes to visit, I’m responsible for keeping them company.”

She smiled at Juno.

“Someone like you. But I see you already have company. Who’s that?”

Kate pointed at Cat.

“That’s Cat,” Juno said.

“Hello Cat,” Kate said. “Can I pick her up?”

“Him. Yes.”

“Him,” Kate repeated and carefully picked up Cat, inspecting the plush toy.

“What a handsome fella,” she said, putting him on the desk again and petted him. She noticed the two pictures by his side.

“That must be your mommy, she looks just like you! I bet you will be just as pretty as her when you grown up. Is that you she’s holding?”

“Yes,” Juno replied. “I used to be very small.”

“It’s a shame she’s not in that other picture.”

“She can’t be in that picture, she’s dead,” Juno said matter-of-factly.

Kate gasped and put a hand over her mouth.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that.”

“That’s okay. It’s been a long time.”

She paused.

“I don’t remember her.”

Kate’s face turned into a mask of sadness, her hand dropping away from her mouth. After a moment, she cleared her throat.

“So ... you like airplanes? Want me to tell you about them?”

“I don’t care,” Juno said.

The sergeant at the front door looked uncomfortable.

“Ma’am, it’s my job to deliver your father’s personal effects, and I cannot return them. Someone has to sign this. It is none of my business what you do with it, but please just sign this receipt so I can go back to the base. You don’t have to open the box, you can throw it away for all I care, but you have to sign off on it.”

“Listen, soldier boy,” Juno said coldly. “I want nothing to do with this. I had to come back to this shithole to clean out the house and to once and for all leave all of this behind me. And now I’m getting more shit delivered here and I’m having to sign God knows what.”

The soldier’s discomfort started turning into anger.

“Ms Price, whatever happened between you and your father, I knew him, too. He was a good man, doing great work for our country.”

Juno glared at him.

“Don’t you Ms Price me. And don’t start with that jingoistic bullshit about serving our *Great Nation*.”

She almost spat out those last two words.

“Ugh,” she finally said. “Gimme me that fucking thing, I’ll sign it. But if I end up on some kind of newsletter now, I’ll come over to the base and kick you in the nuts.”

The soldier shook his head in disbelief, but handed the paperwork and a pen over to Juno, who quickly signed it and shoved it back at him.

“Happy now?” she asked.

“This wasn’t about making me happy. You have nice day, Ms Price. And ... my condolences for your loss,” he replied courtly and left.

Juno watched him leave and looked at the box at her feet. It had an official USAF seal on it and the words *Personal effects, Price, Peter V.* written on it. Juno fought down the urge to kick the box out into the street, instead picking it up and carrying it back into the living room, where she dropped it on the couch. The box bounced off the couch and fell to the floor. Juno rolled her eyes.

“Sure, why not,” she said and picked up the box from the floor. As she lifted it, an envelope fell off that had been taped to the underside. It was completely blank and didn’t look like it was an official part of the package.

“That’s weird ...,” Juno said, putting the box back on the couch, this time gently. She bent down to pick up the envelope. It really was completely blank. No address, no seal, no stamp. Juno ripped it open and pulled out a single sheet of paper and a photograph. The photograph showed a young Juno wearing a pair of pilot specs that of course were much too big for her. Next to her stood a dark-haired female Air Force officer, bending down so their faces were level. They were standing in front of a jet plane, both grinning into the camera, making thumbs up signs.

Juno unfolded the paper to find a letter in a familiar handwriting.

My dearest Juno,

I’m trying to get this letter to you by adding it to your father’s personal effects. Things have changed around here. I wanted to be there for you when you returned, but I cannot leave the base. Now that your father is gone and I cannot be there for you, my heart is broken. I don’t know when I will be able to come and see you. But please know that I wish I could have been there for you, and I will forever feel shame and guilt for not having been the person you needed me to be. I do not expect you to forgive me. But please try to find it in your heart to forgive your father. What happened was out of his control, but he always fought hard to keep you safe. Everything he did, he did to protect you. He had always hoped that things would somehow return to normal between the two of you. He loved you dearly. And so do I.

Your friend, always Kate

“Well fuck,” Juno said. She angrily wiped away some tears. “*Fuck!*”

She threw the letter and photograph to the side and a choked wail escaped her throat.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

That hot burning rage that had been a constant companion for so much of her life and that she so often unsuccessfully tried to suppress finally broke out again and she let out an angry scream, picked up the box from the couch and threw it across the room. It smashed against the wall and ripped open, its contents spilling across the floor. Juno went over, wanting to kick the box and stomp on everything until there was nothing left to break. She stopped when she noticed a picture frame among the assorted papers. She bent down and picked it up, turned it over and looked at the photograph inside.

“Mommy ...,” Juno whispered and her rage dissipated in an explosion of grief. In an instant, the angry young woman became that little child again she was before everything turned into a nightmare. She dropped to her knees and all the tears she couldn’t cry before came rushing in. She pressed the picture frame to her chest and sobbed freely.

*

“Hey Juno, you look happy today,” the officer with the golden stripe on his shoulders called out to her as she skipped past his office.

“Good morning, Marcos!” Juno brightly called back. “Kate said we’re gonna go see the airplanes up close today!”

“Oh, that sounds exciting! You girls have fun!” the officer said, giving her a thumbs up.

Juno continued skipping down the corridor, the small backpack on her back bouncing.

“Good morning, Juno!” she heard another officer call out to her.

“Good morning, Naveen!”

“Good morning, Juno! Good morning, Cat!”

“Good morning, Becky!”

“Morning, June!”

“Good morning, Shawn!”

Juno looked to her left and waved at the officers sitting at their desks.

“Good ... *oof*” she grunted as she bumped into someone who had suddenly stepped out of the office on her right.

She looked up at the annoyed face of Patterson.

“No. Running”, he said, emphasizing both words. “I have told you that multiple times already, Ms Price.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant,” Juno said apologetically.

“Lieutenant *Colonel*,” Patterson said between gritted teeth and shot a look at the officers who watched this exchanged from the office on the opposite side of corridor, some visibly fighting to suppress a smirk. They quickly turned their heads and focused back on the work they were doing.

“Good morning, Colonel. Juno, you have to listen to the Colonel, no more running,” Juno’s father said as he and the General caught up with her, who had been running ahead of the both of them.

“Your father is right, Juno. The Colonel is responsible for the security of the base. Whatever he says is law around here,” the General added.

“Well, if only,” Patterson muttered under his breath.

“Colonel, look around you. Look at our people. Juno has become something of a mascot to this base. We’re doing a complicated job here that’s taking a toll on everyone. Juno being here has been nothing but a morale booster. Everyone loves having her around. I’d say this has been a very successful experiment so far.”

“So far, General,” Patterson said grimly. “I still do not condone of this in any way.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and wait for me in my office?” Juno’s father asked her and handed her his key card.

Patterson looked baffled.

“You gave her the code to your office?!” he asked incredulously.

“Colonel, there is no classified material in my office. And everyone on this base has my code.”

Patterson shook his head and walked off, muttering to himself.

Juno grabbed the key card from her father and ran ahead to his office, swiped the key card and slowly entered the code, silently spelling out every digit. The lock clicked and she entered. She dumped her backpack by the sideboard, grabbed the pitcher and filled one of the glasses with water. Then she walked over to the big window overlooking the airfield and took a couple of big gulps of water. Behind her the door lock clicked and she heard the door open. Without turning, she said, “look, daddy ...”

“Hey sweetie,” she heard Kate’s voice say and turned around.

“Oh hi, Kate!”

“I’m sorry, your daddy had to leave right away. They’re pretty busy down ... er ... back in his ... other office.”

Juno looked at Kate with big eyes.

“So there is a secret underground lair,” she whispered.

Kate grimaced.

“It’s not ... well, yes, there are offices in the ... basement. But please forget about that. It’s one of the things we are not supposed to talk about.”

“What’s so secret about having a basement?”

Kate shook her head.

“Please, Juno. I’m very serious. We cannot talk about this. Okay?”

Juno nodded.

“Okay. Secrets. I get it.”

Kate smiled.

“Good. Ready to go look at the airplanes?”

Juno nodded vigorously and ran over to her backpack, zipping it open and began to pull out Cat.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry, you can’t bring Cat. It’s too dangerous to carry him on the airstrip. You see, if you accidentally dropped him, he could be blown away and damage the planes. He needs to stay here and watch us from the window. Is that okay?”

Juno looked down at Cat, sadly.

“But I told him we would go look at the airplanes together ...”

“Sweetie, please ...,” Kate said. Then she looked at Juno’s backpack. It had two shoulder straps and another security strap across the chest.

“Hey, do you think Cat would be happy if he came with us in your backpack? You can’t take him out, but maybe he could watch from there?”

Juno thought for a moment and then looked down at Cat.

“Yes. That would be fine.”

“Great!”

Kate kneeled down in front of Juno and gently took Cat from her to put him back in her backpack. Then she zipped the backpack shut and helped Juno put it on. She tightened the shoulder straps and finally closed the security strap across her chest. Juno grunted a little. She had never worn her backpack that tightly. But she enjoyed having Kate so close to her. She smelled nice. Kate checked again that the backpack was securely fixed to Juno’s back with no chance of it accidentally slipping off. Then she smiled and quickly stroked Juno’s hair, her hand trailing down the side of the little girl’s face. It left a warm impression Juno felt spread across her face and down into her chest.

“All right, we’re good to go.”

Kate stood up and held out her hand to Juno who grabbed it tightly.

“Let’s go look at the airplanes.”

*

Juno watched the jet plane zoom overhead, quickly followed by the loud *woosh* of its powerful engines. She turned her gaze down from the sky and pushed open the door to the diner. There were only a handful of patrons inside. Juno saw Mary behind the counter preparing a fresh jug of coffee. She walked straight over.

“Mary ...,” she began.

Mary turned around.

“Oh hey, June!”

“Mary, listen, I ... I want to apologize for being such a butt the other day. I was just so angry and I lost control. I’m ... not great at handling my emotions right now. When I arrived here,

everything came back to me. The memories ... they brought out the worst in me.”

Mary smiled softly.

“Oh babe, that’s not the worst of you. Not by a long shot. You think I forgot?”

Juno looked at Mary and she felt a slight flutter in her stomach. A smile spread across her face and she raised her fist towards Mary, middle finger outstretched. Her smile spread into a grin when she saw Mary smiling back at her at this.

“I missed you, June,” Mary said, grabbing Juno’s fist with both hands and pulling it towards her face, kissing it.

“I missed you too, Mary. I hope you didn’t get into any trouble with Adam and his buddies.”

Mary laughed.

“Oh, those little boys? Psh. Nah.”

Juno smiled and felt a serious relief.

“Good.”

She took a deep breath.

“Mary ... is it okay if maybe I asked you for some help with cleaning out the house? I feel bad for bothering you with this, but ... well, it’s not like I have an abundance of friends in this town. And it seems Kate prefers to bury herself in work at the base instead of coming to see me.”

“Of course it’s okay, you little weirdo! And believe me, you have more friends here than you think. It’s just that, after ... well.”

Juno smirked humorlessly.

“Just say it, Mary. It’s okay. I’m an adult now. I’ve had a long, long time to come to grips with it. After my father send me off to the looney bin.”

Mary grimaced.

“After you’ve had to get psychological treatment,” she said. “He didn’t send you off to the ... looney bin. Look, June, I don’t know what you think people think about you. But no one here ever thought you were crazy or something. You had an episode. It happens. As for anything else, you were an angry teenager. That’s not exactly uncommon. And you’re better now, aren’t you?”

Juno shrugged.

“I mean, apart from still being a little rage monster,” Mary added chuckling.

Juno joined her chuckle involuntarily.

“I am that, I suppose.”

“Listen, June. I’ll come over to your place when I get off work, okay? I’ll just call up my man and tell him he needs to take care of the little ones tonight. And then we’ll have a nice girls night, just the two of us. Like back in the day.”

Juno looked surprised.

“You’ve got kids?”

“Three. You’ve been gone a while, June. Life goes on.”

For everyone but me, Juno thought.

“Okay, that’s great. Thank you so much, Mary. It means a lot to me, really. See you tonight then.”

“See ya, babe!”

Juno turned around and left the diner. The desert air outside was dry and hot as always. She squinted at the sky and pulled a pair of pilot specs from her jacket, putting them on and walking off down the road.

“They look great on you!” Kate said, adjusting the oversized pilot specs on Juno’s small face.

Juno giggled.

Kate looked conspiratorially around and then leaned in closer.

“Keep them, but don’t tell anyone. I’ll say I lost them and I’ll just commission a new pair.”

“Thank you, Kate! I love them!” Juno blurted out.

Kate put her index finger to her lips.

“Shhh,” she said, winking, then taking the glasses off of Juno’s face and softly turned the little girl around, so she could open her backpack and put them inside.

Kate got up and Juno instantly grabbed her hand. Kate smiled down at her and the two walked back to the office complex.

Inside, they found Juno’s father coming up the corridor from the opposite end. He smiled at the sight of the two of them and waited in front of his office door.

“Hi daddy,” Juno said. “The airplanes are *awesome*.”

She put emphasis on this word she had just picked up from one of the pilots.

“And also, Kate gave me ...”

Kate squeezed Juno’s hand and looked at her, eyebrows raised.

“Uuuh, Kate gave me ... a lot of interesting information about them.”

“That’s great, honey. I’m glad you had fun today.”

He unlocked his office door and held it open for Juno.

“Please get inside and wait for me, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Juno walked in and the door closed behind her. She pressed her ear against it.

“Listen, Lieutenant Gallo,” she heard her father say.

“Oh please. It’s Kate,” Kate interrupted in a soft tone.

“Kate. I cannot begin to thank you enough for doing such a great job with Juno. She really likes you, you know? She can’t stop talking about you. It’s done her so much good to be around people.”

“I like her, too. A lot. She’s a wonderful little girl. You did a great job with her too, ...”

Juno heard Kate hesitate a little.

“... Peter.”

A longer pause and Juno thought she heard feet shuffling.

“Kate ... if you want, maybe we can meet up in town and ... you know, maybe I can tell you some more about Juno? If you’re interested, I mean.”

“I would like that.”

Juno thought Kate’s voice sounded just a little bit higher than usual.

“Are you free tonight? Say, twenty hundred hours? At the diner in town?”

“It’s a date,” Kate said.

Then silence. And after a moment footsteps moving away from the door. Juno jumped away from the door and quickly moved over to the window. When her father entered his office, his face was redder than usual and he carried a weird smile.

Adults, Juno thought.

*

“Really? That was your fist date?” Juno asked, taking a sip from her paper cup filled with red wine.

Mary shrugged.

“I mean, it’s not like there’s a lot to do around here. The diner, plane spotting ... you have to be creative with what life’s offering you.”

Juno laughed.

“And I guess it did work out for the two of you. Three little Marys! I can’t believe it.”

She shook her head.

“Yeah, it worked out pretty good. He’s a good man, he really is. You remember the guys I used to date ...”

Juno groaned.

“Dick. There’s never been a name more apt.”

Mary laughed out loud.

“He really is a dick. But, well, you know ... that name was apt in more than one way, if you know what I mean.”

Juno grimaced.

“Ew.”

“What about you? There’s no one in your life?”

Juno shook her head.

“I’m kinda busy keeping my own life on track. There’s no place for someone else.”

Mary looked at her with sad eyes.

“Oh, don’t give me that look. I’m not the type of girl who’s pining for her white knight. You know me. That didn’t change.”

She paused.

“But ... you know, maybe things are finally calming down now. So who knows what’s in my future.”

She shrugged and took another sip of wine.

Mary smiled.

“That’s the spirit, babe. You know, I just think none of us is made to be alone.”

She reached over and grabbed Juno’s hand.

“And you’re not going to be alone forever. I know things went pretty bad for you, but that doesn’t mean there’s never going to be a family in your life again. Family is the people we let into our lives. We make our own families.”

Juno glanced over to Mary.

“I’m trying. I really am. Just ... give me some more time.”

Mary nodded.

“Of course, babe. Just know I’m here for you, you little weirdo.”

Juno put her head on Mary’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

*

“No, thank *you*,” Kate said and smiled coyly at Juno’s father.

“Well, it was all my pleasure and I cannot wait to do that again,” he replied.

“What’s that about?” Juno asked confused.

“Dinner,” both adults exclaimed at the same time.

“We’re talking about the dinner last night,” Kate said.

“Oh. Did you have dessert?”

Kate turned red and her father stifled a giggle.

“We did, and it was delicious.”

Kate cleared her throat and began pulling Juno away.

“I think your father really needs to get to work now,” she said.

“I do. See you girls later!”

And he turned around and began walking down the corridor. Then he stopped and turned back.

“Wait, Juno. Take my key card so you can get back into my office later.”

Juno grabbed the key card from her father and pocketed it. He nodded and went down the corridor, walking quickly to join up with another civilian in a white lab coat who had just left an office further down the corridor.

“So what are we going to do today?” Juno asked, taking Kate’s outstretched hand and walking with her in the opposite direction.

“Remember when you helped sort the mail last week?”

Juno nodded.

“I liked stamping the envelopes. But I hated licking them.”

Kate’s eyes grew big.

“Who told you to lick the envelopes? We use self-sealing envelopes.”

“Oh,” Juno said.

“Um. Anyway, today we’re doing something similar. Paperwork.”

“Can we use highlighter?”

“No, I’m sorry. Those documents have already been marked.”

Arriving at her office, Kate held the door open and let Juno inside. Juno climbed on the second desk chair Kate had put in her office just for her and looked at a stack of paperwork on the desk. She craned her neck to inspect the document on top of the stack.

“Black highlighter? That’s a silly idea. Now you can’t read it anymore.”

Kate laughed.

“That’s the point, sweetie. The blacked out stuff is things that are secret.”

Juno furrowed her brows.

“So ... you give someone something secret, but then you paint the secret stuff black so they can’t read it? That doesn’t make sense. What good is a letter like that?”

Kate shrugged.

“You’re not wrong. It’s complicated. Secrets are always complicated. But basically, the government is working for the people, so the people have a right to know what we’re doing. It’s just that some things are too dangerous for everyone to know. So we take those things out to protect the people.”

Juno thought hard about it.

“No, I still don’t get it.”

She slid the document from the top of the stack and looked at the next one. She frowned, her lips moving, silently reading.

“And this letter doesn’t have any black highlighter on it. So there’s no secrets in here?”

Kate had just gotten into her desk chair and looked up.

“What?”

She reached over and grabbed the document from Juno’s hands.

“Crap, how did this end up here? *Fuck!*”

She glanced over at Juno.

“Oh, I’m sorry, sweetie. We’re not supposed to use that kind of language.”

Kate quickly scanned the document and put her hand over her mouth.

“Shit ... sorry, Juno. Don’t use that word either. This is way above my security clearance. I should have never seen this. Something went very wrong here. I have to take care of this right away. Can I leave you alone for a moment? But please don’t touch anything else, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Juno nodded, confused by what just happened.

Kate got up and quickly left her office, the mysterious document in her hand. Juno slowly spun around in the office chair, humming to herself.

When Kate hadn’t returned after a couple of minutes, she grabbed her backpack, zipped it open and whispered into it.

“Cat, I’m worried. Kate said she would be right back. Do you think we should ...?”

She pretended to listen.

“I know, but she only said we’re not supposed to touch anything, she didn’t say we shouldn’t leave. I have daddy’s key card, we can go into his office.”

She zipped the backpack shut again and slung it over her shoulders. Then she walked out of the office and into the corridor. She began walking in the direction of her father's office. After a while she heard a commotion coming from the office she knew belonged to Patterson. There was no one else in the corridor and the office opposite to Patterson's was empty as well. Juno sneaked up to Patterson's door and put her ear to it.

"I don't want to hear any more excuses. This is an absolute disaster. There will be a thorough investigation and there will be consequences."

Juno heard a receiver being slammed down.

"Lieutenant Gallo, who else saw this document?" Juno heard Patterson ask, his voice sharp.

"No one. Just me," Kate replied.

I did, Juno thought. We're not supposed to lie, Kate.

"In that case ...," Patterson began.

"In that case we have no other option than to up the Lieutenant's security clearance. She's been due for a promotion anyway," the General's voice interjected.

There was a pregnant pause.

"With all due respect, General, you cannot be serious. She's in the middle of a security disaster and you're going to promote her for it?!"

"What happened wasn't the Lieutenant's fault. She reacted quickly and commendably. Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Lieutenant."

"I cannot believe it. This is one the most top secret bases in the United States and it's becoming a circus show with toddlers running freely around the offices ..."

I haven't seen any toddlers around, Juno thought.

“... and people handing out highly classified documents like pamphlets to some communist rally.”

“Get a hold of yourself, Colonel!” the General’s voice boomed. “Thanks to the Lieutenant’s quick reaction, the security leak has been contained. Like you said, there will be an investigation on how this happened. Until then, effective immediately, Lieutenant Gallo has been cleared for MJ-12. With all rights and obligations. You are hereby made aware that any breach of this security clearance will be treated as treason against the United States. At the threat of capital punishment. Do you understand, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir,” Kate replied sharply.

“Good.”

The General’s voice softened.

“And now prepare yourself. You are a religious person, if I understand correctly.”

Kate hesitated.

“Yes, sir. I’m a Catholic. I ... I’m not always acting exemplary, but I do go to church.”

“I respect your faith fully. But I have to insist that you have to put your personal beliefs aside for now. What you are going to see could possibly go against some of the things you’ve been taught in your church. Some people involved in MJ-12 had an easier time adapting their personal beliefs than others. As long as you’re wearing this uniform, you’re following orders and you will judge things solely by what you see, not what you believe. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

Footsteps. Juno quickly ran into the empty office on the other side of the corridor and hid behind the door just as Kate, the General and a red-faced Patterson left the office and walked down the corridor in the direction Juno’s father always went.

Juno spied around the corner of the door frame. The group turned right at the end of the corridor. Juno took a deep breath. Her heart was pounding wildly.

“Here we go, Cat,” she whispered and quickly moved down the corridor after the three officers. “This is a real adventure!”

At the end of the corridor she peaked around the corner and saw them standing in front of a big elevator only a couple of feet away. Patterson swiped a key card over a keypad just like the one by her father’s office door. Juno squinted and silently spelled out every digit Patterson entered on the keypad.

Six numbers! It’s like a birthday, she thought and began repeating the sequence in her head.

After a moment, the elevator doors opened and the group headed inside. Juno quickly pulled her head back and listened until she heard the rumble of the elevator doors closing. She waited for another moment and then peeked around the corner again. There was no one in sight. She moved up to the elevator. For a moment she thought about going back to her father’s office, but the thrill of going on a real adventure had completely gotten hold of her.

She pondered what the General said. Things that went against the church? Her father being a staunch Atheist, Juno had never gone to Sunday school and didn’t know much about church. But she had a children’s bible in her bedroom that she had gotten for her birthday from Peppy’s mom one year. She liked to to skim through it sometimes, mostly just looking at the pictures. Her imagination already ran wild with what might be down there. Everyone kept telling her how she wasn’t supposed to talk about secrets. No one ever said anything about not looking for any secrets.

Don’t walk off alone, she heard her father say in her head.

Good thing I’m not alone. Cat is with me.

She swiped her father’s key card across the keypad and typed in the sequence of numbers she had seen Patterson enter. Nothing happened. Her heart raced. Maybe her father’s card didn’t work here? But didn’t Kate say he worked in the

basement? How else would he get down there? Suddenly the doors of the elevator slid open, making Juno jump in surprise. Luckily, there was no one inside.

She stepped into the elevator. There were no buttons, no floor plan. Just a small slot, as wide as her father's key card. She slid the card into the slot. The doors closed and the elevator dropped. Juno moved to the back wall of the elevator and gripped the handrails tightly. The elevator went quickly, and she expected it to stop very soon. After all, wasn't there supposed to be just a basement? How deep could this elevator even go? For a moment she feared the elevator would never stop and she would be stuck in it forever, dropping ever further down. Then it stopped and the doors slid open. Juno stepped up to the doors and peeked in both directions. There was a corridor going left and right, with no one in sight. She stepped outside and after deliberating for a moment, she turned right and walked down the corridor.

*

Empty bottle of wine in one hand and the two paper cups scrunched up in the other, Juno stumbled down the hallway to the kitchen. When Mary left, she had seemed pretty sober, yet Juno felt like she had drunk a complete liquor store.

Oh, damn you, Mary. You've been talking all the time, not drinking. I think I almost emptied this bottle by myself.

"Oof," Juno said, leaning against the kitchen door frame for a moment, trying to shake her head clear. She threw the paper cups in the trash can and left the empty bottle on the kitchen table. She stretched and groaned. It felt good to talk to someone. It felt good to have Mary back in her life. There was that slight flutter in her stomach again. Maybe things were really starting to look up now.

She went into the bathroom, quickly brushed her teeth, then went into the bedroom, stripped off to her underwear and fell into her bed.

Complete darkness surrounded her. For the first time since returning home she had turned off all lights in the house. She

smiled. She didn't feel any fear. No anxiety. Yes. Things were definitely getting better. She closed her eyes and dozed off.

*

Juno blinked. This corridor was so much darker than the one upstairs. And there were no doors. Just a long, dimly lit corridor. She didn't like it. Why was it so dark? And where was everyone? Weren't people supposed to be working down here? Where was her father? She blinked again, but couldn't make out an end to the corridor. It already ran much further than the corridor with the offices. This wasn't just a basement. Juno began to walk slower. Maybe she should have went left after all.

A moment later she saw something different down the corridor. A door? No, it was a window. A big window. That was weird. What was a window doing in a basement this deep underground? Juno walked up to the window. Next to the window was a door with the same kind of keypad she recognized from her father's office and the elevator.

She peeked into the window. Behind the glass was a room, about the size of the living room at home. The room was just as dimly lit as the corridor, with just one flickering light coming from a corner just outside of the window frame. There was a desk with two chairs in the opposite corner. A small bed. As small as her old children's bed before she got her big adult bed. A bookcase. A couch, being lit by the flickering light.

She now recognized what it was, remembering how often she had seen Mary being lit up on the couch by the exact same flickering light. It must have been coming from a television that sat against the wall with the window, just outside her view.

Otherwise, the room was empty. Juno realized she could faintly hear whatever was being shown on the television. But the sound didn't come from the direction of the television set. It came from a small, oval speaker mounted under the window just in the center of it. She moved over to the speaker and held her ear closer to it. Yes, it was definitely the sounds of some television show. She recognized the stock audio effects of an old

Western, gun shots and Wilhelm screams. Suddenly there came a much louder sound over the speaker that made Juno jump back. A door she hadn't realized had been there had opened behind the couch, leading to a dimly lit but clearly recognizable bathroom. And in the door, framed by the light coming from the bathroom, Juno saw something standing, looking back at her.

Her eyes grew big.

*

Juno's eyes shot open. The panic was back. Someone was in the room with her, there was no doubt about that. Every hair on her body stood up.

No no no, please no, she thought. *It's just a nightmare.*

She slowly turned her eyes down, looking at the foot of her bed.

In the darkness of the room she couldn't see much, but she clearly made out a small, slender creature with a big head standing there at the end of her bed, looking at her.

Juno screamed and sat up, backing up against the wall, her hands grabbing for anything that could be used as a weapon. The first thing her hands found was her old children's bible sitting on her nightstand. She grabbed the book and threw it at the creature.

"*Oof*," it grunted, stumbling back. Juno jumped out of her bed, quickly turning on the light on her nightstand and raised her fists, ready to fight.

The creature rubbed its big head where the book had hit it.

"Ow," it said. It picked up the book Juno had thrown at it. "Wow, did you just literally throw the bible at me?"

Juno's arms fell limp to her sides and she stumbled back.

“No,” she whispered. “No.”

The creature stepped forward into the cone of light coming from the nightstand. It was about four feet tall, of a small build with greenish-gray skin, long arms, slim hands with four long, slender fingers and a big, bulbous head. Two big almond-shaped black eyes looked at Juno and the corners of its small, lipless mouth curled up into a smile.

“Heya kiddo,” it said.

*

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thank you for reading this far. If you're interested in reading the rest of the story, head on over to www.mattgrandis.net where you'll find the information on where you can buy the complete book. And why not subscribe to my newsletter when you're already there?

Your friend, always

Matt