

# CHAPTER ONE



*The retriever was a simple creature.*

*One might even hesitate to call it a creature. It was not grown, born, or hatched, but rather constructed. Engineered. This one was a particularly advanced model, designed for the most complex tasks, built centuries ago by expert craftsmen whose knowledge had been all but lost completely. It was the very last of its kind.*

*It was sentient, but not quite like a person. Earlier retrievers had only a primitive instruction set – go here, do this – and could easily be foiled by unforeseen circumstances. This one, however, could solve problems, make adjustments, and think on the fly.*

*It had been sleeping for a long, long time. But then, it had heard a voice, and it woke. The voice had spoken the right words, giving the retriever the one thing it needed above all else: purpose. Then lights flashed, a thunderclap roared, and suddenly, the retriever was elsewhere.*

*It was free to pursue its prey, and it could sense that its prey was near.*



**I**t all started the day of that crazy storm.

It also happened to be the day that I started a new school, in a new city, so I wasn't in a great mood to begin with. We had just finished moving back to Boulder, Colorado, and all our stuff was in boxes. It was impossible for me to find something to wear, even after my dad had just taken me to the outlet mall to get some "new duds" for school. Yes, my dad is the kind of guy who thinks that "duds" is an acceptable term for "clothes".

Supposedly, we had moved here in time for him to start teaching a new course at the University of Colorado, but I thought there was more to it than that. My dad had taught quantum mechanics to University of Washington grad students for a few years when we had lived in

Seattle, happily chirping away about photons, black-body radiation, and Schrodinger's Cat<sup>1</sup>, as if everyone else found it as interesting as he did. But all of a sudden, weeks before the start of the new semester, he came home all out of breath, pants in a wad, to tell me we were packing up and moving back to Colorado. He looked simultaneously ecstatic and slightly terrified, and I had no clue what to make of it.

The program was in Boulder partially because they had a "strong physics program", but also because CU had just opened this big new research facility up in the mountains above town. Rumor had it that the whole thing was actually a front for some dark government installation. There were guards and fences and fancy security badges. I could just imagine crowds of paranoid new age hippies gathered outside the gates, singing protest songs late into the night, having no idea what, exactly, they were protesting.

The guy who ran it, Christance Bakushisomething-or-other (you couldn't pronounce it even I could spell it), was a hyper-genius just relocated from Tajikistan (or Kazakhstan... or, well, I think it was one of the stans, anyway). My dad's course was so out there that they didn't even have a name for it, much less any students interested in taking it. He showed me a picture of the guy. I could barely make his face behind the chaotic smog cloud of curly black hair underneath a ratty old turban.

At least on a fashion front, he and my dad would get along great.

"Tell me again," I asked the night before, eating pizza on a big box, as we sat on two smaller boxes, "what exactly are you going to be teaching?" The boxes were labeled "stuff", "stuff", and "stuff". Yeah, unpacking was going to be lots of fun. Thanks, dad.

"Practical application of theoretical physics," he said between pepperonis.

"Soo... kind of like trying to make gravity go up or something?"

"No, that would be trying to break the known laws of physics," he said. "Up and down are terms defined by the curve of gravity along space-time. What I am going to be doing with Dr. Bakushisahwary is trying to create experiments that use laws of physics that are only theorized at this point."

"Like...?"

"Like using quantum theory to teleport your slice of pizza next to my slice of pizza."

"Oh," I said, nodding reassuringly. "Good, good... And there's going to be aliens involved, too?"

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<sup>1</sup>Seriously, you should google this. There's a cat in a box, with poison and a hammer, and he's kind of dead, kind of alive, at the same time... sort of a zombie cat, theoretical physics style. It's whacked.

"What makes you say that?"

I shrugged. "Oh, you know, all the rumors about that place. Soldiers with guns everywhere. Everything hush-hush. I just figured there had to be aliens."

He fixed me with a thoughtful look. "Well, you never know," he replied, in complete seriousness.

That's when I really started to worry about my dad.

Back in Seattle, he never complained, but I think he had a much harder time with being a single parent than he let on, especially to a "precocious" 13 year old girl. My mom left us when I was 8, and I think it really affected him. I mean, I know it hurt *my* feelings, and it took a long time to get used to it (not to mention hundreds of dollars worth of really sketchy family therapy), but I think it really *wounded* him.

For starters, he has never said that he's divorced; he just says "separated". He doesn't wear his wedding ring on his finger anymore (he did for several years though) but now he keeps it on a chain around his neck. He's never been on a single date in five years. For a while I didn't want him to because I kept waiting for my mom to miraculously come home, but nowadays I am always trying to coerce him into going out with someone. I've never been on a single date in my life, but I try to play matchmaker for my dad. How messed up is that?

My mom has never called us, never written, and she never even said goodbye. It was originally investigated as a kidnapping because she left very suddenly. For a couple years I kept a folder in my room labeled "Jannah Pike" with every scrap of information I could find on her case. My dad didn't object to my obsession, but he himself wasn't very interested in the investigation. He seemed sadly resigned to the fact that she was gone and wasn't coming back. Eventually the case was closed; detectives found evidence that she left voluntarily. She went to Europe or something.

That was a pretty awful year for us. I was so hurt and so mad I wasn't even able to tell who I was really mad at, so I lashed out at everyone. I was so wrapped up in my own feelings that I wasn't able to see how depressed he was.

Then one day I found a glossy picture on my dad's dresser. It had my mom's name on it and it was dated a couple weeks before she disappeared. It was an ultrasound picture; she was 10 weeks pregnant. From that day on things were different between my dad and I, and we've been really close ever since.

My dad grew up in Boulder, and his sister Julia still lives here, so that was another reason he gave why we moved. I don't mind Julia so much; she's a lot like my dad, brainy as hell with the social graces and fashion sense of a train wreck. She's a couple years older than him and was

definitely the alpha child growing up, so she tends to be bossy. I don't mind that too much either since my dad is sometimes such a real pushover.

"It will be nice to be around Aunt Julia," he had said over bites of his second slice. I was still pondering the String Cheese Teleporter or whatever it was supposed to be.

"Julia's fine," I mumbled.

He knew what I was getting at. One eyebrow rose up over his 1970's blocky green plastic glasses frames. "Julia's fine, but...?"

"Come on dad, they're totally obnoxious. Besides, 'Tyler' and 'Taylor'..? Really dad? I thought Aunt Julia was smart."

He shrugged. "She is smart – smarter than I am. And the boys are twins, so she and Dave thought it would be good to give them similar sounding names."

"They're already identical," I countered. "If she wanted similar sounding names, why not just go with 'Thing' and 'Thing'? Can't tell 'em apart anyway."

The conversation foundered after that, and we both silently began to dive into one box after another trying to begin the long process of rediscovering our possessions and figuring out which room they belonged in. I was momentarily elated to find a box labeled "kitchen", but I realized it was in my mom's old handwriting, and it contained our Christmas tree stand, the tarp for our tent, and a haphazard pile of my dad's classical CDs.

The following morning we were in my dad's new Prius on the way to Fairview High School for Day Number One. To add annoyance to my trepidation, 'Thing' and 'Thing' were in the back seat, squawking in the Pidgin English intelligible only to themselves, as they dueled each other with some kind of wireless hand-held games.

My dad had kindly offered to pick them up from Julia's that morning and take them to their new middle school, as they were starting sixth grade. Conveniently on the way. Thanks, dad. As I rode in brooding silence, my dad made some comment on the great weather. In truth, it was nice. Seattle was nice this time of year too, but the foothills and Flatirons<sup>2</sup> above Boulder, basking rose and watermelon in the morning sunlight, were incomparable. Before we drove out here, I had made a couple unenthusiastic statements about what it was going to be like to have snow on the ground all winter long, but in reality I was looking forward to a fall and winter without rain every day.

The weather, however, was not the cause of my brooding.

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<sup>2</sup> The mountains just outside of Boulder, so named for these immense, flat sides of rock that can be seen from miles away. They look like, well, like the bottom of an iron.

I hate going to a new school.

I know that everyone hates being the new kid at school. My dad had argued (in fairness, truthfully) that since it was the first day of freshman year, everyone was going to be new. But everyone else does not have the same problem I have fitting in.

I may not be the brainiac that my dad is, but I'm smart and I do well in school. My dad even moved me up a grade. Of course, that made me the only thirteen-year-old in all of Fairview (I looked it up online). But that was something I could handle.

I am not a future sports star, but I'm fit and pretty athletic. Before my mom left, she was really into fencing, and I fenced from the time I was five. I actually won a Colorado state title in my age group. When she left, though, I couldn't bring myself to do it anymore. After a while my dad convinced me to give soccer a try, and I've been doing it ever since. So that's not the problem.

The problem is my eyes. They are a deep, emerald green color, quite pretty if you ignore the fact that they are half again as big as anyone else's eyes on the planet. Not wider spaced, exactly, just big. Big eye sockets. Big orbital bones. Big irises. They aren't the kind of eyes that people *ooh* and *ahhh* over and say "what beautiful big eyes you have!" They're the kind of eyes that people recoil from, then keep stealing glances at, wondering in whispers behind my back if I have some kind of chromosomal problem.

Which I do, I'm certain of it. I've done all the research; it just appears that my particular disorder doesn't have a name. I've begged my dad to get me seen by a specialist, but no luck. "There's nothing wrong with your eyes," he always says, "your vision is fantastic." While that's true I guess – my eye doctor once told me I'm in the top 1% of people for vision – it doesn't make me feel any better.

My dad likes to tell me that my eyes are the same color as my mom's. Sometimes it is hard to remember exactly how she looked, but I still have a bunch of pictures. She was beautiful. I obviously got my tan skin and bronze hair from her, and even the curls are like hers. And she did have fabulous green eyes. But hers were *proportional*. Mine look like someone used one of those digital photo enhancers to enlarge my eyes, but in real life, not just pictures.

"Thanks for the ride, uncle Paul!" cried the twins suddenly as they tumbled out the back door.

"Cya later, bug eyes!" I was so engrossed in self-pity and beautiful mountains I didn't even realize we'd stopped.

"See? They're actually kind of polite. Sometimes."

"Whatever, dad."

The drive from Sunset Hills Middle School to Fairview High was painfully short. I imagined the march from a prison cell to the Guillotine was probably longer. I could easily have walked, but my dad wanted to drop me off in front.

He maneuvered the Prius between cliques of students for whom "curb" and "street" held no distinction, and finally came to a stop. My oversized sunglasses dropped into place over my face. He leaned over and gave me a hug and a quick kiss. "You always do fine, you know," he said. "You're not a wallflower, you never have been, and nobody cares about the eye thing once people get to know you."

I smiled and nodded. It was times like this that I remembered that I could have had a two-inch-wide scar running from chin to forehead, and my dad would still genuinely think me beautiful. I returned the hug and struck out across the lawn to the student center to see if I could figure out where my locker was before first period.

School went as expected. Math was first. I kept my Bug Shields (aka sunglasses) up as long as I could, but of course once the teacher said "Katrina Pike?" and "Please take your sunglasses off, dear" in the same breath, it all went downhill. She did a double-take right at me, and pretty soon the rest of the class was stealing glances at my face. When I was younger, I used to put my head down or cover my eyes, but eventually I learned they all get their looks in sooner or later; there's no hiding my Bugs. So I gazed back at them as if there was nothing wrong at all.

I was enrolled in the honors program, so Math, English and History were essentially the same group of students. By the end of fourth period the furtive glances had stopped and the blatant open-mouthed staring was going full force. After lunch I tried to be friendly to the girl I had sat next to in biology lab, but she was so flustered by my gaze she suddenly developed an immense desire to know every single possible detail of her microscope.

Mr. Bolt, the bio teacher, stopped at our table and gave me The Stare. The Stare, also known as The Boggle, occurs when the observer suddenly realizes that the size of my eyes is neither a trick of the light nor their viewing angle. They really are that big. The Stare is usually followed by uhhhs and ummms and a lot of eye watering. I've never understood why *their* eyes water. *My* tear ducts work just fine, thank you.

"Uhh, how are you coming with the microscope, Ms" -- he struggled with the seating chart in his hand -- "Pike?"

"Very well, thank you," I said in my sweetest voice.

Bolt stayed put, staring at me.

"My dad is a Ph.D," I said in the same sweet voice. "I used to hang out in his lab all the time. So I know my way around a microscope<sup>3</sup>." Then I added another *thank you*, with a slight edge in my voice that I hoped would convey "This conversation is now over. Go stare at someone else please."

The only thing I had been looking forward to on my first day at Fairview High, other than going home, crawling into bed, and pulling the covers over my face, was soccer tryouts that afternoon. After spending a whole day overhearing whispers of "that girl with the big eyes" I was ready to take out my aggression on a ball. After warm-ups and some ball handling drills, I started to show some of them that they'd better focus on their game and not on my eyes if they wanted to make the team.

That was when the storm happened. Remember the storm I mentioned at the beginning?

We had just been in a 3 on 3 drill, and I had gotten beaten by a really fast girl named Jamie. Right as she kicked the ball through the little orange pylons, everyone else in the drill stopped and stared at me. I rolled my eyes, putting my hands on my hips. I was pretty tired by then; after all, Boulder was a mile above sea level, and we had only just gotten there a couple days before. I was about to make a snarky remark to them, but the snark was stuffed back into my throat by a sudden peal of thunder that rolled across the field.

I spun around to see what they were really looking at. To the southwest, over the mountains, a swirling, dark grey storm cloud hung in the sky. It looked close, although I knew that it was probably miles outside of Boulder. There wasn't as much as a single, puffy cloud anywhere else in sight. It was bizarre to see such a storm in an otherwise sunny sky.

I heard people shouting that it was a tornado. Other people said that the new research center was conducting nuclear testing. Everyone was alarmed.

A stroke of lightning arced away from the cloud toward the peaks. Then, a moment later, another one. Thunder roared. More lightning. More thunder. It looked more like something out of a bad 1950's monster movie than a natural phenomenon.

Then we were being herded together toward the gymnasium. Most of the girls went only too willingly, but there were a few, like Jamie and I, who squirmed out of the grasp of coaches and teachers to watch the angry storm.

"Freaky," Jamie said in an awed voice. She flashed me a genuine smile. I smiled back and nodded, elated on the inside that someone had used the word "freaky" and it wasn't in reference to me. I was starting to like this storm more and more.

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<sup>3</sup>Okay, in truth, quantum physicists don't spend much of their time using table-top microscopes. But my dad is an all-purpose uber-nerd. I got my first microscope when I was four.

A few moments later, the football players were hustling up the slope toward the gym as well. Jamie and I tried to get out of their way, but we were dragged into the building along with everyone else. We weaved our way through sweaty boys to where the other soccer hopefuls were gathered. Everyone was jabbering about the storm.

It wasn't more than five minutes later that the head football coach was hollering across the gym that the storm was gone, and we could go back outside, but that all practices were cancelled for the rest of the day, and we were to go home immediately. I didn't relish the thought of sitting around idly at school waiting for my dad to come pick me up, but thankfully all the "big eyes" whispers had been transformed to "crazy storm" ones.

"Did you see the storm?" I asked my dad when at last I got into the Prius. "Was it something to do with your research?"

"What storm?" my dad asked absently.

I just rolled my eyes and smiled, watching the sky on the drive home.