

SKY GUARD-2 THE APOCRYPHA

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Chapter 1

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 17 – 2:47 PM

Mike Holbrook sat on the corner of his desk and watched his students squirm in their seats. He reached down and picked up a stack of exams and flipped through the papers, building the suspense. Occasionally he paused and shook his head in sadness and disbelief, as if the student whose paper he was holding had deliberately failed the exam as a personal affront to him. Aside from the nervous scuffling of shoes and an occasional cough, the classroom was eerily quiet. All eyes were on the stack of exam papers.

Mike was good at building suspense; he had taught a variety of history subjects at Wichita's Southwest High School and he enjoyed seeing the students in his Kansas History class suffer as much as he had suffered teaching them.

The reason he had suffered was because he was a poor classroom teacher, and his students knew it. As with many high school teachers, he had been hired first as an athletic coach and then pressed into teaching classroom subjects he knew virtually nothing about. Mike's real expertise was coaching Southwest's swim team, and he had successfully led the school to three consecutive State 3-A championships.

Not yet thirty years old and single, Mike cut a dashing figure. His body was muscular and powerful. He wore his blonde hair significantly longer than the school district's *Personnel Policies Manual for Educators* allowed, but his success as a coach and his personal charm afforded him certain perks, which did not endear him to other faculty members.

Mike glanced at the classroom clock on the back wall and checked it against his gold Rolex. He moved an unruly shock of hair from in front of his eyes and affixed the class with a steely gaze. "I can't begin to tell you how disappointed I am with your performance on this test," he said. "It is obvious to me that you have absolutely no interest in learning anything about the State of Kansas and the role it has played in This Great Nation." *What bullshit*, he thought. "I can honestly say that these scores set an all-time low. I'm sure you realize that Kansas History is a requirement for graduation, so whether you like it or not, you will continue to take this class until you pass it. I suggest you spend a little time thinking about that before our next exam.

"I have arranged these papers in descending grade order and Rachel will hand them out. I will be in my office from three to four o'clock tomorrow if you have any questions. Mister Franklin, please remain after class."

Mike handed the stack to a pretty senior named Rachel who was sitting on the front row. She wrinkled her nose at him and began walking around the classroom, passing back the exam papers to

the other students. Most of the students groaned when they saw their scores. Rachel seemed pleased with hers.

At three o'clock the bell rang and the students filed out of the classroom in stunned silence. Rachel, always the last student to leave, lingered by the classroom door and wrinkled her nose at Mike again, an action which was observed by Jason Franklin, who had remained in his seat.

When Rachel had left, Mike walked over to the windows and stared out at the campus, hands clasped behind his back. "Jason," he said without turning, "what did I tell you about your score on this test? Maybe you didn't think I was serious. Maybe you thought it was just an idle threat. I've already looked the other way on your first two test scores, but some of your other teachers are starting to complain about your grades." He turned and walked over to Jason's desk. "So as of now, you are off the team until such time as you can raise your grade point average. I know you're our star diver and breaststroke swimmer, but the rules are clear. You have let me, your school, and your fellow teammates down."

Jason looked at him and blinked. "We have a swim meet this weekend," he said. "You can't win without me, and you know it. If you kick me off the team, *you'll* be the one that lets the school down, not I."

Mike knew Jason was right; without him, Southwest's chances were slim, and he knew that a loss would add to an already declining win/loss record for the year. Had it not been for Jason's swimming ability, Mike would have barely noticed his existence, for there were only two kinds of students he was interested in: attractive young females who were promiscuous, and good swimmers, in that order. Jason was by far the best swimmer he had ever come across, but he appeared to have no interest in anything else. He had come to Southwest High at the beginning of the school year, his past somewhat of a mystery. Supposedly he had been arrested for shoplifting and had refused to answer any questions other than to state his name. At the time of his arrest, he had nothing but the clothes on his back; his pockets were completely empty. His fingerprints were not on file and no one seemed to be searching for him, so he had been sent to Juvenile Hall, where he eventually became a ward of the State and was assigned to a foster family.

In school he showed no aptitude in any subject whatsoever, nor was he a troublemaker; he kept strictly to himself, forming no bonds or developing any friendships. For these reasons, Jason floated through the school system unnoticed by the faculty or his fellow students until his gym class began the swimming phase of its curriculum. One look at Jason and his gym teacher suggested that he try out for the school's swim team. In two short months, Jason had become the school's leading swimmer, far outshining the other team members and spawning thoughts in Mike's head of one day becoming a famous Olympics coach. In his mind, Jason could be the next Mark Spitz.

Unfortunately for Mike, the school system had annoying rules for its student athletes, one of which was academic eligibility. In years past, Mike had gotten away with manipulating school records to maintain a student's grade point average, but computerized records with passwords were more difficult to change than paper files—computer couldn't be bribed or coerced—and Jason's poor grades had finally caught up with him.

Mike sighed to himself. "Jason, what you say may be true—without you, we may lose. I'm sorry about that, but school is not about athletic trophies, it's about learning. You understood the rules when you went out for the team, and you didn't follow them. You're not stupid, Jason; you can pass this class easily. All sorts of people have offered to help you—including me—and you've refused. There's not anything else I can do. I've talked to Principal Keeler about this and he's already sent a letter to your foster parents—the decision's final."

Jason stood up, shaking. "I'll get you for this, Holbrook," he hissed. I'll tell everyone about you and Rachel. You'll be sorry you kicked me off the team."

Mike caught himself before he flinched. "Rachel? Do you mean Rachel Roth? That's absolutely absurd."

"No, it's not, Holbrook. I've seen you together in your car. I know what you've been doing."

"I've tutored her a few times, but that's all; there's nothing wrong with that, and I don't know why I'm telling you this anyway—it's none of your business. Now get out of my classroom and don't you ever threaten me again or you'll be off the team permanently."

"Just you wait, Holbrook—you and that bitch Rachel." Jason grabbed up his books and left, slamming the door behind him.

How could Jason—or anyone, for that matter—know about Rachel, Mike thought furiously. They'd been very cautious. The first time she had asked him to tutor her, he had done so with her mother's permission, and he had made sure that it was all open and aboveboard. Rachel had been wearing the same kind of baggy jeans and thick shapeless sweaters that all students seemed to be wearing these days, and even though she had the most incredible violet eyes and long white hair, it had been pulled back in a tight ponytail as usual, making her appear very plain. They had sat at her dining room table and had gone through two chapters together. She was very intelligent and quickly understood the concepts he was trying to get across, but Mike was not particularly interested in intelligence, and Rachel's plainness was not promising. She didn't appear to be overweight—in Mike's opinion there was nothing so unaesthetic as an overweight woman—but her clothes did nothing to outline her figure; the shape and size of her breasts were barely discernible through her size XXL sweatshirt. Having dismissed her as unworthy of further interest, he made up an excuse to leave. Rachel was disappointed and begged him to stay, complaining that they were only halfway through the material, so he capitulated and agreed to come back the following week.

A week later when Rachel answered the door, she was barefoot, wearing a sheer sleeveless dress that buttoned up the front. Mike noticed that she had neglected to fasten the top two buttons.

He had not intended to become involved with Rachel, but one look at her and he changed his mind. No longer the frumpy teenage girl from Southwest High, she had become a very beautiful and desirable woman.

"Uh, will your mother be here tonight?" he asked, looking around.

"She has the night shift this week," Rachel replied. "She won't be back until tomorrow morning, but it's okay—I told her you were coming over."

"What about your father?"

"My father left four years ago—we have no idea where he is." She locked the door behind them and slid the bolt into place.

Rachel took his hand and led him into the living room. There was a small fire glowing in the fireplace and the only other light came dimly from a small table lamp next to the couch. "I'm all ready for you," she said, turning to face him. Her deep amethyst eyes sparkled in the firelight. "I thought the couch might be more comfortable than the dining room table."

Mike sat down on the couch and watched Rachel as she walked slowly over to the fireplace and bent over the gas logs, turning the flames up a little. The firelight showed through the filmy material of her dress and he could easily see the outline of her slender body as she adjusted the gas valve.

Rachel could feel his eyes on her but she pretended not to notice. She felt nervous and jittery in front of him, and she forced herself to keep from shaking as a thrill of excitement rushed through her body. Her mouth was dry and she was afraid she wouldn't be able to talk; she had rehearsed

this moment many times during the past week and now that he was here, she was afraid she would appear clumsy and childlike.

She walked over slowly and stood directly in front of him, her feet apart. "Can I get you a soda or something before we start?" she asked in what she thought was a sensual voice. She slid her hands slowly down her hips, pulling the dress tight against her, trying to send him a message without being overly obvious.

Mike looked up at her. Her eyes were wide, staring down into his, her long white hair framing her delicate face, cascading down around her back and shoulders. He wanted to run his fingers through her snowy hair. "Ah...no, thanks," he replied, having trouble with his own voice.

He let his eyes travel down Rachel's body. He could see the upper part of her breasts and the dark valley between them; the dress itself was very short, stopping just below her hips. He could see her soft, glossy thighs below the dress and the smoothness of her knees, her shapely calves and her small, delicate ankles. He longed to put his hands on her thigh and slide his fingers up her leg under her dress.

She sat beside him, her bare leg against his, her dress barely covering her. He could see the soft insides of her thighs as she leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, looking at the book he had opened on the coffee table. Now that she was sitting under the lamp he could see through her gossamer dress that she was wearing nothing underneath; it was stretched tight around her back and it tucked up into the soft fissure in her buttocks. This can't be happening, he thought to himself.

Mike could feel the warmth of Rachel's body next to his. She wasn't wearing perfume and he could smell her faint feminine scent, making him very aroused. He knew she was trying to seduce him but he didn't care—he wanted to push her down on the couch and tear her dress off.

He leaned back and put his arm on the back of the couch behind her. She closed the book and sat up, turning her head and looking at him, her big eyes boring into his. She smiled and raised her eyebrows slightly. Leaning toward him, she whispered, her face very close to his, "What would you like to teach me tonight, Mike?" He could feel her warm, sweet breath on his face.

"What would you like to learn?" he whispered back.

"Anything you want," Rachel murmured, brushing her lips across his. "Anything at all."

He left Rachel as the sun was coming up, having made arrangements to meet again the next evening. After that, they met as often as they could. He checked carefully before picking her up in the park, and he made sure that nobody saw her in his car until it was safely parked in the garage of his condominium—or at least he thought he had. Once a month she would tell her mother she was going to spend the weekend with one of her friends and they would have two days together. Her mother never checked—on her nights off, she would be drunk and unconscious by nine o'clock.

Mike knew what would happen if he were discovered with another student, even if she was over eighteen. He had been caught with a fourteen-year-old girl two years before and it had cost him ten thousand dollars hush money, paid in cash to the girl's parents. He missed the cash more than he missed the girl, but not so with Rachel—her appetite for sex was insatiable and she let him do things to her that left both of them exhausted and hungry for more.

Mike sat at his desk, thinking about Jason Franklin's accusation. He realized that he and Rachel had been too lax. He'd have to ask her to be more careful about the way she looked at him at school and how she always stayed after class on some pretext. He liked the way she wrinkled her nose at him, but she would have to save that for when they were alone. And he would have to be more careful about the way he treated her in class; she was starting to be considered a teacher's pet, and that might draw attention to them both.

He decided to talk with Rachel that night, but he would have to be careful not to upset her—the three hours they would have together were precious.

At seven o'clock, he drove to Riverside Park and picked her up, then he headed west on Kellogg. "Where are we going?" asked Rachel. "This isn't the way to your condo."

"I thought we'd go somewhere different for a change," he replied. He had decided to change their routine until he could determine if anyone—especially Jason—was stalking them. He drove past the airport and turned left onto a little-used road which wound around through the woods until it ended on a hill overlooking the runway. Off in the distance, the lights of downtown Wichita glimmered in the gathering darkness, but neither of them were interested in watching lights.

He shut off the engine, locked the doors and moved the seat back all the way. Rachel leaned over and untied her shoes, pulling them off along with her socks; she was already breathing hard. Mike unfastened her jeans and hooked his thumbs in the waistband. She raised up and he pulled her jeans and panties down her legs, then she lifted her legs and he slid them off over her feet. Rachel pulled her T-shirt off over her head and tossed her bra on the floor. As they embraced, the windows began to fog over; the city lights were no more than faint halos through the glass. The last vestiges of daylight were quickly fading.

Suddenly the back of the car rocked as if it had been stuck by a heavy object. Mike couldn't see because Rachel had her arms wrapped around his neck. She leaned around his head, looked through the foggy rear window and saw the shadowy figure of a man standing motionless behind the car. The figure reached out and thrust down on the trunk again, crumpling the deck, causing the rear of the car to bottom out and recoil violently. "Mike!" she cried. "There's somebody back there!" She crawled off his lap, groping for her panties.

Mike pulled up his pants, then he reached across her and opened the glove box. "Stay here," he ordered her. "I'll take care of this." He pulled a revolver out of the glove box and climbed out of the car. When he had shut the door, Rachel reached over and locked it. She laid down in the front seat and pulled on her panties, not worrying with the bra which was somewhere on the floor. She found her T-shirt and struggled into it, trying to keep a low profile.

The figure standing behind the car folded its arms and waited patiently as Mike approached. Mike had never fired a gun before, but its cold weight in his hand gave him confidence. "Okay, buddy," he said, "I don't know who you are, but back off from my car. I have a gun."

"Real tough, aren't you, Holbrook? Is that Rachel Roth in the car with you?"

Mike recognized the voice immediately. "Jason! What are you doing here? You're in big trouble. I'll make sure you never get back on the swim team."

"I told you I'd get you and that stupid whore Rachel," said Jason.

"And I told *you* I've got a gun," Mike replied. "I don't want to have to use it, so just turn around and get out of here."

"It's too late for that. Swimming is the only thing I'm good at, and you've taken it away. It's your fault, and now you'll pay for it."

"I'm warning you, Jason—I'll shoot!"

Jason took a step toward Mike. "Go ahead—you think that thing will stop me?"

Mike cocked the revolver and aimed it at Jason's face. Jason took another step and he pulled the trigger. The hammer fell home but there was no report and no recoil. Mike looked at the revolver and back at Jason. Jason took another step toward him and he pulled the trigger again, but again there was no report. He continued pulling the trigger until Jason reached out and snatched the useless weapon from his fingers.

Jason pitched the gun back over his shoulder and laughed. "Now what are you going to do, Holbrook? You're a real tough guy in the classroom but you don't look so tough now."

"Jason," said Mike, "listen to me: you're not off the team, you're just suspended. We can work this out—you don't need to do this."

Mike had back-pedaled and was now up against the trunk of the car. Jason was standing a foot from him but he didn't seem to have heard Mike. "That bitch, Rachel: Miss High-and-Mighty is too good for us students. I asked her for a date and she laughed in my face. Now *I'm* the one who's laughing. Goodbye, Coach."

Jason reached out and put his index finger on Mike's forehead. He backed off and saw that Mike was standing rigidly, staring straight ahead.

Rachel had cautiously raised her head until she could peer over the front seat. She could hear them talking but the windows were up and it muffled their speech. She saw Mike standing with his back to her, leaning against the trunk, unmoving. The other man took him by the arm and steered him toward the driver's side door. He tried the handle but it wouldn't move. He bent down and looked in at Rachel, and he could see that she recognized him. He smiled and waved; Mike was still standing where he had left him. Jason wedged his fingers in between the glass and the window sill and ripped the door off of its hinges, slamming it on the ground. The sound echoed through the woods. "Hello, bitch," he said as she screamed. "Relax—I'm not going to touch you. I have your boyfriend here."

Rachel slid across the seat and tried to open the passenger-side door but the handle wouldn't budge. "You're not going anywhere," said Jason. "Coach here is going to join you. Get in, Coach."

Jason moved aside and Mike got into the car, still staring straight ahead. Rachel watched Jason as he walked to the rear of the car and stood looking at her, grinning through the rear window. He waved at her again, then he placed his palms flat on the trunk. After a few seconds she could see his face begin to glow as if he were holding a candle in his hands. As the light grew brighter, Jason turned and walked off into the darkness, leaving the light behind.

Rachel couldn't see the source of the light, but it was now very bright and she could clearly see the trees which surrounded the clearing. Tears rolling down her cheeks, she shook Mike and cried his name but he continued to stare out the windshield. She climbed over him and fell out of the car, landing on her side on top of the broken door. She crawled around the front of the car on her hands and knees over the gravel and into the woods.

When Jason had walked a few hundred feet down the road, he turned and watched. The light was so intense he had to squint. Suddenly the gas tank exploded, sending the car high into the air. It flipped end over end and landed on its roof, flames shooting from the shattered windows. Jason could feel its heat on his face and he held up his hands toward the fireball as if trying to absorb some of its power. As the flames subsided, he turned again and was gone.

The explosion knocked Rachel backwards. As she pulled herself to her feet, she could see that her legs and hands were bloody from her mad scramble across the gravel. She had nothing left but her panties and her T-shirt; she had left her purse in the car along with the rest of her clothes. Ignoring the blood streaming down her legs, she turned, crying, and began picking her way through the woods, away from the fire and heat.

At first the flames illuminated the woods, casting her shadow crazily in front of her, but as they died down, the cold and darkness returned. She had no idea where she was going. Rocks stabbed at her bare feet and branches reached out for her as she slowly worked her way down the

hill. She hoped she was moving toward the airport, but she didn't really care—she just wanted to get as far away as she could. The sounds of her passage echoed through the dark woods.

Rachel held her hands out in front of her, feeling her way around trees. She walked into several bushes, forcing her to backtrack around them; each bush she hit jabbed her calves and thighs; she could feel them ripping and tearing her skin. She stepped on an exposed root and her foot slid out from under her, causing her to fall and land heavily on her side and cry out in pain. She raised up on one elbow, tears running down her face, shivering from the cold, and discovered that her hair was caught on something. Rolling onto her knees, she pulled, trying to free her hair, finally grabbing it and yanking as hard as she could. It broke free suddenly and she flew back and landed flat on her buttocks.

Rachel put her hands over her face and cried, feeling hopelessly lost, her body wracked with sobs. As they subsided, she could feel something wet underneath her, soaking into her panties. She reached down and put her fingers into a pool of slimy mud. "Just great," she moaned, flicking the mud off her fingers. Rolling back onto her hands and knees, she pushed herself to her feet. She tried to wipe off the mud but all she did was smear it around her legs and into her cuts, making them burn and sting. She heard something crashing through the undergrowth toward her and she screamed, but whatever it was veered away and headed off through the woods.

Rachel wiped her hands on her T-shirt and looked around, unsure of which direction she should go. The darkness was total; she could see nothing whichever way she turned. The hill seemed to slope down to her left, so she slowly moved in that direction. Her foot hurt from the root she had slipped on; she was no longer able to put her full weight on it.

The ground was becoming less steep now. Rachel thought she could see some lights shining through the trees ahead of her and she was encouraged, pushing her way forward more rapidly. Suddenly the ground disappeared in front of her and she pitched forward, landing hard on her stomach and chest, knocking the wind out of her. She slid screaming down a steep slope head first on a layer of wet, slimy leaves, finally coasting to a halt. She rolled over onto her back and stared up at the night sky, lying spread-eagled, not moving, trying to catch her breath; she could see it condensing in the cold air above her. Her breasts hurt so bad she wanted to cry, but there were no tears left. Feeling her chest for injuries, she pulled off the wet leaves which were plastered on her T-shirt. She laid there, taking deep breaths, forcing herself to relax. As she looked up again, she thought she could just make out the faint outline of the trees above her; perhaps there were lights somewhere close. Her fall had stripped her panties down around her knees so she tried to pull them back up, only to find that they were ripped down one side. She yanked them up as best she could and tugged her tattered T-shirt down as far as it would go.

Rachel sat up, trying to determine where she was. She could definitely make out individual trees; there was light coming from behind her. She turned her head around; not two feet from where she had been lying was a chain link fence. She felt a surge of elation as she realized that civilization was close. Grabbing onto the fence, she pulled herself upright, hanging on and looking through it at what lay beyond. She rattled it back and forth, laughing and enjoying the metallic sound it made.

Just on the opposite side of the fence was an asphalt road running parallel with it, and about a hundred yards beyond the road across a field were some large office buildings, dimly illuminated by streetlights on their far side.

She looked up at the fence and thought about climbing it; it was at least ten feet high. Scaling it barefooted would have been bad enough, but she could see that the fence was also topped with barbed wire.

Rachel looked both ways along the fence. Where there's a fence, there's a gate, she thought. There was nothing but darkness to her left, but there were some bright lights far down the fence to her right. She could see that the woods did not come clear down to the fence; there was a narrow band of flat ground next to it, and then a steep slope—the slope she had fallen down—back up into the woods.

Sensing that rescue was close at hand, she turned to her right and began limping her way along the fence, shuffling her feet through the dead leaves. What was left of her panties slid down her leg as she walked. That was the last straw—her fear turned to anger and she ripped them off, threw them to the ground and stomped them with her good foot, yelling, "*Son of a bitch...son of a bitch...son of a bitch!*"

She stood there, panting and staring down at her panties—now an unrecognizable wad—and feeling much better. Finally she straightened her shoulders, pulled her tangled hair out of her face, tugged her T-shirt down, knowing that it was far too short to cover her nakedness, and hobbled toward the lights.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 17 – 10:57 PM

Judy Carlyle was just preparing to make her eleven o'clock rounds when the phone rang. "Westcomm, gate three," she said, trying to hold the receiver with her shoulder as she strapped her gun belt around her waist. "Hold on, Jack," she said, laying down the receiver and getting her belt buckled. "Damned stupid thing," she muttered. "Okay, I'm back. What?...No, not tonight, I don't get off until midnight...Well *you* pick him up, then—he's *your* kid...I don't care how many beers you've had; that's your problem...You better *not* pick him up if you've been drinking...Aw, jeez. All right—tell him I'll pick him up in twenty min...hold on, Jack—somebody's walking up the road."

She laid the receiver down and stepped out of the guardhouse. In the distance she could see what appeared to be a woman moving toward the guardhouse, holding onto the fence with one hand and pulling herself slowly along. As she watched, the woman stumbled and fell to her knees with a cry of pain, and then pulled herself back up and continued. Judy walked toward her and as she got closer she could see that the woman was very young, wearing nothing but a filthy, ripped T-shirt. Her whole torso was smeared with mud, and her hair, a dirty mass of snarls, was hanging down in her face. Judy could hear her whimpers as she struggled to keep her feet.

"Oh, my god!" Judy said, and started running.

Rachel heard a voice and saw someone moving toward her. She let go of the fence and fell to her knees, trying to see through her hair.

Judy rushed up and knelt beside her. "Oh, honey," she said, putting her arm around Rachel's shoulders. "Let's get you inside. Can you walk?"

"Please help me..."

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – 12:51 AM

"Skyguard—how may I direct your call?"

"Yes, this is Judy Carlyle, I'm a security guard with Westcomm Communications in Wichita, Kansas. I need to speak to General Richard Stuart immediately, code Aegis Two."

"Hold on, ma'am—I'll get him."

"Aegis" was one of many keywords used by Skyguard to screen and direct incoming calls from field agents. The keyword "Two" designated the priority level of the call, with "One" being the highest.

Ostensibly, Skyguard was an interagency consortium of the United States government dedicated to the discovery, cataloging, and tracking of asteroids, comets and other near-earth objects, usually referred to as "NEAT," or "Near Earth Asteroid Tracking." In actuality, only a small portion of Skyguard's resources was dedicated to this endeavor. Skyguard's true mission—completely unknown to the general public—was to carry on the work of Project Blue Book, a now-defunct organization within the U.S. Air Force which had been dedicated to the investigation of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and other extraterrestrial phenomena between 1948 and 1969.

After having investigated thousands of reported alien activities, the Air Force had announced to the public that in its opinion there were no such things as extraterrestrial spacecraft or alien encounters. However, enough of their investigations had uncovered real evidence of alien activities to warrant continued research and inquiry. Because these activities constituted a "clear and present danger"—to use government parlance—to the United States, Project Blue Book was publicly disbanded and Skyguard was secretly created.

General Richard Stuart, Director of Skyguard, answered only to the President of the United States and the Air Force Chief of Staff, but his tendrils reached far and deep into government and he was adept at obtaining research and operating funds without consulting Congress or providing specific details. He was also an expert *shmooze* artist—if Skyguard needed another helicopter, somehow a Sikorsky Black Hawk would be delivered to Skyguard's operations center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma within a few days, no questions asked.

Judy Carlyle was just one of hundreds of Skyguard's auxiliary field agents spread throughout the United States. All of these part-time agents led normal lives and had regular careers, but they had been trained to observe and report any event they deemed worthy of Skyguard's scrutiny. None of them were ever paid a dime for their work; they were volunteers who were dedicated to the Skyguard mission. They permeated all sectors of the community and came from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and races.

Richard Stuart had personally recruited many of Skyguard's auxiliary field agents, or AFAs, including Judy, who had been an officer with the Wichita police department before her retirement. She now worked four nights a week as a security guard for Westcomm Communications, a large avionics company adjacent to Wichita's Midcontinent Airport.

While Judy waited to be connected with Richard, she glanced over at Rachel, who was sound asleep on Judy's living room couch. After she had determined that Rachel was not in need of emergency medical attention, she had half-carried her into the guardhouse and wrapped her up in a warm blanket. Fortified by several swigs of Jack Daniels, Rachel had poured out her story. Judy's first concern was that she had been raped, but when Rachel described how Jason Franklin had ripped the door off of Mike Holbrook's car and had somehow "hypnotized" him, an alarm had gone off in Judy's head and she had taken Rachel home with her instead of calling the local authorities.

Rachel had been too weak and exhausted to stand in the shower, so Judy had laid her in the bottom of the bathtub and turned on the shower head, letting the water pour warmly over Rachel's small body while Judy washed off the filth. Rachel had lain quietly, her eyes looking into Judy's, feeling the warm, healing water soak into her skin. Under several layers of mud, Rachel was a mass of cuts, contusions and bruises—fortunately none of them serious—and there were no marks on her beautiful face. Judy had removed the twigs and leaves from Rachel's long white hair and washed it with baby shampoo, pulling out the snarls and tangles, bringing back fond memories of the times she had bathed her own little girl years before. The warm water had caused some of Rachel's wounds to ooze blood but Judy knew there was little danger of scarring; she had treated many such wounds in the past. She wrapped Rachel in a thick terry-cloth bathrobe, led her out to the couch and

blow-dried her hair. As Judy ran a brush through her hair and the hot air swirled around her, Rachel found herself drifting off, unable to keep her eyes open, and she fell over on the couch, sound asleep.

When Richard finally came to the phone, Judy explained the reason for her call, apologizing for having gotten him out of bed.

"Don't worry, Judy," he said, "you did exactly right. Have you notified her parents?"

"No—she has no father and her mother works nights at a convenience store. Rachel says she's an alcoholic and will probably come home and get drunk."

"How old is Rachel?"

"She says she's eighteen, but I can't confirm that—she lost her purse in the fire."

"We'll run her name and get an age verification. If she is eighteen, I'll send a plane up to Wichita tomorrow morning and bring her here to Skyguard; otherwise I'll send an agent. Don't let her leave—if what she says is true, her life is in danger. I'll call you back with the details and I'll have someone contact her mother with some story to cover her absence. Meanwhile, if Rachel has any more revelations, please call me back immediately. And Judy, thank you for your help—I really appreciate it."

"Glad to be of help, Richard—that's what I'm here for. Say hello to Flora for me, and I'm looking forward to seeing you both at our next high school reunion."

Chapter 2

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – 8:20 AM

A sleek, black Learjet displaying the name "Pendragon Aviation" in gold letters touched down at Wichita's Midcontinent Airport and taxied to a private hanger well away from the terminal building. The door swung down and an attractive raven-haired woman stepped out and walked toward Judy and Rachel, who were standing in front of the hangar. She gave Judy a hug.

"Hello, Rachel," she said. "My name is Laura Powell, and I'm here to take you where we can talk about what happened last night. Please understand that you are not in any trouble—I work for the federal government and I'm not a law enforcement officer. If you don't want to come with me you don't have to, but because you're an eyewitness to a murder, Judy will have to take you to file a police report. On the other hand, if you want to help us *really* find out what happened, then I'd recommend you come with me."

"No, that's okay," said Rachel. "I want to know. I'll come with you."

"Thank you," said Laura. "You're a very brave and courageous young woman. If you'll just follow me, we'll get going. Judy, thanks again for your help—Richard will let you know what happens."

As they entered the plane, Laura said, "I know you don't have any clothes with you. When we get to our destination, the first thing we'll do is get you some."

"That's very nice of you," Rachel replied. "Judy let me wear some of her daughter's clothes but they're too big, as you can see—especially the underwear."

"I'd guess you're a size three, same as me," Laura said. Rachel nodded. "I'll call ahead and have some new clothes waiting for you. Why don't you sit down here next to the window and buckle your seat belt. This is Sandy Rhodes, our pilot."

A pretty blonde with sparkling brown eyes turned around in the pilot's seat and waved. "Hi, Rachel—welcome aboard Pendragon Airways. Have you ever flown before?"

"No, I haven't; I've never even been on an airplane. This is kind of exciting."

"Well, if you've never flown before, I'll avoid doing any loopy loops. As soon as we take off, Laura has some sandwiches for you if you're hungry. Oops, there's the tower calling, so I've got to get busy."

After they had taken off, Laura served some club sandwiches and a Coke, which Rachel consumed voraciously. "I can't believe I'm eating all this," she said. "Judy already fed me a whole stack of pancakes."

"From what she told me, you had quite a tiring night," said Laura, "so I can understand why you'd still be hungry. But let's not talk about that right now—let's just relax and enjoy the flight."

Rachel looked out the window, fascinated at first with the patchwork of fields below her, but her thoughts gradually turned to the mysterious woman with emerald eyes sitting next to her. Laura's eyes were the deepest green she had ever seen. Her skin was clear and light without appearing pale; it was so translucent as to appear faintly bluish, a stark contrast to the long wavy

black hair which framed her face and tumbled down around her shoulders and back. She could tell that Laura was older than she, but her delicate face was completely unwrinkled and her hair showed not a strand of gray, making it impossible to guess her age. Why would this beautiful woman fly all the way to Wichita, pick her up, and whisk her off toward some unknown destination?

"Laura, you said you work for the government. What exactly do you do?"

"Well," she replied, "I work for an agency called 'Skyguard' that investigates the kind of thing that happened to you last night. My husband David works with me, and Sandy works with us, too."

"Can you tell me where we're going?"

"Sure—to a little city in Oklahoma called Bartlesville. You've probably never heard of it. Rachel, one thing I must tell you: very few people know about our agency; it's very secret. You must promise not to talk about it—or where we're going—to anyone, ever. Will you promise me?"

"Yes, of course I promise. Wow—a secret government agency. How exciting!"

"It is for us, too. We get to go places and see things that hardly anyone ever knows or hears about."

"Rachel," Sandy said over her shoulder, "if you'd like to sit up here next to me, I'll let you fly the plane."

"You're kidding!" she exclaimed.

"Not at all; I let Laura fly all the time."

Laura moved out of the way and Rachel climbed into the copilot's seat. When she was strapped in, Sandy pointed out some of the instruments and their functions. "The most important ones you need to watch right now are the altimeter and the artificial horizon." She explained how the controls worked, and had Rachel put her hands lightly on the wheel and her feet on the rudder pedals while Sandy did some gentle maneuvers. Once she felt that Rachel understood, she took her hands off the controls and gave Rachel command of the plane.

Sandy had done this many times; as a flight instructor, she was always looking for new students, regardless of their background or where they came from. "For now," she told Rachel, "just try to keep the plane at wings level and move the wheel very gently while you watch and feel what the plane does. Very good! Okay, now we're going to do a lesson. When I tell you, I want you to roll right fifteen degrees then bring it back to wings level. Don't look out the windshield, watch the artificial horizon to tell how many degrees you've rolled. Understand? Great—okay, go ahead."

Rachel eased the control wheel to the right and the plane began a gentle roll. When the artificial horizon indicated that she had rolled ten degrees, she tapered off until the plane was flying exactly at a fifteen-degree angle, then she did the action in reverse. "That's perfect!" said Sandy. "You're a natural—you've got the touch." She called Air Traffic Control and requested permission to change altitude, then she had Rachel climb two thousand feet. "What's our altitude now, Rachel," she asked.

"It's...thirteen thousand, six hundred feet, I think."

"That's exactly right. What's our heading?"

"Uh, it's...one eighty-eight, whatever that means."

"That means we're flying almost due south—I'll teach you what the numbers mean later, if we have enough time. Okay, let's do one more thing: these two levers, or 'throttles,' control the engines, similar to the gas pedal in your car. When I pull them back, I'm cutting power to the engines, and vice versa. You can see that the throttles are about halfway up, so we're flying at about half thrust. What I want you to do is to decrease power to one-third without changing altitude, and I want you to figure out how to do it."

Rachel reached down and pulled the throttles gently towards her. Immediately the engines decreased their whine and the plane began to nose over. Rachel pulled back on the control wheel, adding more lift until the plane was once again flying level. "Did I do right?" she asked.

"You did perfect," said Sandy. "Are you enjoying this?"

"This is absolutely amazing!" she said, her violet eyes sparkling.

"Well, like I said: I think you're a natural. How would you like to *really* learn how to fly a plane? I'm a licensed flight instructor and I could give you flying lessons."

"Oh, gosh," said Rachel. "I can't afford to pay for lessons. Besides, I live in Wichita and I'm still going to high school."

"Don't you worry about that," Sandy replied. "If you want to learn how to fly, then you'll learn and it won't cost you a cent. Okay, we're about fifty miles north of Bartlesville and I've got to make landing preparations. You stay right where you are, because you're going to help—you'll be my copilot."

Laura relaxed in her seat and watched as Sandy showed Rachel how the Microwave Landing System, or MLS, worked. Laura herself was very intelligent and a quick learner, but she agreed with Sandy—Rachel understood the plane and its characteristics instinctively; she had lightning-fast reflexes and she knew what to do without having to stop and think about it.

As the Learjet approached the runway, Sandy had Rachel lower the landing gear and extend the flaps as Sandy touched the plane down gently and taxied to a stop in front of the Pendragon Aviation hangar. Sandy cut the engines and killed all the power, then they climbed out onto the flight line.

"I have to fly to Tulsa pretty soon," said Sandy, "but before I go I want to show you something." They entered the hangar through a small door. The huge interior was ablaze with light, revealing a startling array of fixed and rotary-winged aircraft, as well as a veritable parking lot of trucks, vans, cars and other vehicles. In the corner was an old pontoon boat on a rusty trailer. They walked around a Sikorsky S-76 Spirit helicopter and stopped at a small sleek jet. Rachel thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"This aircraft looks like a Northrup F-5B two-seater Freedom Fighter but it's actually a unique prototype," said Sandy, leaning up against the nose gear. "It has a twenty-six foot wing span and is forty-seven feet long. It originally had two General Electric J85 engines, but we have modified them extensively. Now it will fly at twice the speed of sound at seventy thousand feet. How would you like to take a ride in it with me tomorrow?"

"Oh my god!" said Rachel, licking her lips. "I'd love to!"

"Great! Then Laura will get you fitted with a flight suit and helmet, and I'll see you tomorrow. Why don't you climb up and look in the cockpit while I talk to Laura for a minute. Just don't touch anything, the seats eject."

Rachel climbed the ladder and gazed lovingly at the interior of the little fighter.

"Sandy!" said Laura when they were out of earshot. "What are you doing? Rachel's supposed to be here for a debriefing—you don't even know her, she could be a complete psychopath."

"I want her flying," said Sandy. "I've never seen anyone take to it like she has—she has built-in gyroscopes in her butt. I can have her doing perfect eight-point rolls in that fighter in thirty minutes and outside loops in an hour. If I have to fly my Beechcraft to Wichita every day to teach her, I will, and inside of six months she'll be a Skyguard pilot and that fighter jet will be hers to fly. Laura, Rachel *needs* to be up in the air—that's where she belongs; I can see it in her eyes."

Laura chuckled. "She damned near had an orgasm flying that Learjet, didn't she? Well, it's fine with me, but we'll have to clear it with David and Richard first."

"I'll take care of Richard," said Sandy. "He thinks I'm one of his daughters from a parallel universe. You just convince your husband—I know that won't be hard, if you catch my drift."

"I don't know," Laura said dubiously. "David can be difficult to convince sometimes, and I've never used sex as an incentive. Much."

"Oh, bullshit," said Sandy. "I used to do it with Wade all the time and he didn't have a clue—back when we used to do such things. Here's what you do..." She whispered in Laura's ear.

"*Sandy!* You do *that*? How can you bend your...Good grief—that even makes *me* blush, and David and I are extremely...experimental."

Sandy shrugged. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, you know. Of course, those days are past."

"What do you mean? Trouble between you and Wade?"

"It's a long story," she replied. "I'll tell you about it later."

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – 1:15 PM

Laura had wanted to take Rachel directly up to meet David and Richard, but Rosalita Martinez, Skyguard's resident physician and director of its forensics lab, had vetoed that idea, insisting on examining Rachel's injuries first.

Rosa had been a crime scene investigator for the Astoria, Oregon police department until she was shot in the back during an investigation. Paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair, she soon learned that field work was virtually impossible. Rosa realized that the scenic town of Astoria was simply too small to offer a future for a disabled forensics expert so she resigned and returned to college. After obtaining her medical degree, she was hired as an Assistant Professor of Anatomy at the University of Kansas Medical Center, where she was recruited by Skyguard.

The entire Skyguard forensics lab and sick bay had been designed around Rosa; its tables and examination beds were all the correct height and reach to allow easy access, as were the aisles between them. Skyguard had even designed her motorized wheelchair—which Rosa had named "Quetzalcoatl" in honor of an ancient Aztec king—and had built her an apartment on the third floor of the hangar so she wouldn't have to commute, although she had her own van—also designed by Skyguard—for running errands.

Laura introduced Rachel to her, explaining what Rosa wanted to do, then she went off to find her husband.

David Powell was sitting on the couch in the huge office suite he shared with Laura. Mary, their eighteen-year-old adopted daughter, was sitting astride his lap, leaning against his chest and whispering something in his ear, her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Hey, you two," said Laura, "what have you two been up to, as if I couldn't guess."

"Nothing, unfortunately," Mary replied. "David has been showing me this graphics program called 'AutoCAD.' You can draw all sorts of things with it. Go look at what I've done."

Laura walked over to the computer and looked at what Mary had drawn. "Mary, this is beautiful! What made you pick this to draw?"

"I don't know," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "I was just doodling and it came to me." Mary had drafted a fairly accurate side elevation of Skyguard's F-5 Freedom Fighter.

"Well, I think it's great," said Laura. "Why don't you save it and go see if Cliff Evans up in Communications has any editing for you to do." During Mary's time away from her studies, she worked part-time doing odd jobs for various Skyguard personnel. "Leave the drawing on the screen and you can finish it later, and pull the door shut on your way out."

"Okay," Mary said. She gave Dave a long, juicy kiss and climbed off his lap. "See you later," she said over her shoulder.

Laura took Mary's place astride his lap. "My turn," she whispered. "I missed you, David."

"I missed you too," he replied, "but I think it was a good idea for you and Sandy to go alone—I'm sure it made Rachel more comfortable. Did you get back with her okay?"

"The flight was uneventful, as they say, and Rachel is up in sick bay with Rosa."

"What's your opinion of Rachel?"

"She's very intelligent and mature for her age—she's also gorgeous. Her hair is pure white, like an albino's, except Rachel is no albino, she has a fantastic tan and violet eyes—she said we were like amethysts and emeralds. She had a horrible experience last night; she has scratches all over her and she hurt her foot, but mentally she seems to be bearing up. David, Sandy let Rachel fly the Learjet and then she showed her a fighter jet down on the hangar floor—*that* fighter jet." She pointed to the computer screen.

"That's a bit of a coincidence," he said.

"*That's* a bit of an understatement," she said. "There's no way it could be a coincidence."

"Maybe not, but Mary has not shown any signs of telepathy."

"Do you think she was reading Rachel's mind?"

"It's certainly possible. While Rachel's here, we'll give her and Mary some standard ESP tests and see if there's anything to it."

Dave and Laura's involvement with Mary had begun some six months earlier^{*}, when a county sheriff investigating a car wreck had discovered an invisible dome—later code-named *Aegis*^{**}—in the middle of a remote field. Unsure who to notify, the sheriff had called his friend, Dave Powell. At that time, Dave was retired from the Air Force, having served as the last director of Project Blue Book and the first director of Skyguard. Dave had notified Richard Stuart, who had sent out a Skyguard site investigation team, a member of which was Laura. He invited Dave to join their investigation and Dave readily accepted.

After extensive testing, the site team determined the Aegis to be a transparent spherical ball of pure energy buried halfway in the field. All attempts to penetrate the Aegis, ascertain its technology, or determine its purpose met with failure. During the investigation process, Dave and Laura worked together very closely and fell in love. Dave proposed and Laura accepted, but because of their hectic schedule, they did not set a marriage date.

After the Aegis suddenly became opaque, a Skyguard helicopter lowered a team member onto its apex and was shot at by a sniper posing as an NSA agent named Smith. This mysterious NSA agent had also murdered one of the sheriff's deputies, who had been luring teenage girls to his trailer for sexual purposes, drugging them and taking pornographic pictures of them in various poses. When Dave and Laura ransacked his trailer, they confiscated the pictures and circulated photos of them (faces only, of course) to law enforcement agencies as being runaways.

Smith kidnapped Sharon McGinnis, the team's philologist, and when she was recovered and examined by Rosa it was discovered that Smith had been harvesting human eggs from abductees, including Sharon's.

^{*}Details of Skyguard's encounter with the Aegis may be found in *Skyguard* §1: *The Aegis*.

^{**}In Greek mythology, the Aegis was a shield associated with Zeus, who was called "the Aegis Bearer," and with the goddess Athena. Homer described the Aegis as a shaggy breastplate bordered with serpents. The tasseled Aegis of Athena, constructed of goatskin, was set with the fearful head of Medusa, the gorgon.

When the temperature of the Aegis stabilized at ninety-eight degrees and dozens of heartbeats were detected within its shell, Dave and Laura surmised that the Aegis was an artificial womb about to give birth. Matters were complicated by the discovery of a second Aegis high in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Dave and Laura attempted to fly to Colorado but their jet was shot down by an invisible assailant.

While all this was occurring, the police in Oklahoma City arrested several teenagers for panhandling, one of whom was a girl named Mary Jane. The police recognized her picture as being one of the runaways Dave and Laura were searching for, and they had her flown to Skyguard.

Mary's story was that she had awakened in a park two months previously, completely naked and alone, with no memory of who she was or how she had gotten there. She had been rescued and befriended by some real teenage runaways and had lived on the streets of Oklahoma City until her arrest.

Diagnosed with total amnesia, Mary appeared lost and confused. Though physically a eighteen-year-old woman, her behavior was generally that of a young, immature girl. As they questioned her, they discovered that she unknowingly demonstrated fluency in at least five languages—later testing had expanded that number to twenty-three and counting. Suspecting that Mary was the product of an Aegis, Dave and Laura hastened their marriage in order to become Mary's legal guardians.

Their honeymoon night was interrupted by frantic pleas from Mary—temporarily under Rosa's care—who insisted that the three of them visit the Aegis immediately. When Mary touched the Aegis, she was able to pass through its surface and they were finally able to enter and explore. Mary fell unconscious and became a conduit through which the creators of the Aegis could communicate. Dave and Laura were told by the creators that ninety-six human clone-like replicas nurtured by the Aegis had been mistakenly released into the world flawed and incomplete, and that they must be destroyed. Dave and Laura were not told the nature of their flaw, their location, or their ultimate purpose. Their only clue was Mary herself, but unfortunately, Mary did not appear to have any knowledge of her own origin, nature, or powers.

They were also warned through Mary that the second Aegis site in Colorado would be destroyed. After the Colorado site team was safely evacuated, the second Aegis exploded with the force of a nuclear bomb, destroying itself and everything else within a twenty-mile radius.

Dave and Laura had been left with an empty Aegis, a eighteen-year-old girl/woman with no memory, and the knowledge that they must stop ninety-six creatures—whom they dubbed "Aegisians"—whose identity, location, and purpose were unknown.

At Richard's request, Dave rejoined Skyguard as co-director, and promoted Laura, previously the team's photographer, to be Dave's partner—which she already was, for all intents and purposes.

Skyguard personnel were very fond of Dave and Laura, and because they were rarely seen apart, their fellow co-workers had lovingly nicknamed them "D&L." Although they both had moments when they needed solitude—as does any couple—D&L got a kick out of the nickname and readily acknowledged that they played off of each other constantly, each one able to complete the other's thoughts and sentences correctly.

In the months following the Aegis events, D&L had been on the watch for evidence of teenagers who exhibited significant aptitudes, talents or behavior out of the ordinary—a difficult task, considering that most teenagers occasionally exhibit significant aptitudes, talents or behavior out of the ordinary.

Although they had received numerous leads, Rachel's description of Jason Franklin appeared to be their most promising so far: his ability to literally rip the door off a car, to "hypnotize"—using

Rachel's word—her boyfriend Mike, and the mysterious light she described as emanating from Jason which demolished the car, made him a "Person of Interest," to say the least, assuming Rachel's story was accurate. Although juvenile records were not accessible, they were able to ascertain that Jason Franklin was a ward of the State of Kansas, in the care of a foster family.

If Mary really were telepathic and had somehow read Rachel's mind, it would mark the emergence of another one of Mary's talents or powers, and it might provide a link through Rachel to Jason Franklin.

Mary seemed quite happy living with D&L, and she fit in well with the Skyguard crew. Only a few knew of her true origin, most of the staff thinking that she was simply an amnesia victim whom D&L had rescued and given a home. To the staff, the only thing of note about Mary—besides her striking pixie-like beauty—was her obvious physical obsession with Dave; she was always by his side whenever possible, holding his hand or wrapping her arm around his waist.

Rumors around the Skyguard hangar concerning Dave and Mary were rampant, but they didn't bother D&L, because D&L had started the rumors. When Mary had first arrived, several of the younger Pendragon Aviation staff members had tried to hit on her; her fifty-eight inch height and eighty-eight pounds put her in the category of what some men crudely referred to as a "spinner" or "revolver." All that stopped when it was rumored that Mary was Dave's playmate, and she was now considered to be Dave's personal and private property, which was exactly what Mary considered herself to be, and out of respect for—or fear of—Dave, they left her strictly alone.

As D&L reacquainted themselves after an absence of five long hours, Rosa called to say that she had finished with Rachel's examination, and that they could meet with her in Rosa's office in half an hour, giving Rachel a chance to try on her new clothes.

"David," said Laura, "do you know if there have been any items in the Wichita papers or on the TV stations about what happened last night?"

He picked up a report he had received from Cliff Evans, Skyguard's Director of Communications. "Yes—it's the talk of Wichita. The car was discovered early this morning and the body has been identified as Michael R. Holbrook, a teacher at Southwest High School. Also missing is Rachel Roth, no middle name, and it was rumored by a student that they were having an affair and might have been together. Rachel's body was not discovered in the car—obviously—and police don't have a clue as to her whereabouts."

"That jives closely with Rachel's preliminary account. Do any of Cliff's sources report the name of this student that was spreading rumors?"

"No, but I'm sure some reporter got his or her name—we can find out. You're thinking it was this Jason Franklin?"

"Yes, I am. Rachel said her boyfriend's name was Mike, so I guess the rumor is true—she *was* having an affair with her teacher."

Dave shrugged. "Holbrook was twenty-eight, and Rachel is almost nineteen. They are less than ten years apart—not so different than us. The only problem would be that if the affair could be proven, Rachel's reputation would be ruined."

"Since she's gone missing," Laura replied, "her reputation is already ruined—everyone will assume they were together."

"She can't go back," D&L said in unison.

Dave sighed. "First Mary, and now Rachel, plus my three grown sons and your grown daughter. With six you get eggroll."

Laura laughed. "Don't worry, we won't have to adopt another daughter. Rachel's mother is an alcoholic non-entity, so Rachel has been taking care of herself since she was fourteen. She'll be okay—better, probably—on her own. Skyguard has an empty apartment next to Rosa's since Mary has moved in with us, and that ties in with something Sandy wants to do: she thinks Rachel is a natural pilot and she wants to give her flying lessons and make her a permanent part of Skyguard as our resident fighter pilot. Also, maybe she can tutor Mary in some subjects."

"Hold on there, my dear—you and Sandy have it all worked out, but how do you think Rachel will feel about this?"

"You should have seen the way Rachel looked at the little fighter jet. Once Sandy gets her up in that thing, she'll be hanging fuzzy dice on the rear view mirror, or whatever girls do to personalize their cars these days."

"I think it's vanity tags instead of dice, these days. You know we'll have to check this out with Richard."

"Sandy says she'll take care of Richard." Laura remembered what Sandy had whispered in her ear. "Are we working late tonight?"

"Hadh't planned on it. Why—whatcha got in mind?"

"Oh, something...special. Sandy suggested it as a way of persuading you to let Rachel have flying lessons. She calls it the 'Alyeska Avalanche.'"

"The Alyeska Avalanche? Wade told me about that. I don't think it's possible—it would require you to bend your...well, I just don't think it's possible."

"There's only one way to find out."

The phone rang—Rosa and Rachel were ready for them.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – 2:49 PM

Rachel was wearing a pair of loose-fitting sweat pants and sweatshirt to avoid irritating her wounds. The long sleeves hid her arms but Dave could see that her hands were covered with cuts and scratches. As she rose to greet them, he saw that one of her feet was wrapped in an elastic bandage. "Rachel," he said, "I'm Dave Powell—welcome to Skyguard. Please, sit down and relax."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Dave," Rachel replied. "Laura and Rosa have told me all about you. Laura said to call you 'Dave'—I hope you don't mind. You have a very beautiful wife."

"Well, thank you, Rachel," he said. "I think so, too, and 'Dave' will do just fine." He turned to Rosa. "How is our patient doing?"

"She'll be all right—I checked her over pretty thoroughly. Plenty of scrapes, and she'll be black and blue for a few days, but nothing serious. She bruised her foot and she'll have to hobble around for awhile, but other than that, she's in good shape."

"Well, that's great to hear. Rachel, Laura has told you why we asked you here. We would like for you to tell us exactly what happened, in as much detail as you can. Take all the time you want, we're in no hurry. And we would like to record this, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind," she replied. She took a deep breath and began recounting the events of the previous night. She was very articulate and was able to go into detail without rambling or getting sidetracked. Dave could tell that she was making an effort to keep her emotions in check. Halfway through her story Mary brought in a tray of soft drinks, flashing Rachel a big smile, and quickly left. D&L let Rachel explain things in her own way without interruption.

When Rachel was finished, she was totally exhausted—her evening with Mike which started out so peacefully and ended with her frantic flight down the hill, had finally caught up with her. She

knew that Mike was gone and that troubled her, but her anger at Jason Franklin overrode her grief and had been the only thing keeping her going—she longed to curl up in a warm bed and sleep for days, letting the terrible memories fade away.

Dave could sense her fatigue. "Rachel, we have a lot of questions for you, but we can tell you're very tired, so I think we'll hold off until morning. You don't mind spending the night here, do you?"

"No, that's okay. Has anyone talked to my mother?"

"Yes, she knows you're alive and well. We told her you were being questioned by the FBI as a witness but that you are not in any trouble. She seemed to be fine with that."

"Thank you. I didn't want her to worry—not that she would."

D&L exchanged glances. What they hadn't told Rachel was that her mother was the only person outside of Skyguard that knew she was alive—the police were baffled as to both the cause of the car fire and Rachel's disappearance. Because Rachel's body had not been found in Holbrook's car, the police were not treating the two as connected, despite the rumors of an affair.

"Are you hungry?" asked Laura.

"Famished, actually."

"Then we'd like to take you home with us this evening and feed you a good home-cooked meal. We have a spare bedroom and we'd like you to be our guest."

"I don't want to be any trouble."

"No trouble at all—we'd love to have you. Mary would like to meet you, too—she's the one who brought in the soft drinks a while ago."

"*That* was Mary? She's a little hottie—she looks just like Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter movies—even her hair is the same."

"You should tell Mary that," said Dave. "She needs all the support she can get, right now." He briefly explained about Mary's amnesia and her need for help and encouragement. He did not tell her about the mystery surrounding her origin or her special abilities.

"Wow, and I thought *I* had it bad," said Rachel. "What a terrible thing to have happen! I'd love to meet her."

"Okay, then let's go find her and get out of here," said Laura.

Rosa laughed. "Mary's sitting right outside the door—she's absolutely burning up with curiosity. She asked me all about Rachel and why she's here, and she really wants to meet her—I think she senses they are kindred spirits. Somehow she got the idea to bring in those drinks—I never asked her to."

"Then let's not keep her waiting," Dave said, rising from his chair. "Rosa, thanks a bunch."

"You're welcome. Make sure you bring her by in the morning, I'll want to look at her foot again."

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – 7:13 PM

"I'm stuffed," said Dave, leaning back in his chair. "I couldn't eat another bite."

"That was great, Laura," said Rachel. "You're an excellent cook." Laura had prepared moo shoo chicken with Chinese pancakes, fried rice with shrimp and scallions, and a green garden salad.

"Thank you, Rachel. With our schedules, I don't get much of a chance to cook for David and Mary. Usually we eat out or stop by the deli on our way home, so I really enjoy the opportunity."

"May Rachel and I get in the hot tub now?" asked Mary.

"Sure, honey," Laura replied. "The water should be hot enough by now. Does your swimsuit fit okay, Rachel?"

"Yes, it's beautiful," said Rachel. "I've never had a bikini that, uh, small. Thanks for all the clothes—I have more here now than I have at home."

"I hope you like them—I wasn't particularly thrilled with Skyguard's selection. You and I will need to go shopping together. The bikini is from me—I'm glad you like it."

"May we go now?" Mary whined.

"Sure, if it's what Rachel wants to do."

Rachel stood up from the table. "Lead me on," she said to Mary, who took her hand and tugged her out of the room.

"Looks like they've hit it off pretty well," said Dave after they had left.

"Seems so," said Laura. "Mary doesn't appear to be jealous of Rachel like she was with my daughter Raina. I hope they get to spend some time together. They're the same age, but Rachel is much more mature in comparison. Hopefully Mary will adopt her as a mentor and some of that will rub off—Mary still behaves as if she's a child sometimes."

"She's much better now than when we found her," said Dave. "There is a woman hiding inside her somewhere, and maybe Rachel can help it emerge. Mary could use a sister figure."

"The woman in her is very evident when you're around," Laura said, grinning. "She's totally obsessed with you. She makes up any excuse she can to touch you—she's all over you, and her favorite place is in your lap. Just an observation, dear, not a complaint—Mary can sit in your lap all she wants. She's not going to be satisfied until you have sex with her—it's her main goal in life."

"She keeps telling me that," said Dave. "But as I said before, that won't happen until she's mentally mature enough to understand that relationships are more than just sex."

"She's getting there," said Laura. "She asks me questions all the time. *You're* supposed to be teaching her about the birds and the bees. You've been lying down on the job, no pun intended."

"Yeah, but some of the questions are about feminine things—things you can answer better than I can."

"Oh really? Things like what?"

"Well, I don't...I mean, like what do to when...Okay, like in her teen magazines. How the hell would I know which tampon is best?"

"She really asked you that?"

"Well, sure. You told her I would answer all her questions."

Laura laughed. "Yes, but I meant about sex, not feminine hygiene. So what did you tell her?"

"I told her that the ones she has are the best. They're the same ones you use; you buy them for her, so they're obviously okay. It's all sorts of things like that. I don't even *want* to know that kind of stuff. I do know that I need to fix up that other bathroom just for Mary—she spends hours in ours doing...whatever it is girls do in there."

"She doesn't spend any more time in there than I do," Laura said, pretending to be offended.

"Yes, but with you the results are well worth the wait—you always look absolutely fantastic."

"Why, thank you, my dear," she said. "Good save—that response just kept your ass from spending a night on the couch."

"So what, if I slept on the couch?" he said, laughing. "In ten minutes you'd be lying on top of me."

"Yeah, you're right." She walked over and sat on his lap, giving him a kiss. "You know me too well, David. What about the Alyeska Avalanche?"

"We'll just have to postpone it. I think we're going to need some props, anyway."

"Aw, jeez," said a small voice. "Are you two at it again?"

"Mary," said Laura, "why aren't you in the hot tub with Rachel?"

"I came in to tell you—Rachel keeps falling asleep and I can't wake her up. I think she needs to go to bed."

"That's *your* job, David," said Laura. "I can't lift her out of the tub."

"Okay," said Dave, resignedly. "I'll go carry her in and get her dried off, you get her bed ready." said Laura.

"What a martyr," Laura snickered.