

Chapter 1

Unusual Meetings

Ryan heard his alarm go off. Sleep gummed his eyes shut as he groggily tried to stir from bed. It took him two tries before he successfully maneuvered his legs to the floor, alarm chivying him along with its insistent beeping. "All right. All right. I'm up." He growled. Ryan walked over to his dresser and hit the snooze button *hard*. Punching the off button to permanently disable the alarm, Ryan briefly entertained the notion of going back to sleep, but the iron call of work goaded him on. With a sigh, Ryan cast a lingering look at his bed, and went to shower.

Breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs, mixed with bacon bits and cheese. He stirred the ingredients in the small skillet, adding the cheese and bacon only after the eggs were well-done. The hot meal revitalized him better than his shower, and he grabbed his workbag off the couch. Starting to run out the door, he felt his pack give a kick. With a sigh fit for the ages, he put down the bag. "Blackie, get out of there." He set the pack down and opened the top. The face of his black four-and-a-half month old kitten popped out and mewed inquisitively at him. Ryan felt his lips tug upward with fondness. "No, you can't come to work with me. Mr. Alvers won't appreciate it." The kitten mewed again and dove back into the bag. Ryan stuck his hands in and felt around. Moments later, his questing fingers felt soft silky fur. Striking quickly, he grasped the slippery kitten around his middle and pulled him out of the bag. The cat purred happily in his grasp. With a laugh, Ryan snuggled the kitten close for a minute and then set him down. "Watch the house, Blackie!" Ryan called as he closed the door.

One of these days, I won't find that kitten until I'm already at work. Ryan wondered what his boss would make of a kitten in the workplace. Alvers was an older man that Ryan would call an "old salt". He had worked in the shop for more than fifty years, eventually inheriting it when the previous owner died. Ryan knew him to be quick to judge and grumpy, but thought that the boss would probably laugh and let the kit stay in the office. Ryan really didn't want to put that theory to the test in case he was wrong.

Taking his keys out of his pocket, Ryan debated a moment whether or not to take his truck, but decided against it. The truck was a gas hog; guzzling diesel like there was no tomorrow. All the modifications he had made only made worse. His smaller car was much more economical, and easier to park anyway. Starting the car engine, he waited a moment for it to warm before putting it in gear.

Pulling it out of the drive, he took one last look at his truck and drove off. *I'll have to drive it this weekend. Poor thing hasn't been out on the roads in weeks.* Putting the truck firmly out of his mind, he concentrated on getting to work safely.

Colson Machining Ltd. was based in a small industrial complex near the edge of town. It consisted of one shop building, two warehouses and a parking lot. Ryan parked at the closer of the two warehouses, which happened to be the one used to store stock material. Locking his car behind him, he slung his kitten-free bag over his shoulder and headed inside the shop.

The floor of the shop was crammed with commercial lathes, mills and grinders. Several of the larger mills and lathes—the size of a pickup truck— were towards the front of the shop while the rear was dedicated to the much smaller precision lathes and mills. On the left, Ryan knew, was the bank of CNC machines, including a cutter and saws for the raw stock that came in. Wide lanes for people and materiel divided the floor into sections. Already, several people were hard at work on the machines. Ryan knew that they needed to get an early start on their projects.

Stopping in the employee's lounge, Ryan deposited his bag in the locker and grabbed his hard hat, gloves and safety glasses. Pulling them on quickly, he slammed his locker shut. On his way out, he overheard a pair of mechanics at one of the tables.

"I just don't understand it." One of the lathe operators was moaning. "I was giving her everything, and then when I was getting it on last night, she slams the door in my face."

One of the forklift drivers nodded commiseratingly. "Don't worry about it. There are plenty of fish in the sea. We'll go to the bar tonight, pick up some girls, and bang 'em all night long." He grinned at the prospect.

The man with the girlfriend troubles looked up with a gleam in his eye. "Yeah." He agreed. "that'll show her!"

Personally, Ryan felt that he was going to lose more than he would gain by such a stupid move, but wisely kept his mouth shut. He had no business butting in.

Walking out to the floor, Ryan checked the leaderboard for information on where he was going. Scanning the list of names, he found his and read across. He was on Lathe 5 today, one of the precision machines in the back. Ryan walked briskly to the back of the shop.

“Hey, Ryan!” Charles “Lucky” Duke waved at him from on Lathe 6. Ryan waved back at him. Lucky was a tall, gangly youth that was just one year out from an apprenticeship from the local college. Alverz found him and talked him out of going to a Silver City corporation in Nevada. Ryan didn’t know the details of the deal, but the kid showed up. Ryan liked him a lot, he was smart and a hard worker. Other’s found his attitude abrasive and so kept him at arm’s length. Ryan was able to get along with him though, and often found himself paired to work with him.

“Hey Lucky. How’s it going today?” Ryan said by way of greeting. He was far more interested in the project ahead than chatting with Lucky, but it was best not to be rude.

Lucky shrugged fatalistically. “Not bad. Keeping this place afloat alone is hard work, but the boss pays us well for it. If we didn’t need the warm bodies for the IRS, we could do without half the losers here.”

Lucky also had a wee bit of arrogance about his abilities. Ryan wondered again why he tolerated it; until he remembered that Lucky was almost always right. He wasn’t a bad kid, in Ryan’s estimation. If he could get his ego under control, he would go farther than Ryan ever hoped too.

Lucky gave him one last wave before returning his attention to his project. Ryan peered around to get a better look. It seemed that he was making a particularly convoluted part. Ryan briefly wondered what the tolerance was, but knew it wasn’t any of his business. He had work of his own to get on with.

A chunk of round stock greeted him as he walked into his station. Ryan checked the material and noted the bright shine on the cut side and the much duller shine of the rest. A quick search showed no rust or other impurities. So, he would be working with stainless steel then. Ryan nodded to himself and quickly looked over the plans. Ah, he was supposed to turn down the stock to the appropriate size before sending it to the mills. The finished product had a curious final shape that looked to be tapered. Ryan took a closer look. It *was* tapered he realized. He studied the plans for a few minutes, and then looked for the tolerances he would be working at. When he found them he whistled through his teeth. Most of them were at plus or minus ten thousandths. This was one of the tightest pieces he had ever done. Ryan could feel himself mentally rubbing his hands together excitedly at the prospect of challenging his skills. He quickly got started.

First, he laid out all the tools he would need. His cutters and tool holders went on one side of his workbench, while he laid his dial calipers, micrometer and glass on the other side neatly. It was good practice that had been ingrained in him during his classes. A good mechanic always knew where his tools

were. Chucking the bar stock in the lathe, he selected the small roughing tool and placed it in the holder. Setting it onto the machine, he secured it down and started the lath. He slowly drew the tip against the rapidly rotating part. Sizzling chips flew off as he started his cut. He went slowly, barely moving at all as he made several passes, occasionally taking out his dial calipers to get a rough estimate of where he was. Gradually, the basic shape of the part emerged from the stock, gleaming under his harsh work lights.

Ryan was surprised to look up from his work and realize the sun had nearly set. Rays of golden light shone through a row of windows near the top of the shop walls and illuminated the floor, bathing it in soft hues. Other workmen were busy putting away tools and securing their parts. Ryan waved goodnight to everyone before climbing into his car. On his way out of the lot, he spotted the forklift driver and the lathe operator with the girlfriend issues leaving together in rusted red pickup truck. Ryan shook his head, he was glad they hadn't asked *him* to go drinking. He, at least, had more self-respect than to go out and pick up women when he was low!

Ryan found very light traffic on the roads and was quickly pulling up to his small house. As he parked the car, he noticed a long wooden crate at his door. Ryan frowned as he grabbed his bag out of the back seat. Who would be sending him a crate? It was a big one too, nearly ten feet long and more than four high. Ryan had rarely seen any of that size except in the shop for some of the larger parts or material that came in and out. Another oddity he noticed was a row of air holes that had been cut near the top. A sheet of paper was attached to the top of the box. Pulling it out of its protective sleeve, he spotted a letter hidden behind it. The paper was simply FedEx stating that they had delivered the crate to him. Ryan again frowned when he saw that there was no return address. *Huh. I guess no one wanted the box to come back.* Ignoring the sheet, he turned instead to the letter. He saw that it was addressed to him, although he didn't recognize the handwriting. Tearing it open, he read:

Ryan:

I hope like hell that you are the one reading this letter. If you aren't, then that means that I've failed to get her out. I couldn't join them, you see. I had to stop them any way I could, and getting the word out is the only hope I have. I won't live to see this letter get to you, or see this company torn down. I just pray you will be able to. This company is evil and has got to be put down.

Enclosed you will find a jump drive that contains all the information I have been able to gather on the company, its finances, and overall objectives. Plus all the information on

experiments that it has done and some that are in the works. I was able to get one of the experiments out. Keep her safe, Ryan. The experiment will be more than enough to shut this company down for good, if you tell the right people.

I'll do what I can to cover my tracks and divert attention away from you. I'll buy you as much time as I can. It won't last long, so BE WARNED!!! They will stop at nothing to keep her secret. You will suffer an accident if you aren't careful.

—Colin

Ryan blinked and read the strange letter again. *I'll buy you as much time as I can. Keep her safe.*

Ryan found the notion ridiculous. It sounded like something out of a bad movie or cheap book.

Corporations didn't run around killing people. If they did, they wouldn't find anyone willing to work for them! Ryan was beginning to wonder if this wasn't just some prank. *Colin, Colin. Where have I met him?*

Ryan closed his eyes and focused. A memory emerged of a red-haired, mischievous teen with a fondness for pranks and red bulls. A computer engineer and designer, Ryan recalled. They had spent most of a year together in college before Ryan dropped out of the course to study industrial applications and eventually machining instead. They had all but lost touch since he had gone off to some job.

Wondering what kind of joke Colin was playing at, Ryan decided to pull the crate into his garage before opening it. Testing the crate, he determined that it was definitely too heavy to move by hand. Ryan pondered for a moment before stepping into his garage. He came out a moment later holding furniture movers and some wood wedge blocks he had stashed in the back for times like this. Setting the stuff down, he went back for a hammer and proceeded to pound the wedges under the edges of the crate, lifting it off the ground. Sliding the wheels under proved to be tricky, and Ryan swore a little as one wheel kept twisting in the wrong direction. Straightening it out, he slowly removed the wedges one at a time and set the crate on the wheels. Finally, he could roll the crate into his garage.

The light showed the crate well as he closed the garage door, sealing them in. Grabbing a crowbar from his toolchest, he jammed it between the box and lid and heaved. It gave with a crack and a sudden hiss! *Gas!* His mind screamed at him to do something. Instinctively, Ryan dove back behind a shelf of auto parts and oil. He pulled his shirt up over his nose and tried to breathe shallowly. How soon before the gas filled the garage? What kind of gas was it? His mind gibbered in fear as he imagined anthrax or ricin gas billowing out of the crate. It took him long moments to shove that fear aside. It wouldn't be

anthrax or ricin or any of the other gas he heard about on the news. Most likely, it was just nitrogen or something. The letter *had* mentioned something about experiments, he remembered. Maybe it had needed to be kept cold and the lid had punctured the container.

Now concerned that his friend's experiment might be exposed, he hurried back to the crate and pushed the lid of the box off. It fell with a loud clatter, but Ryan didn't notice. He stared at the object in the box. *It CAN'T be*. his mind whispered. It just *couldn't* be.

The little centaurette moaned quietly and shifted in her sleep. Her childish face wrinkled into a pout as she fought to stay asleep. Ryan could do nothing but gape in shock. *It can't be real. It can't be real*. His mind chanted. There was one way to find out for sure, Ryan realized. He reached out with one trembling hand and brushed the soft, roan-colored hind of her horse half before running it up to her human belly. It certainly *felt* real.

The girl's eyes snapped open. The green eyes stared blearily around for a moment until focusing on him. Fear flooded her face and she scrabbled back, hooves flailing and striking the side of the crate. Finding no escape, she huddled in the corner and drew her legs close to her, scrunching into a ball like a human would.

"Please, don't hurt me." She whimpered. "I promise I'll be good this time. I promise!" She sounded desperate as she locked a pleading gaze on him.

Ryan rushed to comfort her. "Shh. Shhh. It's all right. I won't hurt you." He raised his hands out to show her that he was unarmed. He crouched himself and tried to appear as non-threatening as possible to reassure her. Her wide, terrified eyes twisted his guts painfully. "I'm a friend of Colin's" he added helpfully. A flicker of what might have been hope crossed her face.

"Doctor Cee?" she asked.

Ryan did a quick guess and nodded. "Yes." He told her.

Her face suddenly brightened. "He told me he was send-ing me to safe place." She stumbled a little over the unfamiliar word. "Is this 'safe place'?" She asked curiously.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. Colin thought that his house was a safe place? Safe from what? What danger could she be in that Colin would send her his way? Something about the whole thing just wasn't right, Ryan decided. He would need to play it cautiously for now, and lied; "Yes. This is a safe place." A thought suddenly occurred to him. "I'm sorry, but I don't even know your name."

The centaurette looked shyly up at him from where she lay. "My name is Amelia." She whispered.