

## CHAPTER ONE

**S**MOKE RISES FROM THE TIP OF THE soldering iron, my eyes watering as I stare at the motherboard through the microscope. I don't dare to blink, not until I finish melting the silver solder with its rosin core flux into miniature peaks, connecting the loose components together.

I count the seconds in my head as the solder dries. *One, two . . .*

The butterfly lifts its delicate mechanical wings, scalene triangles of filigree metal opening and closing as it runs through system checks. *Whirr-click*. A small vibration signals the 'okay'.

'Yes!' I jump to my feet and dance, swaying my hips in time to the victory music in my head.

Mom rushes in from the kitchen. 'You did it!'

'Why don't you check?'

She nods and says, 'To me, Petal.' It takes a second for the command to register, but the butterfly flaps its wings, lifting up to land on her hand. Mom's face glows, reflecting back

the stream of texts and emails that Petal projects on to the flat of her palm. ‘Looks to me like she works!’

I grin. ‘Okay, just one final thing.’ I take Petal from Mom, gently placing her back under my microscope as I sit back down in my chair. My work is flawless: so neat the repairs are barely visible. Taking it to the Moncha vet would have taken days (and cost a fortune), but I’ve finished in less than an hour.

Satisfied, I snap the casing back over the exposed electronics. ‘There. Good as new.’

‘Thank you, honey!’ Mom wraps her arms around me, planting multiple kisses on my forehead. I groan in mock-mortification, but my face heats up with the warmth of her praise.

It’s not *that* big a deal. I’ve had a lot of practice with Petal. The butterfly *baku* is one of the bestsellers for Mom’s demographic and insects in general are the least complex models on the market, offering the bare minimum of functions like text and talk, a browser, GPS. The butterfly is extra popular because of the ability to customize its wings. On the flip side, the wings are flimsy, prone to snapping with the tiniest snag, which in turn damages the internal electronics. Petal is a perfect example. She got caught when Mom unwound her scarf and her projector malfunctioned.

‘You’re welcome. Remember to unleash her as soon as you get inside next time.’

‘I don’t know what I’d do without you, Lacey. Your repair

is better than what any of the vets could do.’ Mom smiles as Petal flies back up to settle on her shoulder, her hand still lingering on my back. ‘You find out today, don’t you?’

I cringe. I thought she had forgotten. To my surprise, even I’d managed to forget about it for an hour. Fixing things does that for me. My mind focuses in on the problem – in this case a loose wire and a dodgy PCB connection – and the rest of the world falls away.

Even the fact that any minute now I’m going to receive the biggest news of my fifteen-year-old life.

‘Yup.’ All moisture evaporates from inside my mouth, and I try in vain to return the smile. I sense hesitation from Mom, her fingers drumming a pattern up and down my spine, so I stand up abruptly from my chair. ‘Better put this stuff away,’ I say, gesturing to the tangle of silver wire and machinery.

Mom gives me one final kiss on the top of my head. ‘Whatever happens, you’re still the best companioneer in *this* household.’ She heads over to the sink, Petal fluttering up to the leash behind her ear, where she plugs in to charge. Mom bobs her head in time to some invisible music, and I assume Petal has started streaming her favourite podcast.

I wipe the end of the soldering iron with a sponge and pack it away, closing the case with a decisive click. Some people ask for bikes or giftcards or books for their birthday. I asked for a soldering iron. I had researched a store on the outskirts of town that sold refurbished electrical tools and casually added it to Petal’s GPS database – and Mom had taken me there on my fourteenth birthday. Hey, Monica Chan – who

invented the bakus and lent her name to Moncha Corp, now the largest tech firm in North America – had one when she was a teenager. I'd read that somewhere. If it's good enough for her, it is for me too.

As Zora, my bff, would say, *that doesn't make you special – it just makes you weird.*

She's right.

I carry my kit and microscope back to my room. Mom normally hates it when I solder in the condo – the metallic smell seems to sink into everything, from the pillows on the sofa to the rice in the cooker – but when it's her own baku that needs repairing she makes an exception.

That's too often for my liking. The level 1 insect bakus are renowned for being a bit . . . *buggy*. If I had my choice, I know exactly what baku I would get. I'd go straight for one of the originals. One of the level 3 spaniel models, with cute floppy ears and a tail that works as a selfie stick. If I close my eyes, I picture hanging out with my baku in my room, teaching it to play games, helping me with my homework and cuddling up with it at night. *But you only get a spaniel baku \*if\* you get into Profectus*, my brain reminds me.

My dream school – Profectus Academy of Science and Technology – founded by Monica herself, and fully owned and operated as a division of Moncha Corp. I need the grant they offer incoming students who can't afford the minimum level 3 baku. Otherwise, the only one I can afford is a puny level 1. Even though I've been eligible to get my first baku for a week (since I finished junior year for the summer), I've

put off going to the Moncha Store until I found out about my admissions status.

I take a deep breath.

I've done everything I can to make it happen. I have near-perfect grades, checked off all the extra-curriculars, participated in science fairs and early bird band and volunteered for an environmental charity to pad out my resume.

Zora once told me I was a lock for a place because no one worked as hard for it as I did. If only it was that easy. It's not like I'm Carter Smith, the son of Eric Smith – Monica's business partner and co-founder of Moncha. Carter is also in our grade at St Agnes, and even though I beat him in all our classes, and in two science fairs, I know he'll get in without a fight.

*Whereas my dad . . .*

I twist the ring on my finger, the only object I have left of him.

*. . . is just a liability.* I don't let myself think about it any more. Besides, Mom and I, we owe Moncha *everything*. They gave us a place to live when Dad disappeared, gave Mom a job and provided childcare for me while she worked. Without Moncha, I wouldn't have met Zora.

No matter what, I want to work for the company – I'd sweep Moncha floors if I had to, a practical dung beetle baku at my side. But if I truly let myself dream . . . I know what I want to do with the rest of my life. I don't want to work for Moncha. I want to be Monica Chan. I want to be

a companioneer, one of the people working on the bakus. I want to design new animals, innovate for existing ones, implement even more amazing features. Every day would be a challenge.

But the first step to get there is acceptance into Profectus. Although in theory, Moncha could hire companioneers from anywhere, for the past decade (since Profectus has been open), every companioneer hire has been a graduate of the Academy.

*You'll know soon enough*, I remind myself. I gently place everything down on my desk. *But maybe I should just check . . .*

I bounce on to the bed and tap my phone screen to wake it up. No email from Profectus. But I have missed a Flash from Zora. 'BYE BYE!!!!' is scrawled in her fingertip-writing as a boomerang clip plays back and forth of her hurling her phone from the deck of the Toronto Island ferry.

I swipe the screen so I can see the next Flash: a still of the splash her phone makes in the lake, with the caption #PHONEMURDER.

I snort a laugh and collapse back on to the nest of pillows. #PHONEMURDER is the latest craze – the wanton, totally unnecessary (but often hilarious and creative) destruction of your old, government-granted smartphone, filmed by a newly acquired baku and shared online. Things got out of hand when a Flashite committed #PHONEMURDER by dropping his device from the edge walk of the CN Tower and almost caused *actual* murder-by-phone. Still the video got over ten

million hits, so he'd probably consider it a win. Thanks to his status as an incoming Profectus student, he was released from police custody with only a caution.

Within the space of a few seconds, I film a video of myself drawing a fake tear dripping down my cheek, select the puppy-ear filter, type 'RIP ZORA'S PHONE' as a caption and send my reply. This is the distraction I need.

If Zora is destroying her phone that means she must have chosen her baku already. My next message to her is a giant question mark. Okay, I send her about fifteen of them.

'I chose . . . a dormouse!' Zora's next selfie shows her hugging the cutest baku I've ever seen, a tiny ball of soft matte-grey metal fur, pointed nose and oversized eyes. It's curled up in a ball next to her cheek, its long tail extended to take the picture, her dark brown skin glowing gold from the sunlight reflected off the lake. She looks so happy; I can't help but smile with her. A dormouse is a level 2 baku – higher than I could afford, but not good enough for Profectus – but going there was never one of Zora's goals. She's going to continue at St Agnes for senior year, then apply for programming internships after she graduates.

'His name is Linus and I can already tell we're going to be best friends for life. Well, not better friends than you and me but you'll know what I mean as soon as you get your own. Tell me as soon as you hear anything!!!' reads her next message.

'Of course,' I shoot back. I stare at the photo of her and Linus together a little longer, my throat feeling tight.

Then it comes in. The alert. I can only read a tiny portion

of the subject line and it gives nothing away. LACEY CHU:  
PROFECTUS APPLICATION STATUS

My heart hammers inside my chest. The slim rectangular device feels so old-school in my suddenly clammy palm but then . . . this is it. The very last time I use it. Before I choose a baku of my very own. Level 1 or level 3.

A single tap opens my email app where, in bold letters, is the message I'd been waiting for.

I click open.

Dear Lacey,

We regret to inform you that . . .

The phone flies out of my hand like it's heated to a thousand degrees. It bounces off the corner of my bedframe and on to the floor, where – just like that – the screen shatters into a million tiny pieces.

Just like my dreams.