

## Chapter 1

The timer on my watch ticks too slowly.

I know the rules, and I know I'm not supposed to look at anyone else's screens, but I can't help myself. Is my watch broken, or does my brain find algebra so dull that it changed my perception of time? I peek at Sasha's watch. Her timer reads the same as mine.

She sees me look, and looks confused.

"What's wrong?" She mouths.

"Never mind." I mouth, turning away. She looks at my screen at exactly the wrong time, just as our professor looks up from his tablet directly at our table. He clears his throat.

"Sasha? Do you care to explain why you're looking at Kaylee's screen?" She looks up at him, startled.

"Uh..." He sighs and takes a document from the side of his desk and fills it out at record speed, before placing it in the wire basket at the end of the table. I don't see paper or physical documents almost ever, the exception being these documents.

Sasha turns red as the class groans and the timers simultaneously vibrate on our wrists. Time to go home. I close the case of my tablet and put it into my bag, signing out on the keypad by the door with Sasha at my side and Caroline coming up behind me, and pulling on a lock of my blonde hair and smirking. Her own light-colored hair is in a high ponytail, straight and shiny.

"I hate uniform, don't you?" Sasha says as we exit the academy, signing out on what seems like keypad after keypad. I could type 'Kaylee 32126' with my eyes closed. It seems like it would be too easy to fake a sign out. I know everyone in my year's birth number, and we were all born in 321, so I could sign out as anyone I liked.

We checked our watches as they buzzed again, telling Sasha to go with Caroline to pick up clean uniforms for next week, and telling me to go to the Junior academy to collect my brother and sister. There are more keypads to sign in to there, but at least my siblings don't have to try to figure out a keyboard every few minutes. I can easily do it for them. 'Jackson 32804' and 'Cassidy 32934' have become almost as familiar as my own code. They are two polar opposites, just like our parents were. Cassidy reminds me so much of our mother that it used to be hard to look at her. Jackson and I look like siblings, so much so that people often forget that Cassidy exists. I don't forget, and neither does my father.

"Hey." I say, signing in and signing them out, then resigning out for myself. The both say hi back and Jackson begins talking rapidly about his day as my watch tells me to go home.

After about thirty minutes of walking, we arrive home long before my father will be.

"I'm hungry." Cassidy says quietly after Jackson finally finishes his story.

"Me too." Jackson says, hanging up both of their backpacks by the door and sits down instead of running around. The lunch at their school is quite small, and it's been about four hours of them running around and doing classwork. I was hungry too.

The glass pantry had a full charge, and projected a full cabinet of food. But, per usual, the cabinet was empty upon being opened.

"I'm sorry." I said, closing it. "No extra food. Dinner will be in an hour or two. Do you think you'll survive until then?", I say, dramatically fainting against the couch. Jackson laughed and pushed me off as Cassidy ran around whacking him in the back cackling. It was easy to forget about time and that it was Friday, Distribution Day. My watch buzzed angrily at me to stop playing and get changed but I ignored it. Distribution day came to often to seem important to me anymore, and I think Jackson and Cassidy felt the same. After ignoring it three times, a shock went up my arm that made me cry out.

"Stop!"

"Kaylee? What's wrong?" Cassidy blinks her big blue eyes at me and looks scared. I hide my arm behind my back as the watered-down poison seeps gold through my veins.

“Nothing,” I say, walking further into the hallway curving into the back of our house. “Come on, go get your Lottery clothes on.” Jackson and Cassidy run into their rooms and open their small closets. There’s only three outfits in each one, a school uniform, a Lottery outfit, and pajamas. Cassidy runs in, doing a cartwheel that makes her orange skirt puff up and landing on my bed. I realize I’ve been staring at the wall for too long. I lift a long indigo dress from the closet and shoo Cassidy out as I change. I look hard at the white heels in the floor of my closet. I don’t have time to find replacements, so I slip them on and quickly fishtail my long blond hair. We have to sprint if we want to make it in time, so we do. They seem to have unlimited energy, something I envy deeply. We make it to the Lottery Center mere seconds before the bell rings. The screen shows a balance of 1/5, making it the third week in a row where the Contributions outweigh the Distributions. I pat my siblings on the head and watch as they scurry off to meet with their friends in their sections. I find Sasha and Caroline quickly, although everyone in 321 is in the same Indigo as I am. Sasha’s dress has a large, puffy skirt that she has to lift to walk in, which looks nice but doesn’t suit her. Caroline has a tight, short, dress that matches the vibe of her layered, shoulder-length blonde hair.

My arm still burns as Caroline grabs my wrist and shakes her head, chuckling. “So this is why you’re late. You’re lucky the spinners are in a good mood.” I take my wrist back. “Yeah. I guess.”

Sasha scrunches her eyebrows together. “Are you alright? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” I say, pulling my hair out of the fishtail and shaking it loose. A microphone beeps and a man with slicked back black hair uncovers the lottery cage. He clears his throat and the Lottery begins.

“The first 5 lottery spins are contributions for years 310-325.” He turns the handle slowly and five balls roll out slowly. He picks them up and reads them.

“31336. 32323. 31732. 32528. 32109.” Sasha’s eyes flash up and she smiles, as the fifth number is hers. We push her out of the crowd. She walks up on stage and is handed a shiny bronze card, and comes back to us. Caroline grabs it out of her hands and reads it quietly aloud.

“Extra Lottery Dress.” Caroline hands it back to her and looks playfully jealous.

“I’m so happy I can have an alternative to this awful thing.” Sasha remarks, nearly tripping on her skirt as she speaks.

“Shush,” a girl in a blue dress says, rolling her eyes. “I want to hear the Distribution.” Sasha, Caroline and I shut up. We want to hear it too.

“This week has one Distribution, rated a 9.4.” I’m startled. Distributions above 6.0 are rare.

“Ten days ago, 32802 was pushed into a river outside of boundaries. She drowned, and the distributioned will face the same. Numbers from 01-36 in 328 will be eligible. My heart drops and I’m happy I wore heels so that I could see Jackson’s face. He’s normally not great with numbers, but I can tell he understands.

The handle turns slowly and a ball rolls out.

“3280-“ Oh, god no, please. “7.” I feel sick thinking how I breathed a sigh of relief as I hear the girl in the blue start sobbing as a boy in a yellow uniform was grabbed by guards and led away. Sasha walked over quietly and attempted to comfort her. Jackson was crying and looked terrified. Poor little guy. I knew who the boy was, Jackson’s friend, Luke. And I recognized the girl as his older sister, Alexa. They have the same shiny black hair but their eyes clash. They had an average sized house with big windows. They have another older brother, Daniel, who I can see in a black uniform running his hand through his hair and chewing on his lip. I can tell he is holding back tears.

The microphone beeps again and the Lottery is over. I wave goodbye to Caroline and Sasha and collect Cassidy and Jackson. Jackson hugs me around my waist, staining my dark-colored dress with his tears. I don’t mind. I know Luke is his best friend. Cassidy looks terrified too. I have never and will never understand how giving an innocent person the charge for a crime is fair.

This isn’t the worst distribution I’ve ever seen. Neah can be a sick society.