

# CHAPTER 1

Outside, rain drummed against the window. Across the metal desk, the guidance counselor talked. Talked and talked. The light in his office was way too bright.

She'd absorbed his bad news fifteen minutes ago. *Time for you to shut up now*, she thought. But he kept on talking.

He shook his head, full of sympathy manufactured for the moment. She didn't buy it as genuine. He barely knew her. How bad could he really feel?

"Sorry, Kayla," he said. "I haven't seen an art scholarship issued to a student weak in computer skills for the last five years, definitely not since 2020. You shouldn't expect to get one, or even to be accepted at the art schools you've applied to. That's just how it is."

Mr. Kerr tugged on his sleeve and her eyes locked onto the inch-long rectangular patch of straight black lines on the underside of his left wrist.

A bar code tattoo.

This wasn't the first time she'd seen one, of course. This year all the kids in her grade turned seventeen, the age when a person qualified for a bar code. As soon as their birthdays came, the first thing

they did was run out and get tattooed. Everyone — even adults — was getting one. Both of Kayla's parents had been tattooed for seven months now.

Even though she saw tattoos everywhere, they continued to fascinate her. How bizarre to be branded like a box of cereal. Didn't people mind being counted as just one more product on a shelf? There had to be more to a person than that.

Unaware of Kayla's gaze on his wrist, the guidance counselor kept talking.

Outside, the rain kept pounding. She twisted in her chair to see it better. Rivers of water raced across the glass.

And then Kayla . . .

\* \* \*

*A jet streaks by. It's low and she's never seen one that looks exactly like it. She's in the woods outside a great city. Tall white buildings spire to the sky. A thick shining wall surrounds the city, about fifteen feet high. Someone else is with her. She senses him standing behind, but doesn't turn to see.*

*Near the wall, people walk toward the city. Many people. Her heartbeat quickens. A low rumble, like many voices speaking at once, fills her mind. She smiles.*

\* \* \*

She blinked hard. Mr. Kerr was no longer talking. The only sound was rain. The guidance counselor stared at her from across his desk.

“Sorry,” she apologized to him, with a quick, stressed, half smile. *What was that about?* she wondered.

“So you understand what I’ve been saying?” he asked.

She nodded. She’d understood it a billion minutes ago when he first began — the art world had no place for a talented artist with bad computer-skill grades.

That’s what it amounted to, though of course he felt compelled to subject her to the *entire* explanation. Although she was only half listening, she understood.

The explanation went more or less like this: Only a few of the most experienced artists were required to input drawings into computer art data banks. These computer-generated images were used to create all other artwork. No art school would award a scholarship to a student weak in data imaging — a student like her.

When she’d first realized what he was telling her, she’d felt like a figure in a video game.

*Smash! A direct hit!*

*Kayla Reed — blown to smithereens.*

*Game Over! Game Over! Game Over!*

*Bye-bye.*