

dissonance

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*To Danny, who I would cross worlds for.
And to my girls, who make my world shine.*

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

During the first conversation we ever had, Joanna Volpe said: Write this book. So I did, because she is fierce and brilliant and tireless and never wrong. (All excellent qualities in an agent, not to mention a human being.) I am continually grateful for the opportunity to work with her. I'm also thankful for the amazing team at New Leaf Literary: Kathleen Ortiz, for her foreign rights wizardry; Danielle Barthel, for cheering me on at every turn; and Suzie Townsend, Jaida Temperly, and Pouya Shahbazian, for all-around awesomeness.

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Thank you to my parents—not only for their love and support, but for teaching me that books were as essential as food or air. In doing so, they gave me the world, a million times. Thanks also to my amazing sister, Kris, who inspires me with her strength and bravery. My entire extended family has cheered me on, but none more so than my aunt, Patricia Layton, who loved romance novels and Christmas and family, and who is dearly, dearly missed.

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Above all, the biggest thanks go to Danny, for making me laugh and swoon in equal measure, for giving me solid ground and space to dream, for building this life with me. You are my heart and my home, for infinity.

In the beginning was the dark, and the Lord spoke and chose the light, and the world cleaved, and the song of the new world was pleasing to His ears. Worlds begat worlds like the branches of a tree, and each favored branch was touched with His song. He anointed the ears and hands of His most favored children, and granted them freedom to Walk among the branches so they might preserve and magnify His song.

—The Walker Bible, Genesis, Chapter 1, Verses 1–3

The duty of each Walker is to preserve the course and integrity of the Key World, the One True World from which the Multiverse sprang, and to protect it from the blight of Echoes. To be a Walker requires obedience, diligence, and sacrifice. The calling to Walk between worlds is both a gift and a burden, and this textbook will guide you accordingly.

—Authors' Note,
Principles and Practices of Cleaving, Year Five

BEGIN
FIRST
MOVEMENT

CHAPTER ONE

IT SEEMED LIKE A LOUSY WAY TO REMEMBER someone: two aging strips of wood nailed together in the shape of a cross, stuck into a weed-choked ditch on the side of the road. A name, careful cursive in fading black marker, looped across the middle, and a tattered supermarket bouquet—carnations, daisies, baby’s breath—slumped against the base.

It wasn’t much, but it would be enough.

More than enough, if you asked me. Which no one did.

The two-lane road on the edge of town wasn’t busy, but the curve was surprisingly sharp if you didn’t know to look for it, or didn’t care because you were young and thought you’d live forever. Backpack over my shoulder, I started into the ditch, tromping over prickler weeds and knee-high grasses. The ground squelched under my feet, but I ignored it, listening for the hum that meant I was close.

My phone rang, and I shoved it deeper in my pocket. I’d gotten the most important message just after lunch.

“Del, it’s Dad. I’m sorry to cancel our Walk again, but I’ve got an emergency meeting with the Consort this afternoon. Your mother says your assignment’s due tomorrow, so why don’t you . . .”

I hadn't bothered listening to the rest. I'd heard it—or a variation of it—enough times. Emergencies were the status quo at my house. There was always a problem my parents needed to fix, a fresh crisis demanding their attention. A situation so important everything else was pushed to the side.

More often than not, I was the “everything else.” But the upside of being ignored is that people forget to tell you no.

Burrs clung to my sweater as I picked my way across the muddy terrain. Clouds blanketed the sky, and the air carried a heavy, earthy scent that signaled more rain to come. With any luck I'd be back before the storm hit.

My assignment was easy enough: Walk to a nearby Echo, locate the trouble spots, Walk home. I'd done it countless times, knew the steps well enough that I didn't need a chaperone. My parents might disagree, but if they were *really* worried, they would have made the time to come with, like they were supposed to.

I could handle this on my own.

The problem was, the only person who believed me was my grandfather. When other kids were playing park district soccer or climbing trees, Monty had taken me wandering among a different set of branches—the multiverse, the infinity of worlds spreading out from ours like the limbs of a tree. It was Monty who'd first shown me how a single choice could create two distinct realities—the world we lived in and the road not traveled. He'd shown me how to move between those realities, listening for the unique frequency each was set to, using the sound as a

pathway across. I'd grown up with his voice in my ear, whispering the secrets of the multiverse, while the sounds of the Echo worlds rang through me like a bell. He'd taught me more about Walking than I'd ever learned from my parents, my older sister, Addison, or Shaw, my teacher at the Consort.

As far as they were concerned, I needed training. Someone to hold my hand while I took baby steps, when all I wanted was to run.

Today I was free to go as fast and as far as I liked.

I held my hand out, palm down, next to the wooden cross. Instantly I felt a thrumming over my skin, like a harp string roughly plucked. It was the pivot, a gate between realities, a sound so faint only one in a hundred thousand people—literally—could hear it.

There are more than six billion people in the world, but only sixty thousand licensed Walkers. Nine hundred in the greater Chicagoland area. Four of them were in my family, and by summer, I'd be the fifth.

Usually pivots are easier to hear than see, but the air around the memorial trembled like leaves in a high wind. It made sense; the strongest pivots form at places where a choice causes a sudden, significant change, and nothing's more sudden or significant than an unexpected death.

I eased inside the vibrating pocket of air, the rift expanding around me. The dissonance slid over my skin like a dusting of snow. With each step the noise in my head increased, countless frequencies competing for my attention. A pivot directly

connects two worlds, but once you're inside, you can use it to travel to any other Echo in the multiverse. The trick is knowing what to listen for.

Over breakfast, my mom had played a sample of my target frequency, the one I'd need for today's Walk. But my assignment could wait for a while.

One foot in the Key World, one inside the pivot, I reached into the fabric of the multiverse, choosing a random thread from the dense, rippling weave. The vibration turned my limbs effervescent, while the air grew heavy as water. I hummed, matching the pitch of the string in my hands. The path cleared, resistance fading along with my vision. Another step, and the pivot went wispy and gray.

Another, and I left behind the rules and disappointments and weight of the old world . . .

. . . and walked directly into oncoming traffic.

CHAPTER TWO

Exercise caution when crossing a pivot, as conditions may prove unexpectedly hazardous.

—Chapter Two, “Navigation,”
Principles and Practices of Cleaving, Year Five

RUSH HOUR SWALLOWED ME WHOLE.

Cars whipped by, sending my hair into a blinding tangle. Trucks belched exhaust fumes, and a Harley roared so loudly I fell backward, gravel biting into my palms. The pivot’s buzz was lost in the chaos. I scrambled out of the path of a beat-up Chrysler, nearly losing my backpack beneath the wheels.

Not a single car honked or swerved.

Technically I wasn’t invisible—Echoes could see Walkers once we touched them. Otherwise we hovered on the edges of their peripheral vision, present but not worth noticing. Usually this was a good thing, allowing us to move freely in Echo worlds. Right now it increased my odds of being flattened.

A semi barreled toward me. I fumbled for the pivot with both hands, searching for a string—any string—to use. One sang out and I latched on to it.

The truck blew by, a burst of diesel-scented air slamming into my back as I dashed through the rift.

Nobody ever said Walking was safe. Nobody ever said it was boring, either.

The pavement under my feet was pitted and crumbling, with weeds sprouting up through the cracks. On the opposite side of the parking lot stood a rundown apartment complex, the balconies sagging, stick-on numbers missing from half the units. A low, monotone pitch filled my ears, and I gasped in relief.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins, replacing fear with triumph. Sometimes Walking felt like a drug. The aching anticipation, the quicksilver rush, the craving for more—but it was completely legal. Even better, it was *expected*. I might not be the Walker my parents wanted; that was Addie's job. But it was my calling, and my life, and the only thing I ever wanted to do.

Best of all, it was infinite.

You could find an endless number of worlds in a single location. If one Echo didn't suit you, a few steps and a flick of your fingers would bring you to another. The rush never had to end.

Again and again I crossed the pivot, choosing new frequencies each time. I visited hospitals and strip malls, farmhouses and factories, reveling in the sensation of slipping between worlds. I never stayed long, and it never got old, watching the differences that sprang up, each Echo a unique combination of choices and circumstances.

In every world I left a tiny origami star, no bigger than a

quarter. Breadcrumbs, my grandfather called them. A piece of the Key World, left behind to mark the way home. As a child, I'd done it to humor him. Now it was part habit and part superstition, my own private ritual.

My world hopping caught up with me in a forest preserve. A dull ache spread through my skull, and my ears rang with the key change. Time to get to work and head home. I could terrify Eliot with my near miss, find out what new disaster my parents had fixed.

Humming the frequency my mom had given me, I stepped into the rift. The string responded, gaining strength, and I followed it through. The massive oak trees disappeared, and when my vision cleared, the dirt path underfoot had shifted to asphalt. Leaf-strewn grass spread out on either side of me. The clouds parted, late-afternoon sunlight warm on my face. I turned in a slow circle, taking in the changes. A big jump in frequencies, for this world to look so different from ours.

On the other side of the pivot, the roadside memorial flickered like the afterimage when you stare at a bright light for too long.

Then it vanished, only a slight ripple marking where someone had died and the world had split in two.

CHAPTER THREE

Vibrato fractums (commonly called “breaks”) are areas of instability within an Echo and an indicator of significant problems. Direct contact with vibrato fractums should be kept to a minimum.

—Chapter One, “Structure and Formation,”
Principles and Practices of Cleaving, Year Five

ACCORDING TO FAMILY LEGEND, I TOOK MY first Walk when I was eight months old—long before my first steps and years before most other kids. Wearing nothing but Pampers and a dimple, I’d crawled through a pivot outside our living room, leaving behind my stuffed panda and my outraged older sister.

Even at four, Addie was a fan of rules, and rule number one in our house was no Walking without an adult. So she fetched our grandfather, Monty, and he came after me.

Addie might have caught me, but Monty brought me back.

My grandfather liked to say it was the first sign I was something special, even among Walkers. Addie said it was the first sign I was going to be a pain in the ass. Everyone agreed it was a sign of things to come. I’d been named the problem child; Addie was the good girl. Sixteen years later, and the labels stuck fast.

I gritted my teeth at the frequency surrounding me. My mom had predicted this world would be mildly off-key, but the wavering pitch was stronger—and more unstable—than expected. At most I could last a couple of hours.

I followed the jogging trail around the perimeter of the park, past the duck pond and the picnic shelter, heading for the playground. It would have been pretty, if the whole Echo didn't sound so awful. Two guys played Frisbee at the water's edge, the ebb and flow of their laughter obscured by a screeching that made me wince.

Break by the duck pond. Noted.

For an Echo to sound this unstable, there had to be multiple breaks nearby overtaking the primary frequency. I listened for them, ears straining as I put some distance between me and the Frisbee game.

The wind shifted in the trees, bringing the rich smell of autumn with it. Joggers and cyclists passed by, oblivious to the noise surrounding them, their eyes sliding over me.

The playground teemed with shrieking kids leaping off the monkey bars, going down the slide headfirst, playing freeze tag. Two moms pushed their toddlers on the swings, gossiping about playgroups and marital woes. Distracted and jittery from the discord, I slid a pale purple square of paper from my backpack, creasing and folding until a four-pointed star took shape. As I worked, another noise fought for my attention. More ragged, less musical. Annoying. I looked around.

A little girl, four or five, huddled at the base of a tree, sobbing

in the unashamed, exceedingly wet way kids do—snot and tears and misery plastered down her front, her wails nearly as loud as the world’s pitch.

Except for breaks, everything in an Echo, living or dead, should resonate at the same frequency. I moved closer, brushing a hand along the girl’s dimpled elbow, wondering if I’d missed something.

I hadn’t. Her signal matched, which meant she was off-limits. Interacting with her would only make things worse, could actually *create* a break. Smarter to move along and leave her to her sobfest.

The problem was, touching an Echo—even a stable one—caused them to notice you. The kid snuffled and clutched my sleeve, tipping back her tearstained face to look directly at me.

Once one Echo sees you in their world, they all can. But nobody on the playground was paying attention to either of us. Not a single turned head or furrowed brow. It was easier for people to ignore her than listen to her, and I knew what that was like.

I pried her fingers off my arm. “What’s wrong?”

She scrubbed at her eyes. “I was playing and I saw the ducks and I wanted to show them my balloon. And I went on the grass to show the ducks my balloon and I fell and the string went up and now it’s gone and it was *red*. And red is my favorite color, but my red balloon is *gone*.” She spoke in one unbroken rush.

“Your balloon is gone.”

“And it was *red*,” she wailed, a fresh flow of gunk cascading down her face. She pointed skyward. “See?”

I did see—caught in the tree branches overhead was a bedraggled red balloon. “Can your mom buy you a new one?”

“Mommy went to work. I came with Shelby.”

“Shelby?” The little girl pointed to a bored-looking brunette Addie’s age, sucking down a smoothie and texting nonstop. “Nanny?”

She nodded, chin quivering.

A tiny tweak wouldn’t matter, considering how unstable this world was. It was like a symphony—a single wrong note in a perfect performance could ruin the whole thing. But if the song was already riddled with mistakes, one more wouldn’t make a difference.

“No problem.”

Had I known I’d be climbing park benches in an attempt to rescue wayward balloons, I would have dressed differently that morning. Still, I dropped the backpack and climbed up, hoping a sudden breeze off the pond wouldn’t cause my skirt to pull a Marilyn Monroe.

“Almost there,” I said, wishing I were taller. Even atop a park bench in my motorcycle boots, I could not reach the ribbon. The kid eyed me dubiously. “Back of the bench should do it.”

I put one foot on the back of the bench, wobbling in my heavy boots, the string dangling inches away.

So much for a quick fix.

“Need a hand?” came a new voice.

Startled, I lost my balance. Someone grabbed me, one hand on my leg, the other at my waist. I looked at the fingers curving

around my thigh—a guy’s hand, wide and strong, slightly calloused, with a leather cuff around the wrist—as dissonance roared through me, twice as loud as before. My knees buckled.

I knew him. A version of him anyway. I’d spent a lot of time studying those hands when I should have been focused on math or history or Bach. They belonged to Simon Lane. And Simon Lane, even back home, belonged to an entirely different world than I did.

He guided me down until I was standing on the seat, balance restored, dignity shaky. He let go, but the noise remained. *He* was the break by the duck pond. I focused on his sweatshirt, the faded blue logo of Washington’s basketball team, and willed the discord away.

He glanced at the kid. “Balloon got stuck?”

Her lower lip trembled. “This girl isn’t big enough.”

It was tempting to point out, standing atop the bench, that I was currently taller than Simon. But he was standing closer than he ever had at school, and his dark brown hair was a good two inches longer and shaggier than I was used to, and I got distracted. He knew it too, judging from the flash of amusement in his eyes.

“I can do it myself,” I said.

“She’s stubborn,” he told the girl, as if he was confiding in her. “If she’d lean on me, we’d have your balloon down by now.”

“You lean,” she ordered.

“Charming,” I said.

He nodded. “So I’m told.”

Some things—eye color, gravity, mountain ranges—were constant no matter how far you Walked. And Simon’s reputation as the guy all the girls wanted, even though they knew better, was apparently one of them.

I shook my head to clear the ringing.

“Fine. But don’t drop me.” I braced one hand on his shoulder and climbed up, both feet perched on the narrow back of the bench, feeling myself sway. His hands closed over my waist and I stretched, catching the string of the balloon, tugging until it came free of the branches. “Got it.”

“Jump,” he said, and I did. His thumbs brushed against my rib cage, lingering when they didn’t need to. This close, his eyes were a darker blue than I’d realized, more thickly lashed, and there was a tiny scar at the corner of his mouth I’d never seen before. *Simon Lane*, I thought dizzily, and pulled away.

I tied the balloon around the girl’s wrist, and she ran off without another word.

“You’re welcome,” I called after her.

“No good deed goes unpunished,” he said, grinning at me. “I’m Simon, by the way. You look familiar.”

“Del,” I said. “I go to Washington. With you.”

He squinted, trying to place me. It wasn’t his fault. Walkers didn’t have Echoes, the way regular people did. But we left an impression through the worlds, like a daydream. When I was in class with his Original, this Echo would see my impression hovering in his peripheral vision. If he tried to look at me directly, the image would fade away, and he’d forget about me.

Which was not so different from the Key World, now that I thought about it.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” I asked.

He ducked his head for a moment, then looked up with a mischievous smile. *Trouble*, I thought. Way more than his Original, which was saying something. “Aren’t *you*?”

A voice from behind me, bossy and superior, said, “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

Addie.

Simon didn’t hear her, of course. Unlike me, Addie would have been careful to avoid touching any Echoes. Casually I looked over my shoulder. My sister stood ten feet away, hands on hips, foot tapping, eyebrows drawn together in disapproval.

“You cut class again?” she said.

“It’s only school,” I replied, keeping my eyes on Simon, answering both questions at once. “Most useless part of my day.”

I didn’t mention that I found my classmates equally so. They’d probably say the same about me.

Suddenly a soaking wet chocolate Lab raced past us, Frisbee clamped in his teeth, a red bandana around his neck. He circled Addie twice and dropped the orange plastic disc at my feet. He let out a thunderous bark and panted up at me as if looking for approval.

“Iggy,” Simon said warningly at the same time I said, “Good puppy.”

Which was all the encouragement Iggy needed to shake himself off, spraying pond water all over me.

“No!” groaned Simon. “Bad dog!”

I brushed at my clothes as Iggy romped around. “Serves you right,” Addie said, snickering. “You know Mom and Dad don’t like you Walking alone.”

Iggy woofed in her direction and put his paw out for me to shake. Gingerly I took it. Monty said animals liked Walkers because they could hear the difference in our frequencies, and we sounded good. Whatever the reason, the dog was all lolling tongue and blissful unrepentance, even when Simon grabbed his collar.

“Leave her alone, Ig.” The dog ignored him. “Sorry. I think he likes you.”

“Animals do,” I said, pulling at my drenched sweater.

“He’s got good taste.”

Addie tapped her watch, her face drawn. The noise was already getting to her. Iggy must have heard it too, pressing damply against my leg and whining.

“Chill, boy,” Simon said, scratching the dog’s ears. “Let me make this up to you? There’s a kick-ass band playing at Grundy’s tonight, and we just got new IDs. You should come with.”

“Absolutely not. Tell him no,” Addie said.

The real Simon would never go to a bar during basketball season. He had too much to lose. I must have frowned, because his eyebrows lifted, dark lines over dark blue eyes. “Okay, not Grundy’s. What about the Depot?”

In the Key World the Depot was a coffee shop on the south side of town, in the old train station. After a huge crash decades

ago, the city built a new station on the north side, and the Depot became a landmark and a place for locals to get lattes.

Walkers believed every accident came from a choice. Nearly forty people had died that morning; another hundred were injured, simply because the engineer picked the wrong time to throw the brake. Countless worlds had sprung up in the aftermath, a lesson in the way a single decision could transform the fabric of the multiverse.

I wondered what choices had shaped this version of Simon, who cut class and used a fake ID. Despite his dissonance, I was tempted to find out. He was definitely the break, and it was just my luck that the one time he noticed me, there was something fundamentally wrong with him.

Iggy bumped my legs, and I fell heavily into Simon again. His arms came around me, and for an instant I let mine circle him. Then I took a quick, unsteady step back. "I'll think about it."

Now it was his turn to frown. Most girls would have been falling all over him for that kind of invitation, but I wasn't most girls.

"Playtime's over," Addie said, her expression like a storm front. "Wrap this up."

I gave Iggy one last pat. "See you around."

"Count on it," he said, scooping up the Frisbee and tossing it toward the pond. Iggy raced away, Simon followed, and I turned, awaiting the wrath of Addie.

"We're not here to troll for guys, Del."

"You're not, anyway. I'm sure we could find you someone." I

pointed to a girl biking on the other side of the pond. “She’s cute.”

Playing matchmaker for Addie wasn’t a bad idea. Not that the outdoorsy type was right for her. She needed someone as effortlessly polished as herself. But if she had a girlfriend, maybe she’d be too busy to notice my mistakes.

Her green eyes took on a warning gleam. “Leave it alone, Del. Him too.”

I shrugged. “He’s a break. I was getting a reading for my homework.”

“Some reading,” she replied.

“How long have you been spying on me?” I asked, trying to draw her attention away from Simon.

“Long enough to see you get the balloon down. There was nothing wrong with that kid. You should have left her alone.” She crossed her arms, her face taking on the pinched, fussy look that made her look older, and not in a good way. “We have rules for a reason, Del.”

I studied my nail polish, plum colored and starting to chip.

“She was miserable.”

“So? She’s an Echo. It doesn’t matter.”

It matters to me, I wanted to say. But Addie was right. Echoes weren’t real people, only copies of Originals, no matter how alive they seemed. Still, her response, practical and dismissive, nettled me.

“Whatever.” I glanced over at Simon, roughhousing with Iggy. The discord surrounding them scraped along my nerves, growing louder the longer I watched. “Why are you here?”

“Dad asked me to help you with your homework. I left you three different messages.”

“Didn’t get them,” I said airily, pulling Simon’s wallet out of my pocket. I held up the out-of-state license that claimed he was twenty-four. “This is a terrible ID. They’d totally bust him.”

“You picked his pocket? Did Monty teach you?”

“Who else?” She frowned as I continued. “Simon’s Original is the star basketball player at my school. He’d never try to sneak into a bar. What’s the harm in keeping this one out of jail too?”

“It’s pointless,” she said, swiping at a wisp of strawberry blond hair that dared escape the neat twist at the nape of her neck. I never understood how she was able to get her hair to behave. Mine was a perpetual mess—reddish brown, unruly as tree bark, black at the ends like they’d been dipped in a pot of india ink. “He’s not even real.”

Simon’s palm on my bare leg had felt pretty damn real, but I kept that tidbit to myself.

I couldn’t say why, exactly, I’d nicked his wallet. Because it was fun. Because I wanted to test myself. Because while this Simon flirted, the one back home barely noticed me. Because even if he was only an Echo, I’d hate for him to end up in juvie. Because Addie couldn’t. A million reasons, but mostly . . . because I could.

I shook my head and slipped the wallet back into my pocket. “I hope he didn’t pay a lot for this. It’s awful.”

“Leave it here.” Her tone and temper were both growing short, but so were mine. “You know it’s dangerous to bring it back.”

“It’s not radioactive. It won’t hurt anything.” According to the Consort, bringing Echo objects to the Key World was like introducing bubonic plague, but they’d never explained why. It made sense for big things, like pets. Clear violation of the rules to bring Iggy back, since the *real* Iggy was already frolicking about somewhere. But an object as small as Simon’s wallet wouldn’t affect my world, the same way a single grain of sand wouldn’t hold back the tide.

Even so, it was easier to let Addie think she’d won, especially with a migraine brewing. I tossed the ID in the trash and the wallet on a nearby table, where he’d spot it on his way out. “Happy now?”

“Not really,” she said. “Let’s get started on your homework. The first step is to locate the vibrato fractums.”

“Already did. Simon’s one. Jogger’s two.” I jerked a thumb toward the trail where a stout, balding man was running. “Minivan’s three, but it pulled out while I was talking to Simon. Swing set makes four. Did I miss anything?”

I hadn’t, but it was fun to make her admit it.

She scowled. “Since you’ve got it figured out, go get your readings.”

“I already checked Simon,” I said, and flashed my phone. I hadn’t just picked his pocket—I’d recorded his frequency so I could determine exactly how bad the break was. “I can skip the others.”

“Three breaks, three readings,” she said firmly.

The thing about Walking is you’re always playing catch-up.

It's not time travel. You can't go back and prevent a problem. Once a decision is made, a branch—the choice you didn't take, an alternate pathway, an alternate world—is created. Most of the time, it's no big deal. The alternate world, populated by Echoes, goes its own way. It creates Echoes of its own and never interferes with the Key World again.

Every once in a while, for reasons unknown, something goes wrong. There's a snag in the fabric of reality, a frequency that's grown too strong or too unstable. Left alone, it will spread, destabilizing the Key World and weakening the other branches of the multiverse. And that's where Walkers come in—crossing through pivots, cutting off one reality to preserve the rest. Cleaving.

Breaks are the first sign of a problem, but they aren't necessarily fatal. Like infections, some are more serious than others, so we have to determine which ones can be left under observation and which require cleaving. I didn't doubt this world would end up cleaved—it was sounding worse by the minute—but Addie would never let me bail early.

I'd heard the jogger's pitch warbling across the park, but the assignment required I get a direct reading to be sure. I started toward him as he came around the curve, checking his pulse, his face red and his shirt sweat-soaked. I shuddered.

I picked up the pace as he approached, his signature growing louder. *Get away clean*, Monty always said, and I hustled the last few steps, phone clutched in my hand.

Our paths intersected, my shoulder brushing against his

arm. He stumbled onto the grass, yelped, and swore.

“Oops,” I said, and kept going. He threw up his hands and continued running. The touch had been brief, but long enough to turn my screen cherry red. I headed back to Addie. “That was gross.”

She fixed me with an expectant look. “Well?”

“Yes, obviously.” I showed her my phone. “I didn’t need a direct read to know he’s a bad break.”

“*Augmented* break,” she corrected, tugging at the hem of her tweed blazer. “He’s not good or bad; it’s a question of how far his individual frequency has degraded.”

“Whatever. Can we go now? This place sounds awful, and I have plans.” A sharp ping, like a violin string breaking, split the air. The wobble in the frequency sped up.

“A date with Eliot is not a sufficient reason to blow off training.” She rubbed her temples as she spoke. “Check the swing set.”

“It’s not a date,” I ground out. “It’s *Eliot*.”

Everything is possible, for a Walker. The multiverse is infinite, like an ancient tree with branches in every direction, each branch sending out countless shoots, each shoot sprouting an endless number of worlds. Walk far enough, carefully enough, and you could find whatever world you wanted. But you would never find a world where Eliot Mitchell and I were a couple. It was hard to feel romantic about someone you’d gone through potty training with.

I stomped across the playground to the swings and gripped the chain with one hand.

Discord knifed through me, and I let go as if scalded.

Immediately the noise receded. I bent over, hands on knees, waiting for the nausea to pass before rejoining Addie.

“Done. Bet you they cleave this place by lunch tomorrow,” I said.

“The Consort’s not going to cleave a world because a fifth-year Walker said so,” she scoffed. “On the other hand, if *I* said so . . . I bet they’d let me help.”

Naturally they’d listen to her over me. “*I* found it.”

“You stole a wallet and let an Echo get grabby. You will not be helping.” She set off toward the pivot we’d come through. If I squinted, I could see the roadside marker flickering in and out of view, a sign this world was rapidly destabilizing.

I chased after her. “That’s not fair. I should at least get to try it.”

A thrill ran through me as I spoke, dark and compelling. My fingers twitched, sliding through the atmosphere, through time and space and perception until they touched the fabric of this world, the threads raucous and trembling. Like a key in a lock I hadn’t known was there, the sensation called up something more instinctive than memory, a sudden yearning to fix the snarled, too-tight lines straining against my skin. I hummed a half-forgotten song, only to be cut off by Addie.

“You. Aren’t. *Licensed*.” She took my arm, looking frazzled. “We go home. We tell Dad. We let the Consort handle it.”

“Why not save them the trouble?”

“Like you’d even know how.”

Over her shoulder I saw Simon lift a hand to wave at me. I

smiled back, then caught myself. Not real. The Original Simon wouldn't wave at me. He wouldn't notice me. He definitely wouldn't invite me out to hear a band or grab coffee or anything else. He wouldn't have made me feel this uncomfortable regret. Not real—but very dangerous.

“It's not hard,” I said, the heart of the world vibrating under my fingers, as reckless and chaotic as my own. “All you have to do is start.”

CHAPTER FOUR

When interacting with Echoes, do not let emotions cloud your judgment or divert you from your duty.

—Chapter Three, “Echo Properties and Protocols,”
Principles and Practices of Cleaving, Year Five

IT SHOULDN'T BE SO EASY TO END A WORLD.

When you think about it, unraveling the fabric of reality should require more effort than clipping your nails. As it turns out, all you need to do is find the right thread and yank.

Or hold on to the thread while your sister yanks you.

The strings slid away with such force I thought they'd slice my fingertips, the remaining fabric slack and gauzy. The ground at our feet warped like a Salvador Dalí painting, nearby trees going liquid and limp, the sky a smear of blue and white.

“What did you do?” Addie looked around wildly.

“It wasn't my fault! You grabbed me!” A line of silver shot from the playground to the pond, which turned gray and began to fade.

“You shouldn't have been messing around,” she snapped, pulling me toward solid ground.

“They were going to cleave it anyway,” I said. According

to the Consort, cleavings were complicated procedures that required tools, and training, and time.

I'd done it completely by accident.

My stomach churned as I watched the ducks bobbing along the increasingly dim surface. They flickered, turning grainy black-and-white like an old movie, and then a blob of static, and they were gone.

White noise, like listening to a seashell, filled the air.

Simon threw the Frisbee and Iggy leaped, the color leaching out of the bandana around his neck. My chest squeezed painfully at the sight. I'd expected something . . . cleaner. A quick winking out of existence, like stars at sunrise. "I didn't mean to."

"Like that matters? We have to go." She started toward the portal but stopped when she saw I wasn't moving.

One by one, the cars in the parking lot guttered like candle flames. Even the ones with people inside them. "I did this," I said hollowly. "I should watch."

Addie's voice was unexpectedly sympathetic, despite the note of panic creeping in. "Del, they're not alive. They were never alive, just Echoes."

"They don't know that."

"No, but we do. It's cleaving too fast," she said. "It's supposed to start at the breaks and spread out from there. This is . . . random."

She was right. The whole point of our training was to manage cleaving in an orderly way. Cleavers cut away the damaged branch, then rewove the strings, ensuring the healthy world

stayed strong. The Echo was left to unravel at its own pace, triggering a domino effect. The worlds that sprang from the cleaved Echo would unravel as the effects spread. It was like pruning a shrub: Cut the base of a branch, and all the twigs and leaves attached would fall away too. The effects would take time, but cleavings were irreversible.

The chaos before us shouldn't have happened for days, but already the wooded area beyond the paths had turned to a misty gray wall, the unraveling flowing across the field. The roaring in my ears increased with every Echo that disappeared. I turned, looking for the rift we'd come through.

“Addie?”

The grass around our pivot was silvery with hoarfrost.

“Come on!” She sprinted, graceful even when she was running for her life. I followed as best I could in my clunky boots and overloaded backpack. The asphalt was starting to soften and the curve ahead was fading. I could see where the edges of the world didn't quite align, and hear the Key World's frequency drifting through like a beacon.

Inches away from the pivot, the signpost for the park dissolved into a lumpy puddle. There was no way we'd reach it in time.

“Wait!” I caught the hem of her jacket. She ignored me, and I yanked harder. “We'll never make it through—we'll be caught in the cleaving.”

She whirled, eyes bright with fear. “We're caught unless we get out of here, you moron!”

“Look,” I said. The signpost disappeared. An instant later, the pivot was gone too, replaced with the same formless gray overtaking the park.

Addie made a sound like a drowning kitten and went limp. “We’re stuck.”

The silver-coated ground crept toward us like fog. I tugged at her. “Back this way. The park.” For once, she didn’t argue. “There has to be an emergency plan.”

“Yeah. Don’t cleave a world while you’re standing in the middle of it!”

We reached the playground, where the disintegration was already setting in. The benches bowed toward the ground, the moms and nannies oblivious. The kids climbed on the jungle gym, unconcerned by the bars warping beneath their hands.

“No pivot points,” Addie said. “That’s the only way in or out.”

She was right. The ooze had overtaken the far end of the playground and the parking lot, where the strongest concentration of pivots was. It was impossible to cross. Iggy and Simon had been replaced by a sea of grayish light; so had the swingset and the spot where I’d bumped into the jogger. The Echoes never noticed. They’d fade before they realized what was happening, reabsorbed into the fabric of the universe.

We wouldn’t be reabsorbed. We’d be dead.

Addie dropped onto the bench and started to cry. I tried not to throw up. A few feet away the little girl with the balloon twirled, the balloon’s color bleeding away.

The balloon.

The balloon should have been tangled in the tree overhead.

I'd fixed it, and the kid had gone back to playing, instead of crying at the base of the tree.

And she was still here. Only . . . not for much longer.

"Move!" I hauled Addie up.

"It's too small, Del. We'll never get through."

"You have a better option? Move your ass, or we're dead!" I skidded to a halt inches from the girl. I listened as hard as I could for a frequency—any frequency—not obscured by the white noise of the cleaving.

"Hurry," Addie said.

"Shut up!"

The balloon flickered as I heard one—E minor, haunting and sweet. Light filtered through the pivot, pale as dust and barely visible. I lunged for it, clutching my sister's hand.

The last thing I saw was the little girl disappearing in a burst of static.

CHAPTER FIVE

The term “accident” is a misnomer. Every consequence, no matter how unexpected, is rooted in a choice.

—Chapter Ten, “Ethics and Governance,”
Principles and Practices of Cleaving, Year Five

LANDED HARD. MY PALMS AND KNEES STUNG from the impact, and my ears rang in the sudden silence. Less than a foot away, the edges of the portal fluttered like the wings of a monarch and sealed themselves. Slowly, I sat up and brushed wood chips from my hair.

Addie lay nearby, flat on her back, panting and staring at the sky. The blue, blue sky. Azure. Lapis. Cornflower. Glorious, rich, head-spinning color. After the relentless gray of the world we’d escaped, I was practically drunk on it. I hauled myself up, using the jungle gym to keep my balance.

The scene before me was identical to the cleaved world. Joggers and kids and nannies. Ducks bobbing on the pond. Simon and his friend playing Frisbee with Iggy. My throat tightened and my breath eased simultaneously. Everything was exactly as it had been.

Almost. The little girl sat next to her nanny, head bent,

shoulders shaking. I looked up and saw the balloon, caught in the highest branches of the tree. Soon the wind would carry it away.

I thrust my hands in my pockets and found my star, crumpled and half-finished. Smoothing it out, I folded the rest from memory, the movements familiar and reassuring.

Addie stood, her face white and set.

“Not bad, right?” I tried to smile, but it felt as wobbly as my legs.

“No, Del. That was bad. Very, very bad.” She swiped a finger underneath each eye, erasing the tracks of mascara. “We have to keep moving.”

“We’re safe.”

She shook her head and studied the playground. “When that world finishes cleaving, this one will start. It’s a domino effect, and you knocked over the first one.”

My stomach twisted, and I nearly dropped to my knees again. The Key World was safe, but every Echo originating in Park World would unravel and fade. Because of me. “What about the people?”

“Del. Focus. We have to find a pivot we can use to get home. Where’s our best shot?”

She must have been seriously rattled to ask me for advice, instead of ordering me around. It was almost funny. Almost, the way that this world was almost the same as the one we’d fled. “Almost,” as it turned out, meant “not at all.”

A sour taste flooded my mouth. “Parking lot,” I said. “There’s a ton of decisions in a parking lot.”

“Then let’s go. And don’t touch anything.” I glanced over my shoulder at the little girl, still crying.

“Thanks, kid,” I murmured, and followed Addie toward the rows of cars and pivots. The instant before I crossed over, I tossed the paper star toward the signpost. Pointless, considering this world would soon vanish, but it was habit.

A breadcrumb, just like Monty had taught me.

For someone who spent so much time talking up how she was the mature one in the family, Addie wasted no time reverting to childhood when we arrived home.

“I’m telling Mom,” she said, slamming the car door extra hard and marching up the driveway.

I chased after her. “You’re tattling on me? Seriously? Are we five now?”

“Five-year-olds have better impulse control,” she hissed. “We could have been killed. Do you think the Consort won’t notice? *You cleaved a world.*”

“You grabbed me,” I said, fighting back the fear that enveloped me. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant. It’s what you did. And don’t try to blame me—you shouldn’t have been touching the strings in the first place. This is completely on you, Del.” She stalked inside.

I stood in the driveway, shivering as a chill worked its way under my sweater. Our kitchen windows glowed warm and yellow, the peeling paint less visible in the dusk. It looked homey.

Safe. Cheerful. But I knew exactly what kind of welcome awaited me when I crossed the threshold, and it was none of those things.

The barberry bushes bordering the yard rustled, and a moment later Monty popped out, his cardigan catching on the thorns. He swatted at them, not noticing when his hands came away scratched.

“You’re back?” he asked, his voice thin and reedy like an oboe. Monty had been a big man once, but he’d diminished over the years. Most Walkers developed frequency poisoning as they aged, but his was especially severe. Too much time spent in bad frequencies had left his shoulders bent and his gait slower. He lost time, forgetting my grandmother was gone. Worst of all, his hearing was ruined. Without hearing, a Walker had to rely on touch to navigate through the multiverse. Difficult and dangerous, but it didn’t stop him.

“Hey, Grandpa.” I took him by the elbow. “How long have you been out here?”

“I was going out. Where was I going?” He patted his pockets, pulled out a cheap little spiral notebook and a pencil stub. “I wrote it down. I drew a map.”

Walker maps didn’t look anything like the jumble of lines and musical notes he was peering at. He’d end up lost. Real maps showed only the major, stable branches of an Echo, their important pivots color coded to show strength and stability. Computers had made them easier to maintain—the old bound versions, drawn on onionskin paper, were inches thick and instantly outdated. Even with technology and experience on our side, tracing

a path through the multiverse was no more accurate than charting wind currents.

“You’re not supposed to Walk by yourself,” I said, taking the notebook. Then again, neither was I.

A cagey light entered his eyes. “We can go together.”

“I—” The screen door flew open and my mother appeared, anger visible in the rigid lines of her posture. Addie stood behind her like a self-righteous shadow. “Mom—”

“Not a word, Delancey. Not. A. Word.” She pointed to the kitchen table, and I slunk past her to my usual chair. Monty followed me inside.

“Foster!” she called into the twilight. From his office in the garage, my dad shouted back something unintelligible, and then hustled inside. Nobody messed around when my mom used that tone.

Monty patted my arm. “She’s in a temper, isn’t she? Been snappish all day.”

“Do not move from that spot,” Mom said, her glare nailing me to my seat. Addie smirked as they filed into Mom’s office and shut the door.

“You’ve been out a long time.” Monty drew two glass bottles out of the fridge. “Root beer?”

“Not thirsty,” I mumbled as he pried off their tops.

He brought both bottles over and drained half of his. I rolled mine between my hands, listening to the faint hiss and snap of the carbonation.

“I screwed up,” I said. “Big.”

He belched gently, and I wrinkled my nose. “Nothing’s done that can’t be un-, Delancey.”

It’s what he’d always said, when I was a kid and we’d gone Walking together. A song he’d invented, special for me.

Nothing’s done that can’t be un-,
Nothing’s lost that can’t be found,
Make a choice and make a world,
Find another way around.

It had cheered me whenever our Walks had gone awry, and with Monty, they usually did. But I’d figured out by now that plenty of things—and people—stayed lost forever.

People like my grandmother. She had been a medic—the Walker equivalent of a doctor—charged with keeping Cleavers like my grandfather and my father healthy during their trips through the multiverse. A few months before I was born, she’d gone out on a Walk and never returned.

My parents and Addie had been living in New York at the time; Monty and Rose were here, in this house. According to my mom, the Consort’s teams had searched for weeks, but she’d vanished completely. Their official verdict was that Rose had been caught on the wrong side of a cleaving, like we’d been today.

Monty wouldn’t accept it. They were meant to be together, he insisted—Montrose and Rosemont, two halves of a whole. He’d wandered the multiverse alone, looking for her, until the Consort had stepped in and issued a second verdict: Either my

parents come back to take care of Monty, or they'd send him to a home. So, a month after I was born, we returned permanently.

It was Walker tradition to name a kid after big pivots in their parents' hometown, and few pivots were bigger than train stops, where decisions accrued on a regular basis, day after day. Everyone else in my family was named for Chicago, but I'd been named for New York, a reminder of what could have been. My grandmother's disappearance had given me my name and an entirely different life.

When someone vanishes, it leaves behind a scar. Some heal better than others. My grandmother had unwittingly left her mark on our whole family. My mom saw the world as a collection of messes to be contained. Addie was so desperate to please her, she'd taken that need for order and translated it as a need for perfection. My dad tried to keep everyone happy, ever the peacemaker. The only path left to me was the one marked trouble.

Even now Monty didn't believe my grandmother was really gone. He slipped away whenever he could to continue the search. But instead of finding Rose, he'd lost his mind.

His song had failed us both, but I didn't tell him so.

"Now," he said, leaning back in his chair and lacing his hands over his stomach. "What's this about?"

"I cleaved an Echo," I said. The words felt leaden as I spoke them, and Monty's head snapped back as if he'd taken a punch. I hurried to explain.

"Not on purpose. I touched the strings for a second and it sort of . . . happened. Everything fell apart crazy fast. I've never

been inside a cleaving. I didn't know . . ." My throat clogged up. "There was a guy from school—an *Echo* of a guy from school. Simon Lane. One minute I was talking to him and the next he was gone." Monty's eyebrows lifted, his watery blue gaze turning sharp. "I know they're not real, but . . . that's not how it felt. It felt awful."

He nodded. "As it should."

"We barely got out in time, Grandpa. I thought unravelings took days."

He looked like I'd given him a prize instead of a problem. "How'd you manage to escape?"

When I explained about the balloon, he chuckled. "Clever girl."

I didn't feel clever. I felt sick. "I didn't mean to. It was an accident."

"There are no accidents," said my mother from the doorway. My father's hand rested on her shoulders, a unified front.

I turned to plead my case. "I only wanted to know what the threads felt like. I'd never been anywhere so out of tune. Then Addie yanked me away, and they split. That's it."

"That's it?" Mom's voice was like a lash. My father stepped between us.

"You two must be starving. We'll talk after dinner."

I barely touched my food. Monty smacked his lips, slathering butter and jam on a biscuit. How could he be so cheerful after what I'd told him? My parents were ominously quiet, while Addie spooned up delicate bites of lentil soup with a satisfied air.

Whatever punishment they'd decided on, she was happy. It must be bad.

Finally my dad pushed his bowl away. "Your actions today were reckless. And dangerous. Do you know what could have happened to you and your sister?"

I stared at the brown ooze congealing in front of me.

"You could have been killed. And we'd never have known. This is exactly why we don't like you going out by yourself. Did you even think about us? What it would have done to your mother, living through that again?" Dad asked.

"This isn't about me," said my mom. She folded her napkin precisely and set it on the table. "This is about you, and your behavior, and your constant need to flout every rule that has been laid out for your own protection and the protection of the Key World."

"I'm sorry." I slid lower in my chair. "I didn't mean for it to happen."

"You never do," my mom said. "You rush in and trust that your gifts will be enough to get you out of any mess you create."

I poked at my bowl. I'd screwed up, but I'd also saved us. That should count for something, shouldn't it?

"It was a neat trick," Monty said. "Getting out of there. You should give her some credit."

Gratitude rushed through me. Monty understood.

"She wouldn't have needed a trick if she'd followed the rules," Mom replied. "Addie made it through five years of training and we never once saw this kind of behavior."

No, of course not. I'd figured out a long time ago that I couldn't beat Addie at her own game, so I stopped trying.

My father added, "Cleaving can't be handled by one person. The protocol mandates three Cleavers to manage it safely."

"Hogwash," said Monty. "They send three Cleavers so no one knows who cut the last string. Keeps 'em from feeling too guilty."

"Why would someone feel guilty?" asked Addie. "They're only Echoes."

Monty shook his head in disgust.

"A faulty cleaving causes more harm than good," my father said. "It leaves the Key World weak."

There was no greater crime than damaging the Key World. My voice sounded very small when I said, "We can fix it, right? We don't have to report it?"

I thought about the stories I'd heard, Walkers stripped of their licenses, forced to live like ordinary people, never again venturing outside the Key World. Walkers who vanished altogether, sent to an oubliette.

Oubliettes were prisons, hidden behind rumor and speculation. The story was, to contain the worst of our criminals, the Consort had played with the fabric of the multiverse. They'd created worlds no bigger than a jail cell, severing them from the Key World and Echoes except for a single thread. A world with all possibilities eliminated, impossible to escape. No one had ever come back from an oubliette, so no one knew the truth.

But I'd been reckless, not malicious. I wasn't even seventeen—surely the Consort wouldn't want to sentence a teenage girl to life

in a prison world. Even so, I wasn't eager to test the theory. "Dad, please. We can't tell the Consort."

Regret tempered the firmness in his voice. "We already have."

"You're supposed to be on my side!" I'd expected that kind of betrayal from Addie. But not my parents. Not my dad.

"We are. A cleaving that big can't be covered up, and it's better to admit what you've done. Take responsibility for your actions," he said.

"It was an accident!"

"The Consort has rules, Del. If you want to be a Walker, you have to prove you can follow them." My mom's frown made it clear she wasn't willing to bend the rules for me. Addie's penchant for the straight and narrow was as genetic as our ability to Walk.

I wanted to remind her it wasn't rules that had saved our lives today, but the breaking of them. And that I wasn't going to be an Echo of my sister, no matter where we Walked. I didn't say any of those things, though, because my mom would never truly hear them.

Monty had dozed off, crumbs scattered across his cardigan. Addie toyed with her necklace, pretending not to listen. My dad's hand laced with my mom's in a silent gesture of support.

I was on my own.