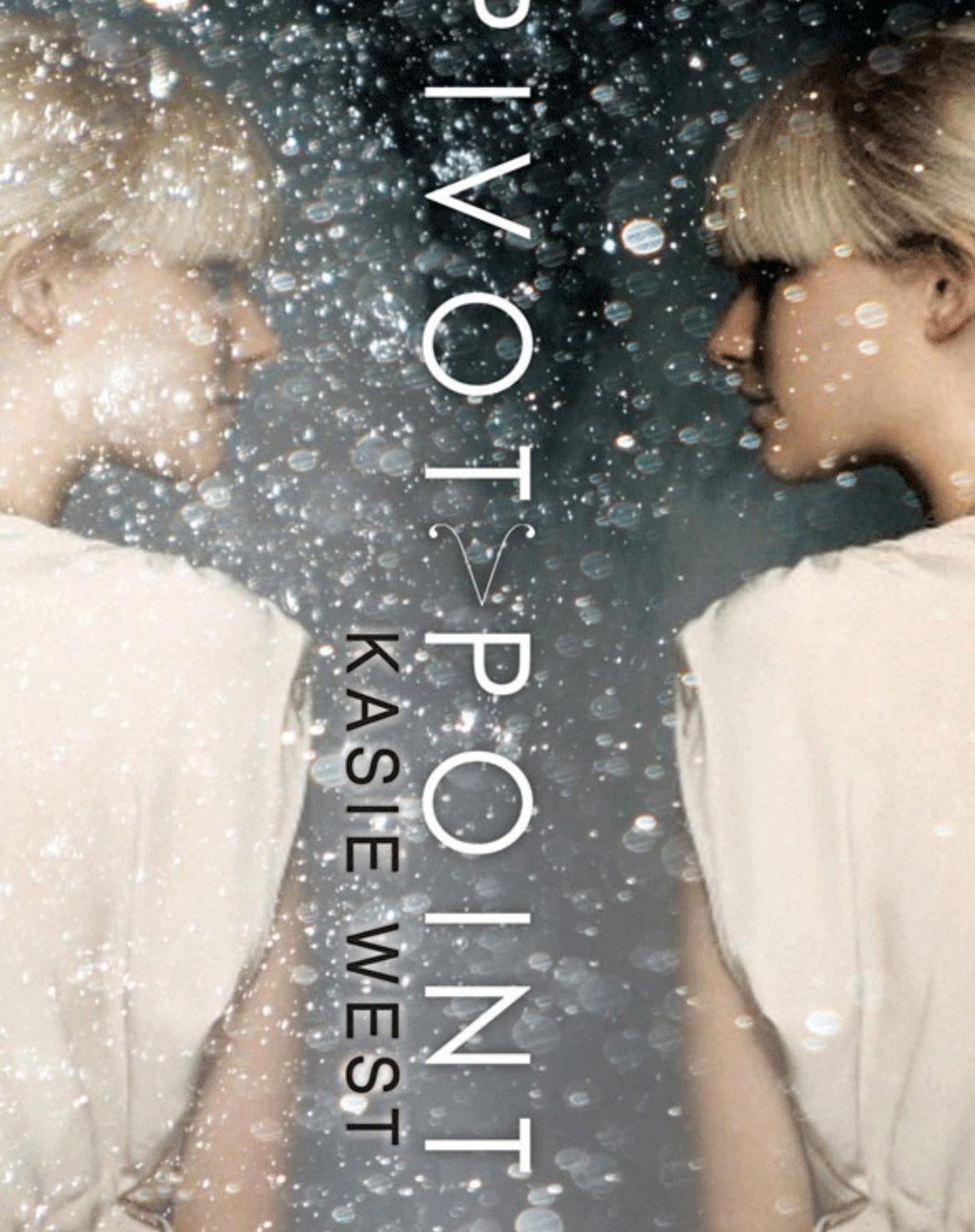


ONE GIRL. TWO FATES. ONE CHOICE.

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KASIE WEST



KASIE WEST

PIVOT
POINT

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DEDICATION

To Jared, I'm glad I chose the path that led to you.

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CHAPTER 1

am•bush: *n.* to pick a subject (me) and lie in wait to attack

“Heads up,” a loud voice called from my right. I looked up just in time to see a football smack me right between the eyes.

I never really understood the saying *heads up*. At least not as a warning. *Duck* or *watch out* or *flying object*, even *heads down* would’ve worked. I lie on my back, book clutched to my chest, staring at the purple-and-gold streaked sky—the Perceptives must’ve been gearing up for the football game that night. As if the school colors splashed across the sky would send us running to the ticket booth.

I mentally inventoried my situation. I’d landed on cement, so no mud was involved, thankfully. I’d only lost thirty seconds, at the most, so I’d still make it to class on time. I was fine. A little anxiety melted away with the thought.

A familiar face with a mess of blond hair and a wide smile appeared above me. “Sorry. I said heads up.” His smile proved he wasn’t very sorry at all, but more likely amused.

And I looked up, was what I wanted to say, but instead I ignored his offered hand and pushed myself off the ground. “Yeah, I heard you, Duke.” I brushed myself off and continued walking. The spot the football had hit throbbed, so I pressed my fingertips against it, sure there was a nasty red welt.

Guess I should’ve Searched the morning after all, and I might’ve seen that coming. But I didn’t Search all my choices—only major ones. There were already enough alternate realities floating around in my mind that sometimes it was hard to keep track of which one I had actually lived and which was the opposing choice never made.

And yet, earlier that morning when I climbed out of bed and saw the fog outside my window, I was tempted to see what would happen if I stayed home versus what would happen if I went to school. My mom made the decision for me when she opened my door and said, “Addie, I’m driving you this morning. I don’t like you to drive in the fog.”

“Okay, thanks.” I knew better than to disagree. My mom was Persuasive. It was her mental ability. As far as mental abilities went, I thought my parents had the worst ones any teenager’s parents could have. Who wanted her mom to be able to Persuade her to do anything she wanted? My mother claimed she only used it when it was

important, but I wondered.

My father was a human lie detector—although my mom didn't like it when I called him that; the technical term was Discerner—and he could immediately tell if I lied. He said he could even tell when I *planned* to lie. Irritating.

I slid into my seat, barely making it before the tardy bell. My best friend, Laila, wasn't so lucky. As usual, she came walking through the door a good five minutes later. Her bright red lipstick against her pale skin immediately drew my eyes to her defiant smile. We were an odd pair, constantly tugging each other back and forth over the line that represented normal teenage behavior. Everything she did made her stand out, made people notice, but I just wanted to blend in.

"Laila, what do I have to do to get you here on time?" Mr. Caston asked.

"Move the buildings closer together?"

"Funny, Ms. Stader. Warning today. Lunch detention tomorrow. Walk faster."

She plopped into the seat next to me and rolled her eyes. I smiled.

"Okay," Mr. Caston said. The lights dimmed, and our desk monitors lit up. Instructions appeared on the screen, and I meticulously copied them into my notebook.

"Seriously, Addie?" Laila asked, nodding her head toward my paper.

I made an exploding sound and kept writing. The school computers hadn't crashed in more than twenty years, but preparing for the worst never hurt anyone.

"We're finishing up our partner work today," Mr. Caston said. "Remember, no abilities, please; just use your brain."

"We *were* using our brains," Bobby said from up front.

"The part of your brain that doesn't house your ability."

Everyone groaned. But, considering biology was a Norm-training class, we all knew the rule: Classes that taught us skills to exist on the Outside needed to be learned traditionally.

"Don't make me turn on the room's ability blockers. I'm not teaching middle school here. And turn off your phones, people."

Another collective moan sounded.

Laila flashed her phone at me with a conspiratorial smile. A barcoded football filled the screen. "Come to the game with me this time."

"You bought a pass? The sky thing worked on you?"

"What? No," she said as though the implication that she could be influenced by manipulation techniques deeply offended her. "I was going anyway. This had nothing to do with the— Whoa, what happened to your head?"

I rubbed the welt again. "Duke's football."

"You talked to Duke?"

"Not really, but his football and I seemed to hit it off."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bobby walk up. His leg pressed against the edge of my desk, and my stomach twisted into a knot. I tried to ignore it and pretend I didn't see him.

"What do you want?" Laila asked. No matter how often I tried to convince her otherwise, she thought of herself as my bodyguard.

"I want to talk to Addie."

I bent over and rummaged through my backpack, hoping he'd get the hint. He didn't. I pulled out a yellow highlighter and set it on my desk. Still, he stayed. Finally,

with a sigh, I looked up. “Bobby, please, just leave me alone.”

“I thought now that the dance was over, you’d talk to me, tell me why you went from friendly to cold the minute I asked you.”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, so leave,” Laila added.

He walked away, glancing back once. The look he gave me said he wasn’t ready to give up yet. I hoped my look said, *You’re going to have to*. I also kind of hoped it said, *I hate your guts*, but as long as it said one of the two, I was satisfied.

“Addie, you can’t punish someone based on a Search. He has no idea what he did wrong.”

“It’s not my fault that if I went to the dance with him, he was going to shove his tongue down my throat and his hand up my dress,” I whispered.

“I know, and I’m so glad you didn’t go with him. But he didn’t *actually* do that.”

“But he would’ve.” I nudged the highlighter. It rolled over the glass surface of my glowing keyboard and inched toward the edge of my desk before rolling back to safety. “That’s who he is, and I can’t look at him without seeing that Search.”

“Do you want me to Erase it?”

“Have I asked you to Erase something before?” Every time she offered to Erase a memory, I asked her that question.

And every time she always answered, “If you did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

I made a face at her. “You’re a brat.”

She began painting her nails with a black Sharpie. “So, do you?”

“No. Because then I’ll forget what he’s capable of and his puppy-dog eyes might convince me to go out with him.” I shuddered. I couldn’t imagine ever thinking that his greasy brown hair and holey jeans meant he was misunderstood. But without the memories, I was sure, once again, I’d believe a good shampoo would wash the appearance of creep out of him.

“That’s true.”

“Hey, can you give me a ride home today?” I asked, ready to move past the Bobby subject.

“Sure, your car didn’t start again this morning?”

I scrolled through the diagrams on my monitor until I found our current assignment. “No, fog.”

“Ah, of course.” She didn’t need further explanation. My mom’s overprotectiveness had affected a lot of our outings. She turned toward her monitor because Mr. Caston started pacing the rows. Up on the screen was a diagram of frog innards. “Where is the kidney?” she asked.

I pointed, and the bean-shaped organ blackened as the heat from my finger touched the screen. Mr. Caston passed our desk.

“So, back to Duke,” she whispered when he was out of hearing range. “Tell me all the details.”

“There’s nothing to tell. His football knocked me down. He apologized.”

“And you said?”

I thought back. “I said, ‘Yeah, I heard you, Duke.’” A look of horror came onto her face, and I cringed.

“Addison Marie Coleman. You get handed an opportunity to flirt with Duke Rivers

and you blow him off? All these years of being my friend and you have learned nothing. That was your chance. You could've acted like he hurt you and made him walk you to the nurse's office."

"He did hurt me. But he annoyed me more. He let a football hit my head."

"How do you know he let it?"

"Hello? Because he's Telekinetic. He could've easily knocked it out of the way."

"Come on, Addie. He can't use his powers all the time. Give him a break."

"He *let* a football hit my head," I repeated slowly.

"All right, all right, perhaps he's not the most gentlemanly guy in the world, but he's Duke. He doesn't have to be."

A loud sigh escaped my lips. "Laila, don't make me hurt you. It's girls like you who let guys like Duke get away with their behavior."

She laughed. "First of all, I'd like to see you try to hurt me, Miss Skin-and-Bones. Second of all, if I were with Duke, he'd be cut down to size in seconds." She leaned back and let out a dreamy sigh, as if a mental image of her with Duke played through her mind. "Hotlicious."

"What?"

"It's *hot* and *delicious* combined. In the dictionary it would be listed as a noun and wouldn't even have a definition attached, just a picture of Duke Rivers."

"Please. There are plenty of real words Duke's face is probably already attached to in the dictionary ... *conceited*, *egocentric*, *arrogant*. And besides"—I smiled—"hotlicious would be an adjective."

"Girls," Mr. Caston said, "I don't think much studying is going on in your corner."

Laila pointed to the monitor. "We've located the kidney, Mr. Caston."

When I got home, my parents were both in the living room. They sat on opposite couches, hands folded in their laps, looking grim. My cheeks numbed as all the blood in them suddenly left.

My house was what Laila always described as old-fashioned cozy—overstuffed, mismatched furniture; plush carpet; honey-colored walls. The kind of house that was easy to curl up and relax in. I had the opposite feeling at the moment as tension spread across my shoulders.

"Is Grandma okay?" I asked. It was the only reason I could come up with for them both being home in the middle of the day, looking so somber.

The smile that appeared on my mom's face seemed patronizing and immediately put me on guard. "Yes, honey, Grandma's fine. Everyone is fine. Why don't you take care of your backpack and then come sit down? We need to talk."

I went to my room and wondered what would happen if I barricaded myself inside. I even glanced at the tall bookcase next to the door as if the idea were actually a valid one. If I never came out, they wouldn't be able to deliver whatever news had etched worry onto their faces. I paced for a few minutes, reviewing my options, talked myself out of Searching, then walked back out. My mom pointed to the *lair* (so dubbed because it was smaller than a love seat but bigger than a chair). It sat against the wall between the couches, and I lowered myself into it.

I wedged my hands beneath my thighs to keep myself from biting my nails. "Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" I looked straight at my dad, hoping he

would tell me. Whatever the news, my dad was better at a gentle delivery. He actually acknowledged the existence of feelings. Unlike my mom, who seemed to think people were like one of the programs she developed: easy to reconfigure when they didn't react as expected.

His face gave away nothing at first, then softened to what looked like pity. That wasn't a good sign.

But my mother spoke. "Addie, after trying for several years now to work out our differences, your father and I have decided to go our separate ways."

It felt like a hundred footballs whacked me in the forehead. The throbbing returned, and I rubbed at the welt. I tried to process what she had said, but the only answer made no sense. My parents got along just fine. Why would either one of them leave? "You don't mean you're getting a divorce?"

"Yes, sweetie." Apparently the straightforward approach didn't trigger the right response, so she changed to the look-how-sympathetic-I-can-sound voice. "It has nothing to do with you. It's about issues we can't work through. This was the last thing we wanted—to split up our family. But no matter what we tried, it didn't help." She tilted her head and squinted her eyes. Was that supposed to be her sorry face? It looked forced. "We thought maybe you would've seen this coming. Haven't you Searched anything lately?" The last sentence was accompanied by a hand on my arm.

I started to look down at her hand, but it was gone in an instant and had moved on to pick a piece of lint off the arm of the couch, before joining her other hand in her lap.

It took me a moment to realize she had asked a question. "No, I haven't." My last Search was the week before last and went as far as the homecoming dance, which happened Friday. If I had just looked a few more days ahead, I could've seen this coming. "I don't understand. Why would you get a divorce?" The word tasted bad in my mouth.

"Because we're like strangers living in the same house. We don't even care enough about each other to fight anymore."

I waited for my dad to speak up, to say he didn't want this, but he nodded his agreement. "Sorry, baby. It's true."

"But I care about both of you. You can't do this."

"Our choice has already been made," my mom said. "You're the only one left to make a choice."

"I choose for you to stay together."

My mom had the nerve to laugh. Okay, it wasn't a laugh as much as it was a small chuckle, but still. "That's not your choice, Addie. Your choice is: Who do you want to live with?"

CHAPTER 2

Un•just•ville: *n.* the land ruled by my parents

I sat in stunned silence, convinced the house must've initiated security protocol when I came home, and these were the holographic versions of my parents, programmed to fool intruders. That's how little sense what they said made. But they weren't holograms. They were right in front of me, waiting for my reaction. Considering none of us had moved for what felt like five minutes, I was surprised we hadn't been plunged into darkness. I didn't know what my parents expected from me, but I was waiting for the world to realign on its axis and return my life to normal. Not used to surprises, I decided I didn't like them very much.

My mom broke the silence with: "I know it's a hard choice, Addie. And we fully expect you to use your ability to see which future looks more appealing. You don't have to answer us now."

"Can't I be with both of you? Isn't there like a fifty-fifty deal we can work out?"

"That would be okay, but your father's decided to leave the Compound. He's going into the Normal world."

My stomach went from twisting uncomfortably to dropping straight to my feet. "You're leaving, Dad?" Not many people left the Compound. No one I knew personally. So this news was almost as shocking as the divorce announcement.

My mom continued, "I don't think you joining him there would be good for your develo—"

"Marissa, you promised you wouldn't try to influence her one way or the other."

"I'm sorry. It's true. Addie, this decision is yours. Stay here with others like you, or leave the Compound and live in a world surrounded by people who use only ten percent of their brains."

"Marissa."

"Sorry," she said again. This time they both laughed. I was glad they found this situation so amusing, considering my life had just ended. I stood abruptly, and they stopped laughing. My dad's face crumpled into the pity look again, and I could tell he was about to apologize, but I didn't want to hear it.

Without a word, I walked by them, straight to my room. I slapped my palm against the panel inside, causing the door to swish shut behind me. Angry music blasted from

above, the computer obviously sensing my mood from the palm scan. “Off,” I said, and silence took over. I walked around the bookcase, placed my back against the side, planted my feet firmly on the ground, and pushed. When it didn’t budge, I slid to the floor and lowered my forehead to my knees.

There was no way I could make this decision. It would’ve been better had they just told me what needed to happen, left me no choice in the matter. Sure, I would’ve complained about that as well, but at least then I wouldn’t have been forced to pick between my parents.

I crawled to my backpack, grabbed my phone out of the front pocket, and called Laila.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m almost home. Did you forget something in my car?”

“Did I?”

“I don’t know. I just thought that’s why you were calling.”

“Oh. No, I didn’t.” I lay on my backpack, not moving when the pens and other lumpy items pressed into my cheek. The discomfort created a momentary distraction from more unpleasant feelings. Closing my eyes, I listened to the slight static of the phone line.

“What is it then?”

“My parents are getting a divorce.” For the first time since the announcement, my eyes stung and my throat tightened.

“Oh no. I’m so sorry. I’m coming back, okay?”

I couldn’t answer. I only nodded.

Ten minutes later there was a knock on my window. The window was how she snuck into my room in the middle of the night. She didn’t need to use it in that moment, but I was glad she did. I felt betrayed by my parents and didn’t think they deserved to know how much I needed my best friend.

I powered open the window and screen. Laila climbed like a pro over the struggling bush in the flower bed and into my room. She immediately threw her arms around me. “I’m so sorry,” she said again. “This sucks.”

“My dad’s moving away.” Against her shoulder, my voice came out muffled. “I have to pick.”

“What?” She brought me out to arm’s length. “He’s leaving the Compound? Why? Is he helping with containment?”

“I ...” I had been too shocked to ask him what he’d do on the Outside. Most people only left the Compound to help in the process of keeping the Para-community a secret—investigating leaks, assessing damage, Erasing memories. But some left for high-powered positions, to help gather intelligence to send back to the Compound, keeping us informed on the world outside the walls. Only a few left because they wanted to integrate into the Normal world—essentially disappear. I had no idea which category my father fell into. “I don’t know.”

“But you might leave with him?”

I nodded.

“No. You can’t do that. You can’t leave. You’ll hate it out there. When’s the last time you’ve even had to deal with Norms?” she asked, putting one hand on her forehead and the other flying to her hip.

“I don’t really remember. Years.” I remembered perfectly. I was eight. We had to fill out tons of paperwork and take secrecy oaths. All for a weekend trip to Disneyland. It was crowded. Everything seemed so *normal*. All the rides were outdated, and the fireworks were nothing compared to a Perceptives light show. My parents argued the entire time.

“This is so unfair.” She led me over to the bed, and we both climbed on, leaning against the headboard. She kicked off her shoes and turned toward me. “So then you’re staying here, right? Otherwise you would have to leave school and all your friends ... and me.”

I hadn’t even begun to think about the details of one choice over the other, but she was right.

“Are you going to Search it?”

“I need to make a list. Pros and cons.” I jumped off the bed and grabbed a notebook and pen out of my desk. I opened it to a blank page and drew a line down the center, then sat on the edge of my bed, pen ready. The silence stretched as I stared at the page, trying to think of the good things about leaving.

My shoulders tensed as I wrote the first word, because I knew there would be no other words to add beneath it. *Dad*. When put that way, the choice seemed easy: Lose one person, or lose everyone and everything. But the thought of losing my dad consumed me with such sadness that my stomach hurt. He was my rock. The calming force in my life. I gnawed on my thumbnail. It wasn’t like I’d never see my dad again. Of course he’d come visit, and I could go visit him in whatever Norm town he moved to.

I traced each letter over and over again until the word was black and bold on the page. As I went to add another line of ink to the *D* Laila grabbed my hand. “Addie, you need to Search it. It will help.”

She took the notebook from me and set it on the bed beside us. “How long?”

The longest amount of time I’d ever Searched was when Bobby asked me to the dance. He’d asked me a week in advance, and because I chose not to Erase it, I had to live and then relive that week of my life. That was rare though. When I Searched, it was usually just for a few days, sometimes only for a few hours, at a time.

I shrugged my shoulders. “A month maybe. Six weeks?”

“How long will that take?”

“Five minutes. I don’t know.” The energies I focused on just seamlessly blended into my mind. It was sort of like a stream joining a river—instant “memories” of the two paths I could take. When it was over, it felt like I had already taken both paths. That’s why I didn’t like to do it too often, because it felt so real that it was hard to separate the would-have from the would.

“Do you think six weeks is enough?” My parents’ surprise announcement was making me second-guess everything. I usually knew exactly what needed to happen and exactly what I would do to make it happen. Not because I Searched everything—I didn’t—but because I liked to have a plan. Plans were good. But now I didn’t know. I was confused and frustrated. I pressed my palms to my eyes.

“It should be plenty.”

I let my shoulders rise and fall with a deep sigh.

Laila, always ready and willing to do just about anything, said, “Well, what are

you waiting for?”

“You want me to do it now?”

“I think it would make you feel better.”

I grabbed a pillow, pulled it against my chest, and lay down. On the ceiling above me, in black scrolling print, was the Aristophanes quote I had painted there: “By words the mind is winged.” For some reason it stood out among all the other quotes that loomed above me. “I don’t know. Six weeks is a long time. I’d hate to have so many detailed memories floating around up there.”

“Why? That week leading up to homecoming was pretty awesome. I liked knowing that the heel of my red shoes was going to break on Wednesday after third period and that there would be a pop quiz on Friday.”

“Since I live to serve you, why don’t I just Search every day from now to death?”

“Seriously, why don’t you?” She smacked my leg. “Are you waiting for me to offer, or are you just being ridiculous? You know I can Erase whichever path you don’t choose, so you don’t have to fake it. Sometimes I wonder if you just picked me as your best friend because of my awesome ability.”

“Whatever. Your ability didn’t even Present until the seventh grade.” I paused, then tilted my head. “So wait, are you saying I use your ability a lot?”

“I’m not telling,” she sang. “And it’s true. You didn’t pick me for my ability. You picked me because I shoved Timothy after he stole your virtual pet.”

I smiled, then took a deep breath. I was avoiding the choice, still not sure if I wanted to know, if I was ready to know what my new life would look like. My parents admitted that the only reason they had left the decision up to me was because of my ability. And why wouldn’t I want to know for sure which choice would turn out better?

“Are you ready?” she asked.

I nodded. I had to know.

“So what do I do? Just sit here? Do you need something?”

I laughed. “No, I’m fine. It might take awhile. Are you sure you want to wait?”

“Please, that’s like asking someone if they want to leave the room while Picasso paints a masterpiece.”

“You’re comparing me to Picasso?”

“You know what I’m saying. Now start.”

I settled deeper into the pillow and tried to relax. It was hard when I knew I was about to be flooded with memories of a life I hadn’t lived yet. Really, two lives I hadn’t lived yet. It would only seem like five minutes to Laila, but to me it would feel like a month. I concentrated on the energies around me, and everything went hazy.

CHAPTER 3

PAR•A•digm: *n.* something that serves as a pattern or model

“Aren’t kids of divorced parents supposed to get whatever they want due to the extreme guilt of both parties?” I ask at breakfast a week after my dad left. The house feels different without him ... empty.

“You’re not getting a new car,” my mom says from where she sits at the kitchen table behind her laptop. A pen holds her blond curls in a loose bun at the nape of her neck, and she grabs it to jot something on the notepad beside her. The action sends her hair down over her shoulders and reminds me of how similar it is to mine. Just when I think she’s forgotten we were talking, like she often does, she adds, “Your car runs just fine.”

“I’m not asking for a new car. Just a different one. Mine barely runs. Have you heard the latest noise? It’s kind of like a *knock-clank-knock* sound.”

“Talk to your father about it.”

I scoop a spoonful of milk-engorged bran flakes and then watch them slide slowly off my spoon. “Oh good, at least we’re not going to skip the pass-the-problems-to-the-other-parent part of divorce. I knew you wouldn’t let me miss out on at least some fun.” I know I’m being a brat, but I can’t help it. Like a bad cold, every negative feeling or complaint I’ve ever had about my mom has decided to accumulate in my chest.

For the first time since the conversation started, she looks at me. “Addie, knock it off. I just meant that your father is better at knowing what weird car noises mean.”

I stand, stick my bowl in the sink, and swipe my backpack from off the floor. “Well, I would ask Dad, but I don’t think my car would make it the five *hours* to his house.”

“We’re going to get through this,” she calls as I walk out the front door.

“And one day you’re going to understand why I did it,” I finish for her as the door shuts behind me. I don’t know how many times she’s said that line over the last week. She probably hoped that each time it was said the “one day” would get a little closer. It only seemed to push that day further away.

Once in my car, I pull out my cell phone and dial.

“Coleman,” my dad answers.

His voice alone makes me smile. “Don’t they have caller ID out there in Normville?”

“Yes, of course they do.”

“Then how come you answer that way when you know it’s me?”

“Habit. How are you?”

“Okay. My car’s being weird. Are you ready for it?” I hold the phone out the window and press my thumb against the start pad. The seats and mirrors adjust to my thumbprint specifications, and the radio starts playing my preset playlist that I have to voice command off. But the engine sputters to its halfhearted existence. “See?”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound good. Is it fully charged?”

“Yes.” I tap on the dash. The green bar that used to indicate its charge level had blackened long ago. “It was powering all night.”

“Hmm. I’ll talk to your mother about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

In the background I hear a muffled, deep voice and my dad say, “Thanks. Stay cool.” Then he gives a little chuckle, and a door shuts.

“Did you really just tell someone to *stay cool*?”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s hot here.”

I laugh. “Who was it?”

“The mail carrier. Just got a package. But, anyway, we’ll figure out the car situation. Sound good?”

“Yes. I’d better get to school. See you lat ... I mean ...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. Somehow saying *I’ll see you in a month* didn’t sound right.

“Addie,” my dad says in his soft voice, “it won’t be long. We’ll see each other before you know it.”

I give a little hum and hang up the phone.

In the parking lot at Lincoln High, I glance at the clock on my dash. The talk with my dad put me a few minutes behind schedule. Just as I open the car door, a football hits my windshield. “Are you flippin’ kidding me?” I mumble.

“Sorry about that,” Duke says, running up to retrieve it from where it had bounced five feet away.

“Do you go anywhere without that thing?”

“If I didn’t have a football, people might not recognize me.”

As if. I look up at him. His perfectly messy blond hair and gorgeous smile greet me. Hotlicious. Was that Laila’s word? It fits, but I will never tell her or she might die of smugness. I grab my backpack off the passenger-side floor and stand. “And that would be a tragedy.”

He laughs. “I’ve just been practicing. Big game coming up.”

“Well, maybe you should practice on the field, away from people, because your aim seems a little off.” I shoulder my backpack and walk away.

“My aim is always perfect, Addie,” he calls after me.

What was that supposed to mean? That before he’d been trying to whack me in the forehead. And now he was trying to crack my windshield. What had I ever done to him?

Halfway to class Laila catches up with me, out of breath. I raise one eyebrow at

her, surprised she ran in order to make it on time.

She provides the explanation: “I can’t get lunch detention today.”

“Nobody left to flirt with?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Gregory had his last day yesterday.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s so nice to have a best friend who bases her choice on whether or not to be responsible solely on guys.”

“I’m glad to see you’re channeling the my-parents-were-just-divorced-so-I’m-allowed-to-be-pissy-anytime-I-want-and-everyone-should-understand attitude so well.”

I smile. “I’m sorry I’ve been so pissy.”

“Yeah, me too. Could you work on that, please? It’s ruining my social life.” She slips her arm in mine and lays her head on my shoulder as we walk. “I’m sorry your life sucks.”

“It doesn’t suck. I’ve just been spoiled by the ideal all these years.”

“I know, your parents did you a major disservice by giving you such a great childhood.”

“I’m sorry.” I say it because I realize how selfish I’ve been. Laila has a horrible home life, and she never complains about it. Nobody would know that her father lost his job because he has a drug problem. He spends all the family’s money to support his habit while her mom works all the time in order to support them.

As if reading my mind, Laila says, “Don’t start feeling sorry for me. You know how much I hate that.” She squeezes my arm and then straightens up. “You want to go to that party Friday? I promise not to leave your side the entire time.”

My brain tries to come up with an excuse, any excuse, but I already know my Friday evening is wide open and I’m a horrible liar. “Sure. Sounds exciting.”

“You are the queen of sarcasm, my friend, but I’ll pick you up at nine so you don’t stand me up.”

I open the door to the morning meditation room. “What would I do without you?”

“Probably curl up and die of boredom.” She pauses. “No, actually, you most likely already have your death penciled in sixty years from now, somewhere after homework and yoga.”

“I’d better not have homework in sixty years.” I step into my cubicle. The small, wall-mounted screen lights up at my entry and the acronym DAA—Department of Ability Advancement—pops up in bold letters. And if that isn’t enough to wipe the smile off my face, the talking head that appears next finishes the job.

My mother.

She’s a program developer for the DAA. It’s rare to see her in my cubicle in the morning, but according to her smiling, obviously prerecorded face, a new mind pattern has been introduced, specialized for each of our “claimed” abilities. She doesn’t actually use air quotes, but I can hear them in her voice. Adults like to make a point of adding the word *claimed* before *abilities* until we graduate and are able to officially prove ourselves by passing all the tests. It’s like they want to remind us that we’re not fully capable yet and still have to rely on them to help us reach our potential.

“So sit back, relax, and let your mind expand,” my mom’s face says.

Tones sound in my ears as images flash rapidly on the screen. I sit back. The relaxing part is out of the question.

CHAPTER 4

NOR•Mal: *n.* conforming to the standard

I lie on the couch in our new house staring at the slowly circling ceiling fan. I decide it must be the least efficient way, ever, to cool a room. I long for the crosscurrents of my Compound house. My dad moved us into an already furnished rental in Dallas, Texas. Considering the state and style of the decor, I assume it was furnished forty years ago. Other than the ancient furniture, the house is bare—its walls white and empty.

On the floor around me I have spread out the required reading I received upon leaving the Compound. Considering I spent half the day in the Tower before I left—where I had to take a mandatory Norm-training class, be briefed on my new backstory, and receive Norm credentials like a driver’s license and birth certificate—I didn’t think there was anything else to cram into my head. I was wrong. They sent me off with reading materials—a very thick packet refreshing my Norm history knowledge.

I had done a lot to avoid this novel-size assignment written by someone who didn’t care about making it entertaining in the least. I had unpacked and meticulously organized my room, down to color-coordinating my clothes. I had even searched through the unpacked boxes but couldn’t find the one titled “Addie’s books,” which I clearly wrote in black Sharpie so as to avoid this very situation. I have no idea where that box is now. Probably somewhere in the garage, buried beneath the hundreds of boxes that should say: “Dad’s crap.”

I pick up one of the sections of the packet, World War I, and read. Norms believe Archduke Franz Ferdinand was not Paranormal. He was assassinated due to a power play, not because people feared he could control them with his mind. I say that to myself several times. “World War One was not started because of a Paranormal.” I flip through a few more pages of Norm war history. I toss the packet aside, then grab the Space section, remembering some sort of weird beliefs they have about the moon landing.

“Bored,” I moan. My hand starts to sweat from the tight hold I have on my cell. I know Laila won’t call for at least another hour, since she’s still in school, but I hold out hope that she decided to ditch. We haven’t talked since yesterday.

The doorbell rings, and I practically trip over the study papers in my excitement to answer it. The sun assaults my eyes, and a burst of sticky, hot air hits me across the

face when I open the door.

It's the mailman, holding out a clipboard. "Can you sign for a package?"

I pocket my cell and grab the clipboard. "Yeah." I scribble my name in the box he points to. He hands me a large, padded envelope and starts to walk away.

"How is your day going?" I blurt out. "Staying cool?"

He stops. "It's October. This is the start of our *cool* season." He winks.

"Really?"

"You'll get used to it. Welcome to Dallas," he says, and walks away.

"Thanks." The phone in my pocket vibrates. "Hello?"

"You miss me yet?" Laila asks.

I shut the door. "Let's just say I'm so desperate for conversation that I was just chatting it up with the mailman."

"Was he cute?"

"He was probably fifty."

"Ew."

I glance at the padded envelope in my hand. It's addressed to my dad with no return information. I walk into the kitchen, and when the lights don't immediately turn on wave my hands in impatience. It takes me a second to realize they aren't going to. I toss the envelope onto the counter and leave without searching for the switch. "Not that I'm complaining, but shouldn't you be in class?"

"Yeah, probably, but I'd rather be talking to you. It's just Thought Placement. I have that down."

"You do?" I ask.

"Don't you?"

"Just short distances."

Laila hums and then says, "You know who's having a hard time with Thought Placement?"

"Who?"

"Bobby."

I curl my lip. "That's because he's not used to manipulating people's minds. Only mass." He can walk through walls, harden liquid, stretch objects. I will never admit it out loud, but he is really good at what he does. Probably the best Mass Manipulator I know who's his age.

"That's exactly what the teacher said. He said it's nearly impossible for people to master Thought Placement if their abilities aren't ones that work on others' minds."

"My mom told me that. She's an expert at it. Probably because she's the master mind manipulator."

Laila laughs. "True. So how are the Norms? Are they hard to talk to?"

"Not really, but I haven't really talked to many, just a few on the way here and now the mailman." I suspect my dad is trying to introduce me into the Norm world slowly, because he hardly stopped at all on the way here.

"You've inspired me. I think I'm going to a few away games this year with the football team. If you have to suffer through talking to Norms, the least I can do is experience a little bit of your pain."

I laugh. "You don't sound prejudiced at all."

"And you're not?"

"I'm not."

"No, you just think you're better than they are."

"Not better, just different because I can do more things."

She laughs like she won the argument.

I plop, back first, onto the couch and throw my legs over the armrest. It's warm from my earlier occupation, and after I remember how many other people have probably already occupied this couch, I'm grossed out. I sit up. "It's not so much the people who are different. It's the place. I swear it's hotter here and brighter. Do you think the sun is going to give me brain damage?"

She laughs.

"I'm serious. Why else would they filter sunlight in the Compound?"

"I'm sure they've found the optimum lighting for brain development. Just like everything else that's altered here to maximize our brains' potential."

"Exactly."

"Another reason you should come home immediately. Either way, I have no doubt you'll come home eventually. Wouldn't want to risk your children being born without advanced minds."

I sigh.

"Oh, speaking of perfect marrying genes, guess who asked about you today?"

"No idea."

"Duke Rivers."

"Uh ... why?"

"I don't know. I thought you'd tell me."

The door that leads from the garage into the kitchen opens, and the sound of keys landing on the counter rings out. "Hey, I'll call you later, my dad just got home."

"Okay, bye."

Duke Rivers asked about me? Weird. "Hi, Dad." I gather my scattered papers and stand up. "You're home early."

"Considering I wasn't supposed to go in at all today, I'm home very late." He picks up the padded envelope on the counter and looks at both sides.

I place my cure-for-insomnia reading on the table. "Oh, that came for you a little while ago."

He lowers his brow.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Just something I'm consulting on for the Para-bureau."

"I thought you weren't working for them anymore. I thought we were trying out this whole Normal thing." *We're going to live like the rest of the world, Addie*, he had said. *It will be refreshing.* The words sound cheesy now, but at the time they made me feel like we were marching into battle or something.

"Well, when I left I said I'd do some side jobs if they needed me."

I grab an apple from a bowl on the counter. "You're gone less than a week, and they're already calling on you? They must be hurting without their best lie detector."

He rolls his eyes.

I take a bite of my apple. "Sorry, I mean Discerner. I bet the bureau here is happy to have you, though. Where do you work again?" I try to remember the acronym. "The EBI ... SBI ..."