

## DAY 1



My tires squealed against the pavement as I made a sharp right turn, racing toward the coast. I could feel Violet's heart starting to race as I floored the accelerator against the carpeted Tesla floor mat.

"Hold on, Violet. I'm coming," I said through gritted teeth.

My phone rang through the car speakers and I answered it on the first ring, effortlessly pressing the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel with my thumb. "Did you find her?" I asked, my words rushed and clipped.

"Yes. Bethany said she's being held on the beach at *Pacifica Pier*. Annabel is orbiting us now," Brett, my ever-serious sister, said. Normally I'd find her militaristic no-nonsense attitude irritating, but things were different now that Violet's life was on the line.

"Okay, see you shortly," I said taking another corner faster than I should.

"Robert, take a deep breath. We'll get her out of this." Brett did her best to sound reassuring.

"I'll breathe easy once Violet's safe." I pressed the Bluetooth button again, ending the call and quickly typed *Pacifica Pier* into

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my phone and hit navigate. I was fifteen minutes away. I could only hope I wouldn't be too late.

A searing pain shot through me from the bond. My vision blurred and I had to fight the throbbing radiating from my head. Gripping the steering wheel so tightly I thought it might snap, I took a deep breath, gathered my senses and accelerated forward.

I needed to get to Violet. Now.

Throwing the gearshift into park the second I arrived, I shoved the door open and sprinted toward the beach. With a quick jump over the railing, I landed on the rocks below and scanned the shoreline.

"Annabel, get her out of here!" I yelled over the din as my eyes caught Violet's for a brief moment. With the connection spell still active, I could feel her fear ripping through her like a jagged blade. The urge to run to her and shield her from any more pain propelled me forward.

Quickly I maneuvered across the beach, dodging Cinder orbs and fireballs. Someone released a Galvin spell and green tendrils of electricity crackled across the shore like tentacles, electrocuting anything they came in contact with and causing uncontrollable muscle spasms.

Annabel ran toward Violet, disappearing and reappearing at intervals, dodging both people and explosions as I took advantage of the fact that most of Aiden's people had their backs turned to me. Running up behind one of them, I quickly snapped his neck before taking my place next to Brett.

Another wave of Violet's emotions surged through me. I tried to push what she was feeling aside, but she was beginning to panic and the shock of it choked me and left me gasping for air. We needed to get her out of here before it was too late.

"Annabel!" I yelled again. She was the only one who could get Violet out of here quick enough to survive the firestorm of Magic around us.

"I can't!" she yelled back, "she's been anchored to this plane."

"Do something, we can't lose her!" I turned my head just in time to see a massive wall of fire barreling down on Brett and I. My shield materialized on instinct and stopped the flames from engulfing us. Brett dropped to her knees, dug her hands into the wet sand and summoned the ocean water, making it rise high above us and douse the blazing inferno battering against my shield.

"Stop her!" someone yelled. Searching the beach, I saw green sparks flying toward Annabel while she was mid-orb. Her body blinked for a moment, shimmering as she struggled to stay grounded and then reappeared as she fell to the sand convulsing and screaming. I looked in the direction where the sparks were coming from and recognized Lila's sharp features and long blonde hair. A part of me hoped she wouldn't be here. Our history made things complicated and even though I'd moved on, it would still pain me to kill her.

Running toward Annabel, I watched her writhe in the sand as the Galvin spell kept her pressed against the ground, when suddenly I found myself gasping for air. No matter how much oxygen I sucked into my lungs, I couldn't breathe. Looking toward the pier, searching for Violet, I realized she was underwater. She was suffocating and I could feel the agony of her last breath burning in my own chest and throat. Looking back toward Annabel, I saw her take off toward Violet while Jake was busy fighting off Lila.

My feet tossed sand into the air as I ran toward Violet. The connection spell was getting stronger the more she struggled to survive. My vision blurred and my throat burned as I made my way across the shore.

A stout, portly man and a woman who was more limbs than body appeared in front of me out of thin air, blocking my path to Violet. I looked behind me to see if anyone else could get to her, but everyone was busy with their own fight. Brett stood in front of Lila and absorbed the woman's Galvin spell into her body. She

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was the only person I'd ever known who could withstand the effects of the spell. In fact, it seemed to make her stronger. Jake fought against two guys and Annabel rolled on the ground in a brawling struggle with a red-headed woman.

"Go help Violet!" Brett yelled at Annabel again.

My anger and Violet's terror surged through me with a force I'd never felt before. Every nerve in my body pulsed with an energy that begged to be released. The gangly woman ran at me as the man raised his hands above the sand, making each tiny pebble rise from the ground into a twister. I didn't have time for this. Each one of my muscles tensed and the rage pumping through my blood pulsed off of me in a circular formation, sending the two assailants flying backward. The sand twister crumbled, throwing grains of rock and seashells flying in all directions. Taking a fraction of a second to assess myself, I patted my torso. I'd never felt so much Magic course through me before.

My two opponents rebounded quickly and before I could take more than two steps the woman stood blocking my way again while the stout man circled around me.

"You know what to do Jo," the heavy man growled and the lanky woman smirked and nodded.

I looked between Jo and the pier to gauge the distance. Annabel had just orbed next to Violet with Taylor Deardon and they worked together to untie Violet from the pillar.

Another wave of energy burst out of me but this time they blocked the blow and threw two Cinder orbs my direction. I raised my shield just as the first one hit. It bounced off of me into one of their other men. He froze mid-run then disintegrated into a pile of ash.

Jo's unnaturally long fingers held her cheeks as she screamed like a wolf in pain. Arms flailing, she made a run for me again. Her partner vanished into thin air and I knew I needed to keep my guard up. She jumped into a spin-kick formation and I ducked out of the way just in time. Landing gracefully back on her feet, I



caught her by the waist and tackled her to the ground. A ball of Arcane Magic formed on my palm, ready to take her out when I fell forward with someone on my back. Jo disappeared from underneath me and the Arcane orb in my hand reabsorbed into my palm. Snarling at my missed opportunity, I grabbed the guy on my back and threw him over my shoulder. He landed in the shallows with an audible *thud*.

Violet's emotions gripped me again and I doubled over in pain. The air in my lungs burned in concert with Violet's agony. A thousand tiny knives pricked over my skin, forcing another uncontrollable pulse of energy to erupt out of me. The dark-haired man I'd thrown over my shoulder flew backward as the pulse of Magic hit his body.

"Annabel," Jake's voice tore across the shore with an edge of urgency.

Looking in Annabel's direction, a stream of Devil's Flame licked across the beach aiming directly for her. Blinding yellow light moved unnaturally, changing directions on a whim and hitting the pillar Violet was strapped to. Annabel and Taylor quickly jumped out of the way, diving into the ocean and out of sight.

Enough was enough, I put up my shield and made a beeline for Violet. Nothing would stop me from reaching her this time. The cold water stung my legs as I rushed into the surf. The pain in my chest grew the closer I got to her and I had to fight against the overwhelming surge of terror, panic, and anguish coursing through me from the binding spell.

About fifty yards away, I dove into the waste-deep water and began to swim. When I reached the pillar, I took a deep breath and submerged myself. My hands fell on Violet's shoulders and I quickly found her mouth. Pinching her nose, I placed my mouth on hers. She tensed for a moment and then seemed to understand what I was trying to do. Relaxing against my lips, she let me blow air into her mouth.

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Another wave roared above us and I knew that she would die if we didn't get her out of the water soon.

The pillar Violet was tied to vibrated as the battle for her life waged on above us. I squeezed her shoulder for reassurance and then resurfaced.

"Robert, give her this," Annabel said. She threw an oxygen tank and mouthpiece to me. I grabbed it, gave her a quick nod of thanks, and took another deep breath before dunking back below the water line.

I felt around for Violet's shoulders again and found her body limp under my hands as I placed the mouthpiece between her lips. I put my hand on her chest and gently pushed, telling her to breathe, but she didn't move.

Resurfacing, I yelled at Taylor and Annabel, "Get her out of here, she's dying."

"We're trying!" Annabel snapped back. "We just need one more minute."

"Get back to the fight, they need you," Taylor yelled over the rumble of the ocean as he worked on the ropes tying Violet to this plane.

As I pushed through the water, I made a run toward Lila and her companion.

With his back turned toward me, I knew I had a clean shot. Summoning a stunning orb, I aimed it at the center of his spine. The orange orb flew across the beach as I ran toward them, but he turned just in time to deflect the spell. His maneuver, however, allowed me to close the gap and land a clean punch to his jaw. His face swept to the side and then he was back on me in the blink of an eye. A black orb appeared in his hand and I threw up my shield. Instead of throwing the sphere as I expected, he held the ball of Magic against my shield and stared at me with eyes like death.

My defense crackled under the pressure and darkness spread out from the orb like tentacles where it touched my shield. I

couldn't hold the Cinder spell at bay much longer, so I took a gamble. Retracting my Magic, I let my only defense shimmer away, as I ducked down and swung my leg out to throw him off balance.

He fell to the ground and the Cinder orb disappeared.

I gathered my fist to take another swing at him, but he jumped up and stepped back toward Lila.

It was then that I realized a bright light was glowing just behind me. Looking over my shoulder at the source of the light, I saw Brett glowing like the sun, brilliant and terrifying. Lightning erupted from her outstretched arms and crackled down her entire body.

Lila and the man I'd just been fighting turned their attention toward Brett. *That's not good*, I thought. I ran in front of my sister and summoned my shield just as Lila's spell flew at us.

The force of it knocked the wind out of me and I fell to the ground.

"We need to make sure Robert comes with us!" Lila yelled over the roar of the battle.

A few of Lila's henchmen shimmered and disappeared. They were retreating.

Brett swung her arms open and then brought them together as forcefully as she could, sending our attackers flying as a stream of raw electricity arced into each of them.

"Are you okay?" Brett asked as she knelt next to me.

"I'm fine, get Violet," I winced as I got to my feet.

Brett nodded and ran toward the pier where everyone was gathering to help Violet. As she did, Lila approached me with arms raised in surrender while I dusted the sand off of my jeans.

"Lila," I said through gritted teeth.

"It's nice to see you again, Robert," she replied and a wicked smile spread across her face.

In one quick motion, she reached out to me, bound my wrist and said a spell under her breath. The ground disappeared

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beneath me as the world swirled around me in an array of colors.

A moment later, my legs hit something solid and gave out beneath me. I lay still for a moment to catch my breath before opening my eyes. We weren't on the beach anymore, that much I knew. I could feel it in the air.

Rolling onto my side, I pushed myself up and healed all of my wounds. Then I scanned the area, looking for any sign of a threat, but it was just the three of us.

We had landed on an unnaturally green lawn that had been manicured to perfection. A large stone estate loomed to the right of us, just out of reach of the tree line. Seagulls squawked overhead as dark, ominous clouds pressed down on us, promising rain.

*We must be close to the sea*, I thought as I watched a few of the seagulls land on the grass nearby. That was a start. At least there might be boats nearby I could use to escape. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that we had come a very long way from the California coast. There was something familiar about the cold, humid air, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was.

"Let's go. He'll be waiting for us," Lila said, starting toward the estate.

I took a hesitant step forward. I could make a run for it, but where would I go? I had no idea where I was or where I could find help.

"Ian," Lila snapped at him, "Will you please." She smiled and motioned toward me.

Ian shoved me by the shoulder and I resigned myself to getting more information before trying to escape.

As we approached the estate, an older gentleman emerged, meeting us at the front of the property.

"We have a present for you," Lila announced, her deep voice purring with affection.

Ian walked alongside me looking utterly dejected. I wondered

idly what could possibly have made him so distraught. Violet was struggling for her life on the beach and they had me prisoner. What more could he want?

"Is The Waker dead?" the older gentleman asked. He folded his arms across his chest as we came to a stop in front of him. His slender build did nothing to detract from the unspoken authority emanating off of his presence as his eyes narrowed in an appraising gaze.

"Of course. We performed the ritual like you said and stole their Healer just to be safe," Lila answered, her voice cracking and her eyes shifting back and forth.

Ian shoved me down on my knees as realization began to set in as to who this man was. A small tremor of fear settled in the pit of my stomach and I prayed I was wrong.

"Very nice," he said, eying me up and down. "But what am I supposed to do with him?" He looked at Lila in disgust. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ian smile as he shifted back and forth from one foot to the other in a nervous little dance.

"I thought you'd be happy, Father," Lila said. Her voice still held an edge of pride but she wrung her hands together with a child-like worry.

My instincts were correct. The old man was the infamous Aiden Partridge. I looked him over more carefully and measured him against every horror story I'd ever heard. He wasn't what I pictured but he was cold and stiff as if his heart had truly frozen over.

"You're sure she's dead?" Aiden asked, addressing Ian this time.

"I wouldn't be here if I thought she was alive," he said with pride. I wanted to punch my fist through someone's skull. How could they speak so casually about someone's death? The hope that Brett and the others had found a way to save her was the only thing keeping me from lunging at Aiden Partridge in a suicidal rage. I tried to reach out through the Connection spell but felt nothing. Ice froze my heart and I rationalized that I must be too

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far away from her to feel anything. But deep down, I knew the spell wasn't hindered by distance.

I glared at Aiden with utter disdain and spat at his feet. "Such a big man you are, having your daughter do your dirty work," I said through gritted teeth.

"How dare you speak to-" Ian erupted, but Aiden cut him off with a simple, silencing raise of his hand.

Aiden knelt down in front of me, grabbed my face between his thumb and finger and forced me to look him full in the eye, "It must be difficult to know that you failed not only Violet but the prophecy as well," he chided with a wry grin.

I tried to pull my head free but he tightened his grip and leaned in closer. "Robert must find her before it's too late," he whispered and let go of my face.

Those were Belinda's words to William. I was the one who was meant to find Violet. I was the one who was meant to protect her, but how could he possibly know that? William was the only one Belinda told that night. Only another Soothsayer would know what Belinda shared with William, but how could any Soothsayer betray their gift and work with Aiden?

Aiden rose to his feet and looked me over once more. "Throw him in one of the cells for now. I'm sure we can find some use for him," he said, then turned on his heel and walked back the way he'd come.

Lila followed after her father and they disappeared inside.

"Get up, *Healer*," Ian said, using my ability like a curse word as he kicked me with his thick, leather boot.

We trudged across the lawn to the back of the house. There we came across a set of double doors in the ground, like a tornado shelter or an old root cellar. Ian pulled one of the doors open and pushed me down the stairs. We passed a few empty cells as we made our way down the concrete path. One cell, second to last on my left, held an older woman who had honestly seen better days. A plastic tray holding a sandwich and a bottle of water sat on the

floor of her cell, untouched. Her eyes tracked me as we passed and her mouth parted slightly as if she wanted to say something but thought better of it.

We arrived at the furthest cell from the entrance. Ian slid the bars open and shoved me inside. Following me into the cell, he slammed the bars closed behind him and waved his hand over the lock. An electric blue force field shimmered across the metal and suddenly I felt empty.

"You think you're so special," Ian fumed and punched me square in the stomach.

I coughed and doubled over. With my hands still bound I couldn't defend myself. Looking inward, I tried to summon my shield but found nothing. My Magic was gone. But how?

Ian chuckled and said, "Did you really think we wouldn't take precautions?" He tapped the bars with his knuckles and the force field rippled across my prison.

"What purpose can you possibly have for keeping me here?" I asked as I righted myself.

"I was wondering the same thing." Ian's voice held an edge of jealousy as he took a step toward me. He didn't want me here, that much was clear, and the way he looked at Lila when she wasn't watching made me wonder.

"You're upset Lila brought me here at all, aren't you?" I guessed.

"Don't you dare speak to me about Lila." Ian shot toward me and grabbed my shirt in his fist.

I laughed. "Do you really think you have a chance with her?"

"I'm warning you." He clenched his jaw and balled his other hand into a fist.

I looked him up and down and said, "You're not really her type, trust me," I paused and looked him straight in the eye, "I would know."

Ian swung at me, his fist landing right on the bridge of my nose. A loud crack and an explosion of pain radiated from the center of my face. Blood sprayed from my nose then dripped at a

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steady pace. Ian reached back to punch me again, but I threw my weight against him and caught him off-guard. Dodging to the right and then left, I quickly got behind him and threw my bound arms over his head. Getting his thick neck in the crook of my arm I pulled tight, cutting off his airway. His elbow shot backward into my torso and knocked the wind out of me. My grip loosened and he reached around, grabbing the back of my shirt and throwing me over his shoulder. Landing on the cold, hard cement I struggled to breathe. Before I could right myself, Ian was on top of me. His fists came at me with a one-two punch as I rolled him off of me in one quick motion.

A dark chuckle escaped my throat as I rose to my feet and said, "She doesn't even notice you, does she?" I spat a mouthful of blood to the cold floor. I knew I shouldn't goad him, but I needed a way to release everything I was feeling. Anger, fear, anxiety, they all clawed at me and propelled me forward.

Ian lunged at me again, but I quickly dodged out of the way.

"After everything you've done for her, she still doesn't even take a second glance at you," I cackled.

"That's enough!" he yelled and closed the gap between us in two strides.

"It must be so hard knowing that some of us don't even have to try to get her attention." I shrugged and pain shot down my left side.

He punched me across the jaw and grabbed me by the shirt again.

"At least the woman I love is still alive," he snarled. His face was only a couple inches from mine, his breath warm on my face as dark amusement glistened in his eyes. The *click* of a switchblade being opened caught my attention and I shook my head in disapproval.

"You can't kill me. Aiden wants me alive," I said through bloody teeth. My mouth tasted like salty pennies as blood dribbled down the back of my throat.



"For now. But I will be the one to kill you when the time comes." His fist connected with my stomach again and I sunk to the floor. My body throbbed in cadence with Ian's footsteps as he stepped away from me.

"Pathetic," Ian scoffed as he unlocked my cell.

"Give Lila my best," I uttered, struggling to get the words out as I stood up.

"Don't push me, *Healer*." His head twitched to the side as the bars slid closed in front of me.

"You think I'm afraid of you?" A short dark laugh escaped my throat. "I have nothing left to lose." I stared him straight in the eyes. It was true. If Violet really was dead, then my entire life had been a waste.

"You always have something to lose." A wry smile spread across his face as he waved his hand again and my wrists fell free from their shackles.

Without another word, that sick smile still plastered on his face, Ian left.

He really was unhinged. I realized it was only a matter of time before Aiden lost his hold over him and I sure as hell didn't want to be around when he did.

"You should be careful what you tinker with. The puzzle pieces don't quite fit together if you know what I mean," the old woman said and nodded in the direction Ian had just exited.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied and smiled as kindly as I could manage given the circumstances.

Pulling my shirt over my head and using it as a rag, I wiped as much of the blood off of my face as I could. I tried to tap into my Magic again to heal myself, but nothing happened. I felt empty and naked without my Magic. It felt wrong to feel so normal. And for the first time, I finally understood how Violet must have felt when she first got her Magic. Being normal now, I realized how different having Magic felt.

"Oh Violet," I said under my breath. I needed to find a way out

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so I could get back to her. I wouldn't believe she was dead. Our souls were connected, after all. Wouldn't I be able to feel it if she was really gone? There had to be some way for me to reach out to her and make sure she was alright. I sat down on the edge of the two-inch thick mattress and closed my eyes. I focused my energy inward, hoping I could feel something or get a sense of what she was feeling.

"If you keep concentrating that hard you might lay an egg," the old woman said, breaking my concentration.

I sighed. As much as I wanted to believe I could still feel Violet through our connection, I knew it wasn't possible if I couldn't use Magic.

"I just wish I knew for sure that she was alright," I admitted without looking up.

"Of course she is, dear. It's going to take a whole lot more than a little spell to kill The Waker," the old woman said with a light chuckle.

I raised my head then. "You mean you can see her? Violet, she's alive?" Hope sprung up inside me as I pictured Violet unharmed and safe. I crossed the small space to the metal bars in three strides and searched for the old woman's face hidden in the shadows.

"She's alive," the woman said with a warm smile.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "So you're a Soothsayer then?"

"Once I went by that title, but *he's* made a disgrace out of my gift. It's nothing but a curse now." She looked up at the ceiling, toward the house above us.

*So that's how Aiden was able to quote Belinda's words*, I thought as I looked her over carefully.

"Why serve him at all?" I asked. My broken nose made my voice sound stuffy and I cringed at the thought of having to pop it back into place.

"I don't have a choice," she said and shook her head as sadness crept into her eyes.

"How long have you been down here?" I reached my arms through the bars and let them rest on the cool metal.

"Too many sunsets to count." She sighed and looked up at the small window above her head.

"I didn't catch your name. I'm Robert."

"Clara," she said. The old Soothsayer placed her hand against her chest and inclined her head. "And I know who you are, Mr. Maxwell. I've had many visions of you."

I looked away, suddenly self-conscious. It was always an odd experience interacting with a Soothsayer. They seemed to know more about you than you knew about yourself.

"You must get back to Violet, no matter what the cost," she continued, catching my eyes. "She cannot succeed without you." She nodded, having said what she needed to say, then turned away from me and sat back down on her bed.

I wanted to ask her a million questions, but it was clear she was dismissing me. Leaving her to her own devices, I tried to get comfortable on the sorry excuse for a mattress and stretched my legs.

Now that I was alone with my thoughts, I let them drift to Violet. Racked with guilt, there was no way I'd ever be able to forgive myself for not getting to her sooner. I was supposed to protect her, keep her safe, and I'd failed her again. Living through her terror as she was taken from the cabin in Yosemite had been my own personal hell. It didn't matter that Lila had sent a squad of men to keep me occupied while they ran off with her. I never should have left her side. I wanted to show her she could still have a normal life with normal friends, but that was foolish, and I knew better. I let my feelings for her cloud my judgment.

*Once I get out of here, I swore to myself, I'll never leave her side again.*

It wasn't going to be easy to escape without Magic, but I had to find a way. If only I could get close to Lila, I might be able to use my history with her to my advantage. She may not be the young

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schoolgirl I once cared for, but I knew who she was underneath all her bravado.

Granted, getting close to her was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to kill her for even laying a finger on Violet. But again, it was my fault she ended up here, back under her father's thumb. If I hadn't left things so badly with her, then maybe she wouldn't have crawled back to Aiden. I would have to tread very lightly if I was going to pull this off.

Exhaustion from the battle began to creep across my eyes, but there was something I had to do before I fell asleep. Thankfully, I'd observed my instructor perform this task a hundred times when he thought someone deserved to feel the pain of a broken nose rather than just heal it with Magic. This was going to be unpleasant.

Taking a few deep breaths, I put my fingers on each side of my nose and snapped it back into place. Ripples of pain radiated across my face and hammered behind my eyes. I tried to breathe through my nose but it was too swollen for any air to pass through. *My throat's going to be dry in the morning*, I thought as I closed my eyes and settled into my temporary quarters.