

Chapter One

When I was born, everything changed. Perhaps I didn't know or understand this, maybe it was something I'd never get. But when I came, reality cracked. Imagine, every single thing in the world, breaking. All of it, turning into ashes, held in your very arms. Maybe it was something yet to come, but that was what would happen. Because it was inevitable that my world would disappear from the second I entered it.

My name is Maeve, but my parents called me May... at least for the first six years of my life, before they vanished from the face of the earth. After that it was house to house, wandering from person to person, with masked faces pretending that they loved me. Until my aunt finally agreed to take me in. But she never loved me, 'cause she didn't like my dad, I think. He was different, she warned my mom about him... and if my mom had listened, none of it would have ever happened.

The ashes, the blood, the crumbling... it would have all disappeared, because me, something that shouldn't have been, would have never come to fruition. I would have never existed, and everything, everyone, every person, would have been... saved.

But what can you do? There is nothing, sometimes. There will always be those things utterly out of your control. People like to lie to themselves and say everything happens for a reason, but they don't get it. There are no reasons in life. The world could be one set reality, but nothing is looking out for you. In this life, it's only going to destroy you. When the worst things happen, it's not because of the bullshit they say about it building you up. They happen because they want to tear you down. Life is trying to kill you. No one is born to make a difference. You know how rare it is to live? But that doesn't mean you were put on this planet by someone, waiting for you to be something. No. That's the lie they say. Really, actually, the rareness of living is the curse of it. It's all so precious, but it constantly wants us dead.

And here I am, the thing to erase it. Why does the universe even exist? How did it start anyway? Something made it, didn't it? Maybe I don't believe in destiny... but this. This was the one exception... "Maeve! Maeve!" Some things... "Maeve!" Are really the fault of our own creations. "Maeve! Are you even listening to me?"

When I opened my eyes that Saturday night, I had no idea, not even the concept of one, that the world was slowly ticking away with the numbers on my wrist. All I knew was that I could see the hazed lights, flashing against my face. Blue and red, blue and red. It all looked blurred against the sky, blending together with the stars I could hardly see. There was blood in my eyes, or maybe sweat, or tears... I was never sure, just that I wiped it away, and cleared my view enough to see her face.

Lyra. She was bending over me, her hands placed on either one of my shoulders. "Maeve," She said, shaking me, just a little. "Maeve, we have to go... Maeve?"

I stared at her. There was a large gash straight down her cheek that had not been there an hour ago. It bled, spilling down the lines of her face. It must have hurt, but then and there, she only seemed to care about me. Her face, softened up, her eyes blinking slowly. "Maeve..." Her words turned into a whisper.

I could feel the intensity of her breath, see the whispers of it, clearing off her lips. Everything around us, I slowed it down, made it stop. The lights went still, the sirens quiet, our eyes locked...

"It's okay," I said, the words barely able to pry between my lips. "Lyra... it's okay." Even my voice was slow, the searing pain in my body so much worse than it should have been. I could feel it, all down through me, but especially in my arm. The left one. When the numbers came, I bled.

Someone, one of the members, had told me that if I waited too long, it might have eaten me up entirely. But, I'd never tried it or cared. I thought they were stupid, the adults who considered themselves so much smarter than us.

But they didn't matter then. Only that second, each one more precious than I ever could have imagined, did. "Maeve," Lyra whispered, as she took my hands, trying to force me to my feet. "You can't... just... You've already..."

"I'll be fine," I told her, taking a few deep breaths. "I'm fine..." I couldn't tell if it was a lie, or if it was the truth... but I had to pretend, to let it be the only thing I knew. It was slow, getting back to my feet, and it burned more than it should have.

I leaned heavily on Lyra, my arm over her shoulders, as I put more than half my body weight against her. "You should unfreeze it," She told me, quietly, as we looked around just once.

Cops were running towards us, even bullets, frozen in the air. I had stopped it all, but they should have been thanking us. I stared at them for a long time. There were so many, even helicopters, rushing in the sky. For no reason.

"They put more people out against us than the ones who are actually destroying everything..." I said, "I can't unfreeze it, they'll arrest us."

Lyra and I met eye contact, as she slowly sighed. "You're going to hurt tomorrow."

"I don't care," I replied, taking a deep breath, as I ran the back of my hand under my nose. "It's worth it. I don't have an option. Besides, I'll just make Ace fix it or something..."

"He can't fix what your magic destroys."

"Whatever..." We staggered, arm in arm, through the darkness. As I fought to keep everything frozen. Time had to stay in that one second, if it moved any more forward, I was almost sure we would be destroyed.

“ Just, as soon as it’s safe, or close enough, please, please, just unfreeze it.” She looked at me, as I slumped even more of my weight against her. She seemed so desperate, and if I had known then, what I know now, maybe I would have listened to her. Maybe I would have let time be more regular, instead of clinging onto it in that frozen atmosphere, the way I did.

But in that moment the only consequence I understood from freezing time, was the way it hurt me, or the years I perceived it to take off of my life. I glanced at my arm just once, checking. Anytime I did it, I got the numbers, like a tattoo on my wrist. But it changed, it went up every time.

Lyra looked at it too, frowning, but she didn’t say anything, just looked at me as a way of quietly reinforcing what had already been spoken.

“I’ll be fine,” I told her, instead of letting time move regularly. Then I staggered a little, taking a deep breath, as I pulled her with me down through the city streets, of that horribly dark night.

We left behind the blue and red lights... abandoned the partly caved-in building, and left for the police the two men who had been trying to ruin it. We weren’t the evil ones, but just like them, even if we had stopped them, we would have gone to prison.

So it was left, time frozen until we had gotten to our car, hidden like any other, in the mix of vehicles jammed up the side of the road. I let it run regularly the moment I touched the seat, deeply exhaling as my body lured itself to the cushion. I literally could not move it. Everything about me just drifted away, as I felt lighter than even the smallest feather.

Lyra sat behind the wheel, taking a small thing of wipes and gauze from the glove compartment before we left. She cleaned her face, and applied the bandages, before turning around to me. I didn’t even know I had a cut anywhere, but she cleaned something above my brow line, before putting everything away.

“I’ll take us back towards base,” She said, her fingers rolling around the wheel.

“Sure,” I responded, “My car is there, right?”

“You don’t have a car,” She told me.

I smiled a little, “No. I’ll take the bus...”

Lyra turned to look at me, her eyes faltering down into a rather quiet expression, as her lips parted a half an inch. “Why?” She asked, posing the question, so it rather froze itself in time.

Every single day we spent together when I turned away to leave, she would ask me that. Every single time, so serious about it, as her eyes looked at me with desperation. I stared back at her, eyes the key in the ignition that had not been turned. I avoided answering it, but felt cornered, as I could not move, or freeze anything, or simply turn away.

“Why?” She asked me again, tilting her head to the side.

For a moment, a long moment, I had no idea what to tell her. Before I swallowed hard and went with it. “My family.”

“They hate you,” She said, “They’ll never understand you, I mean... what? Just stay at the base. God forbid they decided to turn you in one day, or you come in all hurt and die... They’ll never ever be able to relate to you.

I knew that, I had known that my entire life, and I stared at her, smiling a little to myself. “They’re my family, it doesn’t matter what they think of me, or what you think they think of me, or what the base might offer. It’s my home.”

Lyra shook her head a little, "You've told me some of the things they've said, I doubt that's much of a home."

I shrugged, "It is to me," I promised her, before carefully placing my hands up on my knees, tilting my head back as my body drifted off. I could hardly keep my eyes open, and Lyra noticed that. "We should go," I told her, in one of those voices, drawn almost entirely away from itself.

"So they don't find us."

She stared at me, tempted to ask again why I was so desperate to go home, instead of staying in the base... but she never did. Instead, she grabbed the key and turned it, like I had wanted to do since we had gotten into that car.

It rumbled as it started up, humming, before Lyra was able to make it go... leaving the city behind us.

Our base was still in New York, it just wasn't in the city. It was closer to New Jersey, where things slowed down a little, and people could actually drive their own cars. At least somewhat effectively.

There were many of them, all throughout the country, for people like Lyra and me. This one was just the closest. We knew everyone who either lived there or was a piece of its community, as most of us always stuck to one base until it was gone.

They were taken and raided by the police, at least once a day. As we were in a tied alliance, it was always sad. It felt like by that point more meddlers were in prison than actually walking the streets. Yet there was nothing we could do, aside from continuing our work in the silence of our hiding.

The base was a small apartment building, down in a smaller, nowhere city, beyond New York. It wasn't very splendid, or big, or nice, or anything like that. But it was, for then, like a second home to me.

The people who chose to actually live in the base always filtered out. Once they got their own homes, they stopped staying. It was all young people, runaways, who had powers but weren't with families that did. Magic sometimes skipped a generation.

Lyra wanted me to be one of them, because my aunt, just like my mom even, had no magic. In fact, none of them even knew I could do all that I could. I suppose my dad must have been the one, who I got it from. Yet then I felt I would never know.

When we walked into the base, through its entryway doors, I was thinking of this. The complicated relations of my family, and how I was never sure where my power had come from. I just knew I had always known about it, my whole life. And that I had always hidden it from them.

I sighed, as that main idea seemed to tremble through my existing thoughts and concepts, smiling as we passed the woman at the front desk, who seemed normal enough. She raised one hand to wave and smiled as we staggered in, so used to seeing so many broken people, seeping through that doorway.

"Now we just have to find Ace," Lyra whispered to me, before cautiously surveying the space. "You think he's in his apartment?"

"No idea," I said back to her, as I sighed. "I feel like he constantly disappears."

"It's cause he's high in demand," She said, before pulling me along into the elevator. She pressed the three button and we both leaned heavily against the rail. It was a slow elevator, but the whole building was slow, so it wasn't something I should have been annoyed over.

Everything about that place felt like time had been turned down. I always accounted it to the heavy amounts of protection that was flushed around the area. To keep wandering ordinaries, from raising questions on our behalf.

We had to protect ourselves, more than ever. But it made everything dreary, heavy... At the ding we were allowed to the third floor, one dedicated only to living spaces. We followed it down to room number 58, which had a star next to the door number.

It only took one knock, before Ace had pulled it open and was staring at us with his signature grin. "Hey," He said, music playing softly as his theme song. "Whatsapp? You two get into a fight or something?"

He always knew what actually happened, we didn't even need to ask, because still grinning, he pushed his door open to invite us in. "So how long did you keep it frozen for this time?" He asked me, as he wiped his hands along his sides, grabbing a bag of chips as we went over to his sofa.

"Too long," Lyra said before I could answer. "I'm convinced she'll get herself killed."

"I'm not gonna get myself killed," I said, "I disagree with you."

"And I disagree with you," Ace said, as he ate a couple Cheetos, before dropping into a seat across from us. His music was an almost jazz and hip hop hybrid, playing aggressively around us, as it seemed to almost perfectly match his character.

He pinned his fingers together as he leaned over, raising his eyebrows and looking slowly. Back and forth, back and forth. I watched him, shaking my head a bit as I made myself comfortable on his sofa. "You both are so judgmental," I told them, as I took a deep breath, allowing every piece of my body to relax. "I do know my limits."

"No you don't," Ace said, as he reached forward and snatched my arm. He turned it over, so he could see the number. It was red and flushed out on my skin, like a tattoo or a cursed birthmark. It was much higher than it should have been and he stared at it, before staring at me.

"I can't heal immortal injury," He told me, "You're gonna hurt tomorrow."

"I know," I said, "I don't care. Did you even see what we did? It's all over the news, you can go look."

Ace shook his head, "It doesn't make you hurt yourself..."

"They were going to bomb the whole building, we didn't have a choice," I told him, sure of that too. "I promise, I really do, that I'm not going to stupidly push my limits."

Ace didn't seem to believe me though. He stole away a quick glance with Lyra, which held far more worry and concern than any other look ever should have had. They were too fixated on me, on what I was and what I did. It was weird, and I made sure they knew this with how dramatically I sighed.

It got their eyes to me, as Lyra crossed her arms over each other. "We're just worried about you," She told me, without a frown or any indication of real stress. "At least stay here the night?"

"Nope," I said, "Which reminds me, Ace, please hurry it up with the healing. I did promise I would be home by dinner."

"It's two in the morning, I think you've far passed it."

I frowned, feeling the pressure of the world catch up to me at once. My arms dropped, my head tilted back, and my eyes pulled themselves shut. "Just heal me so I can go," I said.

There was a moment that followed, where no one said anything. Where silence was our only familiarity as it seemed everyone was too peaceful to feel the need to talk. We looked at each other, as this sensation moved all the way around us. A quiet type, which felt too familiar.

No one wanted to speak again, or communicate, or even try. I raised my hands out in front of me, giving them a bit of a shake. Ace looked down, taking my hands, but not running magic through them. He more or less just studied my fingertips, almost examining the dirt that had become packed below my nails.

"You're stupid, Maeve," He said, his voice very distant from the rest of him. "You're gonna die, I know enough about this shit to know that." His eyes darted to mine as his fingers closed all the way around my hands.

I stared back at him, "Heal me," I demanded, with a straight face.

He closed his eyes for a second, "Fine," He said before his hands closed all the way around the two of mine. He was rather concentrated, focused, and intense. "But again, I can't heal..."

"Immortal wounds, I know," I said. "Just fix what you can."

He sighed but nodded as he understood what his task was meant to be. Ace could heal, with little consequence too. He was one of very few who could do that, making him one of the most valuable meddlers to have.

We assumed, once upon a time, that none of the magic would have created as many complex and life-altering issues for our bodies. But after it had been shut out, it had evolved into something dangerous, deadly towards its user.

The power it contained was violent and uneasy. It didn't wait on anyone, it just happened. But Ace avoided most of that, he got away easy. So healed I got to be, and so did Lyra. He was always solemn when he did it, his face all relaxed, as it seemed he didn't care for anything, but focus and silence.

Then when he was done he would scoot away and look you over. As though he debated how good of a job he had done. "Well," He said, "you should both be fine now."

"Hopefully," I said, as I fattened my hair with both of my hands.

"Yeah, well, your other stuff won't make tomorrow over fun, but I did try."

"I know you tried," I said, "Thank you."

Then I attempted to stand up. I probably should have guessed it was a bad idea, but usually, the pains, the sickness, all of that didn't really settle in right away. I guess I must have kept the world frozen for too long. Or waited too long. The second I rose to my feet was the second I came back down.

At least there was something soft to fall on. I went right back into the sofa, my body hitting down hard enough for everything to start to hurt the second I touched it.

Lyra watched me, a frown instantly sealing her lips, "Maeve..." She whispered, coming over to me, as her body was mostly fine. "What did I say..."

"Shut up," I replied, trying to brush her off. "I just, too fast, you know?" What a lie that was. "I stood up too fast, it happens all the time."

Neither she nor Ace believed me though. They didn't even try to hide it with their facial expressions. They were frowning at me, looking at each other with that rich disappointment that I should have been used to at that point.

"I'm going to request you stay here tonight," Ace told me. "In the healing ward upstairs..."

"No," I told him, "I'm fine, I swear." But the lie was too clear through my teeth. I said it well I leaned fully back into the sofa, almost melted into it... spoken well my body slowly ripped apart, decomposing in the flesh... at least with how severe the pain felt.

I knew I must have frozen time longer before, but there wasn't much I could do... other than sit there and hope it would go away. For how much she didn't like me, I knew my Aunt would have hated the idea that I hadn't come home. I needed to get there, more than anything.

But they didn't want me to go, I felt they were almost taking my body's rough hit as an excuse, a reason to trap me in that place, as they had always wanted. Lyra was at my side, holding me with one arm, well Ace stood in front, watching.

I stared at them both, "I'm really fine," I told them, "I promise. I need to get home."

"I'm not gonna allow it," Ace told me.

"Ace... come on," I said back at him. "Seriously. Let me go."

"No," He said, his voice all serious. He meant what he was saying, and seemed convinced by himself, actually. He didn't want me to leave, and standing there he carried his case perfectly.

I looked at him, breathing out slowly. "Alright," I said, as I carefully lifted my hand up. I think they knew what I was going to do, because in an instant both of them moved away from me, going quiet. I laughed, just once, "You can't keep me here," I told them, "I can always get away."

Then I pressed my hands down, hard, and started to push myself up. When I tell you it seared, I'm not lying. The pain in my legs was almost unfathomable. It shot down between the both of them, running the length of my body in its entirety. It was terrible.

I sucked it all up, but that didn't ease how severe it felt. I was only able to go about three feet before I almost toppled over again. Ace tried to help me, but I stopped him. "At least let me drive you," Lyra said, "You'll die trying to bus to New Jersey, come on..."

I was almost at the door but stopped as I decided I would let her. "Just don't keep me here," I told her, my voice shattering with each word. "I have to get back."

"Why?" She asked me, being all serious about the question. "Come on, Maeve, why do you really have to go back? There's nothing for you..."

"There's plenty for me, actually," I said, looking back at her as I sighed. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I have reasons."

She took my arm, letting me put my weight against her again. "Alright," She said, as she smiled faintly. Then she helped me out of the apartment, waving bye to Ace, as we headed back to her car.

It was only when we sat down in it, that she asked me, "What are they? Like really, what are your real reasons?"

I had not expected the question, as she had never really been brave enough to ask it before, but it came out then, slipped between her lips with less than any form of hesitation, as she asked it before thinking what I might have responded with.

It led us to stare at each other for a little while, before I placed my elbow up and rested the side of my head against the window, with my chin on my hand. "I don't know," I said, even though I did know. I was waiting. I couldn't leave in case they came back for me.

Sure, my parents could have very well been dead... but I hoped, constantly, that they weren't. It was one of those things I held onto, always and forever. I had no intention of dropping it either. Just in case.

But that was something I could say allowed unless I felt like ruining my reputation, which I didn't. So I simply looked out the window and shrugged.

It gave Lyra utterly no satisfaction to my insanity, but, she seemed to get ahold of herself the moment she started driving. "Well... maybe it's cause it feels normal," She told me. "Or the fact that you're safer there, than you are in the base."

I looked at her, perfectly silent, "Maybe," I said, and then it was all back to silence.

They lived in the suburbs, just like everyone else. My Aunt and her husband were quiet people, with one kid of their own and me. They blended into everything else, making Lyra's idea of normal much more plausible than I had considered, at least at first.

The whole thing did look very normal, it was all tamed down, silent. It sat with everything else, one of the many mixed into the plentiful.... Lyra wanted to wait and watch me go in, but I told her to leave.

There was too much risk, the whole place was dangerous... for us at least. I stood there, staring towards the front door, which I was almost fearful to open. That place, even if she had suggested it, was not safer than the base.

One day, if I didn't leave, I knew they would find out. Then I would end up in a facility... It was dumb, but magic was illegal, and having it was breaking the law. Nothing I could say would ever change that... I had no choice.

I took that in as understanding... talking slowly towards the door at least, as every step came out a limp. Controlling the pain, as it was, might have been the hardest part. It was nearly, close enough to entirely, impossible. To just swallow it all.

Trying was one of those things, the basically pointless kind. The more I attempted the less things worked how they were supposed to. But I didn't have many options, so away I went... staggering until I had made it through that door.

The TV was on, that was the first weird thing I noticed when I came in. Its light was a pale blue, skewed onto the floor, reflecting into the entryway. I couldn't see the screen, but I could hear it, quietly. There was a faint buzz the whole thing seemed to produce, attaching to my ears as I found a way to listen.

"Another building destroyed in New York City... the terror of lose meddlers seems to be getting worse," The lady was saying, a reporter, whose voice was skewed in the silence. "Though authorities have not identified the perpetrators, they say two men were arrested in part of the cause. The two women involved are still out there, having vanished towards the end of the scene... These cases are getting more and more frequent, so here it was you can do..."

I toned it out around then, creeping on my toes through the dark, as I aimed to get back to my room silently. It was down the hallway, located in what should have been a closet, as it was just barely above the size of one. It probably honestly had been a closet, I just never questioned it.

It was better than some of the situations I had been in with foster homes. Those I hardly even wanted to think about, so I considered my situation as lucky. I just had to get back there, to get into my bed, to close my eyes...

It was all the way down the hallway, and if I didn't want to wake anyone, I was going to have to move really slowly. I feared what they might have said if they saw me come in so late... I feared what they might have thought too, finding it far more safe just to stick with what I knew. So down the hallway, I went, in absolute silence. I tried not to break any formalities of sound, to keep my personal regulations as tight as I could, to leave the boundless bound alive, where it would not falter for even a second.

I didn't want to lose what I had, and I felt keeping it with the right ideas was all that mattered. If I could keep it all the same I would be fine, I knew that, I think. Felt it more presently than anything else, as I perhaps, even, understood it. Of course, there was a point where it seemed strange, but I had gotten used to that. I had become accustomed to its oddness, as I felt it all had slowly begun to make pleasantness throughout the circle of my head and mind. I was so close to getting to my room, so close I could almost feel my bed, craving it more than ever... yet I was used to it, the pain, the fear, the...

"Maeve..." My thoughts had to all stop when I heard the voice. I was in the space between the hallway to my room, and the kitchen, paused now in place as I turned... The light from the TV still spilled everywhere, the blue tint to the room more developed, as my eyes landed on my uncle. Uncle Jeff, sitting in front of the television, utterly soaked in its colors. He stared at her, as I stared at him, a smile slowly coming over the index of his face. "Where have you been?" He asked me, "You missed dinner."

It was hard for me to stand still because everything hurt too much. My legs felt like all the muscle and stiffness that usually kept me standing, had been drained right from them... While the rest of my body was desperately trying not to sway. Since I was in the middle of that gap, between the living room and kitchen, I had nothing to hold onto.... No wall, no chair, nothing.

I sighed... slowly, as I stared at my uncle, not knowing what to say to him. "Sorry?" Was the only thing I could think up, hesitant between my lips. "I lost track of time."

"It's three in the morning," He said.

"Oh, see, I didn't, uh, know that."

His eyebrow raised, as his head tilted softly to one side. "You didn't?" He said, before he shook it, taking a sip of his beer, which he clutched to the right, his fingers holding it so tightly they formed small dents in the metal.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry Uncle Jeff... really, I am, I'm just... If you could just not tell Aunt June... not that it's like some big secret or, just... please?" I looked at him in desperation, hoping he was drunk enough that he would forget the whole interaction entirely.

But it was nothing I could bet on, and I think he knew that too. He smiled a little, first in the lips, then all across the face, so that the entirety of it creased, even his eyes crinkling up. "You're funny," He said to me, downing another long gulp of beer. "I'm not gonna cover your shit for you, Maeve. What were you out doing anyways? Some boy?"

I turned a little red, "What? No..."

"Mhm?" He said, shaking his head again as he drank more beer. "I was once young, I get it. You thought you would finish up sooner, it happens. But if she finds out I'm not going to pretend I didn't see ya. That's how you kids think you can keep getting away with it."

"Right," I said, tracing my fingers against the back of my neck. It was sweaty as fear had begun to set in... more and more. I could feel the little beads of it all, clinging to me. It didn't

help that down through my spin, this sensation only comparable to burning, rushed through every ounce of me. God... I wanted to scream right then and there, but I knew I couldn't. Uncle Jeff, he would have told everyone if I did, his smile revealing that perhaps, he already would. "I hope it was worth it," He said to me, as he sighed. He rested his head back on the sofa, his fingers tapping mindlessly to the side of the chair.

I eyed them, before I looked at him, biting on the corner of my lip. "I was out with friends..."

"No you weren't," He said. "I'm not stupid."

I stared at him, wanting to tell him he was, but I didn't have much I could have said. So I turned away instead, "Yeah, you're not," I told him, "Just don't tell Aunt June."

He only laughed at me, sipping more beer as he lifted the remote to change the channel to something else. What a man he was. I couldn't even look back at him, there was no time, no reason, no point. Instead, I shoved my hands in my pockets, and went, now safe to my room...

Sometimes I had no idea why I ever went back there the way I kept on doing. It was so pointless, so stupid... such a waste of time and of my life. But I did it and would have kept on doing it if the rest of the world hadn't stopped me.