

Chapter One: Lost and Broken

At first glance, it seemed my office was trashed.

About two hundred sheets of A4 paper were strewn across the floor. My pens had been taken from my top drawer and scattered across my desk – some broken. The printer’s paper tray was open, the ‘add paper’ light glowing.

I hesitated in the doorway. I had a lot of enemies, but I struggled to think of one that could reach me here, in the heart of my Council building.

My goldfish was swimming happily in his bowl. My laptop sat on one of the desk, shockingly where I’d left it. I crossed the room and started it up.

It seemed to be working.

And that when I noticed the pens – they weren’t scattered randomly across my desk. They were carefully arranged there. They spelled **Find Kaylee**.

“Kaylee?” I whispered aloud. But even the way my lips moved to make the word seemed unfamiliar. I couldn’t recall ever meeting a Kaylee.

While I thought that over, while my computer was starting up, I picked up a handful of papers from my floor.

I’d thought whoever trashed my office had just taken it from the printer and tossed it around, but they’d gone so far as to print at least a couple of words on every page, so I couldn’t use them. And people think I’m evil.

Except, when I read them, they all said something similar to the pens. **Kaylee is in danger.**

Find Kaylee.

Protect her.

Help Kaylee.

Kaylee needs you.

“Who the hell is Kaylee?” I murmured. I was going to have to find out.

First, since my computer had started up, I ran a check through the Red Vulture database. A lot of people over there had preferred pseudonyms like Blaze and Cinder, so it would be easy for me to have met Kaylee and never known it.

But my search came up blank.

I dug my phone out of my pocket and texted my sister. **Come to my office.**

Her office was only three doors down, so she walked in thirty seconds later. “Did your printer throw a tantrum?”

I shook my head and showed her one of the messages. “Do you know anyone called Kaylee?”

Erin thought for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, whoever she is, she’s apparently in danger.”

“Did you call security?” Erin started picking up the rest of the papers from the floor. “Someone was obviously in here, and that just shouldn’t happen.”

I sat in my chair and leaned back, surveying the room. “I guess we should. If we can find out who was here, it might help us find Kaylee.”

“Oh,” Erin said softly, her gaze on the sheet of paper she’d just picked up. She held it out to me wordlessly, worry lines marking her forehead.

Because the message on that page wasn’t about the elusive Kaylee.

Elliot is in danger.

I did know an Elliot. I was dating one.

“I’ll get security,” Erin said. “You get him.”

Elliot was two minutes away, unharmed and unaware of any present danger. He, too, didn’t know any Kaylee.

Security were scanning through the tapes from last night, searching for anything – anyone – suspicious. There was no camera in my office, but I hoped we’d have a picture of my visitor in the hallway.

I called my mother and had her check for Kaylees at the school. There had only been one in the past ten years, and she’d been a victim of the war.

I checked with the newspaper, looking for any Kaylees who had been in the news. All I found was a death notice.

“Two hundred messages about Kaylee,” I murmured, “and no last name.”

Erin had been chasing down her own leads, searching her old Resistance databases and our father’s Council records. She stood in my doorway. “I have nothing.”

“Me neither.”

“I think we should get the Council on this,” she said.

Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to ask me to help Kaylee. And it was my duty to help any witch in need – even the ones who were hard to track down. I nodded. “Call a meeting.”

I grabbed my laptop, a notepad and one of the lucky pens that had been spared and made for the meeting chamber.

Erin darted back towards her office, so I was alone when I reached it. I sent Elliot a quick text telling him to meet me there, took my seat at the head of the table and waited, watching the time tick away on the wall clock.

The other Council members started to file in a few minutes, my sister among them. Elliot slipped in, too, waved in greeting, and grabbed a spare chair from the corner.

He wasn't a part of my Council. That had been a hard decision to make, but I stuck by it. Still, I'd never turned him away from a meeting he wanted to be a part of.

I scanned the group – one empty seat at the table. One Council member missing.

Sam. Elliot's father.

Elliot was pulling his phone from his pocket, concern clear in the lines on his forehead.

Neither of us had ever known Sam to be late.

Give orders when you're unsure. Something my father had taught me. *Because everyone else is probably just as unsure, and they'll follow someone who seems like they're not.*

"Call him from the hallway," I instructed Elliot. "We'll start without him."

He nodded and made for the door.

The Council members looked my way, waiting.

"Someone broke into my office at lunch," I said. "They left me hundreds of notes – most of them warning that someone called Kaylee was in danger and asking me to find her, one saying Elliot was in danger."

William Green – Alex's father – raised his eyebrows. "Not Sam?"

"No," Erin said. "And security got back to me two minutes ago. Whoever was in Innocence's office, they didn't go through the door."

Blaze scrunched up her forehead. "What?"

"Three possibilities," Erin said. "They can transport through an anti-transport barrier, they were invisible, or they were able to pass through walls."

Of those three, I'd only known one to happen before. "Jim," I murmured.

"Share with the whole class, if you don't mind," Jeanette, the former leader of Dark Phoenix, said. Her brown hair was streaked with silver.

“Jim Sanders – his coven could all transport through anti-transport barriers,” I clarified.

Kim’s coven. But there was no way she was involved. She was dead. Jim was the only one of them who wasn’t.

Blaze set down her pen. “If he had something to say, he’d just show up and say it. Whoever sent this message did it this way because they couldn’t just come and say what they had to say.”

“She’s right,” Erin said. “Breaking into the infamous Innocence Cooper’s office has desperate written all over it.”

My stomach twisted. My father told me you needed at least one of two things from your people to rule: respect or fear. I had far more of the latter than the former.

But Erin was right. No one would dare risk it if they had another choice.

“So,” William said. “We’d better find Kaylee.”

Elliot slipped through the door, pocketing his phone. “I tried Dad’s mobile, his home line and even his next door neighbour. Nothing.”

He was watching me, eyes wide with worry.

I looked away from him, back to my Council.

“Erin, Elliot and I are going to find Sam,” I said. “Jeanette, build a team and look into who was in my office and how they got there. Blaze, you’re in charge of finding Kaylee.”

Blaze nodded slowly. She tilted her head. “How will I know when I have the right Kaylee?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I sort of hope you’ll know her when you see her, but if not – you’ll have to protect them all.”

“Alright,” Blaze said.

My Council members moved, teaming up and taking on the tasks I’d set. I leaned a little closer to Erin. “Tracking spell.”

“On it.”

And then, quite suddenly, I was alone with a sullen and silent Elliot.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I said.

Elliot shook his head. “I thought you were supposed to be a good liar.”

The tracking spell turned up exactly nothing. Elliot and I met Erin in her office. She was near tears, shaking her head. “I’ve tried three times.”

“Blackout field?” I suggested.

“I have cameras on the entrance of the only one we know about,” she said. “No one’s been in or out since the Kim thing.”

I averted my eyes at the mention of Kim. Of what she’d done to me.

“I saw him this morning,” Elliot said. “He was fine. He’s not dead.”

None of us could guarantee that. It was the simplest explanation for a failed tracking spell. But it was a better working assumption than the alternative.

“He will have gone to lunch,” I said. “Let’s retrace his steps.”

Erin pulled the band from her blonde hair and ran her hand through it as it came loose. “You two go,” she said. “I’m going to work on a spell to map areas where I can’t track and try to narrow down the search.”

I nodded. I led Elliot out into the hallway.

He caught my wrist and stopped me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“If... if something has happened,” he said slowly, softly, “then I need to know that you...”

He didn’t look me in the eye. His breaths were heavy. He didn’t have to say it.

“We both know, if someone has hurt him – and therefore hurt you – I’m going to want to hurt them back,” I whispered.

His grip loosened.

“But I won’t.”

As the leader of the Council, I had to hold myself to higher standards. But it wasn’t just that. I was older now, wiser. I knew revenge and hate and hurting people hadn’t really got me anything.

And I knew that I had to be better.

“Thank you,” Elliot said. And he walked down the hallway in the direction of the stairs.

My palm sparking with purple energy, I followed.

Most days, Sam went to a café a few streets away for lunch. Elliot and I walked towards it, weaving through the early afternoon crowd and searching for any sign of him.

Elliot was moving fast, intense and silent.

I had enemies. I knew that. But Sam never had. He was a healer. He was a good guy.

Maybe someone had gone after him to get to me. Maybe they thought he was the weak link in my Council.

Probably, this was my fault.

I pushed the thoughts away, focusing on the faces coming towards me, scanning the cars as they passed.

We turned the last corner and the café was visible in the distance. Still no sign of Sam.

I'd wanted to believe he was okay – that solar flares or ion storms had somehow blocked our tracking, and his phone was dead or lost. I couldn't do that anymore.

My heart heavy, I followed Elliot all the way to the café and waited as he checked inside. He came back, his eyes a little duller.

"I will find him," I vowed.

Elliot nodded. "Let's transport back. Erin might have something." He started the spell that would let us transport out of the busy street without anyone noticing.

I took his hand and took one last look around.

Across the street, through four lanes of traffic, someone was watching me. I stared back, my mouth dropping open.

His head tilted. He glanced over his shoulder, almost like he thought I might be looking at something behind him.

When he turned back, understanding swept across his face. He moved, slipping into the crowd.

I wasn't sure if I'd seen what I thought I'd seen: Bullet, my dead ex-boyfriend watching me from the side of the street. But I was suddenly running, sprinting after him.

Brakes shrieked and a car horn cut through the air.

"Innocence!" Elliot called.

I'd been less than half a metre from being run down.

For an instant, everyone was looking at me. I took a breath, realising how insane it had been to run into the traffic. Remembering that a car wouldn't care that I was the world's most powerful witch – it would crush me all the same.

Bullet – or his identical twin – was long gone. I made my way back to Elliot's side.

"What the hell were you doing?" he asked. "That's the *road* out there."

"You didn't see him?"

"Who? Sam?"

I shook my head. It was more than crazy, but I still said it: "Bullet."

Elliot blinked in surprise and looked in the direction I'd been running. Then he frowned and said, "I think we have bigger issues."

"What?"

"That guy stopped before he hit you."

The vehicle that almost hit me was long gone, but I turned back to the street and said, "I didn't take issue with that."

"I'd just cast the spell so they wouldn't notice us."

My heart sank. "Then he shouldn't have seen me."

"Exactly," he said. "My magic isn't working."