



elementals
DISCOVERY

DIONNE WITT

Chapter One

My father disappeared on a Wednesday evening in April.

The story made headlines all across the country. It was one of the items scrolling across the bottom of the screen on CNN, over and over again. Wendell Benton, a one-time Academy Award winning actor turned media king, had vanished at the age of forty-two, leaving behind a devastated teenaged daughter and an empire that consisted of several newspapers, magazines, television and movie productions worth millions.

His disappearance wasn't particularly dramatic. It wasn't one of those incidents where his private plane

went down in bad weather and fell off the radar, or he'd gone missing during a natural disaster, or he'd been forcibly taken from his home. No, he just vanished after spending a wonderful evening with me at the theater to celebrate my eighteenth birthday. My birthday wasn't until July, but he had a confirmed trip out of the country at that time, and he didn't want to miss this milestone in my life.

He'd given me my gift, a gorgeous silver and diamond pendant in the shape of a snowflake, on a silver chain. The winter season was my favorite, and he knew I loved a good snowstorm. He told me the pendant was one of a kind, just like a true snowflake. I put it on immediately and hadn't taken it off since. I didn't want to think it would be the last thing he ever gave me.

There were no signs of foul play, no signs of forced entry into our apartment or his office, and none of his personal possessions had been taken. There had been no activity on his credit cards, and surveillance footage throughout the city was being examined. All of his employees were interviewed, and I was interviewed incessantly, just in case I remembered something that could be of importance. The police had followed every lead they had, hitting dead ends with each of them. We kept waiting for a ransom demand that never came. It was as though he'd simply walked away.

I went to stay with my grandfather, packing only enough clothing for a few days. I could have stayed at our

apartment by myself, but it seemed too empty, too quiet and too eerie without my dad there, especially after it had been searched by the police. Things had been moved, and it bothered me that strangers had been in our home. Grandpa had given the household staff a paid leave, “Just until we figure out what to do next,” he told them, but I saw the glances pass between them all. They didn’t think Dad was coming back.

He was considered by many to be an A-List celebrity, so for someone not to recognize him was unlikely. The paparazzi were following me around, digging for their own clues, and I had received several notes of condolence and support from various people in the entertainment industry. School was hell, as the students, and even a lot of the teachers, wanted to know all of the details. I had none to give, and that was disappointing to them.

People kept telling me, “Oh, he’ll turn up somewhere,” and that bothered me. Did they mean his body would wash up in the Hudson? Or that he’d be spotted sitting in Central Park enjoying a cup of coffee? He wasn’t a misplaced piece of clothing, or a toy that had been left behind by a child somewhere. He was my father, the one person I had always counted on to be there for me, no matter what.

Two weeks after he went missing, a body was found.

My grandfather took the call, his features twisting into a sad grimace, and I felt my stomach flip. He nodded, said he’d be there as soon as possible, and hung up. Before he

turned to face me, he squared his shoulders and took a deep breath.

“Dad?” I asked, and he could only nod.

“Aubrey, sweetheart,” he said. “They want someone to come down to identify the body. I told them I’d come alone.”

I paused for a moment, fighting with myself over whether I should stay behind or go, finally deciding I should go. My grandfather opened his mouth to protest, then agreed. I went to grab my purse from the guest room, moving as though on auto-pilot, taking my cell phone off the nightstand and stepping into a pair of shoes.

I made my way to the foyer of my grandfather’s apartment. He was slipping into a suit jacket and hadn’t noticed me yet. I could see the tired line of his shoulders, and I knew this was as hard for him as it was for me. Dad was his only child, and my grandmother had passed away years ago.

The ride to the coroner’s office was silent. All I could think about was what would happen if this really was my father. What would I do without him?

Two police detectives who had been working my father’s case met us at the door, and we were ushered down a long hallway to a small room. The entire place smelled of antiseptic and something else that I didn’t dare try to name. I walked with my arms wrapped tightly around myself, wanting nothing more than for all of this

to be a bad dream. We were told the body had been pulled from the river, and I gasped at the thought. My grandfather stood behind me and gripped my shoulders, to support me or to support himself, I wasn't sure. The body rested on a metal examining table, a white sheet draped over top. One of the detectives gave a solemn nod to the medical examiner, and the sheet was pulled back, just to the neck.

I steeled myself for the worst, sucking in my breath and suppressing the shiver that curled its way up my back. I let out a cry and shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut and taking several hasty steps backward before slamming into a tray of medical equipment.

"It's not him," I heard my grandfather say, the sound of relief evident in his voice.

We left the room and stopped in the hallway. I gulped in mouthfuls of air, my tears threatening to choke me.

"It's not him," Grandpa said, repeating it again and again as he hugged me.

While I was overjoyed at the fact that the man in there wasn't my dad, it still pained me that someone else wasn't going to be so lucky. Grandpa spoke with the detectives for a bit before we headed for the exit. As we stepped outside, bright flashes went off in front of my face, and someone was yelling at us, asking if my dad was dead. I recoiled at the harsh words.

The detectives helped us over to our car, doing their best to shield us from the reporters and the cameras. I

wasn't surprised that they were there, just angry that we couldn't even have had this moment to ourselves.

"Why won't they just go away?" I asked, glaring at them as we passed them. They were still taking photos. "I wish I could hide from them for a while."

My grandfather reached out and patted my knee. "I may have just the solution for that," he said.

"Oh? Are we going somewhere? Not too far though, in case Dad comes back," I said.

"Well, I need to stay here and keep the business going. It's important that we don't let that fall by the wayside."

Grandpa had stepped back into his former role as CEO, and he was handling the everyday tasks that my dad had taken care of. I knew it was hard work, and I kept waiting for him to tell me that I needed to start learning about it for myself.

"How does St. Louis sound?" he asked. "Or at least the suburbs?"

I frowned at him. "St. Louis? Missouri?"

He nodded and gave me a small smile, and the realization sank into the pit of my stomach.

"You want me to go live with my mom?" I asked, and my voice shook.

"Not permanently. Just until we know what to do next," Grandpa said. "She's very eager to see you."

"What about school? I still have two weeks of finals."

“It would be after the school year is finished. We both think that spending the summer away from here would be good for you. And with her, you’d have a more stable home life.”

“I’ve been fine staying with you,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest and turning to the window. “Why does that have to change?”

“I’m so busy now, Aubrey. I don’t want you spending all your time alone.”

“I have friends.”

Grandpa gave a polite cough, and I felt my face burn. He knew as well as I did that my friends at school were nothing more than casual acquaintances. Most of them were only interested in me because of Dad, something I had learned very early in my academic career. Because of Dad’s fame, I had a hard time making true friendships last. Everyone always wanted something from me.

“She’ll be here tomorrow to go over the final details,” Grandpa was saying, and I jerked my head around to look at him again.

“What? You mean it’s already decided? I don’t get a say in this?” I asked.

My grandfather’s expression changed then. His lips went into a thin line, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Aubrey, please. Your mother loves you very much, and she wants to help. Once you’re finished with finals, you’ll join her and her family for the summer, and most likely the following school year.”

My mouth dropped open. “I have to start at a new school? For my senior year?”

“It’s been decided,” Grandpa said, and from his tone I knew there would no further arguing with him. “I know it’s not ideal, but what you need to understand is that this was not my idea, or your mother’s. These are your father’s express wishes in his absence.”

That silenced me.

My parents had married young and divorced after five years together. My memories of my mother, Maddie, as my father called her, before the divorce were a little foggy, but I did remember leisurely walks through Central Park, play dates with other children, and learning to bake with her. She had been working as a print model when she met my dad, and she continued doing that after they were married. She took me along to a few of her photo shoots, and I remember thinking she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Somewhere along the way, the glitz and the glam of their successful lives had overshadowed their marriage, and they decided to go their separate ways. The problem was what to do with me. Dad wanted me to stay with him, but my mother wanted me to go with her. She had made the decision to move back to where her family was, somewhere near St. Louis.

My parents went through several months of custody discussions, and eventually my mother ended them. She reasoned that it would be better for me to be raised in a

world of wealth and opportunity. Not long after she moved away, she met a new man, a scientist of some kind, and remarried. Several years later, I had a younger half-sister named Alyssa. They all came to visit a couple of times in New York City, but I didn't see them for very long. If I were completely honest, it was my fault. A part of me resented my mother for leaving me with such ease, and so I wanted little to do with her. I didn't know much about her husband or my sister, and I fooled myself into thinking I was okay with that because I had Dad, and he wasn't going anywhere.

I could understand that she wanted me to have luxuries that she couldn't provide for me on her own, but I often thought she hadn't given herself a chance. I always felt a twinge of regret that maybe I hadn't given her a chance either.

When she arrived the next afternoon, it was with a single suitcase and a tentative smile. I hadn't seen her in almost a year, and then it was just for a brief and uncomfortable lunch with her and Dad to celebrate my last birthday. She stood in the gallery, one hand fiddling with the strap of her purse, the other gripping the handle of her suitcase.

"Hello, Aubrey," she said.

"Hi," I said. She hugged me, a quick barely touching hug, and I took her suitcase and allowed her inside. My grandfather came to the door then, and I made my escape.

She stayed for a week, spending most of her time with Grandpa as they made plans for me to move. I stayed in my room, studying for finals, emerging for dinner because Grandpa insisted that we eat together. We made polite conversation whenever we saw each other, but anyone could see that things were awkward between us.

Before I could leave New York and join her in Missouri, Mom and her family were thoroughly checked out, just in case they had anything to do with Dad's disappearance. Her parents had passed away a few years earlier, and like Dad, she had been an only child. The background check didn't take long, and she was cleared by the local authorities and the FBI. I never even considered the possibility that she could be involved. It was just too ridiculous a thought.

The night before she left, I found her standing alone on the balcony. She was leaning on the railing, her arms crossed at the wrists, looking out over the city. I held back, just watching her, surprised at how sad she seemed, and I realized that she did still have feelings for my dad. Whatever had happened in their marriage didn't mean that she stopped caring about him.

I joined her on the balcony, and she smiled and beckoned me closer. I took up a similar pose beside her.

"I'm...sorry," I said, chewing on my lower lip.

"For what, sweetheart?" she asked.

"For not being around much this week."

“Oh, that’s all right. I knew you were busy with your tests.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been avoiding you too.”

She reached out and patted my hand. “I know. It’s all right though. We have some work to do to repair our relationship, and I’m willing to try if you are.”

I nodded and said, “I’m actually okay with leaving the city. I’m so tired of all the reporters hanging around and following me everywhere I go. A bit of normalcy will be good for me.”

“I agree.”

She hugged me the next day before she boarded her flight back to Missouri, and this time it was a warm embrace. I finished the last week of my junior year at Radcliffe Academy, then I packed up the things I wanted to take with me and said goodbye to everyone. Mom and I had talked about waiting until later in the summer to move, perhaps Dad would return, but then I decided that I wanted and needed to get away from the craziness of the constant media attention. I also reasoned that I would have the whole summer to become adjusted before school started. I would keep our penthouse apartment, at least for a while. It was the only home I’d ever known, and I couldn’t bear the thought of getting rid of it just yet. What if Dad came back? He’d go home first, and I wanted it to be there for him.

I boarded an early afternoon flight out of LaGuardia International Airport after a goodbye brunch with my

grandfather. He promised to keep in constant contact with me. He had a team of private investigators looking for Dad, and he had also made plans for me to join him next summer after I graduated high school, to start attending meetings with him and learning the business. Even though he left his sentence unfinished, I knew he was thinking, “If your father hasn’t been found by then.”

Chapter Two

It was supposed to have been a straight flight to St. Louis, but there had been some sort of mix up with my reservation, so I was transferring in Chicago. This delayed my arrival by a few hours. I sent my mother a text message letting her know of the change.

There was no one seated beside me for the first leg of my journey, and for that I was grateful, since I didn't feel like talking with anyone. I wasn't so lucky on my connecting flight from Chicago to St. Louis. My seat mate introduced herself as Monica Orson, and she was headed

home for the summer break from college. She was cheerful and sunny, and she had wanted to chat about everything from the weather to movies to favorite colors, and all I had wanted to do was ignore her and everyone around me. Monica had gotten the hint and left me to listen to my music and sulk in peace for the remainder of the short flight.

A gentle tap on my shoulder jolted me out of my reverie, and I jerked upright in my seat. A uniformed flight attendant was looking at me expectantly. I blinked and pulled my earbuds from my ears.

“The announcement has been made to turn off and stow all electronic devices. We’ll be descending into St. Louis soon,” she said.

“Oh, sure, thanks,” I said. I turned off my iPod and reached down to shove it into my purse under the seat in front of me.

Monica stared out the small window, her face close to the glass. “There’s the Arch,” she said. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Uh huh,” I replied without looking. Instead, I checked my seatbelt and smoothed my skirt over my legs, noticing how sweaty my palms were.

“Is your family meeting you at the airport?” she asked, turning to face me.

The word sounded funny when she said it. *Family*. I nodded in response.

“Are you excited to see them?”

I shrugged and swallowed hard. I wasn't sure how to respond to that question. Monica tipped her head and gave a little smile. "I'm sure they're excited to see you," she said, trying to sound encouraging.

The plane landed smoothly and began its journey toward the gate, or in my mind, a journey toward an unknown chapter of my life. As I stared straight ahead, I thought about how unbelievable the entire situation was, like I was watching a movie.

The seatbelt light went off, and the cabin came alive as everyone stood up to stretch, turn on their cell phones and open up the overhead bins to grab their belongings. I picked up my purse and checked my own cell phone out of habit, expecting to see a missed call or text message from my father as I always did when I traveled. I threw the phone back into my purse and slung it over my shoulder as I got to my feet.

"Well, Aubrey, I hope things work out for you," Monica said. "If you ever need a friend, give me a call sometime." She passed me a slip of paper with her name and phone number written on it.

"Yeah, sure," I said, forcing a smile and putting it into my wallet. I got my carry-on suitcase from the overhead bin and exited the plane into the terminal.

There were signs along the walls, welcoming me to St. Louis and displaying bright pictures of all the local attractions. I sighed and followed everyone to the baggage claim area, walking at a brisk pace to get away from

Monica in case she wanted to talk some more. As I rode the escalator down to the ground level, I spotted my mother standing at the bottom with a large but timid smile on her face. Upon making eye-contact with me, she raised her hand to wave. I swallowed the lump in my throat and waved back.

Once I reached the bottom, she pulled me into a hug, and I could feel her trembling.

“It’s so good to see you, Aubrey,” she said. Her voice was soft and nervous. “How was your flight?”

“It was fine. Where are Eric and Alyssa?” I asked, pulling away. I glanced around for her husband and my younger sister. I hadn’t seen them in a while, aside from random pictures sent here and there. I wasn’t even sure what Alyssa looked like anymore.

“Eric’s bringing the car around, and Alyssa’s at home with a babysitter. She doesn’t do well with crowds.” She took a step back too. “Let’s get your luggage, shall we?”

I nodded and we walked over to the luggage carousel. Her arm was still around my waist, and it felt nice to be near her again, although it was still difficult for me to see her as “Mom”. Aside from her infrequent visits, and a few phone calls and birthday cards over the years, we hadn’t communicated much before Dad went missing.

We stood side by side for a few minutes, not saying anything as we waited for the carousel to start moving. Across from us, I spotted Monica, busily chatting with another passenger from our flight.

“How’s your grandfather doing?” Mom asked, breaking the silence.

“Oh, he’s okay. Working all the time.”

“Were you still staying with him?”

I nodded and said, “Yeah. I couldn’t bring myself to go home yet.”

Mom tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, a nervous habit she had, and one that I had inherited, I thought, as I did the same. Where her hair was a gorgeous natural blonde, mine was a dull, dark brown. Sometimes, when I was feeling nostalgic, I would sneak into Dad’s office and pull out the old magazines that she’d been featured in during her time as a model, and wish to look more like her. Feminine and soft, rather than so rugged like my dad.

The luggage carousel buzzed and began to move. People crowded closer to pull their overstuffed suitcases from the belt without hurting themselves.

“What do yours look like?” Mom asked.

“They’re brown, monogrammed Louis Vuitton.”

She smiled. “Very nice.”

“A birthday present from Dad,” I said, my voice dropping a little.

We spotted my suitcases, and we each went after one, meeting near the door.

“Did the rest of my stuff make it okay?” I asked as we stepped outside.

“It’s all in your new room. But don’t worry, I didn’t unpack any of it. Your room is like a blank canvas. I didn’t want to decorate it without you.” Her words came out rushed, revealing again how anxious she was.

“Oh, that’s great,” I said. “Really thoughtful of you.”

She smiled and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “We can go shopping tomorrow, how does that sound?”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

A horn beeped and a black SUV pulled up to the curb.

My step-father, Eric Vaughn jumped from the vehicle and hugged me. “Aubrey! How are you, sweetheart? How was your flight?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I knew he was just being polite, but if everyone asked me that same question, I was going to scream.

“Fine. How are you, Eric?”

“Never better, glad to finally have you here. Your mom has been a wreck waiting for you to get here.”

“Eric, stop,” she said, shaking her head. “Let’s get going. Alyssa’s waiting.”

“And she’s so excited to see her big sister again,” Eric said while loading my luggage into the back of the SUV. He held the door open for me as I climbed in.

I buckled my seatbelt and checked my phone again out of habit, mentally kicking myself for forgetting that there would be no message. My mother twisted in her seat to face me and saw my disappointed expression.

“How did your school year end?” she asked.

“Great,” I said. “All A’s.” I turned my attention to the passing cars. I didn’t want to talk about school and everything else I’d left behind. “So where are we going again?”

“Hamilton Green,” Eric said. “It’s a lot smaller than New York City, but still nice. You’ll love it. It’s a close community, and the high school is one of the best in the country.”

Eric continued to talk about the history of Hamilton Green, and I tuned out. I knew it was rude, and it wasn’t even Eric that I was annoyed with. No, Eric was great. He was always courteous to me and showed me nothing but decency and affection whenever we were together, and it was so obvious he loved my mother. I just couldn’t get a grasp on the fact that a few hours earlier I was saying goodbye to my comfortable existence in the big city. I knew that my mother had grown up here, and that was why she’d moved back, and she’d never been happier. I just didn’t know if I could be happy here without my dad.

“Aubrey?”

“Huh?”

“We’re home,” Mom said, her voice hesitant as she spoke the words.

I hadn’t even noticed that we’d left the highway and made it to Hamilton Green. As we pulled into the driveway, I looked out the window at the two-story light

gray house with a white porch and colorful potted plants. A small bicycle leaned against the two-car garage, pink tassels on the handlebars. It was like the perfect American dream.

We all got out of the SUV, and Mom guided me inside while Eric handled my luggage. We entered through the back door into a mudroom, and I found myself taking in the jackets and umbrellas hanging on hooks, the rain boots lined up against the wall on the polished wood floor, and thinking how different it was from the entryway to the apartment in New York that consisted of an antique Louis XIV table and a vase of fresh flowers. Through the mudroom was the kitchen, and on the table sat the remains of a child's lunch. There were crumbs from a grilled cheese sandwich, a bowl of applesauce with a few bites left, and a glass of orange juice.

The kitchen opened to a family room with a sliding door that led to the deck. A huge television was mounted to the wall, and Mom informed me they didn't use it much. The formal living room had a fireplace and was set up for entertaining with nice furniture, and built in bookshelves filled with books and framed photographs. We passed a small bathroom and a dining room before stopping at the stairs.

Mom called out for Alyssa. "We're home, honey!"

A thump was heard from upstairs, and then excited footsteps followed by a skidding halt at the landing. I

looked up to see my younger sister staring down at me, her green eyes bright and inquisitive, her blonde hair in two braids that fell over her shoulders. I guessed her to be seven or eight, if I remembered correctly. I felt bad that I didn't know for sure.

"Hi," I said.

The little girl took one step at a time, slowly and carefully, as if deciding how far to go. She stopped on the third step from the bottom so she was eye level with me and said, "Hello. Are you happy to be here?"

Mom's laugh was uncomfortable. "Sweetheart, she just got here. Why don't we give her a chance to get settled first, okay?"

"Okay."

"Where's Mrs. Cameron?"

"Cleaning up. She'll be down soon." Alyssa took the last three steps and then walked right past us and out to the kitchen. We could hear her talking with Eric as he brought in my luggage.

"Let's see your room," Mom said to me.

Upstairs, we ran into Mrs. Cameron, a neighbor that sometimes watched Alyssa. She said hello, averting her eyes to the floor, then good-bye and hurried on her way. I wondered if everyone was going to be awkward with me because they knew why I was here after all these years.

Mom pushed open the door to my new bedroom. It was bigger than I'd expected. The hardwood floors had been polished, and the walls were white. It was big

enough to hold a queen bed, nightstand, dresser with mirror, a chest of drawers, a desk and chair and a bookcase. The bed had been made up with a deep purple comforter and sheet set. Matching curtains hung from the windows. The closet doors were open, revealing a large open space and empty hangers. One window faced the front street, and I had a nice view of the neighborhood. Boxes were stacked up all around the room.

My entire life is in those boxes, I thought. *How strange.*

“The furniture is new, and you can decorate the room however you want. I wasn’t sure what you were into these days,” Mom said. “If you don’t like the bed set or the curtains, we can exchange them.”

“No, everything’s great. I’m not sure what I’m into these days either,” I said, shrugging.

“Still taking pictures?”

“Yeah. Radcliffe had a great photo club.”

Her smile faltered a bit. “Oh, well, Hamilton Green High School has an art club. I’m not sure if photography is part of it though.”

“That’s okay. I’ll figure something out.”

“Whoo, these sure are full,” Eric said, scooting past us with my suitcases. He set them by the dresser and clapped his hands together. “That’s everything. I’m going to start the grill. How do you like your hamburger cooked?”

“Actually, I don’t eat red meat anymore,” I said, leaning on the desk.

“Really?” Eric said, sounding puzzled. “Huh.”

Mom put her hand on his arm. “We have lots of stuff to make salads, and I can cook up some pasta for you instead. Or chicken. We have chicken. Is that all right?”

I nodded. “Chicken sounds good.”

“We’ll give you some time to get yourself organized then. The bathroom is through that door,” Mom said, pointing. “You and Alyssa will share. Her room is on the other side. Let us know if you need anything, okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Mom nudged her husband out of the room, pulling the door shut with her. Before she closed it completely, she said to me, “I know this is going to be hard at first, but we’ll make it work. I promise.”

I waited until the door closed with an audible click before I dropped my purse on the bed and lay down beside it. I dug around for my phone and dialed my voicemail, selecting the last one my father left me before he went missing. I listened as he told me he was sorry he was going to be late for dinner, and to go ahead and eat without him. It was so mundane and unexciting, but I must have listened to it a hundred times since his disappearance.

The message ended, and frustrated, I threw the phone to the floor, wincing as it hit with a hard thud and slid under the bed. I curled myself into a ball and hugged a

pillow to my chest, breathing in the clean scent and trying to calm down. My mom wanted to try, and I knew and understood that. I just couldn't stop my doubts about how well I would adjust here. I knew I didn't want to stay here forever, in this strange house with people I didn't feel connected to.

Everyone at school was shocked that I had to leave, but I wasn't eighteen yet, not officially an adult to be left on my own. While they promised to keep in touch, I knew better than that because I'd made the same promises to others that had moved away. Radcliffe Academy was an elite prep school whose students prided themselves on their academics and athletics. Forming close personal relationships was not part of the curriculum. I knew that they would move on without me, and that was still upsetting, even though I wouldn't consider any of them a best friend. Who would be my friend here?

"Don't cry, Aubrey. I'll be your friend."

I sat up, startled at the words, and even more startled at who had spoken them. Standing in the doorway to our shared bathroom was Alyssa.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" I asked.

"You're sad, but it will pass," Alyssa said. Then she turned and went to her room, closing the door behind her.