



elementals  
FOCUS  
DIONNE WITT

# Chapter One

My alarm clock beeped, soft at first, and then louder and more insistent as the seconds ticked by. After a minute, I reached over and smacked the off button, annoyed that I had even set it the night before. It wasn't like I needed it in the first place, since insomnia and I had become quite close over the last few weeks. I had been lying awake for over two hours already, staring at my bedroom ceiling.

If I slept at all, it was fitfully, and always with those vivid nightmares invading my few hours of peace.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I could still feel the heat of the flames, hear the whir of the helicopter blades as it

lifted off the roof of the burning building, see the pain register in Connor's eyes as he realized he was about to die. At that moment, I would jerk awake, tangled in my blankets, shaking, and sometimes crying. It was Connor's death that pained me the most.

Rolling onto my side, I glanced to the window and saw the sun piercing through the sheer curtains. Huge snowflakes drifted past, covering everything in a soft blanket of white. Today was the last day of school before winter break, and in years past, I had looked forward to it. Winter had always been my favorite season for as long as I could remember. I loved the cold, the feeling of brisk air against my face, warm mittens and hats, and hot chocolate.

My mom and my sister had plans to put up Christmas decorations and bake enough cookies to feed the entire neighborhood. This was something I would have loved to join them in doing, but as soon as classes let out, I was heading to the airport to board a plane to London.

Although I did feel bad for not spending the holiday with my mom, my step-dad Eric, and Alyssa, my reason for leaving at this time was to locate my father and try to finish this nonsense with Luminesk. Since I'd received the picture of a man, who I believed to be my father, alive and meeting with Simon Foley in London, I could do little but think about going there to bring him back. I was on a mission to find out what had happened to the other Elementals that Simon Foley had kidnapped. I needed to know how my father was involved, and I wanted to know

for certain that my sister was safe. I couldn't allow Connor's death to be in vain.

There were so many unanswered questions and too many variables to think about. My ticket was one-way, and I had no idea how long I would stay. I knew I was going to hit a lot of dead ends because it wouldn't be as simple as walking to the spot on Tower Bridge and finding my father just waiting for me. A lot of time had passed since that picture had been taken, and most likely, he wasn't even in London anymore. But I was at least hoping to learn something useful and return home with a few answers and some possible new leads to check out.

Of course, it had taken some serious convincing and a lot of promises about safety in order to get my mom and step-dad on board with me. Especially since I insisted on going alone. I was eighteen now, legally an adult. They couldn't stop me, but I still wanted to know they supported me. Mom agreed as long as we let my grandfather know where I was going and why.

While we couldn't tell him about Alyssa's abilities or the Anemone organization, I did share with him the picture of my father that Connor had left me, proving that he had spent some time in London after his reported disappearance. That delayed things a bit, as my grandfather then directed his team of private investigators to do their own research. He had also been in touch with an investigator at Scotland Yard. I had the man's information and was instructed to make contact with him as soon as possible after arriving in London.

My grandfather's final requirement was that my education was not going to be interrupted. I knew he was just thinking about my future, but I saw it as an annoying road block to move around so I could get my dad back. After a quick check of my school records, it was determined that I had enough credits to graduate a semester early, due to my time at Radcliffe Academy and their accelerated program. That was fine by me, and I finished my classes, somehow managing to earn A's, even though it was difficult for me to focus.

A soft knock came at my door, and my younger sister, Alyssa, tiptoed in. I held up the corner of my comforter, and she crawled in beside me.

"I want to go with you, Aubrey," she said.

I sighed and hugged her close. We had been over this numerous times, and she knew I wasn't going to change my mind.

"I just want you to be safe," she said.

"That's all I want for you too, and the safest place for you is right here with Mom and Eric. Paul has promised to keep an eye out for anything suspicious."

"Will you call me?"

"Every single day," I promised.

We lay there for a few more minutes, until we heard Mom and Eric moving around downstairs, then we hurried to get ready for the day. Mom made a special breakfast for us, way more food than the four of us needed. The mood was light but somber as we ate, and then Alyssa and Eric wished me luck and hugged me

goodbye. I was catching a ride to school with Paul, but Mom was picking me up so she could see me off at the airport.

Paul arrived, grabbed a couple of leftover waffles, and we left for school. I was thankful that today was going to pretty much be a breeze, since no teacher wanted to start something new before break. Paul pulled into the student parking lot, and we gathered our backpacks and got out. He waited as I walked around the car to join him.

“So, are you ready to cross the pond?” he asked.

I nodded, and we headed toward the front doors. “All set. I talked to Jonathan last night, and he said he’d be available if I needed his help.”

“How’s he doing?”

“All right. He didn’t tell me where he and Monica are, but he assured me they were safe. He said Carly was happy with her new family.”

We fell silent for a moment, thinking about them. Jonathan Orson and his daughter, Monica, ran the secret organization Anemone, responsible for helping to relocate families of Elementals who had gone missing. Jonathan's son Travis, an Elemental just like my sister, had been taken by Simon Foley years earlier. Carly Grand, also an Elemental, had lost her parents to him. We didn’t want to see that happen with my family.

“How long is your flight?” Paul asked.

“Long. I leave St. Louis at 6:42 and fly to Chicago, stay there for a little over an hour, and then straight on to London. I should get in around eleven in the morning.”

“And that’ll be about five a.m. here, right? With the time difference.”

“Yeah. I’m not looking forward to that.”

“You probably won’t sleep much anyway,” Paul said, and I had to agree.

I sat through my classes in a daze, waiting for the end of the day. At lunch, Paul and our friend Charlotte made sure to keep me entertained. Charlotte knew I was going to look for my father, but nothing about the Elementals. Paul was the only other person outside my family and Anemone to know about Alyssa and her abilities. He would have loved to come with me, and I would have appreciated having him along. He wasn’t sitting as comfortably with his credits though, so he couldn’t just take off with me, even for just a few days over break. He had gotten into some trouble with his mother while helping me, so there was no way she would have let him go without a full explanation, and even then I wasn’t so sure. Sometimes I still thought the whole situation sounded too crazy to be believable, and I had lived through it.

Paul was my best friend from the minute I arrived in Hamilton Green, and he had been there the night of the fire at the Luminesk laboratory. He even had a tiny scar from where Simon Foley’s bullet grazed his forehead, something he kept hidden from everyone. I felt guilty for involving him in this mess, even though he never expressed anything more than an eagerness to help in any way he could.

Everyone in my last class was antsy to leave, to have two weeks off for the winter break with no threats of homework, or tests, or papers to write. Most of them had already applied for colleges, something else that I had skipped out on as well. I was going to take a year off and decide what to do after that. I was hopeful that everything with Luminesk and my dad would be resolved by then, and I'd be able to attend a college with a great photojournalism program, my true passion. It had fallen by the wayside, even though I tried to keep my camera with me at all times to capture photos whenever the mood struck, which seemed to be less and less these days.

When the final bell rang, I was first out of the classroom, falling into place with the other students pushing toward the exits. I met up with Paul and Charlotte on the front steps, and it was a similar scene as at home, with lots of hugs and wishes of good luck. Mom's van pulled up to the curb, and she honked once. I wished Paul and Charlotte a Merry Christmas, and then climbed into the van. Mom had brought my suitcase and carry-on bag, and I tossed my backpack into the backseat. I had no use for it anymore. I was done with school and didn't have to come back until the following May to participate in the graduation ceremony, if I even cared to do that. It didn't matter to me one way or another, but I knew Mom wanted me to walk across that stage and receive my diploma. She handed me an envelope with my name written on the front in Alyssa's familiar scrawl.



“She made you a card and wrote you a letter,” Mom said. “She made me promise not to open it.”

I tucked it into my carry-on bag to read on the plane. As Mom drove from Hamilton Green to St. Louis, she ran through a mental checklist to ensure I had everything I would need for my trip.

“Check,” I said, after everything she listed.

“And you’ll call me when you get there,” she said. “The minute you land.”

“Of course, and I promised to call Alyssa every day.”

After learning that my previous cell phone had been compromised, Jonathan hooked me up with a new one that I could use anywhere and that also wasn’t able to be bugged. It stayed with me at all times, and I wouldn’t let anyone else use it. Mom still looked uneasy, so I reached over and placed my hand on hers and squeezed. I didn’t know what else I could say to reassure her that I would be all right, because I wasn’t completely sure of it myself. Even though Simon Foley had disappeared in the burning building, and no survivors had been reported, there had also been no bodies found. I couldn’t rid myself of that tiny nagging feeling that maybe he had an escape plan for just such an event.

We had kept close tabs on his company, Luminesk, and there had been no announcement that their CEO had been replaced or stepped down. The legitimate business that Luminesk was involved in continued to operate as usual. What if he was out there, watching and waiting? He

had lost his brother that night. Did he blame me for that? Was he planning his revenge?

When we reached the airport, I grabbed my things and Mom followed me inside the busy terminal. I checked in for my flight and handed over my suitcase to be loaded onto the plane. Then I took a few minutes to sort through my carry-on and rearrange things. Mom handed me a small bag of snacks, and I peeked inside to see peanut M&Ms, granola bars, and almonds. Then she tucked a thick roll of money into one of the pockets of my bag.

“Mom, I’ve got plenty,” I said.

“Shh. Just take it please.”

“I’ll have to exchange it once I get there. The rate isn’t spectacular you know.”

“I’ll just feel better knowing you have it. It’s a mom thing.”

We walked toward the security line, which was as far as Mom could go with me. She was trying so hard not to cry, and it was wearing down my own resolve to be brave. She faced me and gripped my arms.

“Be safe, and I love you,” she said. “Alyssa and Eric, they love you. We’ve been okay since that night. There have been no signs of Simon Foley or any of his men. You don’t have to do this by yourself. You don’t have to do any of this at all.”

I watched as her lower lip trembled, and a tear slipped down her cheek.

“I love you all too,” I said. “That’s *why* I’m doing this. I don’t want us to be looking over our shoulders in fear for the rest of our lives, and I need to know what’s going on with Dad. I just feel like he’s the key to all of this. I’ll be fine.”

Mom gave an emphatic nod. “Yes, I know. I just worry. I’m your mother, I can’t help it.”

A few months ago, I would have brushed those words aside, not giving them much thought. Until my father went missing and I’d had to relocate and move in with my mom, I didn’t have much of a relationship with her. Now, I could clearly see that she put family first, and even though I hadn’t been part of hers for several years, she never cared for me any less.

She pulled me into a hug so tight I thought she would crack a rib, and I could feel her shaking.

“When you find him, you tell him that I will help him with whatever is going on. No matter what he’s gotten involved in, I’ll be there for him,” she said. “And then you smack him for me, okay?”

I laughed then, and so did she. I kissed her cheek before joining the ever growing line of people waiting to get through security and find their departure gates. Mom stayed and watched until I was next to have my documents checked. Then she waved at me and turned to leave.

It was then that I allowed my nerves to get the better of me. The security agent who took my boarding pass and identification scrutinized me, and I knew I looked antsy

and tired, hopefully not suspicious. He stamped my documents and let me through.

When I was seated on the plane, with my seatbelt fastened, I took Alyssa's letter from my bag and opened the envelope. As I unfolded it, something fell out and landed in my lap. Picking it up, I saw it was a small blue poppy anemone that had been dried and laminated. Just holding it filled me with courage, and I placed the flower in my wallet. I would carry it with me everywhere on this trip.

## Chapter Two

It was early afternoon as I took the train from Heathrow Airport into central London. I had been here before several times with my dad, a few times for business and once or twice for vacation. He always had a car waiting for us at the airport, so the train was a new experience for me. Seated between two other people who had been on my flight, I balanced my carry-on bag on my lap and held onto my suitcase in front of me. I watched the scenery go by and observed a family with young children, so excited to see the sights they couldn't sit still. I yearned for that happiness and ease in my life again. No more Simon Foley, no more fear of strange men lurking around every

corner, waiting for the opportunity to grab my sister and disappear with her.

I had called Mom as soon as we were able to turn our cell phones on, and she answered after the first ring. I was willing to bet she hadn't slept yet. I departed at the London Bridge station and walked the short distance to my hotel, pulling my coat collar up around my neck as I went. It was colder than back home, but not too bad. I checked in, went to my room, and dropped my things by the bed. I packed my shoulder bag with a few items I would need, then I turned right around and went back outside. After almost eleven hours of traveling, I should have been exhausted, but arriving in London had caused my adrenaline to kick in, and all I wanted to do was begin my search. Armed with pictures of my dad, Simon Foley, and Connor, I stopped at every place of business along the street leading toward the Tower Bridge.

Dad had been around this area when that picture was taken, so it was the best place for me to start. I didn't know if he'd been staying nearby or somewhere else. All I had was a picture putting him on the Tower Bridge. Even if he wasn't hiding out in one of the hotels right now, there was always a chance he'd stopped at one of the restaurants or shops. Someone could recognize him.

A dozen businesses later, and I was striking out. I came to another pub and pulled open the door. The sun was shining outside, but as soon as I stepped inside, it was as if the light had been extinguished. It was so dim, I had to blink several times in order to get my eyes to

adjust. Once they did, I was able to make out the bar. There were about a dozen people inside the pub, most of them sitting at tables, hunched over their beers and plates of food. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since I'd been on the plane.

A younger man, no more than a couple of years older than me, studied a cell phone at one end of the bar, ignoring everyone else. I set my bag on a stool and leaned toward the bartender. He walked over and asked if I wanted a menu.

"I'd just like to ask you a couple of questions please, if you don't mind," I said, pulling the photos from my bag.

He frowned at me, looking over my shoulder, immediately seeing that I was alone, and raised a brow. I realized I hadn't checked in with my grandfather's contact at Scotland Yard. *Way to go*, I thought with disgust. I cleared my throat, squared my shoulders, and placed the photos on the bar.

"Have any of these men ever been in here? Perhaps even together?" I asked. I told the bartender their names, watching for any kind of reaction.

He studied the photo of my father and frowned. "Isn't he that actor guy who went missing?" he asked, and I nodded. Then he shook his head. "Nope, never seen him around here. I'd remember." He picked up the picture of Simon Foley, a composite that Paul, Alyssa, and I had put together with Jonathan's help, squinted and

pursed his lips. After a moment, he placed the picture on the bar and studied the one of Connor.

“Sorry, none of them look familiar.”

“Are you sure? It may have been a few months since they were here.”

“Nope. Don’t know ‘em. Can I help you with anything else?”

I thanked him for his time and slipped the photos back in my bag. As I turned, I caught the man at the end of the bar staring at me with a curious expression, so I ducked my head and left. I was disappointed, hungry, and tired. I paused for a moment, debating on whether to keep going until I reached the end of the block or turn around and go back to my hotel. I decided to return to the hotel, order some room service and call the Inspector at Scotland Yard before he panicked and sent an entire team out looking for me. As I rounded the corner, I heard distinct footsteps behind me, which shouldn't have been strange since there were a lot of other people out and about. These footsteps caught my attention because they were slow and even, as though the person was trying not to be obvious about following me.

I sped up a little, and sure enough, so did the footsteps. I spotted a large crowd of tourists ahead of me and hurried between them, mingling and ducking into an alley. A tall figure darted past the alley, and I peered around the building to get a look. It was the man from the pub, the one who had been looking at his cell phone. He cursed and turned, and I saw his expression was



angry. I backed away, right into a trash bag of glass bottles, and I cringed, knowing he heard it.

He was standing in front me in an instant, towering over me. His blue eyes glittered with danger and intensity.

“Who are you?” he demanded, advancing on me, forcing me to step away from him until my back hit the wall.

“Why are you following me?” I countered.

“I heard you asking about Simon Foley. How do you know him?”

“How do *you* know him?”

He glared at me, grabbed my bag and began rifling through it. I reached out to take it back, and he pushed me away. I didn’t hesitate before kneeling him in the groin, and while he was doubled over in pain, I smacked my hands on either side of his head, hitting his ears. He howled and fell to the side. I picked up my bag, prepared to swing it at him if necessary.

He covered himself with one hand and held up the other in surrender.

“Damn,” he gasped. “You’re tough.”

“Who are you? Why are you following me, and how do you know Simon Foley?” I yelled.

After all that I had been through, being threatened by this man angered me, and I refused to cower. He started to get to his feet, and I raised my bag.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said.

“I don’t know that.”

He coughed and stood up, straightening his jacket. “I’m looking for Simon Foley myself. I’ve been searching for him for several years now, ever since he kidnapped my sister.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

“If you’re looking for him too, then you must know why.”

I remained silent, glaring at him.

He sighed and said, “Look, I’m sorry for coming after you like that. Can we go somewhere and talk? I swear, I can explain everything. There’s a cafe nearby, always busy, very public. If you don’t believe what I tell you or like what I have to say, you can leave. I promise I won’t follow.”

He was pleading with me, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to know his story. I nodded and followed him to a small coffee shop beneath the Tower Bridge. I chose a seat at a table near the door while he went to the counter to place an order for drinks. I watched him, studied him, and felt oddly at ease with him, even after our somewhat forceful introduction.

He was tall, broad shouldered, with wavy dark hair that curled at the nape of his neck, and as he glanced over his shoulder at me, he nodded and gave me a half smile. It was a nice smile. With a tug at my heart, I realized he reminded me a lot of Connor. I swallowed and pushed that thought aside as he walked toward me, carefully balancing two cups of coffee and a small plate of scones.

“So, let’s start this over again, shall we?” he asked, extending his hand to shake mine once he placed everything on the table and sat down. “I’m Reese. Reese Holt.”

“Aubrey Benton.”

“Pleased to meet you, Aubrey Benton.”

He took a drink from his coffee, and I waited. I wasn’t going to offer up anything first. I wanted to see what he knew. He reached into his wallet, removed a picture and slid it across the table. I didn’t touch it, just leaned in closer. It was a picture of a young girl with dark hair and similar features as him.

“This is my sister Maeve,” he said. “She was six years old when this was taken, and it’s the last picture I have of her. She disappeared four years ago, kidnapped by Simon Foley.”

“And who is he to you?” I asked. “What do you know about him?”

He eyed me for a moment before answering.

“As far as I know, he’s some kind of scientist. He took my sister because she had...special abilities,” he said, frowning a little as if searching for the right words. “If you’re looking for him too, I must assume someone close to you was also taken by him, someone who also possesses these abilities.”

I held my coffee cup with both hands, feeling its warmth radiate through my skin while I mulled over what to say.

“I know this sounds crazy,” he continued. “And you have no reason to believe me. I just think that if we’re both searching for the same guy we should work together, pool our resources. He’s taken important people from us, and I want to know why.”

I was about to protest that Simon Foley hadn’t taken anyone important from me, my sister was still safe back at home, and then I stopped, feeling that familiar clench of my heart. He had taken Connor from me.

“He may be dead,” I finally said.

“Simon Foley?”

I nodded, and Reese leaned forward, his eyes locked on mine. His jaw tightened.

“How do you know?” he asked.

I forced myself to take a sip of the coffee. It was strong and burned all the way down. I reached for the sugar, poured some into my cup and took another sip. I didn’t drink a lot of coffee, even though I loved the smell of it.

“I can get you something else,” Reese offered. “Tea? Hot chocolate?”

“Hot chocolate would be nice.”

He went back to the counter, and I took advantage of the moment to snap a couple of photos of him on my phone and send them to Jonathan. If anyone could confirm Reese’s story, it was Jonathan. Reese returned with the hot chocolate. I took a long drink, then reached for a scone. I was famished.

“So what makes you think he’s dead?” Reese asked after I had taken a few bites. “I haven’t found anything online stating he died. His company is still operating like normal.”

I took a deep breath before saying, “Because I was there when it happened.”

The look of surprise on Reese’s face was honest, that much I decided. His expression changed to despair, and he leaned back in his chair, scrubbing a hand over his mouth and letting out a shaky breath.

“Then it’s pointless,” he murmured. “She’s gone.”

We sat in silence for several minutes, Reese turning to face the window. I watched him wrestle with his emotions, could almost feel the sense of loss as his shoulders drooped and he wiped at his eyes.

“Can you,” he started, his voice shaking. “Can you tell me what happened? Please?”

At that moment, my phone buzzed. I glanced down and saw that I had a new email from Jonathan. He sure was quick with his research.

“Checking up on me?” Reese asked, startling me. “Don’t worry, I’m not offended. What does your friend say about me?”

“How did you know?”

“If you’re searching for a guy like Simon Foley, I figure you’d have to have some resources behind you.”

He had a valid point. Jonathan hadn’t sent me a lot, just enough to confirm that there was a Maeve Holt reported as missing from a small town outside London.

She had one living relative listed as Reese Holt, her older brother. Their parents had been killed in an automobile accident years ago. Jonathan had included a picture, a passport photo, and I compared it to the man sitting across from me. It was a perfect match. He also requested further information, stating that they'd never known Simon Foley to take any children that were outside of the United States.

"He says that your story checks out," I said, tucking the phone back in my bag.

Reese nodded and shrugged. "Lot of good it does me now," he said. "If Simon Foley is dead, I'm out of ideas on how to find my sister. "

I weighed my options, trying to decide whether or not to trust him. If I left him, I ran the risk of him following me anyway and maybe even interfering with my search. On the other hand, he knew the area better than I did, so he could be helpful. I decided to take a chance. I shared with Reese how I came to know Simon Foley, including Connor and how I thought my dad was involved. He listened without interrupting, showing increasing interest.

"Wow, give me a minute please," he said, shaking his head and taking a deep breath. "I always knew Maeve was special. My parents and I, we did everything we could to keep her safe and to try and understand. We had no idea that there were all these other kids out there like her. This is all too much."

"I know it sounds crazy, and sometimes I still can't believe it myself."

“So how does he operate? How *did* he operate? What did he do with the kids?”

“I wish I could tell you. I have some ideas, based on some information that we were given, but nothing concrete. We were taken to one of his labs, and there was an entire medical team there. They wanted to perform some tests on my sister, but Connor stopped them and got us out before they could do anything more than examine her. He died helping us, for turning on his brother.”

I paused and closed my eyes. There was a lot more to the story, but I didn’t feel comfortable sharing it yet.

“You cared about him,” Reese said.

I nodded, feeling the tears building up. I blinked them away and focused on Reese. Now was not the time to cry over Connor.

“I want to help you,” Reese said. “I want to know what happened to Maeve. She was all I had, and I can’t just let her go without finding out the truth. My parents left her in my care, and when she went missing...” He shook his head. “I felt like I’d let them down. I have to find her. Alive or otherwise.”

My biggest fear was that all of the missing children were dead. Jonathan had shared with me that as the years passed with no signs of them, the families of Anemone were losing hope in ever seeing their loved ones again.

“Tell me about your sister,” I said. “Please.”

“Maeve is ten years younger than me. No one was more surprised than my parents when they found out

they were having another child, but they were pleased. Everyone fell in love with her. She was this chubby little girl with dark curls and pink cheeks, and she would look at you with her big blue eyes, and you'd give her anything she asked for." He began to smile, and he sat up straighter as he spoke. "She started doing things, little things that we didn't know what to make of. She'd make gusts of wind blow the wind chimes hanging outside. She would start fires in the fireplace without any matches. We kept her hidden as best we could, which wasn't hard. We lived out in the country, few neighbors to speak of. She could play outside and no one saw what she could do."

He paused and picked up the picture of Maeve. "Well, someone must have seen her, because a man showed up at the house one day, asking about her and her abilities. My parents made him leave, but they were scared. Something wasn't right about him. He was a little too interested in her. He came back a week later. He said his name was Simon Foley, and he was some kind of scientist. He wanted to study her, and he offered a lot of money, an exorbitant amount. My dad chased him off the property with a shotgun, and we didn't see him again. And then, a month later, my parents were dead."

He put the picture back in his wallet and reached for his coffee. "Whether their accident had anything to do with Simon Foley, I don't know. I was just a kid, so the police weren't interested in listening to me, and I didn't want to share much with them anyway. We came to the



city to live with my dad's aunt. She didn't care about us, so it was just Maeve and me."

"Did your aunt know what Maeve could do?" I asked.

"Nope. Maeve didn't like her, so she kept her abilities hidden."

"You said Maeve went missing when she was six. Did you see or hear from Simon Foley during the four years in between?"

"Not a peep. And then one morning we woke up, and her bed was empty. There wasn't any evidence of a break-in, and for a while I was the main suspect."

At my astonished expression, Reese nodded. "Oh, yes. Parents both dead, younger sister gone, and who is left to receive the rather sizable insurance money that my parents left for us?"

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"It's money. People will do all sorts of ridiculous things for money. Maeve and I didn't know a thing about it, and I wasn't given access to it until I was eighteen."

"So what did you do?"

"I did my own research on Simon Foley. I haven't found very much, other than the stuff about his company, Luminesk. He's like a ghost. I left my aunt's house when I turned eighteen, took the money and I've been on my own these past two years. She passed away last year."

I finished off the plate of scones and brushed crumbs from my lap with a napkin.

"Do you work?" I asked.

“I pick up odd jobs here and there sometimes, computer work that I can do from anywhere I have an Internet connection, but mostly I just hide out in my flat and scour the web for information.”

“So what were you doing at that pub?”

“Trying to decide on what to have for lunch,” he said with a smile.

“So I’m supposed to believe it was a coincidence, that in a city this large, I happen to meet the one person who is looking for the same guy I am?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. We met because we both want the same thing,” Reese said. “To find this man and stop him.”

This was true. If he was alive, I wanted nothing more than to have Simon Foley put behind bars for the rest of his life. He had ruined so many families, and innocent people had died because of him. I didn’t like to think that I was seeking revenge, rather I wanted justice for everyone that had been hurt by him.

“There was something strange about Maeve’s disappearance,” he said, breaking into my thoughts.

“What’s that?”

“My dad gave her this fat little guinea pig for her birthday, and she carried this thing with her everywhere. I was never a fan of it, but she loved it, named it Lizzy.”

I wondered where this was going, when he said, “The guinea pig was gone too. Cage and all. We searched all over for it, but it was like whoever took Maeve took her pet as well. Weird, right?”

“Actually, this sounds familiar. Another boy who was taken by Simon Foley had his favorite bedside lamp taken with him. We think they take familiar objects with the kids to help make them feel more comfortable wherever they go.”

“That’s a little bit creepy,” Reese said. “Tell me, do you really think he’s dead?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m just not sure.”

“Then that means we should keep searching.”

“What information have you been able to learn on your own?” I asked.

He finished his drink and set the cup on the table. “It would be a lot easier to show you. I have everything kind of mapped out at my flat, and my computer is there.”

He could see the hesitation on my face, and he smiled. “I assure you, I’m not a serial killer or a psychopath.”

“Then you won’t mind if I let an acquaintance at Scotland Yard know I’m with you,” I said.

“Of course not. If he’ll help us out, that’d be even better. I haven’t had much luck with the authorities. Why don’t I grab some drinks to go? I’m afraid I haven’t been to the market in a while, so my cupboards are bare.”

“Sure,” I said. He went back to the counter, and I dialed the number that my grandfather had given me and asked for Chief Inspector Merrick Lawson. I was transferred to his direct line, and I introduced myself as Russell Benton’s granddaughter.

"I'm pleased to hear that you've arrived without incident," Inspector Lawson said. "I'm afraid to tell you though, we've had no luck in locating anyone who has seen your father."

"I figured as much," I said.

"Is there anything else you can share with me?"

I paused, glancing over at Reese.

"Not yet, but I wanted to let you know that I met someone who may have some information."

"And who is this person?"

"His name is Reese Holt."

There was a pause, and then, "Where are you right now, Miss Benton?"

"We're at a cafe, but we're heading over to his place."

"I'd prefer if you'd wait until I can run a background check on him."

The offer was tempting. After all, I had only just met Reese. How could I know I wasn't being played again, like with Connor? I decided that I couldn't be sure. If Reese was intent on tricking me, he would have established a very deep background cover. Yet, something about him told me I could believe him, and what he'd said about losing his sister to Simon Foley rang true. For a second, I hated the fact that my experience with Connor had made me question my instincts.

"I'm fine, Inspector. I'll be in touch if I find out anything," I said and hung up before he could protest.

"Ready to go?" Reese asked. He held a cup in each hand.

I nodded and dropped the phone into my bag, accepting the coffee and following him out the door.