

UNTAMED

THE ELEMENTAL SAGA
BOOK TWO



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Chapter 1



SOFT SNORES EMANATED from the bed next to me, and in my drowsy state, I thought it was Lena. As sunshine peeked through the cheap hotel curtains and I became more alert, reality crashed down as it had done every morning for the past four days.

Since Lena had been taken.

Not wanting to make any noise, I sat up slowly and eased my legs over the side of the bed. Though Michelle had taken to spending the nights in my hotel room, I could count on one hand the number of hours she'd actually slept in the last four days.

Of course, I could say the same for myself. With Lena gone, a piece of my soul was missing.

Testing had been officially canceled, and almost all the other elementals had returned home—all of them except the families of the six.

Lena Brandt.

Aniyah Williams.

Shana Kowalski.

Alexis Quigley.

Isabella Garcia-Cruz.

Emma Perkins.

I hadn't heard most of their names before, but now they were forever etched in my memory.

Closing my eyes, I stretched, making my body long. Power zinged from my pointed toes to my fingertips. My power had always been omnipresent under the surface, but recently it had become difficult to ignore.

As I lifted my body off the bed, the coils in the mattress squeaked. Michelle's body jerked, but she remained asleep.

Whew.

Mike appeared in the open doorway that adjoined our rooms. "Good morning." His eyes were bloodshot, and his face was covered in stubble. He hadn't slept much either.

I put my finger to my lips and pointed to Michelle.

His gaze—filled with both adoration and sadness—shifted to his wife's form. "I convinced her to take a sleeping pill. She won't be waking up anytime soon."

"What about you?" I asked. "You need to sleep too."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'll be okay. Do you want to go down and get breakfast?"

Nodding, I went to my suitcase to find some clothes that were somewhat clean, which was becoming harder by the day. We hadn't anticipated being in Florida so long, and none of us had taken the time to hunt down a laundromat.

"Just give me a few minutes."

"I'll meet you in the hall in twenty." Mike pulled the door closed to give me privacy.

As I rooted around in my suitcase, my fingers brushed the phone hidden among the clothes. I'd only used it once, and the memory of those two minutes made my heart pound and my mouth go dry.

Carly Levitt—my mother—had sounded so normal, not like someone who was responsible for the deaths of so many. I'd replayed the previous day's conversation a thousand times in my head, but I'd yet to make sense of it.

"What do you want from me?" I asked. "Why did you find me after all this time?"

She took a shaky breath. "I never expected to hear your voice. I thought you were dead."

I had news for her—everyone had thought she was dead. And no one was happy to discover she was alive, not even me. My feelings were complicated at best.

"Why?"

She paused. "Can you meet me? There's a lot to talk about, and I don't want to do it over the phone."

Suddenly doubting my grand idea to enlist my evil, supposed-to-be-dead mother's help, I'd ended the call.

The bitter disappointment had been hard to swallow, but I didn't know what I'd expected. There would be no happy reunion, not under normal circumstances and especially not now. My short conversation had resulted in more questions than answers.

Why did she think I was dead?

Where has she been for the last fifteen years?

Why show up now?

How did she learn I was alive?

Where is she?

What does she want from me?

After I'd gotten my wits about me, I'd hurriedly powered down the phone, hoping I hadn't missed a tracking app in my initial inspection of it.

Putting Carly out of my mind, I carried my clothes to the bathroom and took a quick shower. When I emerged fifteen minutes later with dripping hair, Michelle was still softly snoring, so I tiptoed out of the room and gently closed the door behind me.

Aidan was leaning against the wall outside my room.

My heart pounded, but this time for an entirely different reason. It was because of Aidan, the boy who'd started out like a brother to me but had grown to be so much more.

But that was before.

My life was divided into *BLWT* and *ALWT*—*Before Lena was Taken* and *After Lena was Taken*. I'd thought learning that Carly Levitt was not only my mother but also alive would cause the largest seismic shift in my life, but I had been wrong.

Lena being taken was so much bigger than that.

Aidan's blue eyes met mine, and for a split second, they were filled with pain and sadness. Then his expression turned neutral, and he donned the mask I'd gotten used to seeing the last few days.

"Hey." I tucked my hands in my pockets, not sure what I should do with them. What I wanted to do was put them on Aidan's cheeks and force him to look at me, to tell me what was going on inside his head.

After I'd finished talking to Carly, my first instinct had been to turn to Aidan, both to tell him about the conversation and to ask him to double-check the phone, but I didn't want our first interaction in three days to be him berating me. The wall he'd erected between us hurt enough as it was.

"Hey." He cleared his throat. "I told Mike I'd walk you downstairs."

"Oh. Okay."

He gestured for me to walk ahead of him toward the elevator. He trailed half a step behind in proper guardian fashion.

Before we'd kissed, I had worried about our relationship being irreparably damaged if we failed in our attempt to move beyond being friends. I'd been right to worry but not for the reason I'd thought. It wasn't our kiss that had ruined everything. Of course, I never could have predicted the kidnapping of six elemental girls right from under everyone's noses.

Aidan hadn't predicted it either, and I knew him well enough to know he blamed himself for not doing the impossible.

I punched the elevator button, and the doors opened immediately. He once again motioned for me to go ahead of him.

What a gentleman.

He could be, but that wasn't what his actions were about. They were about avoidance.

Hypocrite. He'd once called me out for hiding from my problems, but that was *BLWT*. Everything was different now.

He pressed the button for the lobby and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

Staring at him, I willed him to look at me. With everything else going on, I couldn't handle one more second of weirdness with Aidan.

I impulsively pushed the Stop button, and the elevator jerked to a halt.

Aidan straightened. "What are you doing?"

"Are we going to talk about this?" I asked quietly.

Working his jaw, he trained his gaze over my head on the wall behind me.

“*Look at me.*” I hated how needy I sounded, but I was desperate. I *needed* him, even if we regressed back to our old, casual, antagonistic banter instead of continuing our new romantic involvement. I was barely hanging on, and he probably was too. So why couldn’t we hang on together?

He didn’t respond. It was as if I hadn’t spoken.

“Please,” I said softly.

His eyes met mine, and the rawness in them caused my breath to hitch. He hadn’t really looked at me in days. For the first time, I noticed his appearance resembled Mike’s—his cheeks were unshaven, and his eyes were bloodshot. His hair seemed to have grown in the last few days. He usually rocked the slightly mussed-up look, but at the moment, he simply appeared bedraggled.

He was hurting way more than he let on.

Stepping toward him, I reached for his hand.

He allowed me to hold it for only a second before yanking it away. “We can’t.”

“I’m not trying to...” I didn’t know how to finish that sentence because I wasn’t sure what I was actually trying to do, or *not* do. All I knew was that I wanted his comfort and for him to allow me to comfort him. “Don’t push me away.”

“It has to be this way.”

“Why? It’s okay to—”

“It’s not.” The air thickened, and the space somehow increased between us in the tiny elevator. His shoulders sagged, and his voice softened. “I can’t. You’re a distraction, and I can’t help but think if I hadn’t—if *we* hadn’t—then maybe Lena would be here. Maybe they would all be here.”

“There were guardians all over,” I said quietly. “This isn’t all on you.” I didn’t bother trying to convince him it wasn’t his fault. Since he was a guardian, technically some of the blame *was* his, but he shared it with guardians much more experienced than him. *No one* had seen it coming.

His tone hardened again. “Lena’s gone, and that’s on me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not.”

He blew out a breath. “I’m not going to argue with you. But here’s a fact—I can’t *be with you* and protect you. Because when I’m with you, it’s all I can do to keep my head on straight. Because you’re...” He scrubbed his hands over his face then leaned past me to reach the elevator buttons. The car resumed its descent.

“Aidan—”

“Do us both a favor and keep your distance.”

I flattened my back against the wall, granting his request and putting as much physical distance between us as I could in the small space. That wasn’t what he meant, but I still did it for my sake. He couldn’t have hurt me more if he’d slapped me. At least then I would have been able to defend myself.

But there was no defense against his argument. With those words, I lost the other most important person in my life.



AFTER DEPOSITING ME in Mike’s care, Aidan hightailed it out of the room. Mike looked back and forth between me and the trail Aidan had blazed. He knew something was up, but he was also smart—and kind—enough not to mention it. Breakfast was silent with both of us pushing our food around our plates. We

wanted to put on a good show for the other one, but it was a lost cause. Neither of us was kidding the other.

We dumped our plates in the trash and headed back to our rooms. I wished we had somewhere else to go, but we'd been told repeatedly "the guardians are handling it" and "there is nothing you can do."

With all due respect to Vic, Suze, and Aidan, the guardians were *not* handling it. Or if they were, no one was sharing the news. We'd been forced into waiting around, which was maddening.

When I opened the door to my room, I was surprised to see that Michelle was awake. I was even more surprised to see Councilwoman West sitting in the sole chair in the room. I hesitated, wanting to tuck my tail between my legs and run in the opposite direction. I hadn't talked with Aidan's mom since she'd visited us and given me a preview of testing. Never had I thought her intentions were benevolent, but it was only when I learned the truth about my parentage that I understood her ulterior motives... sort of.

She had wanted to see how powerful I was because other than Mike and Michelle, she was one of only two other people who had known Carly was my mother. But what she planned to do with that knowledge, I had no idea. Thank God she couldn't see the currents of power running through me.

Michelle sat on the edge of the bed, wearing pajama pants and one of Mike's T-shirts that swallowed her thin frame. Her hands were clasped between her knees, the knuckles white.

I sighed. As much as I wanted to run, I wouldn't leave Michelle.

"Mike," I called to him. He'd stopped at his own door. When he looked up, I jerked my head to indicate he should

come into my room. His eyebrows rose, but he abandoned his room without question.

When I walked into the room, the councilwoman turned her cold, appraising gaze in my direction. Though she wore her customary suit, her hair wasn't pulled back as slickly as usual, and her makeup did little to cover the circles under her eyes. I was perversely glad to see the girls' disappearance had affected her too. Maybe she was capable of emotion after all.

As I stepped into the room, I realized the two women weren't alone. Aidan leaned against the wall in the far corner. *Damn*. I wasn't ready to see him again, but it was inevitable. With Vic and Suze gone investigating the kidnapping, Aidan had remained at the hotel to guard us.

"Do you have leads?" Mike asked hurriedly, going to sit next to his wife. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

West sighed. "Unfortunately, no. Not really." She laughed bitterly. "The official council statement is 'the matter is being investigated,' but frankly, we don't have anything."

I blinked at her candor. While I hadn't expected her to be forthcoming with information, I definitely hadn't expected her to admit there was none.

"We need to go to the police," Michelle said, repeating the plea she'd already made many times.

"You know we can't." West crossed her legs. "I'm sick inside about those girls, but involving the police would only create more problems."

"But—"

"No," West firmly silenced Michelle's protest. "They're going to want to know why we were gathered at the orchard. They're going to see the damage from the fire and ask lots of questions." Her eyes flicked to me for a moment, and I focused

on the carpet. The police would want to know how we'd put the fire out, but we certainly couldn't tell them the truth—that I'd commanded the clouds to unleash rain. "There's no way we could involve them without exposing elementals."

Anger flared within me. Lena and five other girls were gone. Nothing was more important than getting them back. Who cared if the world found out about us? Maybe that would be a blessing. The secrecy was so tiring.

I balled my hands into fists. "It would be worth it."

"We'd risk more than exposure," Aidan said. Speaking up was a rare thing for him to do with his mother in attendance. "The police would question why we waited so long to report them missing. I don't know the exact legal ramifications, but there would be some. Mike and Michelle—and all the other parents—would most likely be brought up on charges."

"He's right," West confirmed. "It's called Caylee's law. The parents would face prison time."

My body shook with anger. "Michelle wanted to call the police the day it happened, and you—"

"Sophie," Mike said. "What's done is done. Fighting amongst ourselves won't help."

Narrowing my eyes at West, I crossed my arms and leaned against the dresser. Mike was right. We needed to focus on finding Lena. And when we found her, then we could hash out the council's asinine actions.

"Why are you here?" I asked, wanting her to get to the point so we could remedy that fact as soon as possible. Her presence wasn't helping anyone. And despite my row with Aidan, I still had his back where his mother was concerned. I always would.

“Partially because of what we just talked about. We need to keep the girls’ disappearance discreet.”

I frowned at her. It wasn’t as if we were shouting it to the world on social media. We hadn’t reported it to the police, and she’d made it abundantly clear we couldn’t do that at this late date. How much more discreet did she want us to be?

Mike nodded, as though he understood what West was implying.

West’s expression was kind. “We’re readying accommodations for the families. We’d considered using our already established safe houses, but we thought it might be helpful for the families to be close together, so it’s taking longer to find a suitable location.”

“Wait,” I protested. “Why can’t we go home?” As I asked the question, the councilwoman’s reasoning dawned on me. Though we hadn’t reported Lena’s disappearance to the police, people at home would notice she wasn’t around. For instance, there were truancy laws. Without proper documentation for our absences—which were racking up—the school would be forced to report us.

But it wasn’t going to come to that. It *couldn’t*. Because they would find Lena before it became an issue. I refused to accept otherwise. It was the only thing keeping me sane.

West ignored my question. “We’ll arrange for some of your personal items to be shipped if you’ll make us a list. The girls will need to be withdrawn from school. Sophie can finish her senior year as a homeschooled student.”

There were still six months left in my senior year. This *could not* drag on that long. What was the council thinking? They had to realize the kind of message this sent.

One of little hope.

West reached into the satchel at her feet and pulled out a file folder. She handed it to Mike. “The cover story we’ve come up with for the affected families is a temporary move to care for a sick relative. This contains all of the documentation you need.”

“This is so messed up,” I muttered.

I couldn’t help it—my gaze shifted to Aidan. One look at him told me his thoughts were the same as mine—it seemed as though the council was already throwing in the towel. I didn’t understand how they could. Three of the girls were the daughters of council members. I wished Agent Kowalski were there instead of West. With her daughter among the missing, she would understand the council was wasting time arranging for cover stories and whatnot. Every elemental with a brain should have been contributing to the rescue efforts without worrying about secrecy and stealth.

The kidnapped girls didn’t have the luxury of time. According to every true crime show or podcast I’d ever seen or listened to, the longer it took to find them, the less likely they would be found alive.

Except this wasn’t a normal kidnapping.

We all avoided discussing the possibility I was all too familiar with—what if the girls were taken by witch hunters? My witch hunter kidnappers had planned to kill me the same day they took me. As far as I knew, the guardians hadn’t made any progress in discovering who was behind that scheme. The four perpetrators couldn’t have been acting alone. Though witch hunters hadn’t been an active threat since the incident that had killed Aidan’s sister and Lena’s parents, my kidnapping was proof the hateful groups were still out there and willing to act against us.

The council's current actions made me wonder if that was the predominant theory. The possibility of the girls being taken by witch hunters was too frightening, so I'd refused to consider it.

It was more than that, though. The six girls who were taken all showed signs of great strength, which led me to believe they had been specifically targeted. For instance, Kennedy and Lena had been together, yet only Lena was taken. Kennedy's powers were weak. So the logical conclusion was the girls were taken for their value and not for some malicious witch-hunter sacrifice.

That was still horrible, but at least it meant the girls would be kept alive.

"Is there anything else?" Aidan asked.

I shot him a grateful look. I was as eager to be rid of his mother as he was.

"Yes." West gave me a level stare. "I want to talk to you about your mother."

I stared back at her, not quite sure how to respond. West not only had knowledge of my parentage, she was the one who'd arranged for Lloyd and Belinda—who I'd thought of as my grandparents until a few weeks ago—to raise me.

It had been surprisingly easy for me to shift to thinking of them in terms of their first names. We'd never been close. Three months after Belinda died of cancer, Lloyd had received a similar diagnosis and been given six months to live. He'd lasted three. I hadn't been there for that because by that point, West had swooped in again and arranged for me to live with Mike and Michelle.

But I still wasn't clear why she had done all that. Mike and Michelle had told me the council had planned to use two-year-

old me as leverage against Carly, but they hadn't known specifics. How cold-hearted did a person have to be to use a toddler as a bargaining tool? What had the council hoped to accomplish? And if they'd been successful, would they really have returned me to my monster of a mother? I wish I knew their end game.

I had so many questions that only West could answer—if she could be trusted to tell the truth.

Fat chance.

“Why?” It was the simplest question and the most pertinent. Even though I wanted answers to different questions, they weren't important at the moment. There would be time for those later.

“It can't be a coincidence that she showed up shortly before the girls were taken.”

That thought had crossed my mind as well. It made me even sicker to my stomach than the list of crimes my mother was accused of and the even longer list of her victims.

When I'd spoken to her, the relief and joy were evident in her voice. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to get in touch with me. It didn't make sense for her to jeopardize a possible reunion by taking Lena. She wasn't stupid—she had to know that would be a deal breaker for me.

Unless she's manipulating you, the devil on my shoulder taunted. A large dose of skepticism and distrust where Carly was concerned was prudent, but the little girl in me was desperate to believe her mother simply wanted to reconnect.

I know... totally messed up.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked.

No one knew I'd contacted her. Besides, I'd only talked to her for two minutes; I didn't have any more information than

I'd had before. I couldn't tell West anything she didn't already know.

Except I could easily contact Carly again. It took all my willpower to keep my eyes from darting over to where the phone was buried in my suitcase. Turning it over was the "right" thing to do, but nothing the council had done in the last few days—or *ever*, for that matter—convinced me they would use it to our advantage. I'd never been a fan of West's, and frankly, my fragile trust in her was shattered after learning she'd lied to me my entire life.

"Has she contacted you?" West asked.

"No." Technically, it wasn't a lie because I'd called her. But still, my face burned as I spoke the semi-truth. "Do you think she's involved?"

West paused. "Like I said, it's quite a coincidence she reappeared right before this happened."

Her vagueness told me what I suspected—the council and the investigating guardians were grasping at straws. Carly's reappearance made her an easy suspect.

"That's why it doesn't make sense for it to be her," I said slowly. "Why would she show herself right before she planned to pull this off?"

"Maybe she didn't intend to be seen," West countered.

Aidan shifted. "She didn't do a great job of disguising herself at the movie theater."

"Maybe she's out of practice." West sounded exasperated.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I think she wanted to be seen."

"Why?" Michelle peered at me suspiciously. Despite her distraught state, her motherly something's-up radar must have been wailing.

Carefully keeping my expression neutral, I once again forced myself not to look toward the hidden phone. I couldn't answer the question without giving away my secret, which I wasn't willing to do. Not wanting to outright lie, I shrugged.

West stood, a clear signal the conversation was done. "You two didn't know Carly," she said, looking at Aidan and me. Her tone was dismissive. "Don't presume to understand her motives."

And you do? I wanted to fire back. If the council's file on Carly was any indication, *no one* knew or understood her—no one still alive anyway.

"I'm sure if Carly tries to contact Sophie, she'll let us know." Mike looked at me. "Right?"

"Of course."

Michelle exchanged a concerned look with Mike. I hoped my comments defending Carly in a roundabout way hadn't worried her. I didn't have misplaced devotion—it was logic. Also, I didn't want guardians wasting time investigating dead ends. Carly wasn't a dead end, but not in the way they thought. She had contacts and resources the council didn't. Or God, at least I hoped she did.

My mind was already scheming to find a way to be alone so I could contact her again. Carly had once been an elemental criminal mastermind. Sure, she'd been out of the elemental public eye for the last fifteen years, but guardians who were supposedly on top of all the latest intel had come up empty. Carly had managed to track me down, so she still had some skills.

I glanced at Aidan, my instinct telling me to seek out his help, but his closed-off expression kicked my instinct to the curb. He'd already made it perfectly clear he wanted nothing to

do with me. Michelle's mama-bear tendency wouldn't let me contact Carly, and Mike would side with his wife.

I was on my own. And it was time to confront my mommy issues head-on.