

## A HIDDEN ELEMENT

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<http://www.ElementTrilogy.com>

FIRST EDITION Kindle ebook

Imajin Books - <http://www.imajinbooks.com>

Summer 2014

ISBN: 978-1-927792-

Cover designed by Ryan Doan — <http://www.ryandoan.com>

### **Praise for A HIDDEN ELEMENT**

"Chilling and dark...a twisty journey into another world."—J.T. Ellison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When Shadows Fall*

"Fascinating...a haunting story..."—Rebecca Cantrell, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The World Beneath*

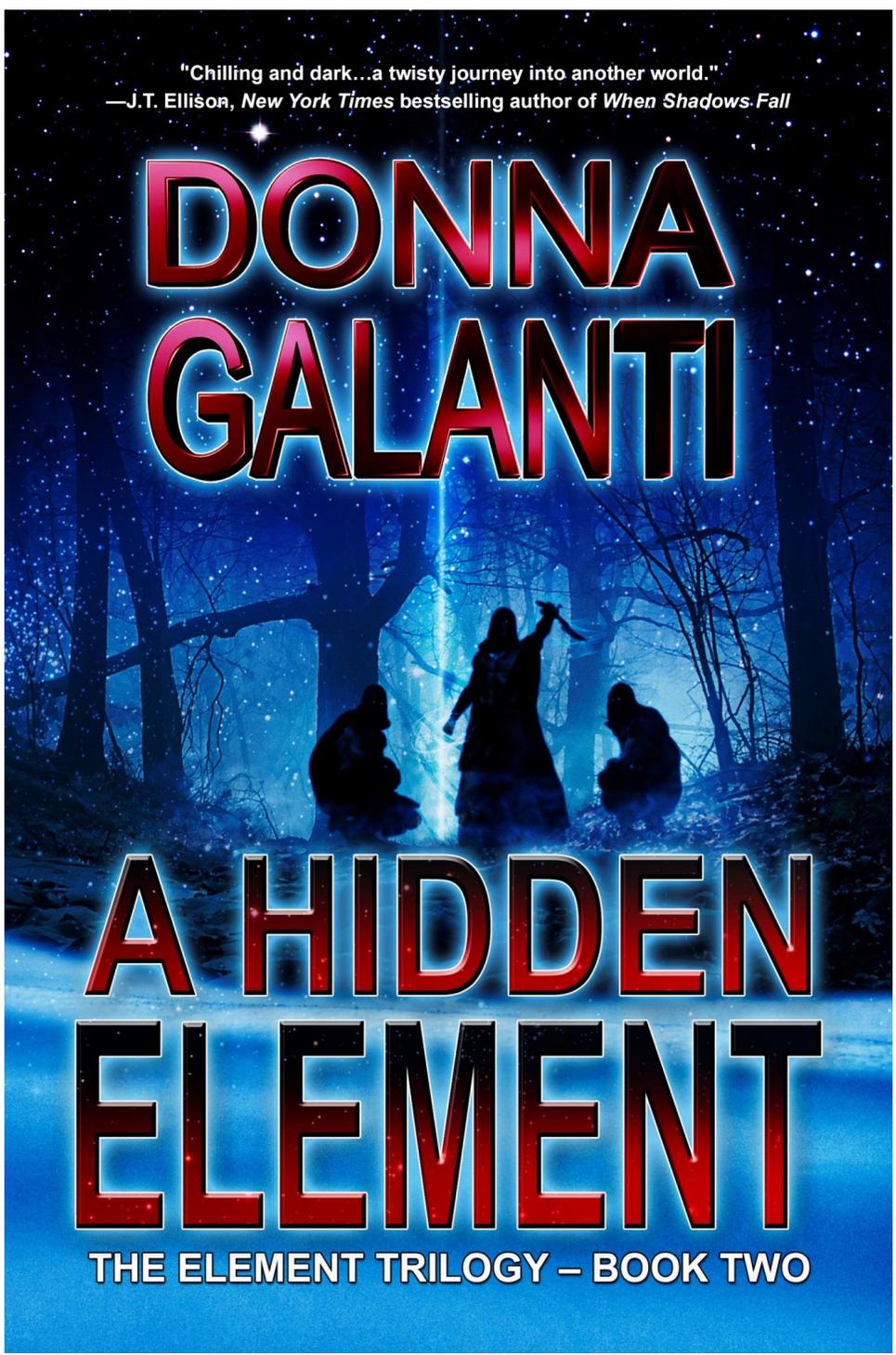
"Will keep you up long past your bedtime...a pulse-pounding read."  
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"Chilling and dark...a twisty journey into another world."  
—J.T. Ellison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When Shadows Fall*

# DONNA GALANTI

A dark, atmospheric forest scene at night. The background is a deep blue with a starry, ethereal glow. In the center, three silhouetted figures are visible: one standing in the middle, holding a staff or wand, and two kneeling on either side. The overall mood is mysterious and chilling.

# A HIDDEN ELEMENT

THE ELEMENT TRILOGY – BOOK TWO

## CHAPTER 1: The Beginning

Silent dark hung under a star-filled sky.

The dark deepened as they headed into the forest. Ancient conifers towered over them, blocking out the moon. Rain fell cold and lifeless. The nearest town of Benevolence, Oregon, was five miles northwest.

Caleb Madroc's father stood across from him, waiting for his people to gather their belongings. Their pale faces glowed like orbs within gray hooded robes as they waited for his father's instruction.

"We head toward town," his father ordered. Caleb opened his mouth, but there were no words for his feelings of anger and loss at suddenly leaving the only home he'd ever known. It raged inside him, a tumult of emotion he must quell for now. At least his own black hair, like his face, was a constant reminder of his mother to his father. This made him glad.

Caleb shut his mouth and nodded, stepping in behind his father. Rain fell cold and lifeless. He fell behind as he helped the womenfolk with their bags. One young female sent him a furtive, desperate look as she touched his hand in passing.

*I'm so scared. What will happen to us?*

He smiled at her. *Keep your thoughts to yourself. It's safer this way. All will work out once we settle.* She bit her lip, her eyes full of tears, and nodded looking back down at her feet.

"Father, how much further? Some of the younger females are struggling," Caleb said.

His father's eyes stung him through the mist rising up from the forest floor. They were eyes so different from his, and from his mother's. Caleb had often seen sadness and pity for his father in his mother's eyes. The day he had found her dead in the well her eyes held only nothingness.

"Can't we stop and rest, Adrian?" A few in the group grumbled. They looked wet and tired, a sea of gray flowing before him. His father glowered at their weakness. As Caleb scanned the sodden crowd a female smiled at his father, holding the promise of submission. Perfect for his father, who wanted to breed another son to take his place. A worthy son.

"We do not stop." His father's voice rose over the line of people before him, and he smiled back at the female and a strange sense of relief washed over Caleb. If his father did create a new prodigal son to groom it might remove his first born from his watchful eye.

With that thought, anguish over his mother's absence hit him fresh again. At eighteen and bigger than his father, he still needed his mother. She had been his kindred spirit, like Uncle Brahm. But now he was alone in this strange place. No longer did he have someone to be his true self with. He must step carefully.

His father continued to scan his flock. They stood still and silent, conveying their subservience. He nodded, apparently satisfied with their response. "You all took the oath to come here. Hard work lies before us in breeding our new community. Understood?"

They nodded in a collective wave.

*Just like you bred with Aunt Manta while your wife lay dead?* Caleb spewed out in his head without thinking.

His father moved closer, until his flaring nostrils touched his. Caleb stepped back, but his father gripped his arm. Dozens of eyes watched their battle.

*Do not ever mention my brother's wife's name again, Son.*

His father's fingers pinched him hard and his hot breath pulsed across his face, but Caleb couldn't stop. *Mother's dead because of you. And what about Aunt Manta? Did you kill her, too?*

*I didn't kill anyone. And your mother should have been more careful.*

*You let her travel alone. She fell and died because she was alone.*

*It was your well, Caleb, she fell into. Your hideaway you carelessly covered up. Your fault.*

His father's accusations stabbed him with painful truth. He sucked in his breath. *My fault. Yes. My fault.*

He looked around the watchful crowd as his head reeled with the agony of what he had done. His people stared back at him, their thoughts hid behind blank faces. Why did they come? Didn't they have dreams and wants and needs of their own, too? Or were they all obedient drones of his father?

His father thrust his arm away and turned around, plunging faster through the woods. Caleb hesitated then followed behind, trying to keep up. He envisioned himself standing still until everyone glided around him, leaving him to remain alone under a watchful moon.

Branches snagged his robe shooting him back to reality. His father's people followed in silence. If they didn't obey there would be consequences. As Caleb knew. He had no special privilege here as Adrian's son.

At last his father stepped out onto a paved road. It stretched far into the distance, where welcoming lights beckoned them across the final mile. They reached the main intersection of town. A car flashed by. A radio blared. Faces stared out at them. He stared back. They were so different from himself and yet...not.

He broke his gaze realizing how out of place this group looked late at night. The people here wore jeans and shirts, the shapes of their bodies outlined under tight clothes. The female's curves called to him, unlike his people who clothed themselves in shapeless robes to discourage free sexual thoughts. They were now to breed only with those chosen for them.

His father led them single file down the sidewalk. A handful of people sat behind windows drinking. They pointed at them as they walked by. "Gillian's Bar" flashed in neon green above the doorway in the late evening hours. A man and woman, heading into the bar, stepped back from the sidewalk to watch them pass. *Freaks*, he heard the man say. And his father erased the memory of the encounter from these strangers' minds in the seconds it took to pass them.

"Father," Caleb whispered in his ear. "Where are we going?"

A large building rose at the far end of a parking lot. "Ray's Lots" blinked over and over.

“Here is where we go.”

A woman pushed a cart filled with bags to her car, the only car left in the lot. She stopped and stared at them. Her hair framed her face in tight curls. A blue and white striped dress strained to contain her breasts and belly.

“Good evening, brothers,” she said with a hesitant smile.

His father motioned for them to stop. He smiled at her. She smiled back.

“Good evening, madam,” his father drawled.

“God bless you.” She grabbed his father’s hand. Caleb swallowed a laugh at the way his father looked at her with such a serious, doting face.

“And God bless you, my child.”

“What church are you with?” The woman fingered a cross at her neck. “Are you having an event in town?”

His father had said a church was the perfect cover. One of the many cultural ways learned before infiltration. All part of his father’s master plan.

“It’s the Church of Elyon,” his father said.

The woman took her hand away and frowned. “Never heard of it. You’re not one those crazy cults are you?”

Caleb stepped to his father’s side. *Let me work her mind, Father.* “What’s your name, Madam?”

“Sally.”

“I’m Caleb Madroc.” He shook her hand hoping his father didn’t have some depraved mission in mind. Caleb wanted to get food for their hungry group and shelter and have as little interaction with these town people as possible. “We’re simple folks. Our bus broke down outside of town. We seek food and a place to stay nearby. Can you help us?”

“What a nice young man you are. Of course I can help you.” She abandoned her cart and pulled Caleb toward the store. “My cousin runs this store and can stock you up with food. And the Mercenary Motel is down the street.”

He didn’t understand her eagerness as she dragged him along then it was made clear by his father’s mirthful laugh. His father had probed her mind and now controlled it—she would do whatever he commanded.

Caleb followed her into the store. Their people streamed in behind. Sally dragged him to a counter where a short red-faced man scowled at them. “Ray, these folks are here in town from a wonderful church. Their bus broke down and they need food.”

Within seconds Ray’s frown changed to a wide grin as Caleb’s father continued his mind games. “Come in, come in. Time to close up anyhow.” He flicked the sign on the front door and shut off the lights outside.

“Thank you,” his father said. “I need food here for my flock before we find a place to stay.”

“Help yourself to anything you want.” Ray ran his hands over shelves. “Pretzels, baked beans, cereal, Ding Dongs. We even sell the word of the Lord.” Sally and Ray beamed at them.

His father directed everyone to gather food and drinks. Sally and Ray stood by the counter, their minds blank except for what his father put into them. He dared not combat his father's powers. Not here. Not now. But someday.

"Ray, I need all your money now," his father said.

Ray clapped his hands together. "Of course." He pulled money from a nearby metal box.

When his father's bag burst full of items he handed it to a community member and cocked his head at Ray and Sally. "Time to go now, my new friends." He motioned his people out the door. Ray and Sally stood with stupid smiles on their faces as the group filed out into the parking lot. All, except his father.

"Come on, Father," Caleb pleaded, the dark knot in his stomach hardened. "Our job here is done."

"Not quite." His father moved toward the smiling cousins, a book in his hand. *The Holy Bible*. He thumbed through it to a passage and looked up smiling. "As for God, his way is perfect, is it not?"

"The word of God is true," Sally sang out, clutching Ray's hand. Her cousin nodded.

"Ray, isn't Sally lovely? Look at her." His father pointed at the heavy set woman.

Ray turned to Sally. His pants bulged and Sally's eyes widened. She tugged on her dress top.

"Have your way with her Ray, you know you want to."

"Father," Caleb whispered, clutching at him but his father stayed his hand.

Ray licked his lips and nodded.

"Sally, unzip your fine dress and show Ray what you've got."

Sally stepped out of her dress in a motion more fluid than one would have thought possible given her size. Her belly oozed over her thighs and her bra cut into her mountainous breasts. Ray panted, tapping his hands against his skinny legs.

Caleb moved toward the door.

"Stay, Son, I want you to watch this."

"I won't."

"You *will* or you know what will happen."

Caleb stopped and sighed, looking down at the floor. Eyes watched from the parking lot.

"Look."

Caleb focused on the dirt in the floor cracks. His muscles twitched with anger. His father thrived on his hate, wanted him to hate—wanted his son to be a Destroyer like him. They had hidden their true selves for so long and now were free here to unleash it. Not Caleb. He refused to give in to the dark inside. He tried to release the hate for his father, but it now filled his every pore. He made a vow right then and there, he'd never allow himself to be controlled. No matter the consequences.

He finally looked up. His father nodded, pleased, and turned back to his playthings. Ray massaged his crotch. Sally moaned, squeezing her mammoth breasts, and stepped out of her underwear.

“Take her, Ray. Bend her right over the counter. Dive into all her lushness.”

“Lush, yes.” Ray moved toward Sally, fumbling to unbuckle his pants. She squealed with glee and bent over the counter to receive him, her white bottom rising like a pitted sea of blubber. Ray mounted her, forged a path through her two white mountains, and slapped up against her in his glory.

“Lordy, Lordy,” Sally sang out as she bounced up and down.

“Now that’s wholesome entertainment.” His father jabbed him. Caleb jerked away. “They’re both enjoying it.”

Caleb clenched his fists and shoved them in his pockets. “Can we go now?”

“Yes, Son, only one more thing to do.”

His father pulled out something that looked like a handle. He flicked it open to reveal a small knife he must have picked up in the hardware section. He placed it next to Ray on the counter. Sweat flicked off the red-faced man’s forehead as he plunged into buttery flesh.

“Ray, enjoying yourself?”

Ray grunted and grabbed on to Sally’s hips, sinking into her expanse. She moaned again in delight as her buttocks shuddered.

“Good. When you’re done fucking, kill the bitch.”

His father strode out the door, pulling Caleb along with him.

“Father, no.” Caleb struggled against him as his father shoved him hard through the door. Caleb spiraled his thoughts into Ray’s brain. *Stop, Ray! She’s your cousin, your family!*

Ray stopped his thrusting as if listening to Caleb, but his father’s punch to his face ended his brain probe. Caleb staggered back, blood gushing from his nose. Ray straightened his head and rammed into Sally with a loud groan. Caleb drew his hand back but his father’s fingers crushed his forearm. He fell to his knees. Blood spattered down his gray robe. The flock widened their circle, silent and watching. His father led as both law maker and enforcer.

“These lowly forms of life must be controlled,” his father said. “We’ve studied their ways. Now, this first act is how we begin their demise and our rule. We will grow in number with our selected breeding and thrive as these useless beings die out. Watch this historic moment, Son, for anyone who turns away will be marked weak...and unworthy.”

All eyes turned to the inside of the store as the desperate carnal scene played out to the end.

“I hate you,” Caleb whispered, watching the forced lovers before him.

His father smiled at him in satisfaction.

Ray arched his back with a moan and finished his business. Sally squealed and pressed up against him. And when Ray raised his knife and plunged into Sally in new ways, she squealed again. And again. Her blood ran onto scuffed tiles and still she squealed. And then she stopped.

Tears filled Caleb’s eyes and he closed them against the evil scene.

His father laughed. “Don’t you see, Son?” He shook *The Holy Bible* at him. “I am their Way, their Truth, their Life—and Death.”

Caleb did not answer. He remained inside his dark prison and swore someday he would end his father’s rule.

## CHAPTER 2: Seven years later

Laura Fieldstone eased herself up from the rocking chair. She bumped into the lamp. Lately, her belly poked out everywhere. She stretched, feeling the pain. Her back ached from sitting all day, but she had a deadline to get this book written before the baby came. It was the final one in a series of three. She would send it off to her editor and then take a long break.

She needed a break from the headaches that had returned. She couldn't tell Ben. He would worry, and she tried not to worry herself. Having a baby at forty was much harder than at twenty six. Her body *felt* older as this baby strained within her. This baby, who took her unaware fourteen years after having Charlie. Long after Ben had a vasectomy.

Ben joked that one snuck through. Her doctor said it did happen, but her natural mother's adamant belief she had been a virgin filled Laura's mind as her belly grew. No one had believed her mother, and yet it had been true. Surreal. Had her baby also been created from someone other than the man she loved? When she allowed herself to wonder that awful reality she shoved the thoughts down deep inside. They were too horrific to define. *This child is mine and Ben's. We created him in love.* She said it to herself like a mantra as if to seal it in truth.

And so this baby grew inside her. A baby who kicked so much it seemed he wanted to break free early into the world. He stormed violently inside her. Would he be violent when he arrived? *No.* Their baby was perfect. Like Charlie had been. On the outside at least. She had seen the ultrasound. But what would he be like on the inside?

The thought of what her baby *could be* twisted in her like a sickness. During those times Ben held her and whispered calming things in her ear. There's only good inside you, he'd say. Our son will be fine, just like our Charlie. There is too much love in this house for anyone to grow up evil, he'd say.

Like her twin had. Like this child could be.

Sometimes Ben laid her down on the bed and showed her in sweet ways how everything was all right. They still drew fire from one another after fifteen years. She laughed. She was eight months pregnant and Ben still touched her with his flames. Even at fifty-one he couldn't get enough of making love to his very pregnant wife. But Charlie could be home any moment now from school, and that spiked her worry about him again.

She eased her anxiety by picking up the first children's book she had ever published, and rubbed her fingers over the cracked cover of a blue pony riding across the sky. *Big Brave Blue*. He was a flying pony who lived in the clouds. His colors blended into the sky and even as a runt he flew faster than any other pony, but he grew up lonely. His size and color separated him from his world's orange herd of giant ponies, but he had an advantage besides speed. He could blend into the sky making it hard for their enemy, the Dragon Beasts, to catch him when they plundered their land.

And when he faced the Dragon Beast leader and killed him in battle to save his herd, his own kind looked at him in a different light. When others like him were born, the herd realized they were evolving into an improved species, and they called upon tiny Blue to lead them into their new future.

She could hear Charlie's voice. *Again, Mommy. Read it again.* And she did. And then he would tug on her sleeve and quote his favorite line. *Being big doesn't mean you're brave—only big of heart does. Am I big of heart, Mommy, like Big Brave Blue?* She would look down at his little head and breathe his baby smell and say, *the biggest heart of all, Charlie.*

That was before he'd discovered his differences. Now her heart ached for him most days as he faced the bullies who saw them, too.

She peered out the bay window. The water raged rough across the Sound today. Waves ripped up and pounded toward land, a watery creature bent on blind destruction. The wind creaked through their ranch house. Wild and primordial and unfettered. Some days it called to her. It filled her with a deep yearning for something she didn't understand. On those days she felt unsettled, waiting for something, anything to happen. She wished to be the wild wind at times, unbound and free. The wind taunted and beckoned her at the same time. It's why she loved living on Puget Sound.

She had fallen in love with the grandness of Washington State. A place different from the Northeast where she came from, which held memories of her peaceful childhood. A place where she and Ben met. It had also been a place of horrific times. Of losing her parents, her friends, and nearly Ben. Their home now, in being so different, helped her forget her past.

She thought living across the country in Oregon was far enough to forget. It was home. She had persuaded Ben to stay on the west coast. His photography assignments allowed him to live anywhere, as did her author lifestyle. And they could leave behind their violent past that had flung them together. Close enough to be home. Far enough away to forget.

Today though, she urged the wind away. She had things to do before the baby came and didn't want to become lost in restlessness. Where *was* Charlie? She peered out the back door into the woods that their house backed up to. She hoped he hadn't taken a detour through the woods from school. She wished he took the bus. He spent too much time in the woods alone, as she had as a child.

The woods stretched deep for miles. A person could get lost in them. Or die in them.

Perhaps the wind blew a yearning in her son as well and the woods provided him comfort. She couldn't take this from him, not with the burdens he carried. Someday she would tell him the true meaning behind his abilities. But not yet. She wanted him to be old enough to handle it—and not let it destroy him.

*There.* Charlie's tall figure strode from the woods, hunched over. Taller than his father, he tried to hide his height. Being 6' 5" at fourteen was a physical trait that made him a target ripe for teasing. Not to mention his other features. She waved at him, but he didn't wave back. He put his head down and slowed his walk to the house. *Now what?*

Laura rubbed her belly and opened the door for him.

"Charlie, I was getting worried," Laura said. "You went to the woods after school, didn't you?" She looked down at his muddy knees, wondering what he had been doing out there this time.

He nodded but didn't look up, just shuffled in the door. She sensed his sadness, frustration, and anger. She wondered what he was thinking, but he seemed to have an innate ability to cloak his thoughts. Did she really want to know all the wild ideas that went through a fourteen year old boy's mind? Ben told her definitely not.

"What's wrong?" Laura hugged his waist from behind at an angle.

"That jerk, Brian, at school, that's what's wrong."

He turned around and set his backpack on the deacon's bench by the door. When he looked at Laura she gasped.

"Charlie, what happened?" His left eye had a cut above it and his lip swelled on one side next to a darkening bruise on his cheek. He shoved his hands in his pockets, but Laura pulled them out and sighed over his scraped knuckles. She pulled him to the sink and ran cool water over his hands, smoothing away the dried blood.

His nail-less fingers stretched long and thick in her small ones. Her pink painted orbs stood out in sharp contrast to his flesh-like pads. How she wished his nails had never fallen off as a newborn. He flexed his fingers and pulled away from her then plunked his large frame down on the bench. Legs and arms spewed everywhere like Bambi on ice. His silver white hair had streaks of mud in it. She got a clean dish rag and wet it, pressing it gently to the cut over his eye. He grabbed it from her. She saw flecks of blood on his shirt and hoped it was his.

"I'm okay, Mom," he said then blew out a big breath. "Didn't mean to grab."

Laura sat down next to him. "Tell me."

"I came out of study hall and ran right into Brian with his gang. He called me a Fieldstone freak and said I belonged in the Guinness Book of World Records. Giant albino pod-man. It's his newest nickname for me." Charlie stretched his long fingers out wide.

Laura took his hand. "You have beautiful fingers. They're—"

"No, Mom, they're not." Charlie snatched his hand away and held it up to her face. "I *am* albino pod-man. Look at me."

"I don't think so." She touched his hair. "Your dad doesn't think so."

"Yes he does. He thinks I'm a freak."

"He does *not* think you're a freak. He loves you."

"I heard him with you. He said I'm not normal and I'll never fit in."

Laura wished for the thousandth time Charlie had never heard their conversation. It had been late at night and they had no idea Charlie had been passing by their room then. Words to sting for a lifetime.

"He didn't mean it in the way you think, Charlie. He just doesn't want you to have a hard life."

"Whatever." He turned away and crossed his arms.

“We can do the surgery, Charlie.”

“Like Dad wants me to have? Then everyone will know I have artificial nails on me, like I’m a girl or something.”

“That we can change. Your hair color we can change. Your height we can’t. Someday you’ll be glad to be tall.”

“Someday can’t come soon enough.” He sighed. She moved beside him and touched his hand again. This time he didn’t pull away.

His teen years loomed long in front of him. How she wished she could make it better for him. Make all kids fair and nice. Sometimes she wanted to tell Charlie to pummel Brian, but she had to be the grown up and maintain self-control. It was the core of everything she taught her son.

“So then what happened?”

“He had an accident, sort of.” Charlie smirked and bent his head.

“Accident? Really?” Laura crossed her arms and leaned back into the bench. Her belly ached, muscles pulling from all directions to hold up the weight she bore. One more month she had to get through.

“Okay, it wasn’t an accident but I’ve had enough of him, Mom!” Charlie stood up and banged on the kitchen table with a sharp *crack*.

Laura frowned at him. “Remember what happened the last time you got so angry. You smashed the lawn mower to smithereens and it cost you all the money saved up to buy a new one.”

“*Self-control*. I know, Mom.” Charlie leaned up against the kitchen counter. “Sorry. Sometimes I get so mad. I hate having to control it. It’s not fair.”

“I understand, but you know what your strength can do. You didn’t use it against Brian today, did you?”

“I tried not to.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t do it to someone on purpose.”

Laura believed him, but she wondered if the ‘tried not to’ would result in a phone call soon from Brian’s mom. Charlie was a good kid at heart, sensitive to hurting others. He didn’t want the strength that came with his powers. Laura never spoke of them as powers to Charlie though. She called them genetic anomalies. It softened them.

She told him they were part of an anger syndrome. His outbursts often triggered them, and Laura used this as a reason. Their pediatrician agreed and said Charlie had some anger tendencies and gave him techniques to combat them. His nail defects were explainable. Ectodermal dysplasia. A condition where a child is born with nail defects or no nails at all. But that’s not what he had.

Some kids would have liked Charlie’s abilities. Not Charlie. He hated being strong like a bully. He hated kids who teased. He never teased. He wanted to treat everyone the same way he wanted to be treated. He acted older in so many ways but immature as any teen. Laura never knew when he might exhibit maturity or immaturity. Right now she had the feeling the immature part was about to be revealed.

“So?” Laura raised her eyebrows at him.

“Well, his pants must have been too baggy as they kind of...fell off him in the hallway, in front of all these girls. He tried to pick them up but somehow his shoes got tied together and he fell over. Those tighty-whities mooned everyone. So sad.”

“Charlie.” Laura tried to sound angry as she overcame the urge to laugh.

Charlie shrugged. “Mom, come on. It was too funny. I’m sick and tired of him picking on me. He teased me last week for wearing tighty-whities in the locker room and now everyone knows he wears them, too. Besides, I didn’t hit him or anything.” He stopped smiling and looked down. “Well, not then anyways.”

“What did you do, Charlie?” Laura was afraid to know. The memory flickered of their cat, Romeo, and an overenthusiastic five year old Charlie who liked to hug. Only he didn’t know what his hugs could do. They buried Romeo in the backyard and told Charlie it wasn’t his fault, but it didn’t make Laura cry any less. She had loved that cat. There were no more pets from then on.

“He said I pantsed him and—”

“You did.”

“Yes, but then he said he’d get me after school, so I thought I’d avoid him and take the woods home instead of the bus—”

“And because you wanted to let off some steam, right?”

“Yeah, okay. But not *at* anyone. I wanted to feel better. Not so...angry.” He gripped the counter and bit his lip. “But Brian didn’t take the bus either, he followed me. Him and his stupid friends. He hit me first, Mom.”

“I believe you.”

“I let him hit me. I told myself he’s inconsequential, like you told me to think. I *did*. I tried to keep on walking and ignore him, but then the others started hitting me. It wasn’t fair. Three of them against one.” He clenched his fist, looked at it, and shoved it in his pocket. “I laughed at Brian and told him he’s irrelevant.”

Laura suppressed a smile.

“He didn’t even know what it meant. What a dummy. So I told him to go find a dictionary. He hit me again and I hit him back. I tried to do it light, I swear, but—”

“But what? What did you do, Charlie?”

“I think I broke his nose.” He blew out a giant breath. “Blood came out everywhere. I didn’t know a nose had so much blood in it.”

“Oh, Charlie.” Laura stood up, pressing a hand to her back, and walked over to him.

“I hate myself.” She took his strong hands. He stood tall over her with a child’s heart trapped in man’s body.

“Don’t say that. I love you. Dad loves you.”

“Why am I like this, Mom? I don’t want to be *special*, okay?” He pulled his hands away. “I didn’t want to hit him. I swear. You can have a doctor make me fingernails and toenails. Can a doctor make me normal, too? Take away these things I can’t control?”

He jerked away from Laura and got a drink from the fridge. The phone rang. Laura sighed. It could only be one person.

Brian’s mother.

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