

A HUMAN ELEMENT

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DONNA GALANTI



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THE ELEMENT TRILOGY – BOOK ONE

CHAPTER 1: 1979

Ben Fieldstone jumped over the rotted log at the edge of Coopersville Lake. A short lifetime of summers told him it was there. He could barely see it in the moonlight. He kicked sticks and stones from his path with the toes of his red Pro Keds. He wasn't going back. He'd stay in the dark woods all night if he had to. He wasn't taking clarinet lessons this year. Every summer vacation here his parents pressured him to learn a musical instrument. Not this year.

He didn't understand his parents when it came to many things, and tonight was proof. His mom and dad didn't understand him either.

He swatted at a mosquito. Through the trees, the last hint of orange glazed the surface of the lake. Its smooth surface didn't fool him. The water still rippled at the edge like a giant mouth. It stuck out its tongue over and over for another taste. A heavy darkness layered the woods to his left and he made sure he stuck to the rough trail hugging the water's edge. There were no cabins on this side of the lake, and he walked on looking behind him to see where his cabin was. It appeared so far away. He could barely make out its shape.

Something crackled behind him. He stopped and held his breath, listening, but heard nothing more than laughter skidding across the water from the other side of the lake. The lights of two dozen cabins speckled the edge of the water. They eased his fear. *Jeez, it was freezing.* He pulled his sweatshirt tighter around him. These August nights sure got cool. Would his parents discover that he ran away soon? He hugged himself tighter. Now that he was nine and a half his parents would have to take his opinions more seriously.

He resumed walking and pulled his sweatshirt up over his mouth to get warm, just like he'd do on the soccer bench back home. Avery called it his turtle look. She'd reach out and tap his 'cute nose' then run away with a giggle. She was annoying because she talked all the time, but tonight he missed her chatter. In two more weeks, when school started, he'd see Avery again.

He looked up through the dark silhouette of trees across the lake. They stretched toward the sky. Stars winked back at him. Perhaps it was cold up there, too, in the dark. He bet it would be quiet there too, without parents to boss him or Avery to blather on. Among the stars. That would be a good place to hide away from his parents. They'd never find him there.

He recognized the Big Dipper low in the sky, and followed its stars upward to where it connected to the Little Dipper. Could a boy live in them alone? It would be more fun with a friend. Maybe with Avery, even though she talked a lot. They could jump from star to star on the Big Dipper like stones in a creek. They might explore the sky all night and when the sun rose, they could sleep in the warmth of its light.

A blast of green broke through his dreamy thoughts. It sliced the night in two. A bright streak barreling toward the earth. He stood, mesmerized. A meteorite? He had just learned about them in school. It grew larger and larger. A

fiery ball. In his excitement, he forgot he had run away. He couldn't wait to get back to the cabin and tell his parents. He jumped around and trotted back along the shoreline. The green light grew larger. He tripped over a rock and fell sideways into the thick brush.

And then something so frightening happened he decided to stay where he was. The moon disappeared. A green brilliance lit up the lake up like a sunrise switched on too soon. Ben shielded his eyes from the light and staggered up to get a better view. He knew a second of terror before an explosion flattened him unconscious.

He awoke facedown. Faint noises bounced around the lake. The smell of burning wood filled his nose with an acrid, dry smell. Sirens shrieked. He stretched his head up and spat out pebbles and broken sticks jammed into his mouth. He spit and spit again, coughing out dirt.

He pulled himself up in pain. His face and hands bled from being slammed into the earth. The quiet realm of the small lake community roared to life with fire and shouts. Where there should have been dotted cabin lights there spread only blackness.

A burning metal smell struck his burning lungs. It *must* be a meteorite. Smoke obscured everything and he couldn't orient himself. Where was their cabin? It was gone. Ben ran toward where home had been. He fell many times and reached for close branches along the trail for support. As he struggled to make the trek back, a mixture of shouts and fire engine horns echoed around the lake. Cabin fires leaped into the woods, fed by the dry August timber. Tongues of flame stabbed out of cabin windows and licked at the rooftops.

Ben ran on, toward where his cabin should have been. In the middle of the blackness, steam rose like the underground coal fire he'd seen on the news. He met up with the others. Fathers and mothers carried crying children. Their fearful shouts swelled in the air around him. They called out to him but he ignored them and continued his pace.

He reached the black abyss and stopped running. His breath spewed erratic clouds in the cold air. The smell here grew stronger than he could stand and he vomited on some rocks. He straightened up after he had nothing left to retch. Before him, a crater the width of his school's soccer field had eaten everything in its path. Steam rose in shoots from the ravaged earth and small fires around its edge illuminated the area. Between these fires, people held their hands over their mouths as they looked down into its depth.

The fire now engulfed half of the mountaintop in a soaring billow of orange light greedily devouring the earth. When the fire engines stopped, the cries of people who had lost their loved ones or houses rose up like the flames. Where a dozen cabins had been now steamed a black mass. In one dying gasp of hope, Ben sought to reorient but he was sure—this was where his parents' cabin had been. They could not have survived. This dark thing had crushed them.

Ben kneeled at the edge of the crater by the water and cried. He was just a boy covered in dirt and blood who wanted to tell his parents he was sorry for running away. Someone put a blanket around his shoulders, but he couldn't be comforted.

His world had ended that summer night of 1979.

The night he had daydreamed about jumping from star to star along the Big Dipper.

CHAPTER 2: 1980

The girl screamed in delirium as she lay on the raised bed twisting the stiff, starched sheets under her. A stain of sweat and blood spread below her shaking legs. A musky smell hung in the air. Outside the rain streamed down in a torrential rush, beating a tinny rhythm on the windows of the back room of the small medical office.

Doctor Britton's right hand slid inside the girl up to his wrist as he pushed down on her monstrous belly. She screamed until her strength gave up and then trailed off into ragged whimpers.

"The head is turned. Get me the forceps," he yelled to the nurse. The nurse identified the instrument from the table near her and placed it in Doctor Britton's outstretched hand. In all his years as a doctor, he had never seen a woman work so hard to expel a baby.

He tried not to think about the nameless man who waited outside for this baby. The government man in charge told Doctor Britton he must deliver the child as scheduled and his job would be done. But for now, he must stay in this steaming room filled with sweat and blood and screams. It gnawed into his stomach and burned deep in his head. How he wished he could grab the bottle of whiskey from the next room.

Doctor Britton glanced at the nurse who stood from a distance. He could tell she wanted no connection with this one. He too had heard the rumors about how the girl said she had never been with a man. But who could believe that coming from a runaway that showed up alone in town one day at the Methodist church? As time passed, it became evident why she ran away. It was decent of the Armstrongs, a childless couple in town, to hear of the girl's plight and take her in. The nurse must have read his thoughts as she moved closer.

"You're a lucky child," the nurse said. "Lucky those Armstrongs took you in with open hearts as God had intended. But God's help won't forgive your sins and blasphemy now, will it?"

The nurse shook her head. "Your sin is here. Tonight. Pushing its way out into the world. Isn't it?" She pinched the girl's arm. The girl moaned and tossed her head.

"Stop it," Doctor Britton demanded, disgusted with her religious idiocy.

He steeled himself as another scream wailed from the girl, who whipped her head back and forth on the narrow raised bed. He spread the girl's legs wider as he gently pressed the forceps onto the pulsing head pushing out from her. Blood gushed from the girl's pathetic body as it quaked. Her belly rose above her small frame rippling in an obscene dance like a fat man's beer gut that pushed proudly out. Overhead, the lights flickered as power lines swayed in the storm. Stark shadows rose and fell in a wave of menace from the room's corners.

The doctor prayed the lights would stay on and he harbored on, struggling to loosen the child trapped inside the small body. It was a good thing the girl remained half-unconscious. The girl and child would die if he couldn't pull this baby out soon. He focused on his mission and the birth canal. He blocked out the quivering being before him and the useless nurse standing her distance. Who was she to judge? They had both accepted this mission and the money promised to them in secrecy.

Guilt consumed him as he worked on this girl beneath him in this bloody, hot room. She struggled here, all alone in this world and tortured by her body's need to push out a baby far too large for her frame. He was glad she went into labor after midnight and showed up at his home office door, doubled over in pain. No one knew she came here, the girl had said, not even Fanny and Wesley Armstrong. They had been told a couple waited to adopt the child immediately following the birth. No one could know what really transpired.

He had not anticipated the girl's complications but had no intention of transporting her to Albany Medical Center to save her. He had to maintain possession of the child or he wouldn't be paid. He needed this money. He just hoped her fast labor would make her death more believable. Guilt tugged at him again.

Outside a drowning deluge of May showers beat down on the roof. Tree branches whipped at the room's windows. They scratched the glass over and over as if to claw their way in and entangle him in their punishing snare.

The slippery body inside the girl gave way in his hands. "It's coming!"

With her last bit of strength, the girl clutched Doctor Britton's coat. "Don't let me see it!"

He peeled her fingers from him with gloved hands, leaving her blood on his coat.

She smiled and closed her eyes. "But if it's girl...name her Laura."

"Sarah, you've got to push." Doctor Britton allowed himself to say her name for the first time that night. "Pull your legs up and bear down now." But the girl's eyes remained closed.

"Nurse, push her legs up further. We need to widen the birth canal."

The nurse hesitated. She didn't want to touch the girl.

"Now!"

The nurse pushed up on the girl's legs until Doctor Britton had the baby firm in his grasp. He pulled with care, suddenly wishing the girl would live. The amount of blood gushing between her legs suggested otherwise. The head stretched and ripped the girl with its savage size. In a sliding, silent whoosh, he pulled out the child.

"Oh, my God," the nurse whispered.

They stared at the boy he held in both hands. It must have weighed twelve pounds. Through the blood and mucus covering it, the child gleamed pale as the moon. The pulse throbbed through translucent veins with a life force so strong it had ruptured its way into the world. Its forehead was a bulbous mass protruding from a Neanderthal-like skull. Its nose and mouth spread wide across its deformed face. When Doctor Britton wiped the mucus from the eyes, the nurse gasped. What should have been a pale child's newborn blue was instead a pale yellow.

"It's the Devil himself," the nurse stammered. The lights in the room shone bright and dimmed again as if in agreement. "See, it's a sign!"

"Stop it. There's nothing here but a newborn baby with some abnormalities," Doctor Britton snapped. "Get him cleaned up and make the delivery." He cut the umbilical cord, tied it with deft hands, and passed the child to the shaking nurse. Its forehead shone like alabaster and it wailed as if already mourning the loss of being separated from its mother.

Doctor Britton turned back to his patient. After hours of thrashing about in pain and blood, she rested. He felt for a pulse and found none. Her chest no longer rose and fell. The blood that had pumped from her now dribbled at a slower rate. He would wait until he cleaned up to call the time of death. He got a fresh sheet to pull over her face but before he could do it, his gaze rested on the soft, peaceful face.

Sarah...oh, Sarah, he whispered to himself, while the baby wailed. He allowed himself to say her name again. Her damp hair draped around her young, narrow shoulders. Her slender hand drifted off the bed as if letting go of something precious. If they had only gotten her to a hospital in time for a cesarean operation, she might have had a chance.

But he would never be more than a poor country doctor unless he saw this assignment through. Still, he set his hand on her womb, that organ that time and time again amazed him with its capabilities. He was struck by the fact that this mother had been young enough to be his own daughter.

That's when he felt movement beneath his hand. He pulled it away, in shock, then felt again more purposefully.

"There's another one!" The nurse had just finished cleaning and wrapping the pale, deformed newborn, still showing off the capabilities of overdeveloped lungs. She jerked around at Doctor Britton's voice and almost dropped the child.

He had to work fast to deliver this other child who had remained hidden for so long. With an urgent need to preserve what life remained, he reached both hands inside the birth canal and pulled loose the remaining child. A girl. Small in size, not quite five pounds. Her enormous twin had taken over and hoarded the nourishment for himself. He immediately wanted to protect her. She squirmed in his hands. A perfect, normal baby in every way.

"Welcome, Laura."

She whimpered through her ruddy skin and wrinkled her smooth forehead where tufts of brown hair grew above. He laughed in delight and held her out toward the nurse. Even she looked less

arrogant by now.

"Just look," he said. "A perfect girl!" He cut and tied the umbilical cord and handed yet another crying baby to the nurse. "Clean her up quickly. We haven't much time."

As he finished cleaning up the still mother, his mind strayed far from the task at hand. He quickly devised a plan. He would deliver the boy to the man outside. Then, he would tell the Armstrongs Sarah died due to complications and that the adoptive parents changed their minds and weren't taking this baby girl. The Armstrongs need never know about the boy, and may want to keep the baby girl themselves. Being God-loving people, they would accept Sarah's fate. Sarah's daughter would console them.

His generous government benefactor need not know about the girl. One baby was expected, not two.

He smiled again as he finished his work over the young mother. Her vessel rested, now at peace. Her children would each find purpose in life. And he was satisfied God had given him a chance for redemption.

The man in black waited at the facility's back door holding an envelope and a small bundle wrapped in a ragged towel. His long coat kept his muscular girth dry from the storm's deluge. His wide-brimmed hat slung low over his jagged face, as water poured off its edge in a steady stream. This weather did not bother him. He waited patiently in the chilled spring night to deliver his packages and receive one in return. The door opened, spilling fluorescent light onto his feet. A plain-looking nurse held a crying bundle in her arms.

The man could hear the child's bellowing cries coming from underneath the blanket covering it. She pushed the child into his arms as if eager to be rid of it. He reached down and hung his head lower, to shield the bundle from the rain and his own face from the glaring light. He took the bundle and handed the nurse his packages. The nurse grabbed the envelope but quickly placed the lump on the ground as if the contents were distasteful. The nurse began to close the door when he heard another far away cry.

The man wedged his foot in the door.

"What was that?" He had to nearly shout over the din of the rain.

"Nothing." The nurse looked up.

The man risked looking her in the eye.

"The girl is in pain and won't keep quiet." She clutched the envelope and folded her arms across her sagging bosom.

"It sounded like another baby," he said.

"It's just the whimpering slut. Now she's paid double for what she's done."

The nurse took a step back as if aware she had said too much already. She glared at him. "Now go on. You have what you wanted. And so do I." She picked up the lump from the ground and shut the door in his face.

The man in black stood there for a long moment, considering the woman's choice of words. He was sure he had heard another baby. What if another child had been delivered and the frigid woman and country doctor kept it secret? *Fascinating*. He decided to keep this information to himself. He would find the opportune time to use it. He was a patient man.

But first, he had to see for himself.

He peeled back the child's bunting and looked for the first time into its yellow eyes. For that moment, the baby fell silent.

"Welcome to Earth X-10."

The baby resumed its wailing.

The man turned with his noisy package and melted into the darkness satisfied, as the doctor had been, that the night's events had provided him with more than he had asked for.

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