



TALENT CHRONICLES SHORT

Impulse Control

SUSAN BISCHOFF

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Obooko Edition

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Note from the author: I'm just a girl who wants superhero romance! Is that so much to ask? Why must it always be a tragedy? Why does Angel walk away? Why does Spike—what *did* happen to Spike? Why did Wonder Woman go back home after the end of season one and WWII, then come *back*, work with Steve Trevor's *grandson*, and *still* not hook up? Seriously! And let's not even talk about *Superman Returns*, ok? Let's. Just. Not.

The Talent Chronicles Series began with my desire for more superheroes! More romance! More Superhero!Romance. In my stories, I like to explore how the things that make us different can sometimes be the making of us. The Talents are kids born with a variety of supernatural abilities. Because not everyone can read minds or move things with their brains, the general population has become afraid of them, resulting in various legislations and a government agency which seeks to find and control them. Kids who are discovered to have these abilities are removed to government-run research and training facilities known as State Schools. That's where this story takes place...

Impulse Control
A Talent Chronicles Story
by Susan Bischoff

The natives were getting restless.

Natives?

Classmates?

Inmates.

My fellow inmates were getting restless. The class we were waiting for should have started two minutes ago. Doesn't seem like much, two minutes, but classes were always on time. Everything was always on time. And any deviation from routine generally meant some kind of trouble.

It was unusual for them to leave us unsupervised. Well, how unsupervised can you be with two cameras mounted in the room? But it was unusual not to have any NIAC—*National Institutes for Ability Control*—personnel physically there to eyeball us. I'd heard stories from kids who hadn't been at State School #15 as long as I had, who'd come from normal schools and normal lives on the outside. They said kids acted up at school sometimes, caused trouble just for the sake of causing trouble. Took the consequences just to get attention, or for the thrill of breaking rules and the possibility of escaping with no consequences at all.

It was hard to wrap my brain around that. But then, Detention doesn't mean the same thing to them. Out there.

My pencil snapped in my hand. *Damn.*

Ethan, Karen's voice soothed its way into my brain, *you need to relax. It's probably nothing.*

I glanced over to throw her a smile, reassure her that I was fine and not a danger to myself or others...except for the pencil. She was fiddling with her long, black hair, and while her mental voice was calm as ever, she couldn't hide the apprehension in her grey eyes.

Then those eyes flicked to Elle who, a moment later, turned in her seat and reached across the aisle toward me. I put the two pieces of the pencil in Elle's hand. She closed her fist around it, opened her hand, and I retrieved my pencil, good as new, from her palm. My fingers brushed her skin

and I felt a tingle all the way up my arm. I had to clear my throat to whisper “Thanks,” at her. I doubt she heard me. I barely heard me. She was already facing front, and I was looking at her honey-brown braid again.

You know what you learn when you can read minds?
Karen “asked.”

I heaved a heavy mental sigh. *Lots of things that aren't your business, I'd imagine.*

Boys are idiots.

Don't you have anyone else to pick—?

They're coming.

The door opened and three people entered the room. One was the armed guard who would stand in the corner and look bored the entire time our instructor was in the room. One was the instructor for this class. The class was called Mental Defense, but the instructor had never told us his name. Lots of NIAC personnel didn't give us their names. We called him Sir. The third was a guy about the same age as Karen and me.

He was on the tall side, pale and really skinny, and his hair was cropped so close to his scalp you could hardly tell what color it was. Brown, I guessed. He walked kind of strangely, one foot dragging a little with each step. The instructor didn't tell him to take a seat. As the kid stood at the front of the room, it seemed he had a tick that caused his head to tilt to the side a few times a minute.

“This,” the instructor said with a tone of suppressed excitement in his voice that made me kind of nervous, “is Anderson. He'll be helping us test the telepathic blocking techniques we've been working on.” I definitely didn't like the sound of that. “Anderson has come to us from Delta Facility.”

That announcement broke through even our rigid discipline. There were a bunch of gasps, even whispers. The instructor pounded his fist on his desk, looking really pissed off at the outburst. What did he expect? Delta Facility was the proper name for what the NIAC personnel more casually

referred to as Detention. It was the worst threat of punishment available to them, the nightmare of every kid in State School. It was a place few kids ever came back from, and no one ever left the way they went in. It was a place of free experimentation where life had no value and pain wasn't a concern. Rumors of unending torment, yet a territory vastly unknown. It was Talent Hell. We called it Everlast.

Across the room, an empath groaned loudly and his chair scraped against the floor. From the corner of my eye I could see him grab his head and twist in his seat.

"Use your blocking, Kenneth," the instructor snapped.

I tried to pull my emotions back, to calm down, to put Everlast and the concern about what the Anderson kid was here to do aside for the moment. I hoped the rest of the class would do the same and give Kenneth a break, poor guy.

"Can you continue without disrupting us?"

"Y-yes, Sir," Kenneth gritted out. He folded his hands on the desk in front of him, arms trembling, knuckles going white. They told the public that they took us from our families to train us to control our abilities, protect us as well as them. Since we were never allowed to communicate with our families, since no one ever went home, it's hard to believe that anyone on either side of the electrified fence believed that. We were training to be government operatives and they didn't like to see weakness. If you couldn't handle the strain, you weren't going to hack it as a soldier. And if you couldn't hack it as a soldier, the next best use was lab rat.

"Glad to hear it," the instructor said curtly. "Anderson has been a successful part of an experimental trial involving an important new technology that may someday aid all Ability-Affected persons. What brings him to our Mental Defense class, however, is his inborn ability: Compulsion."

Even I could feel another shift in the energy in the room. Compulsion and Influence Talents were pretty rare. At least they were in the State Schools. NIAC didn't trust kids

who could affect their thoughts. No wonder he'd ended up in Everlast.

“As we have discussed on numerous occasions, there may be a time when you will be faced with an Ability-Affected opponent or even, at some point in the future, a technology that may attempt to force you off-mission through some form of mind-manipulation. Today we're going to be getting real-world practice in using the blocking techniques we've been learning. All right, Anderson, let's start with something simple. Choose your subject and make that subject...walk to the front of the room.”

Anderson and the instructor went a few rounds of trying to make us dance—literally in one case. The instructor pointed out Rand and Karen and told Anderson to force Rand to strike his older sister. The poor kid got a nose bleed and almost passed out, but he held his own. No big surprise to me. Rand and Karen were really tight and even at twelve, Rand was shaping up to be a strong guy. Even Anderson broke out in a sweat on that one, looking kind of embarrassed and pissed off, but the instructor was pleased.

“All right, take your seat, Rand, and keep your head back. We'll do one more and then we'll call it a day. Your choice Anderson.”

Anderson's head kept snapping that little sideways jerk as his narrowed eyes looked us over. When he looked down my row, I glanced away. *Nope, no challenge here.* The last thing I wanted was to find out that I lacked the mental fitness to stand up to him and end up giving Rand a busted lip to match his bloody nose. Anderson's expression looked mean and I figured that's what he'd go for. Better he pick on one of the smaller guys.

Elle pushed her chair back and stood. She grabbed the back of it and swayed on her feet, as though trying to pull herself away from invisible hands. Her hand jerked away from the back of the chair as one foot slid forward. Then another. She was shaking her head as she moved haltingly forward, grabbing at the sides of desks in an effort to hold

herself back, sometimes pulling them away from their owners.

Anderson waited for her at the front of the classroom, lounging negligently against the instructor's desk. He was smiling now, a predatory smile that made my blood boil. I heard the scrape of my own chair before I was even aware of what I was doing.

Stop it! Karen's thought was forceful, edged with urgency, and made me pause long enough to see the instructor's attention directed my way, his expression half warning and half challenge. *Yes, he'd love an excuse to go after you. Don't give it to him, Ethan.*

Help her, I thought.

You know I can't get involved any more than you can. She's gotta do this on her own.

Some best friend you are. Unfair, but I wasn't feeling a lot of fairness just then. *Elle's no match for him.* She was already near the front of the classroom now.

I know. Ethan, you need to calm down. Sir's watching you. The violence pouring off you is about to make Kenneth sick, and there's nothing to be done. It's humiliating, yeah, but she'll live.

He won't.

Cut the macho crap. You're always going to be on probation here. You can't afford a show of temper, so just cool it. Close your eyes and think of your happy place or something.

But I couldn't close my eyes. I had to watch Elle being pulled and jerked by Anderson's Talent until she seemed to throw herself against his chest. He caught her lightly around the waist and waited for her to raise herself on her toes and press her mouth to his.

I think I growled.

Careful, you're about to out yourself on the whole secret crush thing.

If that was supposed to lighten my mood, it was total fail.

Karen? Shut. Up.

My teeth hurt from grinding them together. I know it was only a moment but it seemed to take forever before the instructor broke it up. Part of me was surprised he had let it go that far. They didn't go as far as they could have to segregate the sexes, but boy/girl relationships were definitely frowned on.

“Okay, Anderson, that’s enough.”

Anderson released her immediately, licking his lips with a satisfied smirk that made me need to kill him. Elle jerked away like he was made of fire and immediately raised her hand to slap him. Instead she used the back of it to swipe across her mouth. She turned and marched back to her seat with her chin up, but not making eye contact with anyone. There were tears on her cheeks.

Beyond my rage at Anderson, at the instructor, at pretty much the whole world just then, I felt bad for even looking at her in that moment, at not having the sense to look away and give her that much privacy.

The instructor looked at his watch. “We’re done for today. I trust all of you will now diligently practice the exercises you’ve been given and strengthen those mental defenses. Dismissed.” As always, the instructor and his guard left first. They took Anderson with them.

Lucky for him, I thought.

“Ow!” I looked up to see it was Karen who had cuffed me on the back of the head. Big surprise.

“You’re having a relapse. Snap out of it. I didn’t spend all that time helping you learn to control that temper of yours so you could blow it now,” she said in a low voice. She turned to Rand. “How’s the nose?”

“It’s fine. What an asshole. Is that what they do at Everlast, turn people into assholes?”

“Watch your mouth! Ethan, what’s going on in the guy’s dorm? Why’s my baby brother talking like a sailor?”

Rand made a disgusted noise in response to the “baby brother” remark. “You okay, Elle?” He changed his voice to

mock the instructor mode, “Okay, Anderson, it’s lackey’s choice.” Then to mock the idiot mode, “Oh, um, I think I’ll pick...get the prettiest girl in the class to kiss me!” Back in his own voice, “How original. Asshole. Like he’d ever get any any other way.”

Karen cuffed him on the head, but Elle smiled. Man, the stuff you can get away with saying to a girl when you’re only twelve.

“Come on,” Karen the mother hen said, herding us chicks along behind the other kids. “We’re gonna be late for PT.”

Physical Training meant different things for different Talents. For Karen and purely mental Talents like her, it just was just calisthenics, laps, stuff like that. She hated it. Rand loved it. The kid had way too much energy. They were trying to curb that with the discipline of a lot of martial arts training. As soon as we walked outside he put a little spring in his step. For a kid who could manipulate his own gravity, that spring sent him sailing over our heads with a wave, and bouncing off to his sensei like a man on the moon.

“Like Tigger on crack,” Elle said.

“Who?” Karen and I asked together.

“Tigger. Tigger and Pooh? He’s bouncy, pouncy, flouncy...and you have no idea what I’m talking about.” Unlike Karen, Rand, and I who had been here since we were really little, Elle had spent years in the real world before coming here. Sometimes I didn’t understand a word she was saying.

I shook my head, thinking how pretty she was, especially when she had color in her cheeks like that. The wind blew at strands of hair that escaped her braid and I really wanted to— I coughed, feeling Karen’s amused eyes on me. “I, uh, gotta...” I hitched my thumb over my shoulder.

“See you at lunch, big guy,” Karen said.

Elle smiled at me.

I thought about that smile later as I waited for a healer. It must have been a busy day on the PT fields because it seemed to be taking forever. I concentrated on Elle's smile, on holding my form, on not passing out. There's nothing worse than getting burned, and I was lucky it wasn't a lot worse.

"I'm so sorry, Ethan," Emily said again. She looked like she was going to cry.

I opened my mouth to tell her, again, that it was okay, it wasn't her fault. But the coach cut me off. "No apologies. Maybe that'll help him think a little faster on his feet next time, right Ethan? Hold that form. You're morphing."

Of course I'm morphing! It was hard enough taking the form of this skinny little girl, then add dodging the fireballs you made her throw at me, and now I'm supposed to be able to concentrate enough to hold it when she's fried my damned arm? Son of a bitch!

"I'm doing my best, Sir."

"Well your best sucks. Your best let this girl make barbeque out of you. Where's that healer? Let's see another shift—no, don't go back to your own form. Do...Marcia over there."

God forbid you could ease up and let me do someone my own size.

It was a really long PT.

Later, in the mess, I spotted Elle and Karen on the line. Elle waved me over to cut in. Most kids didn't much care about that kind of thing. We were all getting fed and the food was nothing to hurry for, and even if someone did have a problem, I'd been big, mean, and unpredictable enough when I was younger that I still had a certain reputation. No one wanted to start something.

"What happened to you?" Elle grabbed my arm to examine it as soon as I was within reach. Her fingers were warm on my bare skin and all the air pretty much evacuated my lungs. The next moment she dropped it like a hot potato and took hold of her braid instead.

I rubbed at a sudden chill, feeling the charred ends of where my sleeve used to be. I'd have to wear this shirt the rest of the day—so that everyone could see I was clumsy enough to get hit, I guess.

“Singed a bit?” Karen asked.

I had no doubt she knew. Her giant, all-powerful, scary-ass psychic brain always seemed to be everywhere at once and she had no concept of privacy.

We were nearing the entrance to the serving area. An armed guard stood off to the side, droning in a loud monotone, “Keep both hands on the trays. No talking to the staff. Keep the line moving.” I always wondered why they didn't just record that and play it over a speaker.

We moved through the serving room. Karen seemed distracted. I saw Elle take her hand off her tray to push Karen's arm forward. The server behind the glass glared at both of them as she smacked a scoop of something down on the plate. “Keep your brain to yourself and pay attention, nosy,” I whispered, in what was supposed to be a taunt to jolt her back to her own reality. But she didn't seem to hear me.

We had almost reached the exit when I saw Rand's dark head bobbing in and out of the crowd ahead of us. He fought his way upstream, shoving kids with trays as he pushed through the narrow doorway. I turned to Elle who switched her grip to balance her tray on one arm and held out the other for mine, and when my hands were free I grabbed Rand by the shoulders and planted his feet firmly on the floor. The guard had stopped droning, and Rand had his full attention.

“Hey kid, calm down. What's going on?”

He looked up at me for just a second, then his face screwed up and he fell against my chest. He was crying.

Aw, hell. I glanced at Karen whose face was tight.

Somebody's dead. One of his friends.

One of the kids?

Yeah.

Aw, hell.

I took him by the shoulders and pulled him away from me, giving him what I hoped was a comforting squeeze while shook him a little. “Snap to, okay, buddy? You can’t do this here. Straighten up.”

I felt like an asshole. You shouldn’t have to say that to a little kid who’s just lost a friend. You shouldn’t have to deal with things like little kids losing friends and guys with automatic weapons looking like they’re ready to pounce.

“You got that under control?” the guard barked at me.

“Yes, sir. We’re fine. Sorry, sir.”

I turned Rand around to walk in front of me. All the other kids had spun back around when the guard spoke and we were moving in quick, orderly fashion. I kept my hands on Rand’s shoulders as I marched him out and over to a table and sat him down next to me. The girls followed and sat across from us. I knew it about killed Karen not to cuddle him.

Karen and Rand were about as tight as siblings could be. They came here when Karen and I were five and Rand was only two. I think their parents might have coped with having a telepath around, but having a toddler literally bouncing off the walls probably made them glad for the excuse of the Ability-Affected Persons Civil Responsibility Disclosure Act—the law that required citizens to notify the government of suspected Talents. It also required parents to allow them to be taken to State Schools to be trained under the authority of the *National Institutes for Ability Control*.

The last few years had been especially hard on them—more for Karen, I think. She and I had turned twelve and were moved up to Senior Section together, while Rand was left behind in Intermediate. We were hardly able to see him at all until he got old enough to catch up to us again. Karen had taken a big step back from him, and that was hard on her too, but she knew she couldn’t keep fussing over him. We were too old for that. NIAC let us socialize, let us form friendships, but they frowned on deep relationships that might get in the way of their own agenda. If two people

seemed to care more about each other than they cared about getting along with NIAC and sticking to the program, well, there were a bunch of other State Schools a kid could be transferred to. Got a problem with that? Then there was always Detention.

Elle slid my tray across to me and I shoved my paper napkin at Rand. “All right now, mop up, kid. Take it easy. This ain’t the place and you know it, so man up.” That sounded harsh. It was harsh. But I just couldn’t let him make a scene and show weakness. Not in front of the guards, not in front of so many other Talents, kids he’d be facing off against on the field or in the classroom, who’d be looking for weaknesses to exploit in order to impress the instructors. I kept my hand clamped to his shoulder, and that was all the support I could offer.

Karen’s face had a look of intense concentration. She was sorting through Rand’s jumbled thoughts, trying to get the whole story. “Eat your lunch,” I told her sharply, jolting her out of her study. “And that goes double for you, kid. Take mine, I’ll go get another.” I shoved my tray in front of Rand.

“I’m not hungry,” he whined.

“Ask me if I care. You’ve been bouncing around like a maniac and I’m sure you put in a good workout before you got your bad news. So eat something, whether you like it or not, or you’ll crash and burn before the day’s over.”

“Says the guy who was dodging fireballs.” Elle’s tray slid across the table and stopped in front of me. “*You* eat, and listen to your own advice. I’ll get another.” She was gone before I could argue.

“Come on, kid, let’s dig in. We’ll talk this out later. I promise.” I was more than ready to lead by example. A big guy like me needs a lot of calories in the first place, and morphing, holding the more complicated forms under stress, dodging fireballs, getting healed...I was starving and if I didn’t fill up now I was gonna tank big-time before food was offered again.

* * *

“Did I mention what a bad idea this is?” I reached up and adjusted the tag in the neck of uniform shirt I was wearing. It was itching my neck.

“Only five or six times,” said Elle, who was walking beside me along the quiet, dimly lit corridor.

On her other side, Karen grunted irritably. “But you’ve been thinking it non-stop. At this point I think I’d prefer your daydreams about—”

“Hey now,” I interrupted on cue. Karen wasn’t really about to out me in front of Elle, she just wanted to annoy me. But what did she expect? That I would be thrilled when the two of them snuck out of the Girls’ Dorm and came looking for me, bearing the dirty laundry of NIAC personnel? I’d said it then and I’d say it again, sneaking around trying to find information about the story Rand had told us was a bad idea.

“Please,” Karen drawled, “don’t say it again.”

“Just keep your nose in your clipboard and look officious.”

“Is that even a word?” Elle asked.

“It is,” I told her. Sure, I liked hanging out and joking with my friends, but with Karen wearing the white lab coat of a NIAC researcher or technician, me disguised as a guard, Elle walking between us as the subject under study, the three of us so where we were not supposed to be, and lighthearted banter was not where my head was.

“This is it,” Karen said, stopping in front of a door. She looked around. “No cameras, and I don’t hear anyone nearby.”

“That’s good, because if anyone hears this, we’re gonna have some explaining to do.” The form I had taken was one of the guards I saw fairly often, a guy pretty close to my own size and muscle mass. Unfortunately, the girls had brought me a uniform, but no boots and all I had were my

sneakers. They were black and would probably pass if anyone stopped us, but for this, it was gonna hurt. “Stand back.” I snapped a kick at the lock. *Son of a...* Had to kick it twice before the door swung inward. We hurried in.

Elle wrapped her hands around the busted lock and closed her eyes. When she pulled them away the door looked good as new. She shut the door and locked us in. I let myself morph back to my real form with a sigh of relief.

“Ethan, these file cabinets are locked.”

“Of course they are.” I broke those locks and we commenced rifling. “I got some more out of Rand before I finally got him to sleep. His friend in the Intermediates told him that they took five kids almost two weeks ago. They came back a week ago with their heads shaved, bandages on their scalps, and acting strange. Over the last week, two of them, his friend Chaz and some other kid, collapsed with seizures and died. Now they’ve notified five more kids in the Section that they’ve been selected for a special project. It’s supposed to start Monday.”

“That’s pretty much what I got out of his head earlier—except it was a lot messier than your version,” Karen confirmed.

“Anderson’s got something to do with it.” Elle got our attention with that one. She was sitting on the desk with a file labeled *Confidential*. “What happened to Rand’s friend is a later phase in an experiment that started at Everlast. The round of...procedures—the surgeries they did two weeks ago—the results haven’t been what they expected. So they’ve flown Anderson in, as a successful test subject, so the doctors involved can study him before the next round.”

“Test subject for what? What kind of surgeries?”

“They’re doing brain implants. Computer chips. For mind control.”

We all let that sink in for a moment. It made sense. Who would these paranoid monsters want to control more than a Talent who had the power to control them?

“It does make sense.” Karen said. “It felt like there was something really wrong with that Anderson guy—”

“You’re telling me,” Elle growled in a dry tone.

“More than just being a creep, though. I wasn’t sure how to describe it, but it was like...not all his thoughts were his own. Now the one about you—that was all him, all horny guy with no respect. That was about showing off. Getting away with something like that—approved by an instructor even—that’s one of the few shows of power he’s capable of. And power’s important to him because he feels powerless. He feels...leashed.”

“You sound like an empath.”

“I’m just trying to put clearer words to it. His thought is kind of non-verbal a lot of the time.”

“Ok, whatever,” I ground out. I didn’t want to talk about this guy, let alone hear about his feelings or how his evil little mind worked. I still wanted to pound him into the ground. “Anything else in those files, Elle?”

“Yeah, but I don’t even know what I’m reading.” She looked at Karen. “We’re going to have to take this back to Angeline.”

“No,” I said, “no, no, no. I don’t care if she does understand everything she reads, we’re not stealing files.”

“Well, I guess we could always bring Angeline down here,” Karen pondered. “We’d probably need two ‘guards’ to pull that off. Think you get another one of the guys to help out?”

“You want to sneak *five* people around the restricted zone after lights out?”

“He’s kinda cute when he’s about to explode. Don’t you think he’s kinda cute, Elle?”

“Give him a break. Look, Ethan, I understand your concern—”

“Oh, I’m real glad to hear that.”

“—but kids are dying. Little kids. Are dead. These,” she held up the files, “are definite plans for hacking into more

little kids' heads and cutting into their brains, making them into slaves of—“

“Okay, okay. Get off your moral high-horse before you crack your head. I get it. But I get to sit next to you on the bus ride to Everlast.”

I couldn't believe I just said that. I felt my cheeks get hot. Elle blushed. Behind a file folder, Karen rolled her eyes at me.

“Get what you're getting and let's get out of here,” I snapped.

* * *

“Okay, we go up this wall. There's an access door on the roof that's going to get us in real close to where they're housing Anderson.”

The girls hadn't wasted any time getting Angeline to explain the file to them. Elle had already been ready to go on a crusade for these kids, and Angeline had told her she believed she might have the very Talent that *could* help them. So without me as the voice of reason, they came up with this great plan to visit Anderson, which had Elle and me staring up the side of this building the next night.

Elle squinted up and tugged on her braid. “Ethan, I can't climb that.”

“I know, don't worry about that. We can do this two ways. I could climb up and lower down a rope and then pull you up. But you'd have to wait down here by yourself while I made climb. I think it would be better if I just carried you up on my back. If...uh...that's okay with you.”

“You can do that?”

“Uh...yeah.” I felt like an idiot. I didn't want to sound like I was bragging or showing off or something, but I wanted her to understand she'd be safe. “Look, I'm a shapeshifter, right? It pretty much means I can give myself as much muscle mass as I need. The only thing is that I'll

need my arms, so you've got to be sure to hold on. It shouldn't take too long, though."

"Yeah, okay, I can do that."

I turned around and Elle clambered onto my back, wrapping her arms around my neck, legs around my waist, and making me really glad Karen wasn't here to read my thoughts. I leapt up for the first handhold, testing our weight, and then started climbing.

"Is this why you didn't want to bring Karen?" Elle asked in my ear.

"Karen doesn't have any business climbing buildings in the middle of the night. Not that you do either."

"You're very protective of her."

What's that supposed to mean?

"I guess. I mean, yeah, I am. Do you know why I'm on probation?"

"What do you mean, 'on probation'?"

"I mean, like, one more strike and I'm on the next bus to Everlast. You didn't know that?"

"Why would they send you to Everlast, Ethan? You never do anything wrong."

"Nothing except sneak around the restricted zone after hours, steal files, carry girls up the sides of buildings."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah." I pulled us over the edge of the roof. Elle slipped away from me and I shook out my arms, let my form settle, caught my breath, while she sat beside me in the shadows. I wanted to take a minute to let my form settle, so this was probably as good a time as any to clear this up. "I'm sorry, I just figured you and Karen talk so much... Don't look so worried. It's not a big deal, I just thought, since you asked about Karen and me—"

"I didn't mean to—"

I cut her off, figuring we didn't have all night to do the awkward word dance thing. "When I came here, I was one of those kids who had a lot of trouble controlling their Talent. I had a really bad temper and my Talent feeds on that. On stuff

like anger and frustration. So I was like any other kid with a bad temper who had trouble controlling it and sometimes lashed out, except that when I lashed out, I lashed way out. And it may not surprise you to learn that coming here didn't really help out with that a whole lot."

"What? You take a little kid away from his family and put him into a military institution with a bunch of freaks and he doesn't immediately find inner peace?"

"I know, right? What can I tell you, I was a tough case. Long story short, Karen decided to get into my head and start saving me from myself. She said I was supposed to have an inner voice of reason or something, and since I lacked it, she was going to be it. And she's pretty much been in my head ever since."

"She never said."

"I may not give her enough credit on the whole privacy thing. She really, literally, saved my life. It was close, though. I was really angry and it took me a long time to get it under control. It's been years since my temper's been a problem, but they're still waiting for me to screw up again."

Yeah, trouble controlling my temper. That's all there was to it. This was such an over-simplification I was afraid my nose was gonna start growing.

"I don't think I've ever even heard you raise your voice. I almost think you're making all this up."

"Anyway, I didn't let Karen come because we didn't need her for this and it seemed too risky to try to look after both of you. I did go on record, right, about hating this whole idea? I don't think any of us should be doing this."

"Yeah, you mentioned. So, um, thanks for doing this. I know you didn't have to get involved."

"Why *are* we doing this? I mean, why are you? What possible reason could you have for wanting to help Anderson?"

"It's not so much him, it's the little kids, you know? Angie thinks I can actually help them. It's hard for me to believe she's right about that, but if she is, I've got to do it.

But I want to try it on Anderson first. So I don't get their hopes up. And Anderson...he's a jerk and stuff, but he's still a person. And he's a Talent—one of us, not one of them, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess." I found my feet and held out my hand to her. "Let's go fix the jerk."

A few minutes later we were in Anderson's private room and he was looking at us skeptically.

"You're going to fix me? Fix what?"

"She's talking about trying to disconnect," I jerked my chin in an imitation of his tick, "that chip," I did it again, "in your head."

He glared at me. "That's impossible."

"What have you got to lose? Or do you enjoy being their pet monkey? Or is it more like a robot?"

"Ethan, cut it out," Elle said. "Look, I fix things, okay. I can see how they used to be and I can fix them. Like the lock on the door. Or if you broke a dish. I think I might be able to see how your brain was, before the chip, and make it that way again. The chip would still be there, but we're talking about...disconnecting it from the circuit."

"So if this works, it will still seem to them like it's receiving their signals and delivering them, but I won't hear them anymore?"

"I don't know. I don't know what your experience will be. I don't even know if this will work."

"And why are you even here?"

"Because they've started working on a bunch of little kids here, and they've got a bunch more they're starting in on next week," I said.

"Yeah, I know. So you're using me as a guinea pig before you go mess with the kids' brains."

"Basically," Elle said honestly.

"Yeah, all right. Do your thing."

"All right, just sit back and try to relax," Elle said, moving around behind his chair. Her hands settled on his shorn hair and I sort of wished Karen was around to tell me

what he was thinking. Elle's eyes were closed, and she frowned in concentration. Anderson continued looking at me, but then his eyes lost focus. His pupils dilated. Elle's hands were moving over his scalp and then I saw a tear fall from the corner of her eye. I got up just in time to catch her as she stumbled back from Anderson's chair.

"What? What is it? Did that hurt you?"

She reached up brushed the corner of her eye with the heel of her hand. "No. No, I'm fine, Ethan." But she was leaning into me and I wasn't sure. "Anderson? Are you okay?"

Anderson got up out of his chair and walked a few steps away. He shook his leg, and I remembered how it had sort of dragged as he walked into the classroom the other day. He paced back and forth and then turned to us.

"Something's different. Something's definitely different." He sounded excited. Hopeful. "Look, I can still...feel it. In there. Still hear the hum of it. But other stuff is different."

"I think the tick is gone," Elle whispered.

"There's no way to be sure, not until they give me a command. But I think this might actually have worked."

Elle was beaming. I was very concerned that there might be crying.

"Listen, you guys, you should know something."

Here it comes, the big 'I was being used' apology thing.

"When you're a lab rat, they see you as a lab rat. These guys talk in front of me all the time, like I'm not even there. I guess they figure it doesn't matter, who am I gonna talk to, right? So look, the guy who did this to me, Dr. Piers, he's here. At least, he was supposed to arrive tonight. They're not happy with the results of the first round of experiments here, so they've flown Piers in from Delta Facility to perform the next round of implantations himself. I heard they were moving the surgeries up to Friday."

"As in the day after tomorrow?"

“Right. He’s giving himself a day to look over subjects, then he’s planning all the surgeries for Friday, and he’s flying out again on Friday night.”

Elle clutched at me. “We have to do something.”

I didn’t know what to say.

She turned back to Anderson. “We’ll come up with something. If there’s a part for you to play, will you help us?”

“If I’m not under NIAC control anymore, I’m going to owe you, bigtime. And even if I didn’t I wouldn’t mind getting a chance to get in the way of Piers’ success. If I can do it, count me in.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait until tomorrow to see how well this worked.”

“I guess so. See you in class, Ethan.”

As much as I was clear on the whole Talents vs. NIAC thing, it was still hard not to be uneasy at the thought of possibly having helped someone like Anderson out of his cage. I hoped we didn’t regret it.

Outside we waited in the shadows for the break in the surveillance loop that would allow us to cross back to our own building with the least chance of being spotted. Elle’s back was pressed to the wall and I was using my own bulk to try to shield her from any possible view. It seemed like she was glowing. She wasn’t. But she was wired, practically bouncing and humming with excitement.

“I can’t believe it! I mean, Angie said I should be able to, she explained it really clearly and it made sense, but I didn’t really think I could, you know?”

I almost reminded her that we didn’t actually know if it worked or not, but I looked into her sparkling green eyes and couldn’t bring myself to be that much of a heel. So I just smiled at her and glanced around at the guard towers again.

“Ethan.” She tugged at my jacket and I looked down at her. She looked very serious all of a sudden. It kind of made it hard to breathe. “You didn’t have to do this for me tonight, and now I get what a big risk you’ve been taking.”

“I don’t know why I told you that. Forget about it.”

“No, I won’t. Thank you.” She reached up and curled her hand around my neck. I followed her lead, bending toward her as she rose on her toes. Her lips brushed my cheek, and then she started to ease back from me again. But she stopped.

We stood there for a moment, me bent awkwardly at the waist, she on her toes, holding herself up with her grip on my neck, our lips inches apart, both of us barely breathing.

“Elle?”

“Yeah?” She was so close that when she whispered back to me it was like I could feel her words against my lips.

“I think I’m gonna have to kiss you.”

“Do what you gotta do.”

I let myself sink those last few inches until my mouth touched hers. God it was soft. My heart was hammering hard against my chest, and I told myself just one more second and then I’d step back from her. Just one more, because I couldn’t believe that anything could feel this good. But we weren’t safe and we had to get back. Then she sighed my name and I felt her fingers in my hair and I forgot all about everything else. There was just Elle and the feel of her body in my arms, her mouth moving against mine, the taste of her, her scent.

When we finally came up for air, I had no idea how much time had passed. We were both breathing heavily. My lips tingled and I ached to go on kissing her.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve got to start over watching this loop.”

“Like what?”

“You know like what.” I was trying not to look at her, but I couldn’t help stealing glances. She looked happy, beautiful, mischievous, and enchanting. And her eyes kept moving to my lips with this wolfish look that was driving me crazy. As evidenced by the fact that I thought, if it could be just me risking it, I thought I’d brave Everlast just to go on kissing her.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She pulled herself up on her toes and kissed my neck. I was not going to give her the satisfaction or encouragement of groaning about it, though I wanted to.

“You’re going to be the death of me.”

* * *

Every time Elle looked at me, which seemed like a lot more than usual, I felt color creep up the back of my neck. I was sure this must be obvious to everyone.

If it makes you feel any better, not to anyone but me.

Thanks.

Not that I know why I should make you feel any better. Do you have any idea how exhausted I am? Do you have any idea how long that girl stayed awake last night thinking at the top of her brain waves about what an awesome kisser you are?

She said that?

Karen subtly flipped me off and I grinned.

Neither of you is focused on this plan at all.

She meant the plan we had come up with over breakfast. A plan which I didn’t really want to focus on because a) it was dangerous and it sucked, b) it relied way too much on Anderson which was dangerous and sucked, and c) it might not really help anything and for as dangerous as it was, that really sucked. So excuse me for wanting to spend my time thinking about kissing Elle which was probably also dangerous, but totally did not suck. And it seemed like it didn’t suck for her either.

Commence idiot grin, Karen thought. At least try to cover that or something.

The guard came in, followed by the instructor and Anderson. I noticed right away that he was back to shuffling when he walked. I studied him carefully as the instructor started in on us, and saw that the tick was back as well. Then the next round of defense exercises started.

Anderson thinks it worked!

He “thinks” so?

It worked. That’s what he believes, Karen clarified.

He’s thinking that he can still hear their orders, but he’s not compelled to obey them.

And the tick? The way he’s walking?

He doesn’t want to let on that anything’s different.

Huh. That’s smart, I guess. Well that’s great. Bet Elle’s happy.

She’s gone completely non-verbal. There’s a lot of making out with you imagery I really don’t need. I had no idea it would get so messy when you guys finally got together.

You say that like you thought it would happen.

Well yeah. You’ve both liked each other for, like, ever.

Wait, you knew she liked me? And you didn’t tell me?

What kind of friend would I be if I did that?

Um...helpful?

Totally caught off guard, I found myself jerked up out of my chair. It took me a second to realize that there was no one there. At the front of the classroom, Anderson was smiling at me. And then I wanted to get up on my desk, scratch my armpits, and make monkey noises. Really, really badly. I shook my head at him. This was so not even funny.

I found I couldn’t sit back down. I took hold of the back of my chair.

He’s thinking you’re a big ape, Karen thought to me, and Elle should see you as you really are. But you’re okay, just focus. Concentrate.

I was trying to concentrate, but resisting him made it feel like he was ripping into my brain. I broke out in a sweat, my heart rate sped up, and then it was like I could feel the blood moving under my skin.

Karen, he’s trying to make me shift.

He can’t do that, Ethan. Her mental voice was calm, sure. That’s your Talent. You’re in control of that. You’re always in control of that.

But I wasn't sure that was true. I could see it now, the image of the ape in my head, the same way I'd see a form I wanted to morph to. Only I couldn't do animal forms. But I could feel my body gathering itself, preparing itself to change.

"All right, Anderson, let Ethan go."

And just like that it stopped and I was released so suddenly that I dropped to one knee before I could catch myself. I climbed back into my chair, panting, exhausted, sore, and glared at Anderson.

He shrugged.

* * *

"Are you sure you're okay to go on?" I whispered to Karen.

She jabbed her elbow into my ribs. Which *hurt*. "I'm fine, okay? Stop hovering. I'm not a marshmallow."

Here we were, here we *all* were, out *again*, lined up along the outer wall of the mess, waiting for the break in the surveillance loop to make the dash to the next building. Waiting this part with Elle had been a lot more pleasant.

"Maybe you should keep your mind on the task at hand?"

"Maybe I'm trying to keep my mind off how many times I've been talked into running around after lights out this week and how my luck can't possibly hold. We've got way too many people along for this. We should have come up with a simpler plan. You should go back. Rand, you should take your sister back to the dorms right now. We can get by without you."

"No way. Chaz was *my* friend. Mine and Craig's. And those kids who're supposed to go under the knife tomorrow are our friends too. We're doing this."

I looked down the line of us to Craig, the Intermediate pathfinder who was going to lead us through the max security building. We'd heard it was supposed to be a

labyrinth. He was looking pale, nervous, and had the saucer-eye thing going, but he nodded at me.

“Anyway,” Karen said, “we don’t know all obstacles, and you never know what Talents are going to come in handy. If nothing else, I can hear people coming by their thoughts. Since we’re not in disguise, maybe what we don’t need is a shapeshifter. You could go back.”

“Oh for Pete’s—”

I sensed a presence before I even saw the gun, and by then I was already reacting, knocking the barrel aside, out of the guard’s grip so that it spun away on the strap he wore. The heel of my hand smacked up into his nose, I drove my other fist into his gut, doubling him over, and then brought my fist down like a club on the back of neck. He was facedown in the grass before I even started to think.

“Holy shit!” Rand squeaked.

“Watch your mouth,” Karen hissed. “Jesus, where did he come from?”

“What was that you were saying about hearing them coming?” I snapped at her, shaking out my throbbing hands and trying to get my heart rate to slow. I felt like I was going to be sick and made a show of checking the guard so I’d have an excuse to get closer to the ground. “He’s seen us.”

“He saw something, maybe. He didn’t know what, so he didn’t raise an alarm, he came to check it out first?” Elle said.

“When he came around the corner, he saw us. He probably won’t be able to identify all of us, but... What are we going to do?” Rand looked as seriously worried and scared as I felt. I didn’t know what to do. I guess if I’d let myself think about it, I would have realized something like this might happen. Rand was right, if he could identify us, we couldn’t let him make a report.

The guard started to stir and I got ready to knock him out again, to give us more time to think. It was Anderson who grabbed my arm. “Let me handle this part. Help me sit him up.”

Anderson and I dragged the guard up and sat him against the wall. Anderson knelt over him and took the guard's head in his hands. For a moment, I expected to hear the guard's neck crack, but after a few seconds Anderson just let him go and stood up. The guard fell sideways and started to crawl away from us. Rand lunged forward, but Anderson stopped him.

"Don't," he whispered. "He's just going to crawl back to the barracks, have a drink, and go to bed. He's not going to remember anything about tonight except that drinking on the job makes him really clumsy."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked him.

Anderson glared at me. "I'm sure. Anyway," he said, shrugging, "he thought he saw something, so when he approached, he had his mental defenses up. He was blocking his thoughts, that's why you didn't hear him coming, Karen. They do train these guys you know. Just apparently not enough to overcome Mr. Fists of Death over here. I'll remember not to try to sneak up on you."

"Yeah, you do that," I said. "There's our break. Get going."

Accessing the building we needed wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. We had been able to use Rand's jumping ability to reposition some of the cameras, and Elle had been able to manipulate some of the locks. Ideally, we hoped to get through this without leaving any definitive evidence that Talents had passed this way. Even if they couldn't pin anything on us in particular, there was always the chance that NIAC would punish any number of kids if a security breach was discovered.

"I can't get this one, I'm sorry," Elle said, shaking her head at the keypad by the door.

"It's all right, you tried," I told her. "What happens if I smash it?"

"Sirens, flashing lights, guys with guns, I presume."

"Great."

“Someone’s coming,” Karen warned. Elle and I backed off and ducked into hiding with the others. A man in a lab coat came from the other direction and entered a series of numbers into the keypad. A buzzer sounded and a green light came on as the lock clicked open. The man opened the door, went through, and shut it behind him. The light went back to red.

Karen rattled off a series of numbers. “That’s what he was thinking at the door.”

“Don’t look so smug,” I told her. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“I think it doesn’t suit *you*,” she grinned.

“I can’t believe this place,” Anderson almost sounded like he was complaining. “At Delta it’s all thumbprints and retina scans...”

“Bite your tongue,” Elle hissed at him.

“I’d rather bite yours.”

“Hey—”

“Children,” Karen interrupted us, “Can we do this before I forget these numbers, please?”

“This must be the labyrinth,” Elle said once we’d all come through the door. We were in a narrow, grey corridor, and whichever way we looked, the hallways looked exactly the same.

“I’m up,” Craig said, taking point and starting confidently down the hall. He turned this way and that, without hesitation, even though he had never been here before, and even though all the many branching hallways looked exactly the same to me, with only slight variation in the number of doors before the next branching corridor or turn. At first I tried to keep track of it, counted doors, steps, left and right turns. But it didn’t take long before my brain just dumped and I was left blindly following with no idea how to get out again if I had to.

Calm down, Ethan. You’re really letting this stress you out.

Hell yeah, I’m stressed out. I’d be an idiot not to be stressed out about this.

You'd be an idiot not to be concerned, yeah. Okay, okay, worried, et cetera, whatever. You need to slow your heart rate. You don't feel in control of the situation and that's causing you to feel frustrated, anxious. You know that's not good.

Yeah, yeah, okay. I tried to calm down like Karen wanted me to. She was right, I needed to keep a clear head. I'd never thought of myself as claustrophobic before, but maybe I was.

"This is it." Craig had stopped in front of a door that looked like every other door we'd passed in every other hallway.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

He gave me a look. "I know."

Karen confirmed, "He's right. Someone in there is thinking about the surgeries. He's alone."

"Anyone else around?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "These other rooms are empty."

"That makes it easier."

I snapped a kick at the door and we all rushed in. Dr. Piers jumped up from his chair and started to move for a panel on the wall but Rand sailed across the room in one of his impossible martial arts moves and kicked him in the chest. The doctor was thrown back against the wall, clutching his shirt front.

"You'd better hope that didn't break anything," I told Rand.

He shrugged. "Maybe Elle can fix it. He murdered Chaz."

I didn't really have an argument for that. I noticed that Elle had just repaired the door and was pushing it gently closed while Karen seemed to be listening intently beside it. Craig shuffled his feet nervously.

Piers, still clutching his chest, stood up. "Anderson," he rasped, "you've come to see me. And you've brought friends. Never really thought of you as the type to make friends."

“You never thought of me as anything but a lab rat.”

“That’s not true. I think of you as a tremendous achievement. You were my first success. You’re just the kind of Ability-Affected person people are afraid of, putting thoughts into people’s heads, making them do anything you want.”

“The way you do.”

Piers smiled. “I guess you’d see a certain irony in that. But that kind of power can’t just be running amok. It scares people. It needs to be in the hands of an organization people can trust.”

“Like NIAC.”

“People do trust NIAC. We’re helping you kids control your abilities so that you won’t accidentally hurt anyone or use them for personal gain. This technology I’m developing will eventually allow all people with abilities to be controlled. Of course, we’re still a long way from that...”

“No. It stops now.”

“Is that what you’re here for? To threaten me? Anderson,” Piers scoffed, “you must know that’s not going to work.” He reached for a small electronic device on the table. I looked to Anderson who shook his head at me. Piers reached under his hair and in the stillness of the room we could hear something snick into place. “Convince your friends to leave the room at once. Have them turn themselves in to the guards.”

“Um...no. I don’t think I’m going to do that, Dr. Piers.”

Piers looked shocked. His hand shot up into his hair where he’d put the device. “Anderson, tell these kids to go.”

“I heard you the first time. Here,” he pointed to his ear, “and in here,” he pointed to his head. “See, that’s what I’m telling you. I’m through taking orders, yours or anyone else’s. My mind is my own again. Do you know what that means, Dr. Piers?”

Piers shook his head. He was pale and his eyes were wide.

“It means no more experiments. This whole sick dream of yours is all over.”

Piers backed away another step and fell into his chair. His hands were shaking. “N-no m-more experiments,” he stuttered. He reached behind a stack of books on the table, pulled out a gun, and without pausing stuck it in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The sound of it echoed with Elle’s scream and for what seemed like a long time I couldn’t stop looking at the pattern of blood and brains on the wall. But I think it was really only a second.

“Holy Jesus Christ, Anderson! You were just supposed to convince him to stop the research.”

“It’s stopped,” Anderson said blandly.

I wanted to wring his neck right there, but I had to keep it together. We all did. “Hey, you guys,” I snapped, pointing at Rand and Craig. “Don’t you even think about getting sick and leaving your DNA all over this room.”

“We gotta go,” Karen said. “Now.”

We’d hardly taken but a few running steps down the corridor when the alarms started to sound. “Someone in one of the rooms hit a panic button!” Karen told us.

We kept running, with Craig in the lead, back the way we came. Suddenly, he just stopped. “That path just ended,” he told us, before taking off in a different direction. I heard a groaning sound coming from above. I looked back to see a fire barrier drop down and block the way we had come. As we ran, more came down behind us. Craig continued to move rapidly, never pausing, sometimes almost tripping over himself as he made a quick turn down a new corridor. Then I heard the groaning sound up ahead.

“Craig, stop!” Somehow I managed to reach him and yanked him back just in time to avoid seeing him squashed by a fire door.

We were trapped.

“Ok, everyone, just calm down,” Karen said.

“Calm down? What’s there to be calm about?” Craig shrieked.

“Calm down, or I’ll have Anderson calm you down,” Karen said, but she was looking at me. “Elle, can you fix this? Can you return it to its original state of not being in our way?”

Elle concentrated on the mechanism, and the door began to inch up. “I’m not...sure...I can do this.” Her face was white with the strain and she had broken out in a sweat. As soon as there was room, I pushed myself under the door. Once on the other side, I started to lift. The other guys came through and tried to help, but it was a ton steel that wanted to come back down. My muscle mass grew as I tried to keep the door up. “Pull. Her. Through,” I gritted out. Rand crawled back under. I knew the moment he had Elle because suddenly it was twice as hard to hold it up, and I prayed, terrified that I would drop it before they were clear.

“They’re through, Ethan.” I felt Karen’s hands, pulling me away. “You can let go.” She pulled me back as the door crashed down again.

There wasn’t even time to be relieved. We were back to running. Craig said we had a clear path to the outside, but fire barriers were still coming down and we were barely staying ahead of them. I looked back and saw that Karen was falling behind. Elle was pulling at her arm. I turned to go back for them.

“Ethan, look out!” One of the fire doors dropped down and almost cut off my toes. I hadn’t even heard it coming. And now it stood between me and the girls.

“Elle!” I called to her. “Can you lift it at all?”

“She’s trying, but I think she’s pushed too far already.”

“I know it’s hard, but even just a few inches. Just enough to let me get my hands under it. Can you do that much?”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t.” Elle’s voice was faint. “Ethan, you’ve got to get the boys out of here.”

“We’re not leaving you.”

“No way!” Rand yelled through the door. “We’re not going without you!”

“Rand,” Karen said, “the guards are mobilizing to come in here and investigate. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“Anderson,” I said, “take the boys. I can get them out.”

“How?”

“Ethan, no,” Karen said, though the door, while in my mind she was chattering away about self control and all I’d worked for. Like any of that mattered.

“Just take them and go. Hurry.”

“Rand, I need to you to go with Anderson. Ethan’s going to get us out, but you have to go right now, do you hear me?” Karen called.

“Karen, what’s happening?” I heard Elle ask.

I had the ridiculous thought that I never wanted her to see me like this.

Then don’t do it, Karen thought.

I could hear Anderson barking at the two boys as their footfalls faded down the hallway and disappeared amid the sirens that continued to blare. I thought about sirens, opened myself up to the noise, the insanity-inducing noise of them. I thought about the guards Karen mentioned outside, and how they were coming with their guns and their boots, and about what they might do when they found Karen and Elle, how they would treat them. It made me angry. Sick and angry and terrified because I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t stop anything. Not really. I couldn’t stop this mess from happening. Couldn’t stop Karen and Elle from getting trapped behind this door. I couldn’t open it, couldn’t get to them.

I let all that frustration and fear fill me, let it turn to anger, let it burn through my veins until it felt like fire under my skin, boiling me from inside. I felt my muscles pop and swell, felt like my skin was being peeled away. I heard myself screaming, felt the hot air tearing out of my throat in a mindless roar.

Somewhere inside the conflagration of rage that had taken over my body, I was still there, a small, quiet presence in the middle of the storm that was watching, thinking, seeing, but didn't have any control of the beast I'd unleashed. I could see my own limbs, now grotesquely muscled and disproportionate to my body. They tore through the steel door and stomped it down.

Karen and Elle were huddled in a corner. Elle screamed when she looked up at me, and Karen wept. They were swept up in those huge arms, and then we were moving, faster than anything that big and ungainly should move, back down the corridor in the direction the boys had gone.

There were stairs, and at the top an open door was letting in the smell of the outdoors. The girls were clinging to my misshapen body and bounced against me as I barreled up the steps and then we were out the door and onto the roof. Rand was there, alone, waiting for us. The beast didn't pause to acknowledge him, but I'll never forget the look of horror on his face when he saw what had his sister. And then we were flying over the edge. And then we were falling.

* * *

The rec yard was quieter than usual. The stress of NIAC's investigation into what happened in the max security building weighed on everyone. Even those who had no idea what had happened or who was involved waited to find out if someone would be blamed, if we would all be blamed, or if NIAC would simply sweep the matter under the rug and pretend they had never lost control. I was leaning up against a tree, alone, thinking heavy thoughts and trying to enjoy a good brood.

It had been three days, and if they hadn't come for us by now, I figured that was good news. There were a number of Talents with the strength to cause the kind of damage I had. It had been so long since I'd let myself shift out of control like that, I was probably near the bottom of that list.

“How are you feeling?” It was Elle’s voice. She had come up behind me. It was the first time any of them had spoken to me since right after it happened.

“I’m okay.” I saw that I was unconsciously flexing muscles that were still sore and I stopped. I didn’t turn around. Maybe if I was rude, she would just go away.

“I heard they moved Anderson into the Boy’s Dorm.”

“Yeah. We’re roomies now. It’s awesome.”

“He said the whole project’s been scrapped, for now anyway. Craig said they brought back the Intermediate test subjects. I’ve seen the three from the first experiment, by the way, fixed them up so they’re not responding the way they’re supposed to. Anderson says they’re calling the whole thing a total failure.”

“Seems like you’re talking to Anderson quite a bit.”

“Is that what you got out of that? How long do you think I’m going to wait around for you to get over yourself?”

“Guess I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Well I’ll tell you,” she said, coming around to stand in front of me, “I’m pretty much going to wait forever. Is that how long it’s going to take?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. Was that even a real question? It was hard to remember what we were talking about with her standing so close.

“I don’t understand what this massive sulk is about. Karen says I have to give you time to readjust, or recalibrate, or I don’t know what. She says you’re embarrassed about what we saw. Are you actually embarrassed about saving my life?”

“Well...I don’t know. No. Not about that. It’s just...”

“The ten-foot, bright red, glowing eyed, long-limbed, muscle-bound...” She did this annoying imitation of my monster gait that looked like an ape, “...thing?”

“It’s not my best side.”

“Well, not your best side ripped through a steel door and jumped off a roof to rescue me and my best friend, so...I’m thinkin’ it’s a pretty okay side.”

“Elle, you screamed.”

She punched me. Hard.

“Ow!”

“You are not going to hold that against me! Oh my God! Did I mention ten feet tall with glowing eyes? And did anyone ever tell me you could do that? Nooooo. What did you think I was going to do?”

“Scream. Possibly cry, maybe faint, I dunno.”

“I’m not a fainter.”

“No, I don’t guess you would be.”

“Are you done being an idiot yet?” she asked, stepping into me and wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Uh, is that a trick question?”

“Cause I’ve been waiting around to thank you for saving my life and I’m getting a little impatient.”

I felt myself start to smile for the first time in days. “Far be it for me to let my massive sulk get in the way of your mission,” I told her.

And let her kiss me.

The End

I hope you enjoyed **Impulse Control**. It's not over for these guys yet. Many of these characters will have important roles to play later on in the Talent Chronicles. But while you wait for their stories to get underway again, I hope you'll let me introduce you to some other Talents. On the following pages you'll find excerpts and information about other books in the Talent Chronicles series.

You can also drop by my website, <http://susan-bischoff.com> to find links to sample excerpts, reviews, retailers, and the latest release info, as well as contact info, social media links, and my ramblings about writing, superheroes, Buffy, Firefly, and other topics of similar importance. While you're there you can also sign up for the email newsletter to be notified of new releases and special offers.

TALENT CHRONICLES



Hush
Money

SUSAN BISCHOFF

An excerpt from
Hush Money
Talent Chronicles #1

Chapter 1

Joss

I already knew it had happened again.

Not like I'm psychic, not really, but you don't have to have any special mental Talent to see the signs...if you're paying attention.

Stacy Scarpelli had had her hand in the air for, like, five minutes. Eventually she was doing that thing where you lean one elbow on the desk, and your other elbow in your hand, like you're going to collapse from the exhaustion of trying to get the teacher's attention. But the teacher was paying attention. She was paying a lot of attention to checking off names on the roll; or supposedly taking roll, but totally not looking at that whole side of the room where Stacy was flinging her hand limply about on her wrist.

And leave it to Stacy to be so wrapped up in Stacy that she didn't notice how quiet it was this morning in first period English and how everyone just kind of sat there. The whispering would start later, as the shock wore off. Later, people would be saying how long they'd suspected, and how much they'd never really liked Krista anyway. But just then we were all looking around at each other and wondering who else was keeping secrets, and who would be the next one to disappear.

Ms. Carter looked up and set her pencil down very carefully on her desk, lining it up precisely next to her planner, and finally raised her eyes to Stacy.

"Yes, Stacy?"

"You assigned me Krista to be my partner for the project. And it's not like I wanted to leave it to the last

minute, but she was always later later later, you know? And finally I said we gotta get together this weekend, and we were supposed to meet on Saturday morning before my tennis lesson? So I waited and waited for her, but she didn't show up, and I *had* to get to my lesson, right? And then I called her house after, but no one answered. No one answered all weekend, and now she's not even here today, and I don't know if she did any work at all on it. I did some, but I was kind of waiting to find out what she had, you know, compare notes, because there was no point in us doing the same thing, right? But I couldn't 'cause she wouldn't answer her phone and then I didn't know what to do, and I was going nuts all weekend trying to get a hold of her—”

“Ok, Stacy. See me after class and we'll work something out.”

“I mean, I don't think I should be penalized because she was too busy to work on the project. Which she probably didn't anyway, which is probably why she didn't show up Saturday, and dodged my calls all weekend, and she's probably ditching school today so—”

“She's not ditching; she's just gone.”

All eyes slid toward Dylan. He sat sideways in his chair, the back of his leather jacket against the chalkboard along the side wall, long legs stretched out in front of him, his expression unreadable.

In the seat behind him, Marco tipped back in his chair. “NIAC hauled her off.” His voice was laced with the kind of satisfaction over other people's tragedies that made me think about his chair tipping too far and his skull bouncing off the linoleum.

Ms. Carter glanced nervously around the room. I felt bad for her. How's a teacher supposed to handle this subject? Encourage open discussion? Answer questions? Should we all share our feelings about the fact that we were never going to see Krista Pace again? It just seemed to me that the faculty probably knew about it earlier. Hell, the *National Institutes for Ability Control* probably sent out some kind of official

letter to the school, wouldn't you think? Our regular teacher should have been there for support and guidance instead of leaving the poor student-teacher to the wolves. But then, what would Mr. Krause have done differently?

"[cough]Freak![cough]"

"Shut up, Marco." Dylan continued to bounce his pencil's eraser on the desk and examine his boot-tops.

"Why, did you and freak-girl have something goin' on? Need a new date for Homecoming now that NIAC's locked her up?"

Enquiring minds want to know. My mind was particularly interested, unfortunately.

"Thanks, but you're not my type," Dylan sneered back at his friend.

"Ok, people, that's enough," Ms. Carter finally gathered the courage to enter the conversation. "The topic of Krista Pace is off-limits in this class. If you have questions regarding her disap— If you have questions, you may take them to Assistant Principal Sims—on your own time. Meanwhile, I believe we have some oral presentations to hear today. Stacy, you can see me after class about your project. Who wants to go first?"

Personally, I think the school system is pretty messed up. I mean, if Krista had been hit by a bus or if she'd died of some terminal disease she'd been bravely fighting in secret for years, there'd be announcements, a moment of silence over the PA, maybe a memorial assembly. And we'd probably have some kind of shrine where people would leave pictures of Krista with flowers and little teddy bears and stuff like that. Out front somewhere, where the TV news cameras could see it clearly, and give it lots of attention, and call it a "makeshift memorial" fifteen times a freakin' day. Like you've got to spend \$5000 on a friggin' stone pillar or fountain with an engraved placard on it because anything else is just "makeshift."

But I digress.

Maybe we'd have grief counseling to talk about how she was just ripped from our lives, and we would never be able to say goodbye. We'd talk about how we felt that she'd never told us about this horrible disease she had, and if we'd known we would have been nicer to her, and now we'd never have the chance.

Because really, Krista was never coming back. And what she had was a lot like a disease. Something she was born with, something that couldn't be cured, something very, very bad.

What Krista Pace had was a Talent.

* * *

Joss

God save us from guidance counselors...

I swiped my sweaty palm down the front of the vintage army field jacket I always wore before grabbing the doorknob and letting myself into the guidance department office. I handed my hall pass to the woman at the desk inside the door whose name I'd never bothered to learn.

I absolutely hated it here.

"Jocelyn. Yes, Mr. Dobbs is waiting for you. Go on in."

I turned away and moved to the door, thinking belatedly that I should have said thank you. Eye contact, a smile, thank you. But I never was any good at that politeness stuff. I was a lot better at the being quiet and melting into the background stuff. Having someone call up my Math teacher, being singled out and told to report to the guidance office while the rest of the class waited to get on with the being bored—er, educated? It really messed with my whole *don't notice me* program.

I was already on edge from that morning—because of the whole Krista thing—and this just made me twitchy. It didn't help that I knew exactly why Dobbs had called me in here.

I did not want to talk about it.

“Joss.” He shuffled some papers into a folder, closed it.
“Come on in. Have a seat.”

I took the seat across from the desk without speaking, keeping my messenger bag on my shoulder and my notebook to my chest. I kept my expression blank, rather than overtly sullen, but Dobbs prided himself on the whole reading the body language thing and my message should be clear.

He took off his glasses and drew the side of his hand along the bridge of his nose as he set them down on the desk. In a moment he would pick them back up and put them on again, because he needed them to see. But his ritual of taking them off, setting them down... that was his way of saying he was serious, yet caring, concerned, and open-minded.

See, I could do body language too.

“So....how’s it going?” he asked, dragging out the question.

“Ok.”

He picked up his glasses and put them back on.
“You’ve heard about Krista.”

I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t a question, and what was I supposed to say, anyway? It wasn’t like the school had any kind of official stance on this stuff. They must cooperate in whatever investigations went on, but they never made, like, statements to the press or anything. There was nothing for me to quote or agree with.

“I thought you might have some feelings you’d like to talk about.”

You thought that? Really? Are you new here? “No, not really.”

“Joss, I know this must bring up some issues for you, feelings I don’t think you’ve ever really dealt with. About Emily.”

The name was like an execute command, automatically flashing a series of images across my brain that started out like a real estate or life insurance commercial. Little girls

playing, laughing, holding hands, dancing in sprinklers, birthday parties, sharing secrets, fire, screaming, end of reel.

I jammed the playback to a stop before it could loop, forced my eyes from the stupid cartoon character on Dobbs's tie, and actually met his eyes. I shoved the discomfort at the personal contact aside with the rest of my feelings and made myself cold. "Emily moved away. Lots of kids have childhood friends who move away. It's sad at the time, but it's not, like, traumatic or anything."

Dobbs waited for me to say more. I figured it was safer to let him steer the conversation rather than take the lead and risk saying the wrong thing. These counselor types could be so tricky. It wasn't my first time in his office, and I knew he liked to try to read into things people said.

"But Emily didn't just move away. A child's parent might get a job in another town, they break the news, and there's weeks, maybe months, of house-hunting, packing—a period to adjust before the actual move. It wasn't like that with Emily. One day the two of you were joined at the hip, running up and down the block, picking the dandelions from everyone's yards... Then all of a sudden she was just... gone."

I continued to hold the eye contact, because to drop it now would be a show of weakness, like I had something to hide. I did a mental check and loosened my fingers on my notebook a little before he noticed my white-knuckled grip.

Dobbs had lived a few houses down and across the street for as long as I could remember. He was the kind of neighbor who waved if he saw you, but didn't walk over to chat. He didn't mind if you went through his gate after a lost ball or a Frisbee, but he never invited you to swim in his pool. In all the years of casual neighboring, he'd never once tried to talk to me about Emily. But since my first day in high school, he'd used any excuse to drag me into his office to try to discuss my *feelings* on the subject.

Why was I suddenly of interest? Was it just because talking to me became part of his job? Or was there

something in that folder he didn't know from just living in the same neighborhood? Had someone told him to ask questions?

Get a grip.

"And then there was the fire..." he continued.

"I told you I don't remember any fire."

"The last time we spoke I suggested you discuss it with your parents."

"I did. I asked my mom about it. She didn't know what I was talking about." This was a planned answer. If Dobbs went to my mom, she would explain that she and dad felt it was best that I wasn't reminded about the incident.

His eyes narrowed as he mulled over that response. I could see the wheels turning behind his pale eyes, realizing that my parents would probably not be open to the idea of him helping their daughter achieve any kind of emotional breakthrough.

Point scored for Team Marshall.

"Hmmm, well.... If you're sure there's nothing you'd like to discuss..."

"Nothing I can think of."

"Don't forget to have Ms. Clark give you a hall pass."

During class the girls' bathrooms were usually deserted, but not the one closest to the guidance offices. That one was too close to the gym, and chances were it would be occupied by those whose decisions to skip gym were more whim than plan, and hadn't come up with any better option. So I'd had to shuffle along two hallways and up a flight of stairs before finding a quiet stall where I could take a few shuddering breaths and try to pull myself back together.

God, I hated Dobbs, the supercilious bastard. *And then there was the fire...* I mocked him in my head, using my best idiot voice. *Yeah, now that you mention it, I do suddenly want to talk about it. And, you know, I feel so close to you now that I feel like I can share my secret.*

As if. Asshat.

Thing was, I could be pissed all I wanted to, but that didn't seem to be stopping the movie in my head, the feelings of dread as I watched it play out, knowing I couldn't stop the little girls from their stupid plan. It didn't stop me from reliving the terror as things spun out of control, or the equally worse fear in the aftermath as we waited to see what would happen. As the unthinkable happened. As everything changed.

I felt wetness on my face and muttered a curse, leaning down for some toilet paper. But of course it was empty. I banged the back of my head on the door as I rummaged in my bag with one hand. I had to get a grip on myself. *No better way to get noticed in school than to walk around looking like I've been cry—*

Still clutching the oversized notebook in my arms, I fumbled the bunch of stuff I'd pulled out of my bag to sort through for a tissue. Instinctively, I reached out with my mind and caught everything. The objects hovered in the air above the bowl: a pen, a scrunchie, a few crumpled bills, and the tissue.

I held them there a moment, feeling in my head those fragile, invisible strings between each object and my mind. It would hardly take any effort at all to open up my bag, tug at those imaginary strings, and float everything right back in. But in my mind I could hear my dad's voice saying, "*The best way to seem normal is to be normal.*"

I put out my hand, grasped the crumpled piece of Kleenex, and let the other things go. The scrunchie bounced off the seat and landed on the floor, the pen and the money hit the water. I put my boot to the handle and flushed.

Be normal, I thought. It's just that easy.

Hush Money is currently available at many of your favorite places to shop for books, in ebook and paperback formats. Search your favorite retailer or visit <http://susan-bischoff.com> for a list of retailers and direct links.



TALENT CHRONICLES

Heroes 'Til
Curfew

SUSAN BISCHOFF

Heroes 'Til Curfew, coming in 2011, is the second novel of the Talent Chronicles and continues the story of Joss, Dylan, and the Talent friends and enemies from **Hush Money**. You'll find the latest information at <http://susan-bischoff.com>.

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Thank you for giving me and the Talent Chronicles a try.