



TALENT CHRONICLES

Hush Money

SUSAN BISCHOFF

Hush Money Sneak Peek Excerpt

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Hush
Money

A TALENT CHRONICLES NOVEL

————— **SUSAN BISCHOFF** —————

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.

Chapter 2

Dylan

“Dylan, bum a smoke.”

“No, man, I quit.”

“What, again?” Marco half whined, like I’d made the decision just to inconvenience him.

“Hey, Marco, I gotcha.” Jeff took a last drag and passed his cigarette to Marco before reaching into his jacket for another.

“God damn, when is this rain ever going to stop?” I turned up my collar when a drop rolled off the slight overhang and snaked its way down my neck. I pressed my back against the wall with the other guys and kept my eyes open for Assistant Principle Sims.

“When it snows. So what is it now? It’s a little late to start a college fund.” There was something about Marco. Everything needed an explanation with him, even something as simple as me giving up cigarettes for the umpteenth time.

I’m starting a getaway fund in case they come for me next. “I’m savin’ up for an ark.”

“Oh, well that’ll work for you. The world covered in water and it’s just you and a boatload of sheep,” Jeff snarked.

“Jealous much?”

Marco snorted, ready to let it go, and Eric said, to no one in particular, “Bet Krista wishes she’d prepared for a rainy day.”

Eric was often the quiet one, and maybe it was all that observation he did that made him seem too damned perceptive sometimes.

“That freak bitch. I knew there was something off about her.”

Yeah, Marco, you knew it from the first time she told you no. “Would you give it a rest?”

“What’s with you?” Marco snapped.

“What’s with you?” I shot back. “I’m just tired of your bullshit, that’s all.”

“You’re always like this when they take someone,” Jeff complained.

I looked across Marco to where Jeff was avoiding eye contact with me. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. All, like, morose and shit. Get over it.”

“Aw, leave him alone,” Marco said, clapping a hand on my shoulder and giving it a shake. It looked like a friendly gesture from the outside, but it was only the extraordinary strength of Marco’s grip on my shoulder that kept me from falling over. Fortunately, I had learned to tuck my chin to my chest to avoid having the back of my head crack against the wall behind me. “You know he’s been trying that sensitivity thing. How’s that workin’ for you?”

“Obviously he has to beat the chicks back with a stick,” Jeff sneered.

“The bell’s gonna ring.” *And save me from you idiots I call my friends,* I thought as I pushed away from the wall and headed for the fire door we’d propped open.

“Yo, wait up,” Marco said, catching my arm, propelling me ahead and away from the other guys. “I’ve got an idea about this weekend. We’ll talk about it later.”

My stomach clenched. This was exactly the conversation I wanted to avoid and really couldn’t put off much longer. Marco and his expectations were going to land me in jail. Or worse. “This weekend? You really think that’s a good idea? I mean what with Krista and all?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. Damn, I could use the cash. That’s ok, though, because I’ve got something else coming up. Something big.” He clapped me on the shoulder again and this time there was no show of strength, just the connection. “What would I do without you, buddy? You’re always thinkin’. Always got my back.”

Yeah. You bet.

* * *

Joss

How bad does it have to get before I can call it the worst day ever?

First Krista, then freakin' Dobbs, and then Mr. Hanson. He'd cornered me after Chem to talk to me about my lousy performance on the latest test. My dad was going to have a fit about that. Bad grades, like outstanding grades, draw attention. A solid B average is the thing to aim for. Anyway, the impromptu summary of the covalent-whatever deal—which I still didn't get—had delayed me in my usual pre-lunch routine, and gotten me nabbed by a hall monitor. Do Not Pass Go, do not sneak up to your usual hideout, go directly to the Fifth Circle of Hell, otherwise known as the cafeteria.

It's not like I'd never been to the cafeteria before. I used to have to eat there when I was a freshman, for a few very long months, anyway, before I figured out how to avoid it. I remembered now that the best caf' strategy was to take your lunch with you to the class before so you could race down there, as inconspicuously as possible, and claim an empty table. It was ok for later arrivals to sit at your table, which they might do, crowding together on the opposite side like you have a disease, but whatever. As long as you got there first, you didn't have to ask to sit at anyone else's table—and risk being told no, because what's more humiliating than that? Sometimes people would just take all the chairs from your table and carry them off to other tables, and that's sort of embarrassing too, but not as bad if you don't let it get to you and remind yourself that lunching alone is a valid lifestyle choice. On the whole, though, the cafeteria is a bad scene and to be avoided whenever possible.

So there I was, standing in the doorway, taking a quick scan of the room and scoping things out. I still had a notebook and textbook for Chem, so I moved them to carry them under my arm. Because you can't be holding books in front of you like a shield. It's way girly and makes people think you're scared. Posturing is very important in the wild; watch a few documentaries, you'll see.

I couldn't spend too much time hovering, because that was only going to draw attention, so I just plunged in and hoped for the best. The caf' was friggin' chaos as usual. I think I have a low tolerance for chaos. I kept scanning, knowing that I wasn't going to find an empty table, but hoped maybe I'd see an empty space near someone I was at least on speaking terms with, and could come up with some burning question I had to ask. It's hard to look around for such a specific situation while still trying to avoid eye contact, let me tell you.

And then I saw it. There were two chairs just standing there in the corner against the wall. One was pushed all the way into the corner and facing out into the room, the other facing the corner. I could sit with my back to the room, put my boots up on the one in the corner, prop my textbook up on my knees, and pretend like I just had to absorb some chemistry knowledge. Perfect.

Except for the fact that I had to pass Marco's table, and I was so excited about the chairs that I didn't even notice him until my books flew out from under my arm and hit the floor. I think I knew what happened before I even saw him. Some kind of *prey recognizes predator right before it gets eaten* kind of thing.

"Oops," he said, in that obnoxious, *I so meant to do that* way.

I had to squat down to pick up the books, because of course papers went flying out of my notebook when it landed. Thankfully they didn't go far and I didn't actually have to go crawling under tables for them.

"Sorry about that, Joss."

"Sure."

"Surprised to see you here."

I didn't answer. I had some answers in my head; it just seemed better to keep my mouth shut and move on.

"You never come here for lunch. Are you meeting your girlfriend? Why don't you bring her over? Jeff, get a couple chairs for Joss and her new girlfriend."

See, this is a thing between Marco and me, and it's really unpleasant. When we were freshmen, I guess he had this thing for me, because he asked me to the Homecoming dance. And he kept bugging me to go out with him for like a week or something until I finally had to get nasty with him so he'd leave me alone. Not like insulting his masculinity nasty, just, you know, the *I don't like you* truth of it. I don't know why we have to think that telling the truth is being mean, but sometimes I'm powerless against my socialization, what can I tell you? Anyway, ever since then, he'd been on this *You must be a lesbian* thing, because I guess that's the only way it made sense for him that I wouldn't just fall at his feet. Mostly I just avoided him.

Which is what I tried to do at that point by standing up with my books and taking a step away from the table, except that he caught my arm.

"Let me go, Marco."

"Or what, you'll get your girlfriend over here to kick my ass?"

Jeff chuckled at that, and I knew that would only make Marco feel like he had an audience so he'd be more into hassling me. I couldn't help but glance over at Dylan. Because I'm an idiot. He was at the other end of the table with Eric. They had their noses stuck in a car magazine and didn't seem to notice what was going on.

I think Marco noticed because his eyes narrowed at me, and my stomach rolled. Marco can be really mean, and what's more, he's not that typical big, stupid bully *as seen on TV*. He's smart enough to come up with the kind of stuff that really hurts. Stuff that sticks forever.

"Joss, where have you been? Come on. Lunch is half over."

What the...? I turned my head—Marco still had my arm—and Kat was standing there. I wouldn't even say I had a speaking relationship with Kat. She'd said "hi" to me last month, and one time in the locker room she'd asked to borrow lotion from me which of course I didn't have. She was new to Fairview High this year, and I had to wonder what she was doing, and if she realized how stupid it was to get on Marco's bad side.

"Kat? You and *Kat*?"

"She and *Kat* need to study for Chem," Kat said in her sassy way, with a quick glance at my books. "Because I just don't get it. So...if you'd just turn her loose, I'd sure appreciate it."

Kat is pretty. There's just no other way to see it. She's got this gorgeous café au lait skin, light green eyes, and lots of dark brown curls. When she turned that pretty smile on Marco, I felt his grip go slack.

Then I, being an idiot as I might have mentioned, glanced at Dylan again, to see if he'd noticed Kat's smile. Which he had, and was now paying attention to the drama. I wondered how many more people were, now that Kat was there.

"Chemistry. I'll bet there's some chemistry goin' on there. I'd like to see some of that action. Maybe the three of us—"

"Marco, honey, I'm gonna have to wreck your fantasy and tell you that not only are Joss and I not involved with each other, and not only are we both straight—which you'd think any *straight guy* would realize—but I would do her and half the guys at this table before I would even let you watch me change my shoes."

Eric opened his mouth to say something but Kat immediately cut him off, "No, Eric. You're in the other half." But I have to say that the smile she threw him made me think maybe that wasn't true.

While they all sat there digesting that, Kat gave me a tug that almost spilled my books again. Before I knew what was happening, I found myself pushed into a chair at Kat's table which was full of

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