



T A L E N T C H R O N I C L E S S H O R T

# Impulse Control

SUSAN BISCHOFF

## **Impulse Control**

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**Author's Note:** This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

**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.

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