



## Excerpt from Blood & Ash

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There was nothing like sitting in a shitty car with a broken heater covertly filming a teenager for cash to make me question my life choices.

My target, Charlotte Rose Scott, had taffy blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a manic enthusiasm that made me want to slip her an Ambien.

Not that I'd waste one on a child.

Her can-do spirit was currently being applied to a bit of breaking and entering. The sixteen-year-old had tried every point of entry on the ground floor of this weathered Craftsman house that was thirty-two blocks and worlds away from her own home. She'd graduated from tugging on the windows' security bars to wobbling her way up a bare trellis to the second-story balcony.

Good to know all those gymnastics and dance classes of hers had a practical application. It was so hard to make it in the arts, but crime was always a growth industry.

I slapped another memory card into my Handycam, absently rubbing my right thigh. I'd been sitting out here in the damp cold for too long, exacerbating the dull ache from the rods holding my femur together, so I grabbed the

Costco-sized bottle of Tylenol that I'd tossed on the passenger seat and dry-swallowed a couple of pills.

She wrenched on the sliding door handle and I winced. Leave a few more fingerprints, why don't you? If it wouldn't completely compromise my case, I'd show her how to break in myself and put us both out of our misery.

I zoomed in, ready to capture C.R. living her best truth. Or better yet, get some answers. Come on, you little adolescent fiend. Why the uncharacteristic foray into robbery? You'd even blown off piano lessons for this and you thrived in your overscheduled teenage existence.

What was I missing?

Denied entry, she shimmied back down the trellis to run at the solid back door. When she bounced off it with a yelp, only one of us was surprised.

Spare me from amateurs.

I dug my buzzing phone out of my hip pocket. My best friend and part-time employee, Priya Khatri, had come through with the land title search on this property. I frowned at the text, trying to place the homeowner's name. Oh, fuck balls. I wasn't being paid to save Charlotte Rose from making a really stupid mistake.

This was not my problem.

Charlotte Rose rubbed her elbow, red from where she'd smacked into the door, and bit her lip, eyes watery.

Grumbling, I turned off the camera and got out of Moriarty, also known as my car, using both hands to swing my poor stiff leg onto the concrete. Tucking my fingers into the armpits of my battered leather jacket, my breath misting the air, I limped over to the tiny backyard of the crime spree in progress.

"Yo, Cat Burglar Barbie," I called out. "The jig is up!"

She froze for a second and then vanished into thin air.

I blinked, gapping at the empty space. "Charlotte Rose

Scott, you get your butt back here this second and explain yourself, because you are not supposed to have magic!”

I'd done my due diligence before taking this case. Verified that she was a Mundane. No powers. Zero. Nada.

Except, apparently, she wasn't. And now, thanks to this unpleasant and unforeseen magical development, I was about to get royally fucked by House Pacifica.

Charlotte Rose flickered back into view, just a fist with her middle finger extended. I mean, impressive control on invisibility magic, but what a little shit.

“Leave her alone!” Another girl about the same age, who spoke with a light musical accent, raced into the backyard. Her worn denim jacket had “Fuck the patriarchy” written in thick silver marker across the back and her dyed black hair showed the ragged edges of someone who'd cut it herself.

Interesting choice for a co-conspirator.

When Victoria Scott had hired me to spy on her kid who'd been “acting cagey” and therefore obviously had some drug habit, she'd casually sported a linen dress that cost more than my much-needed car repairs. We'd spent a grand total of twenty minutes together, all of them in her vanilla-scented Williams Sonoma kitchen with its neatly shelved cookbooks—written by obscure foodies—whose spines weren't even cracked.

I'd bet anything that this wrong-side-of-the-tracks friend was not part of Victoria's bourgeois starter-pack vision of the good life.

“Stand down,” I told the new girl. “And if you know what's good for you, you'll tell Charlotte Rose to show herself.”

The newcomer called up a gust of wind and flung it at me.

I flew backwards, stumbling over a plastic Adirondack chair, and cracked my skull on the corner of the house so hard that I saw stars. My leg buckled briefly as I bounced off

the wooden siding and staggered forward, choking on a hot rush of bile. Gritting my teeth, I touched a finger to the back of my head and came away with a wet, red smear.

Awesome. A pissy air elemental. Just what my day needed.

I found the tiny box stashed in my jacket pocket and pushed its single button. It produced a high-frequency sound barely within hearing range that made the newbie double over and caused Charlotte Rose to become visible once more, clapping her hands over her ears and moaning in pain.

I braced a hand against the bricks to combat my own dizziness. This admittedly illegal sonic weapon should not have affected me this way because I'd built up a tolerance.

Why, *hel-lo* concussion. On the upside, however lackluster the case had been to solve intellectually, I *had* solved it so at least I'd get paid. With C.R.'s true nature revealed, billable hours took a back seat to getting this kid home safely before she ended up with a juvie record, so I powered through the nausea and slapped a pair of cuffs on these criminal toddlers before they could regroup.

I dialed a number on my phone.

"It's Ashira Cohen," I said, when Victoria answered. "Tell your daughter she has permission to get in my car."

Victoria stuttered out protests that she had no idea who I was or what I was talking about, but I cut her off with an exasperated huff. Not this again. Everyone thought they were so clever denying they'd hired a P.I. when things got tough. It didn't work that way.

"Enough bullshit. If you want help getting out of the mess you've landed in with your unregistered Nefesh kid, then give the all-clear for me to drive her home."

Victoria answered with a meek "okay." Damn straight, you better comply.

Nowadays, most people preferred to hire private investi-

gators who had magic, wanting the extra abilities that Nefesh brought to the table. I was the only female P.I. in town, very much outside the boys' club of this industry, and a Mundane to boot. I'd worked my ass off to carve out a niche for myself and Victoria wasn't going to jeopardize that.

I passed the phone to Charlotte Rose, who listened to her mother without comment, glaring at me the entire time. I held that gaze and raised her glower with an arched eyebrow. Snotty teens were the worst. I'd know.

C.R. handed me the cell and linked hands with her friend, the two of them edging closer together.

"I have rights," the second girl howled, shaking the cuffs as if trying to blow them off.

"Nope," I said. "You lost them under Statue 7.5, 'demonstrating exceeding stupidity.' And save your energy. Those puppies suppress magic."

"You're not a cop," she countered. "You'd have identified yourself. And if you had magic you'd have used it. That means, you're not Nefesh and you're not allowed to have shit like this. Or use it on me."

It's true, the cuffs were totally a "fell off the back of a van" purchase, but a woman did what she had to. Just because I wasn't allowed to work magic cases, that didn't preclude supposedly Mundane ones from going sideways—like this one had. "Yeah? How would you know?"

"Television," the girl said. "So what are you?"

I flashed her my P.I. license. "A real-life detective who knows what equipment she's allowed to have far better than you."

Charlotte Rose puffed out her chest. "I won't let her hurt you, Meryem."

"Aw. That's... deluded." I herded the girls to Moriarty, trying not to limp too badly. Never show those monsters weakness. Weirdly, I could still smell blood, as if it was gushing out of me like a waterfall. It wasn't even that bad,

kind of earthy and rich. I touched the back of my head. There was some matted in my dark waves, but the bleeding itself had stopped.

Meryem refused to get into my fine vehicle, holding her wrist pointedly against her chest once I'd uncuffed her as though I'd caused permanent nerve damage. "You gonna kidnap me?"

What a drama queen. "Much as I hate to deprive myself of your stellar company, no."

"Then I can get myself home."

"Mer—" Charlotte Rose sighed. "Be safe, okay?" She leaned in and gave Meryem a quick kiss.

Meryem blushed, scraping one of her raggedy high tops along the ground.

Even I, with my cold, dead heart, found their coupledness adorable.

"Here." I fished out what was pretty close to my last forty bucks.

"Fuck you. I'm not a charity case," Meryem said.

Maybe not, but she was in a jean jacket and had to be freezing in the miserable March weather. No way she had a good home to go to, if any at all. However, she was also prickly and if I was too nice—generally not an accusation thrown my way—she'd bolt.

"Consider it compensation for pain and suffering." I shoved the bills at her.

They disappeared so fast into her pocket that I made a note to get this girl some help.

"Thanks," she said, her eyes flickering uncertainly up to mine.

"Get lost before I change my mind."

She squeezed C.R.'s hand and bolted.

I fumbled at the door handle because there seemed to be two of them, then sank gratefully into the driver's seat, taking a couple of steadying breaths before I leaned over to

unlock the passenger door, knocking the Tylenol bottle onto the floor.

C.R. got into the car, keeping her distance.

Using the rag that I kept to defog the windshield since the heater didn't work, I wiped myself down because my hair was sweatily plastered to my neck. I ignored Charlotte Rose's grimace that came with huffy sound effects.

Once I was dry-ish and reality had stabilized enough to drive safely-ish, I patted Moriarty's dashboard twice and turned the key, whispering, "Who's a good boy?" and praying this wasn't the moment he died on me once and for all. Not like he hadn't faked his death more than once. But he started with only the mildest choke.

Neither C.R. nor I spoke for the first half of the ride.

"You going to out me?" she said.

I braked at a red light and glanced over at her. The world swung sideways and I gripped the steering wheel tight until my equilibrium was restored.

C.R.'s words were sneered but her pupils were slightly dilated.

I slowly faced forward so as not to jiggle my brain. "Contrary to popular belief and genetics, I have a moral compass. It's up to you to tell your mom about Meryem. So, why invisibility magic?"

"Mom used to play this game where she'd pull the blanket up over my eyes and say, 'Where's Charlotte Rose?' Apparently, I went nuts for it."

Uh-huh. Cute answer but there was more to it than that. While Nefesh were born with magic, the precise nature of it developed during childhood and was rooted in psychological primal drives.

The light turned green and I hit the gas, wincing at Moriarty's jerky start. "And the attempted robbery?"

"I wasn't going to steal anything," she said hotly.

I let the silence grow.

It took her all of two blocks to break.

“It was my birth mother’s place,” she said. “I wanted to see...”

“What Darleen’s life was like without you?”

Charlotte Rose shrugged, a mess of emotions playing across her face that she tried to hide under a sullen disinterest. Then it hit her. “You knew? Is that why you stopped me?”

I made a smooth left. “Figured you didn’t want your big reunion to be from juvie.”

She crossed her arms and stared straight ahead.

Thankfully, it was a short drive from there, because by the time we pulled up to her large Tudor home with its pricy S.U.V. parked in the driveway, my skin felt two sizes too small, and the world’s worst itch had settled between my shoulder blades, exactly where I couldn’t reach.

This time, I met Victoria in her living room, decorated with that faux rustic charm involving unpainted wood, a chunky stone fireplace wafting out the scent of pine, and cutesy large prints with sayings like “Laugh. Live. Breathe.” that made me want to “Gag. Run. Drink.”

Victoria greeted me in a purple bamboo yoga number that would have been very comfortable to move in, except I doubted she did classes in full makeup, her blonde-streaked hair twisted in a chignon and large diamonds flashing in her ears.

Inner peace through Tiffany’s. Namaste, bitches.

“Charlotte Rose,” Victoria said. “What’s going on?”

“You hired her to spy on me?” C.R.’s glower at her mom should have incinerated her.

“I hired her because I was concerned that my daughter was a drug addict!” Victoria planted her hands on her hips and the two of them broke into a furious squabble.

I whistled loudly, pain flaring inside my skull. Eyes half-



squinted shut, I massaged my temples. I could patch myself up with some aspirin and a good night's sleep. Nothing to fear. "Your mom was worried. Suspicious and over-paranoid but worried. Charlotte Rose is not on drugs. Fight it out later."

Victoria sat down on the sofa next to her daughter. "Then why has she been behaving this way?"

She'd hired me to get answers and I had them, but this was a delicate situation. "She was curious about her birth mother. It's natural and isn't any reflection on you."

Victoria plucked at her sleeve.

"Mom?" Charlotte Rose reached out for Victoria and I braced myself for her mother's hurt dismissal, but Victoria surprised me and took her daughter's hand.

"I wish you had come to me first but I understand. When we adopted you, Darleen made it clear that if you wanted to meet her, she was open to it, but we need to do this properly, okay?"

"Okay."

Victoria smiled at me and stood up. "Thank you. If you'd care to send your invoice—"

"Sit. Down."

She dropped like a stone onto the cushions.

I perched on the edge of a scratchy wing chair, hoping my casually braced elbow on the back didn't look like the desperate support to remain upright that it was. "Victoria, I specifically asked you in our intake interview if you could think of any Nefesh connection that would prevent me from taking this assignment. I'm not legally allowed to handle cases involving magic."

The law was asinine, supposedly "designed to protect Mundanes like me." Right. Try more money in House coffers since all Nefesh paid taxes towards House resources and protection. But it was what it was and, if House Pacifica found out, I'd be brutally fined, because they took this very

seriously. I was already existing by the skin of my teeth. This would ruin me.

“Magic?” Victoria said, and flushed a faint pink.

I stared at her until her shoulders slumped.

“Her birth mother was from a good Mundane family and there was no father listed on her birth certificate,” Victoria said. “Nothing in the adoption showed that Charlotte Rose might be Nefesh through the birth father.”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that part, since I investigated it thoroughly. However, you knew about Charlotte Rose and you kept it from me.” I practically threw my arm out of its socket trying to get at the itch but it remained maddeningly out of reach. “Why me? You could have gone to a Nefesh P.I.”

“I didn’t want them to suspect. And you were cheaper,” she admitted.

Slight as my accomplishments were, and my mother had written a treatise on that, they were mine and I was super proud of them. Maybe I didn’t have the interesting cases—yet—but a woman had to start somewhere and I was pulling this off on my terms. I’d get there.

I gave up on the itch and my anger. Victoria was not worth committing grievous bodily harm and losing everything. But man, it was close.

“Here’s my advice,” I said, catching myself before I did a slow slide off the chair and onto my ass. Okay, maybe my condition was a bit worse than presumed. “Take Charlotte Rose to House Pacifica and point her baby blues at them. Squeeze out a tear or two for good measure while you throw yourself on their mercy. Mom, you didn’t know. Kid, you were scared to lose the love of your adoptive parents.”

Charlotte Rose bit her lip, exchanging a glance with her mother.

“Hit the mark there, did I?” I said. “Let me guess. Dad

has a few beliefs in common with the Untainted Party?” That explained the invisibility magic.

“How’d you know?” Victoria squeaked.

“I’m well versed on those people. They’re a pretty popular political affiliation around here.”

“I can’t tell him.” Charlotte Rose looked genuinely scared.

I softened my tone. “You don’t have a choice. If you don’t do it by tomorrow, I’ll have to because all people with magic must be registered with the House in their region. A fact you damn well know. But since it’ll be worse if I’m involved...” Mainly, for me. “It’s in your best interests to keep me out of it and pile on the remorse.”

“This feels really unsavory,” Victoria said. “There has to be another way.”

My dad’s voice rang out loud and clear in my head. *There are two types of people in this world, Ash, my girl. Those who are marks and those who aren’t.*

It had only taken me one harsh lesson to swear I’d never make that mistake again. Victoria had tried to play me. Operative word being “tried.”

“There isn’t,” I said. “Your kid is currently a Rogue. Fix it.”

Charlotte Rose surged up like a fury of Greek myth. “I’m not registering with the House. They experiment on people.”

Her voice hurt my ears. It was too loud, too grating.

“While I’m happy to think the worst of Levi Montefiore and House Pacifica...” I dabbed at the sweat on my brow. “They aren’t running some mad scientist lab. They’re legit, annoyingly so, and believe me, it’s much worse to be on their bad side than on the same team.”

My words sounded funny, all long and drawn out. Fuck. I was going to have to brave a hospital. Warning Victoria again to contact House Pacifica and reminding her that late

payment on my bill was subject to interest, I made my excuses and stumbled out to Moriarty, whose headlights seemed to smirk evilly at me.

The drive to the closest Emergency Room was a blur. I pulled up to the entrance, tossed my keys at the attitude-laden valet in the fireman costume who totally wasn't getting a tip, lurched inside, and collapsed, unconscious.