



HELL
BENT
LEIGH
BARDUGO

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HELL BENT

Leigh Bardugo



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For Miriam Pastan, who read my fortune in a cup of coffee

**Ignorant they of all things till I came
And told them of the rising of the stars
And their dark settings, taught them numbers, too,
The queen of knowledge. I instructed them
How to join letters, making them their slaves
To serve the memory, mother of the muse.**

Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound
Inscribed above the entrance to
Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University

Culebra que no mir morde, que viva mil anos.
May the snake that doesn't bite me live a thousand years.

Sephardic proverb

PART I

As Above

November

Alex approached Black Elm as if she were sidling up to a wild animal, cautious in her walk up the long, curving driveway, careful not to show her fear. How many times had she made this walk? But today was different. The house appeared through the bare branches of the trees, as if it had been waiting for her, as if it had heard her footsteps and anticipated her arrival. It didn't crouch like prey. It stood, two stories of gray stone and peaked roofs, a wolf with paws planted and teeth bared. Black Elm had been tame once, glossy and preening. But it had been left on its own too long.

The boarded-up windows on the second floor made it all so much worse, a wound in the wolf's side that, left untended, might turn it mad.

She slotted her key into the old back door and slipped into the kitchen. It was chillier inside than out—they couldn't afford to keep the place heated, and there was no reason to. But despite the cold and the mission she'd come here to fulfill, the room still felt welcoming. Copper pans hung in neat rows above the big vintage stove, bright and ready, eager to be used. The slate floor was spotless, the counters wiped clean and set with a milk bottle full of holly branches that Dawes had arranged just so. The kitchen was the most functional room of Black Elm, alive with regular care, a tidy temple of light. This was how Dawes dealt with all they'd done, with the thing lurking in the ballroom.

Alex had a routine. Well, Dawes had a routine and Alex tried to follow it, and it felt like a rock to cling to now as fear tried to drag her under. Unlock the door, sort the mail and set it on the counter, fill Cosmo's bowls with fresh food and water.

They were usually empty, but today Cosmo had tipped the food on its side, scattering the floor with fish-shaped pellets, as if in protest. Darlington's cat was mad at being left alone. Or frightened by not being quite so alone anymore.

“Or maybe you’re just a picky little shit,” Alex muttered, cleaning up the food. “I’ll pass your comments along to the chef.”

She didn’t like the sound of her voice, brittle in the quiet, but she made herself finish slowly, methodically. She filled the water and food bowls, tossed out the junk mail addressed to Daniel Arlington, and tucked a water bill into her bag that she would take back to Il Bastone. Steps in a ritual, performed with care, but they offered no protection. She considered making coffee. She could sit outside in the winter sunlight and wait for Cosmo to come find her, when he saw fit to leave off prowling the messy tangle of the hedge maze for mice. She could do that. Push her worry and anger aside, and try to solve this puzzle, even though she didn’t want to complete the picture emerging with every new and nasty piece.

Alex glanced up at the ceiling as if she were able to see through the floorboards. No, she couldn’t just sit on the porch and pretend everything was as it should be, not when her feet wanted to climb those stairs, not when she knew she should run the other way, lock the kitchen door behind her, pretend she’d never heard of this place. Alex had come here for a reason, but now she wondered at her stupidity. She wasn’t up to this task. She’d talk to Dawes, maybe even Turner. For once she’d make a plan instead of rushing headlong into disaster.

She washed her hands at the sink, and it was only when she turned to reach for a towel that she saw the open door.

Alex dried her hands, trying to ignore the way her heart had leapt into a run. She had never noticed that door in the butler’s pantry, a gap between the pretty glass cupboards and shelves. She’d never seen it open before. It shouldn’t be open now.

Dawes might have left it that way. But Dawes was licking her wounds from the ritual and hiding behind her rows of index cards. She hadn’t been here in days, not since she had set those holly branches on the kitchen counter, making a picture of what life should be. Clean and easy. An antidote to the rest of their days and nights, to the secret above.

She and Dawes never bothered with the butler’s pantry, its rows of dusty dishes and glassware, its soup terrine the size of a small bathtub. It was one of the many vestigial limbs of the old house, disused and forgotten, left to atrophy since Darlington’s disappearance. And they certainly never bothered with the basement. Alex had never even thought about it. Not until now, standing at the kitchen sink, surrounded by tidy

blue tiles painted with windmills and tall ships, staring at that black gap, a perfect rectangle, a sudden void. It looked as if someone had simply peeled away part of the kitchen. It looked like the mouth of a grave.

Call Dawes.

Alex leaned against the counter.

Back out of the kitchen and call Turner.

She set down the towel and drew a knife from the block beside the sink. She wished there were a Gray nearby, but she didn't want to risk calling one to her.

The size of the house, its deep silence, sat heavy around her. She glanced up again, thought of the golden shimmer of the circle, the heat it gave off. *I have appetites.* Had those words excited her when they should have only made her afraid?

Alex walked quietly toward the open door, the absence of a door. How deep had they dug when they'd built this house? She could count three, four, five stone steps leading down into the basement, and then they faded into the dark. Maybe there were no more stairs. Maybe she would take a step, fall, keep falling into the cold.

She felt along the wall for a light switch, then looked up and saw a ratty piece of twine dangling from an exposed bulb. She yanked on it, and the stairs were flooded with warm yellow light. The bulb made a comforting hum.

"Shit," Alex said on a breath. Her terror dissolved, leaving nothing but embarrassment in its place. Just stairs, a wooden railing, shelves stacked with rags, cans of paint, tools lining the wall. A faint, musty smell rose up from the dark below, a vegetable stink, the hint of rot. She heard the drip of water and the shuffle of what might have been a rat.

She couldn't quite make out the base of the stairs, but there had to be another switch or bulb below. She could go down there, make sure no one had been rooting around, see if she and Dawes needed to set out traps.

But why was the door open?

Cosmo could have nudged it on one of his ratting expeditions. Or maybe Dawes really had popped by and gone down to the basement for something ordinary—weed killer, paper towels. She'd forgotten to close up properly.

So Alex would shut the door. Lock it tight. And if, by chance, there was something down there that wasn't meant to be down there, it could

stay right where it was until she called for reinforcements.

She reached for the twine and paused there, hand gripping the string, listening. She thought she heard—there, again, a soft hiss.

The sound of her name. *Galaxy*.

“Fuck this.” She knew how this particular movie ended, and there was no way she was going down there.

She yanked on the twine and heard the pop of the bulb, then felt a hard shove between her shoulder blades.

Alex fell. The knife clattered from her hands. She fought the urge to reach out to break her fall and covered her head instead, letting her shoulder take the brunt of it. She half-slid, half-tumbled to the base of the stairs, and hit the floor hard, her breath flooding out of her like a draft through a window. The door above her slammed. She heard the lock click. She was in the dark.

Her heart was racing now. What was down here with her? Who had locked her in with it? *Get up, Stern. Get your shit together. Get ready to fight.*

Was it her voice she was hearing? Darlington’s?

Hers, of course. Darlington would never swear.

She pushed herself to her feet, bracing her back against the wall. At least nothing could come at her from that direction. It was hard to breathe. Once bones broke, they learned the habit. Blake Keely had cracked two of her ribs less than a year ago. She thought they might be broken again. Her hands were slippery. The floor was wet from some old leak in the walls, and the air smelled fetid and wrong. She wiped her palms on her jeans and waited, her breath coming in ragged gasps. From somewhere in the dark, she heard what might have been a whimper.

“Who’s there?” she rasped, hating the fear in her voice. “Come at me, you cowardly fuck.”

Nothing.

She fumbled for her phone, for light, the blue glow vibrant and startling. She directed the beam over shelves of old paint thinner, tools, boxes labeled in a jagged hand she knew was Darlington’s, dusty crates emblazoned with a circular logo: *Arlington & Co. Rubber Boots*. Then the light glinted off two pairs of eyes.

Alex choked on a scream, nearly dropping her phone. Not people, Grays, a man and a woman, clinging to each other, trembling with fear.

But it wasn't Alex they were afraid of.

She'd gotten it wrong. The floor wasn't wet from a leak or rainwater or some old burst pipe. The floor was slick with blood. Her hands were covered in it. She'd smeared it on her jeans.

Two bodies lay heaped on the old brick. They looked like cast-off clothing, piles of rags. She knew those faces. *Heaven, to keep its beauty, cast them out.*

There was so much blood. New blood. Fresh.

The Grays hadn't abandoned their bodies. Even in her panic, she knew that was strange.

"Who did this?" she asked them and the woman moaned.

The man pressed a finger to his lips, eyes full of fear as they darted around the basement. His whisper drifted through the dark.

"We're not alone."

1

October, One Month Before

Alex wasn't far from Tara's apartment. She'd driven these streets with Darlington at the start of her freshman year, walked them when she was hunting Tara's killer. It had been winter then, the branches bare, the tiny yards crusted with dirty mounds of snow. This neighborhood looked better in the still-warm days of early October, clouds of green leaves softening the edges of the rooflines, ivy climbing over the chain-link fences, all of it made gentle and dreamy by the glint of streetlights carving golden circles into the soft hours of dusk.

She was standing in the well of shadow between two row houses, watching the street that fronted the Taurus Cafe, a windowless lump of brick decorated by signs promising keno and lotto and Corona. Alex could hear the thump of music from somewhere inside. Small rings of people smoked and chatted beneath the lights, despite the sign beside the door that read *No loitering police take notice*. She was glad of the noise, but less happy at the prospect of so many witnesses seeing her come and go. Better to come back in the daytime when the street would be deserted, but she didn't have that luxury.

She knew the bar would be packed with Grays, drawn by sweat, bodies pressed together, the damp clink of beer bottles; she wanted someone closer to hand.

There—a Gray in a parka and a beanie, hovering by an arguing couple, undisturbed by the heavy heat of a too-long summer. She made eye contact with him, his baby face an uncomfortable jolt. He'd died young.

"*Come on along*," she sang under her breath, then gave a disgusted snort. She had that goofy song in her head. Some a cappella group had been practicing in the courtyard when Alex was getting ready to leave the dorm.

“How are they already starting that shit?” Lauren had complained, sorting through her crates of vinyl, her blond hair even brighter after a summer spent lifeguarding.

“It’s Irving Berlin,” Mercy had noted.

“I don’t care.”

“It’s also racist.”

“That shit is racist!” Lauren had called out of the window and put AC/DC on her record player, turning the volume all the way up.

Alex loved every minute of it. She’d been surprised at how much she’d missed Lauren and Mercy over the summer, their easy talk and gossip, the shared worry over classes, the arguments about music and clothes, all of it like a tether she could grasp to bring her back to the ordinary world. *This is my life*, she’d told herself, curled up on the couch in front of a noisy fan, watching Mercy hang a garland of stars over the fireplace in their new common room, quite a change from their cramped rooms on Old Campus. The couch and recliner had made it into their new suite, the coffee table they’d all assembled together at the start of freshman year, the toaster and its seemingly inexhaustible supply of Pop-Tarts sent courtesy of Lauren’s mom. Alex had asked Lethe for a bike and a printer and a new tutor at the end of last year. They’d been happy to agree, and she wished she’d asked for more.

Their freshman dorm on Old Campus had been the most beautiful place Alex had ever lived, but the residential college—JE proper—felt real, solid and elegant, permanent. She liked the stained glass windows, the stonework faces in every corner of the courtyard, the scuffed wood floors, the heavily carved fireplace that didn’t work but that they’d decorated with candles and a vintage globe. She even liked the little Gray in an old-fashioned dress, a child with hair done up in crisp curls who liked to linger in the branches above the tree swing.

She and Mercy were sharing a double because Lauren had won the single in their draw. Alex was sure she’d cheated, but she didn’t much mind. It would have been easier to come and go if she had a room to herself, but there was also something comforting about lying in bed at night and hearing Mercy snore across the room. And at least they weren’t stuck in bunks anymore.

Alex had planned on hanging out with Mercy and Lauren for a few hours before she had to leave to oversee a ritual at Book and Snake,

listening to records and trying to ignore the annoying *mmmm ooh* of a singing group punishing “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

Come on along. Come on along. Let me take you by the hand.

But then the text from Eitan had appeared.

So now she was eyeing the Taurus Cafe. She was about to step out of the shadows when a black-and-white drove by, a new cruiser, sleek and quiet as a deep-sea predator. It flashed its lights and gave a brief belch of the siren, a warning that the New Haven PD did indeed take notice.

“Yeah, fuck you,” someone growled, but the crowd dispersed, drifting into the club or weaving down the sidewalk to find their cars. It wasn’t properly late yet. There was still plenty of time to find another party, another chance at something good.

Alex didn’t want to think about the cops or getting caught or what Turner might say if she got dragged in on a B&E or, worse, an assault charge. She hadn’t heard from the detective since the end of her freshman year, and she doubted he’d be glad to see her under the best of circumstances.

Once the cruiser was gone, Alex made sure the sidewalk was clear of possible witnesses and crossed the street to an ugly white duplex, just a couple doors down from the bar. Funny how all sad places looked the same. Trash cans overflowing. Weed-choked yards and junked-up porches. *I’ll get around to it or I won’t.* But there was a new truck in the driveway of this particular house, complete with personalized license plate: ODMNOUT. At least she knew she had the right spot.

Alex drew a mirrored compact from the pocket of her jeans. When she hadn’t been mapping New Haven’s infinite churches for Dawes, she’d spent the summer digging through the drawers of Il Bastone’s armory. She told herself it was a good way to waste time, get familiar with Lethe, maybe eye up what might be worth stealing if it came to that, but the truth was that when she was rummaging in the armory cabinets, reading the little handwritten cards—*the Carpet of Ozymandias; Monsoon Rings for calling rain, incomplete set; Palillos del Dios*—she could feel Darlington with her, peering over her shoulder. *Those castanets will banish a poltergeist, Stern, if one plays the correct rhythm. But you’ll still walk away with your fingers burned black.*

It was comforting and troubling at the same time. Invariably, that steady scholar’s voice turned accusing. *Where are you, Stern? Why*

haven't you come?

Alex rolled her shoulders, trying to shrug off her guilt. She needed to stay focused. That morning, she'd held the pocket mirror up to the TV to see if she could capture a glamour from the screen. She hadn't been sure it would work, but it had. Now she popped it open and let the illusion fall over her. She jogged up the steps to the porch and knocked.

The man who answered the door was huge and heavily muscled, his neck thick and pink as a cartoon ham. She didn't need to consult the image on her phone. This was Chris Owens, also known as Oddman, record as long as he was and twice as wide.

"Holy shit," he said when he saw Alex at the door, his eyes trained on the space a foot above her head. The glamour had added twelve inches to her height.

She raised her hand and waved.

"I ... Can I help you?" Oddman asked.

Alex bobbed her chin toward the apartment interior.

Oddman shook his head as if waking from a dream. "Yeah, of course." He stepped aside, sweeping his arm out in a grand gesture of welcome.

The living room was surprisingly neat: a halogen lamp tucked into the corner, a big leather couch with a matching recliner arranged to face a massive flat-screen tuned to ESPN. "You want something to drink or..." He hesitated, and Alex knew the calculation he was making. There was only one reason a celebrity would turn up on his doorstep on a Thursday night—any night really. "You looking to score?"

Alex hadn't really needed confirmation, but now she had it. "You owe twelve large."

Oddman took a lurching step back as if he'd suddenly lost his balance. Because he was hearing Alex's voice. She hadn't bothered to try to disguise it, and the dissonance between her voice and the glamour of Tom Brady created by the mirror had caused the illusion to waver. It didn't matter. Alex had only needed the magic to get inside Oddman's apartment without a fuss.

"What the fuck—"

"Twelve large," Alex repeated.

Now he saw her as she was, a tiny girl standing in his living room, black hair parted in the middle, so skinny she might slip straight through the floorboards.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are,” he bellowed, “but you’re in the wrong damn house.”

He was already striding toward her, his bulk making the room shake.

Alex’s arm shot out, reaching toward the window, toward the sidewalk in front of the Taurus Cafe. She felt the Gray in the beanie rush into her, tasted green apple Jolly Ranchers, smelled the skunk smoke of weed. His spirit felt unfinished and frantic, a bird slamming itself against a windowpane again and again. But his strength was pure and ferocious. She put up her hands, and her palms struck Oddman square in the chest.

The big man went flying. His body slammed into the TV, shattering the screen and knocking it to the floor. Alex couldn’t pretend it didn’t feel good to steal the Gray’s strength, to be dangerous just for a moment.

She crossed the room and stood over Oddman, waited for his dazed eyes to clear.

“Twelve large,” she said again. “You have a week to get it or I come back and break bones.” Though it was possible she’d cracked his sternum already.

“I don’t have it,” Oddman said on a groan, his hand rubbing his chest. “My sister’s kid—”

Alex knew the excuses; she’d made them herself. *My mom is in the hospital. My check is late. My car needs a new transmission and I can’t pay you if I can’t get to work.* It didn’t really matter if they were true or not.

She squatted down. “I feel for you. I really do. But I have my job, you have yours. Twelve thousand dollars by next Friday or he’ll make me come back and turn you into an example for every dime bag hump in the neighborhood. And I don’t want to do that.”

She really didn’t.

Oddman seemed to believe her. “He ... got something on you?”

“Enough to bring me here tonight and to bring me back again.” Alex’s temples gave a sudden throb, and the oversweet tang of apple candy burst into her mouth. “Shit, man. You look bad.”

It took Alex a second to realize she was the one speaking—with someone else’s voice.

Oddman’s eyes widened. “Derrick?”

“Yeah!” That wasn’t her voice, wasn’t her laugh.

Oddman reached out to touch her shoulder, something between wonder

and fear making his hand shake. “You ... I went to your wake.”

Alex stood, nearly losing her footing. She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection from the broken TV, but the person looking back at her wasn't a scrawny girl in a tank top and jeans. It was a boy in a beanie and a parka.

She shoved the Gray out of her. For a moment, they stared at each other—Derrick, apparently. She didn't know what had killed him and she didn't want to know. He'd somehow pushed to the forefront of her consciousness, taken over her face, her voice. And she wanted none of that.

“*Bela Lugosi's dead,*” she snarled at him. They'd become her favorite death words over the summer. He vanished.

Oddman had pressed himself against the wall as if he could disappear into it. His eyes were full of tears. “What the fuck is happening?”

“Don't worry about it,” she said. “Just get the money and all this goes away.”

Alex only wished she had it that easy.