

“Brilliant...impossible to put down.”

—STEPHEN KING



NINTH

HOUSE

LEIGH

BARDUGO

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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To Hedwig, Nima, Em, and Les—for the many rescues.

**Ay una moza y una moza que nonse espanta de la
muerte**

**porque tiene padre y madre y sus doce hermanos
cazados.**

Caza de tre tabacades y un cortijo enladriado.

**En medio de aquel cortijo havia un mansanale
que da mansanas de amores en vierno y en verano.**

Adentro de aquel cortijo siete grutas hay fraguada.

En cada gruta y gruta ay echado cadenado....

El huerco que fue ligero se entró por el cadenado.

—La Moza y El Huerco

There is a girl, a girl who does not fear death

**Because she has her father and her mother and her twelve
hunter brothers,**

A home of three floors and a barnyard farmhouse,

**In the middle of the farm, an apple tree that gives love
apples in the winter and summer.**

In the farm there are seven grottos,

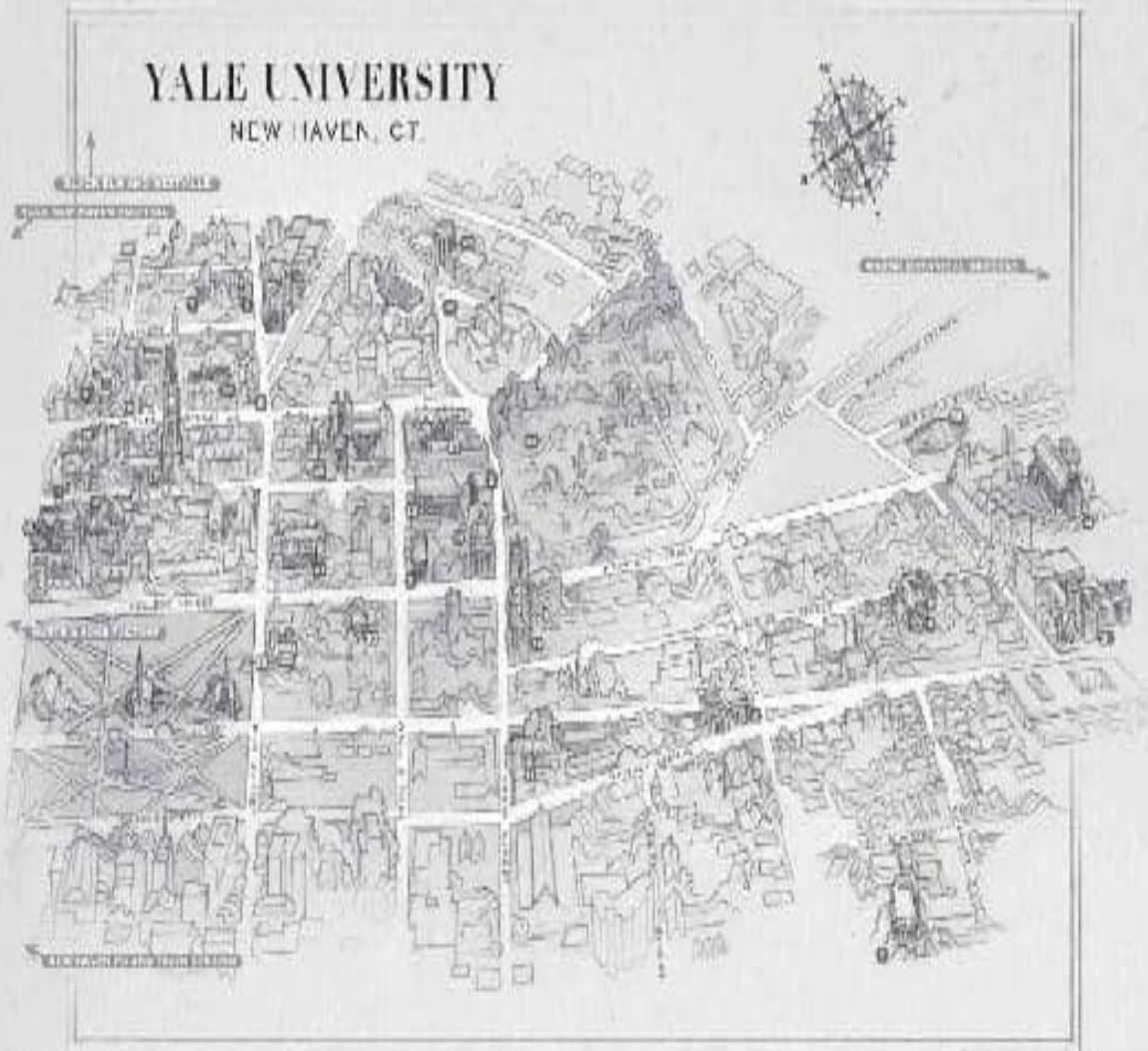
Each and every grotto secured....

Death was light and slipped in through the lock.

—Death and the Girl, Sephardic ballad

YALE UNIVERSITY

NEW HAVEN, CT.



1 GRASS BERRY
 2 URSI G. STONE
 3 BUCKLEY BERRY
 4 WATSON
 5 WOLF E. HEND
 6 BROADWAY
 7 ST. ALAN
 8 TOWNSHIP
 9 H. TOWN

10 COLLEGE STREET BROADWAY
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Prologue

Early Spring

By the time Alex managed to get the blood out of her good wool coat, it was too warm to wear it. Spring had come on grudgingly; pale blue mornings failed to deepen, turning instead to moist, sullen afternoons, and stubborn frost lined the road in high, dirty meringues. But sometime around mid-March, the slices of lawn between the stone paths of Old Campus began to sweat themselves free of snow, emerging wet, black, and tufty with matted grass, and Alex found herself notched into the window seat in the rooms hidden on the top floor of 268 York, reading *Suggested Requirements for Lethe Candidates*.

She heard the clock on the mantel tick, the chiming of the bell as customers came and went in the clothing store below. The secret rooms above the shop were affectionately known as the Hutch by Lethe members, and the commercial space beneath them had been, at varying times, a shoe store, a wilderness outfitter, and a twenty-four-hour Wawa mini-mart with its own Taco Bell counter. The Lethe diaries from those years were filled with complaints about the stink of refried beans and grilled onions seeping up through the floor—until 1995, when someone had enchanted the Hutch and the back staircase that led to the alley so that they smelled always of fabric softener and clove.

Alex had discovered the pamphlet of Lethe House guidelines sometime in the blurred weeks after the incident at the mansion on Orange. She had checked her email only once since then on the Hutch's old desktop, seen the long string of messages from Dean Sandow, and logged off. She'd let the battery run down on her phone, ignored her classes, watched the branches sprout leaves at the knuckles like a woman trying on rings. She ate all the food in the pantries and freezer—the fancy cheeses and packs of smoked salmon first, then the cans of beans and syrup-soaked peaches in boxes marked EMERGENCY RATIONS. When they were gone, she ordered takeout aggressively, charging it all to Darlington's still-active account. The trip

down and up the stairs was tiring enough that she had to rest before she tore into her lunch or dinner, and sometimes she didn't bother to eat at all, just fell asleep in the window seat or on the floor beside the plastic bags and foil-wrapped containers. No one came to check on her. There was no one left.

The pamphlet was cheaply printed, bound with staples, a black-and-white picture of Harkness Tower on the cover, *We Are the Shepherds* printed beneath it. She doubted the Lethe House founders had Johnny Cash in mind when they'd chosen their motto, but every time she saw those words she thought of Christmastime, of lying on the old mattress in Len's squat in Van Nuys, room spinning, a half-eaten can of cranberry sauce on the floor beside her, and Johnny Cash singing, "*We are the shepherds, we walked 'cross the mountains. We left our flocks when the new star appeared.*" She thought of Len rolling over, sliding his hand under her shirt, murmuring into her ear, "Those are some shitty shepherds."

The guidelines for Lethe House candidates were located near the back of the pamphlet and had last been updated in 1962.

High academic achievement with an emphasis on history and chemistry.

Facility with languages and a working knowledge of Latin and Greek.

Good physical health and hygiene. Evidence of a regular fitness regimen encouraged.

Exhibits signs of a steady character with a mind toward discretion.

An interest in the arcane is discouraged, as this is a frequent indicator of an "outsider" disposition.

Should demonstrate no squeamishness toward the realities of the human body.

MORS VINCIT OMNIA.

Alex—whose knowledge of Latin was less than working—looked it up: Death conquers all. But in the margin, someone had scrawled *irrumat* over

vincit, nearly obliterating the original with blue ballpoint pen.

Beneath the Lethe requirements, an addendum read: *Standards for candidates have been relaxed in two circumstances: Lowell Scott (B.A., English, 1909) and Sinclair Bell Braverman (no degree, 1950), with mixed results.*

Another note had been scratched into the margin here, this one clearly in Darlington's jagged, EKG-like scrawl: *Alex Stern*. She thought of the blood soaking the carpet of the old Anderson mansion black. She thought of the dean—the startled white of his femur jutting from his thigh, the stink of wild dogs filling the air.

Alex set aside the aluminum container of cold falafel from Mamoun's, wiped her hands on her Lethe House sweats. She limped to the bathroom, popped open the bottle of zolpidem, and tucked one beneath her tongue. She cupped her hand beneath the faucet, watched the water pour over her fingers, listened to the grim sucking sound from the mouth of the drain. *Standards for candidates have been relaxed in two circumstances.*

For the first time in weeks, she looked at the girl in the water-speckled mirror, watched as that bruised girl lifted her tank top, the cotton stained yellow with pus. The wound in Alex's side was a deep divot, crusted black. The bite had left a visible curve that she knew would heal badly, if it healed at all. Her map had been changed. Her coastline altered. *Mors irrumat omnia*. Death fucks us all.

Alex touched her fingers gently to the hot red skin surrounding the teeth marks. The wound was getting infected. She felt some kind of concern, her mind nudging her toward self-preservation, but the idea of picking up the phone, getting a ride to the undergrad health center—the sequence of actions each new action would incite—was overwhelming, and the warm, dull throb of her body setting fire to itself had become almost companionable. Maybe she'd get a fever, start hallucinating.

She eyed the thrust of her ribs, the blue veins like downed power lines beneath her fading bruises. Her lips were feathered with chapped skin. She

thought of her name inked into the margins of the pamphlet—the third circumstance.

“Results were decidedly mixed,” she said, startled by the husky rattle of her voice. She laughed and the drain seemed to chuckle with her. Maybe she already had a fever.

In the fluorescent glare of the bathroom lights, she gripped the edges of the bite in her side and dug her fingers into it, pinching the flesh around her stitches until the pain dropped over her like a mantle, the blackout coming on in a welcome rush.

That was in the spring. But the trouble had begun on a night in the full dark of winter, when Tara Hutchins died and Alex still thought she might get away with everything.

Skull and Bones, oldest of the landed societies, first of the eight Houses of the Veil, founded in 1832. The Bonesmen can boast more presidents, publishers, captains of industry, and cabinet members than any other society (for a full list of its alumni, please see Appendix C), and perhaps “boast” is the right word. The Bonesmen are aware of their influence and expect the deference of Lethe delegates. They would do well to remember their own motto: *Rich or poor, all are equal in death*. Conduct yourself with the discretion and diplomacy warranted by your office and association with Lethe, but remember always that our duty is not to prop up the vanity of Yale’s best and brightest but to stand between the living and the dead.

—from The Life of Lethe: Procedures and Protocols of the Ninth House

The Bonesmen fancy themselves titans among pissants, and ain’t that a bite. But who am I to quibble when the drinks are stiff and the girls are pretty?

—Lethe Days Diary of George Petit (Saybrook College ’56)

1

Winter

Alex hurried across the wide, alien plane of Beinecke Plaza, boots thudding over flat squares of clean concrete. The giant cube of the rare-books collection seemed to float above its lower story. During the day its panels glowed amber, a burnished golden hive, less a library than a temple. At night it just looked like a tomb. This part of campus didn't quite fit with the rest of Yale—no gray stone or Gothic arches, no rebellious little outcroppings of red-brick buildings, which Darlington had explained were not actually Colonial but only meant to look that way. He'd explained the reasons for the way Beinecke had been built, the way it was supposed to mirror and slot into this corner of the campus architecture, but it still felt like a seventies sci-fi movie to her, like the students should all be wearing unitards or too-short tunics, drinking something called the Extract, eating food in pellets. Even the big metal sculpture that she now knew was by Alexander Calder reminded her of a giant lava lamp in negative.

"It's Calder," she murmured beneath her breath. That was the way people here talked about art. Nothing was *by* anyone. The sculpture is Calder. The painting is Rothko. The house is Neutra.

And Alex was late. She had begun the night with good intentions, determined to get ahead of her Modern British Novel essay and leave with plenty of time to make it to the prognostication. But she'd fallen asleep in one of the Sterling Library reading rooms, a copy of *Nostramo* gripped loosely in her hand, feet propped on a heating duct. At half past ten, she'd woken with a start, drool trickling across her cheek. Her startled "Shit!" had gone off like a shotgun blast in the quiet of the library, and she'd buried her face in her scarf as she slung her bag over her shoulder and made her escape.

Now she cut through Commons, beneath the rotunda where the names of the war dead were carved deep into the marble, and stone figures stood vigil—Peace, Devotion, Memory, and finally Courage, who wore a helmet and shield and little else and had always looked to Alex more like a stripper than

a mourner. She charged down the steps and across the intersection of College and Grove.

The campus had a way of changing faces from hour to hour and block to block so that Alex always felt as if she were meeting it for the first time. Tonight it was a sleepwalker, breathing deep and even. The people she passed on her way to SSS seemed locked in a dream, soft-eyed, faces turned to one another, steam rising off the cups of coffee in their gloved hands. She had the eerie sense that they were dreaming her, a girl in a dark coat who would disappear when they woke.

Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall was drowsing too, the classrooms closed up tight, hallways cast in energy-saving half-light. Alex took the stairs to the second floor and heard noise echoing from one of the lecture halls. The Yale Social screened movies there every Thursday night. Mercy had tacked the schedule to the door of their dorm room, but Alex hadn't bothered to study it. Her Thursdays were full.

Tripp Helmuth slouched against the wall beside the doors to the lecture hall. He acknowledged Alex with a heavy-lidded nod. Even in the dim light, she could see his eyes were bloodshot. No doubt he'd smoked before he showed up tonight. Maybe that was why the elder Bonesmen had stuck him on guard duty. Or maybe he'd volunteered.

"You're late," he said. "They started."

Alex ignored him, glanced once over her shoulder to make sure the hallway was clear. She didn't owe Tripp Helmuth an excuse, and it would look weak to offer one. She pressed her thumb into a barely visible notch in the paneling. The wall was supposed to swing open smoothly, but it always stuck. She gave it a hard nudge with her shoulder and stumbled as it jolted open.

"Easy, killer," said Tripp.

Alex shut the door behind her and edged down the narrow passage in the dark.

Unfortunately, Tripp was right. The prognostication had already begun. Alex entered the old operating theater as quietly as she could.

The room was a windowless chamber, sandwiched between the lecture hall and a classroom that grad students used for discussion sections. It was a forgotten remnant of the old medical school, which had held its classes here in SSS before it moved to its own buildings. The managers of the trust that funded Skull and Bones had sealed up the room's entrance and disguised it with new paneling sometime around 1932. All facts Alex had gleaned from *Lethe: A Legacy* when she probably should have been reading *Nostramo*.

No one spared Alex a glance. All eyes were on the Haruspex, his lean face hidden behind a surgical mask, pale blue robes spattered with blood. His latex-gloved hands moved methodically through the bowels of the—patient? Subject? Sacrifice? Alex wasn't sure which term applied to the man on the table. Not "sacrifice." *He's supposed to live*. Ensuring that was part of her job. She'd see him safely through this ordeal and back to the hospital ward he'd been taken from. *But what about a year from now?* she wondered. *Five years from now?*

Alex glanced at the man on the table: Michael Reyes. She'd read his file two weeks ago, when he was selected for the ritual. The flaps of his stomach were pinned back with steel clips and his abdomen looked like it was blooming, a plump pink orchid, plush and red at its center. *Tell me that doesn't leave a mark*. But she had her own future to worry about. Reyes would manage.

Alex averted her eyes, tried to breathe through her nose as her stomach roiled and coppery saliva flooded her mouth. She'd seen plenty of bad injuries but always on the dead. There was something much worse about a living wound, a human body tethered to life by nothing but the steady metallic beep of a monitor. She had candied ginger in her pocket for nausea—one of Darlington's tips—but she couldn't quite bring herself to take it out and unwrap it.

Instead, she focused her gaze on some middle distance as the Haruspex called out a series of numbers and letters—stock symbols and share prices for companies traded publicly on the New York Stock Exchange. Later in the night he'd move on to the NASDAQ, Euronext, and the Asian markets. Alex

didn't bother trying to decipher them. The orders to buy, sell, or hold were given in impenetrable Dutch, the language of commerce, the first stock exchange, old New York, and the official language of the Bonesmen. When Skull and Bones was founded, too many students knew Greek and Latin. Their dealings had required something more obscure.

"Dutch is harder to pronounce," Darlington had told her. "Besides, it gives the Bonesmen an excuse to visit Amsterdam." Of course, Darlington knew Latin, Greek, and Dutch. He also spoke French, Mandarin, and passable Portuguese. Alex had just started Spanish II. Between the classes she'd taken in grade school and her grandmother's mishmash of Ladino sayings, she'd thought it would be an easy grade. She hadn't counted on things like the subjunctive. But she could just about ask if Gloria might like to go to the discotheque tomorrow night.

A burst of muffled gunfire rattled through the wall from the screening next door. The Haruspex looked up from the slick pink mess of Michael Reyes's small intestine, his irritation apparent.

Scarface, Alex realized as the music swelled and a chorus of rowdy voices thundered in unison, "*You wanna fuck with me? Okay. You wanna play rough?*" The audience chanting along like it was *Rocky Horror*. She must have seen *Scarface* a hundred times. It was one of Len's favorites. He was predictable that way, loved everything *hard*—as if he'd mailed away for a How to Be Gangster kit. When they'd met Hellie near the Venice boardwalk, her golden hair like a parted curtain for the theater of her big blue eyes, Alex had thought instantly of Michelle Pfeiffer in her satin shift. All she'd been missing was the smooth sheaf of bangs. But Alex didn't want to think about Hellie tonight, not with the stink of blood in the air. Len and Hellie were her old life. They didn't belong at Yale. Then again, neither did Alex.

Despite the memories, Alex was grateful for any noise that would cover the wet sounds of the Haruspex pawing through Michael Reyes's gut. What did he see there? Darlington had said the prognostications were no different than someone reading the future in the cards of a tarot deck or a handful of animal bones. But it sure looked different. And sounded more specific.

You're missing someone. You will find happiness in the new year. Those were the kinds of things fortune-tellers said—vague, comforting.

Alex eyed the Bonesmen, robed and hooded, crowded around the body on the table, the undergrad Scribe taking down the predictions that would be passed on to hedge-fund managers and private investors all over the world to keep the Bonesmen and their alumni financially secure. Former presidents, diplomats, at least one director of the CIA—all of them Bonesmen. Alex thought of Tony Montana, soaking in his hot tub, speechifying: *You know what capitalism is?* Alex glanced at Michael Reyes's prone body. *Tony, you have no idea.*

She caught a flicker of movement from the benches that overlooked the operating arena. The theater had two local Grays who always sat in the same places, just a few rows apart: a female mental patient who'd had her ovaries and uterus removed in a hysterectomy in 1926, for which she would have been paid six dollars if she'd survived the procedure; and a male, a medical student. He'd frozen to death in an opium den thousands of miles away, sometime around 1880, but kept returning here to sit in his old seat and look down on whatever passed for life below. Prognostications only happened in the theater four times a year, at the start of each fiscal quarter, but that seemed to be enough to suit him.

Darlington liked to say that dealing with ghosts was like riding the subway: *Do not make eye contact. Do not smile. Do not engage. Otherwise, you never know what might follow you home.* Easier said than done when the only other thing to look at in the room was a man playing with another man's innards like they were mah-jongg tiles.

She remembered Darlington's shock when he'd realized she could not only see ghosts without the help of any potion or spell but see them in color. He'd been weirdly furious. She'd enjoyed that.

"What kinds of color?" he'd asked, sliding his feet off the coffee table, his heavy black boots thunking on the slatted floor of the parlor at Il Bastone.

"Just color. Like an old Polaroid. Why? What do you see?"

"They look gray," he'd snapped. "That's why they're called Grays."

She'd shrugged, knowing her nonchalance would make Darlington even angrier. "It isn't a big deal."

"Not to you," he'd muttered, and stomped away. He'd spent the rest of the day in the training room, working up a cranky sweat.

She'd felt smug at the time, glad not everything came so easily to him. But now, moving in a circle around the perimeter of the theater, checking the little chalk markings made at every compass point, she just felt jittery and unprepared. That was the way she'd felt since she'd taken her first step on campus. No, before that. From the time Dean Sandow had sat down beside her hospital bed, tapped the handcuffs on her wrist with his nicotine-stained fingers, and said, "We are offering you an opportunity." But that was the old Alex. The Alex of Hellie and Len. Yale Alex had never worn handcuffs, never gotten into a fight, never fucked a stranger in a bathroom to make up her boyfriend's vig. Yale Alex struggled but didn't complain. She was a good girl trying to keep up.

And failing. She should have been here early to observe the making of the signs and ensure the circle was secure. Grays as old as the ones hovering on the tiered benches above didn't tend to make trouble even when drawn by blood, but prognostications were big magic and her job was to verify that the Bonesmen followed proper procedures, stayed cautious. She was playacting, though. She'd spent the previous night cramming, trying to memorize the correct signs and proportions of chalk, charcoal, and bone. She'd made *flash cards*, for fuck's sake, and forced herself to shuffle through them in between bouts of Joseph Conrad.

Alex thought the markings looked okay, but she knew her signs of protection about as well as her modern British novels. When she'd attended the fall-quarter prognostication with Darlington, had she really paid attention? No. She'd been too busy sucking on ginger candy, reeling from the strangeness of it all, and praying she wouldn't humiliate herself by puking. She'd thought she had plenty of time to learn with Darlington looking over her shoulder. But they'd both been wrong about that.

“*Voorhoofd!*” the Haruspex called, and one of the Bonesmen darted forward. Melinda? Miranda? Alex couldn’t remember the redhead’s name, only that she was in an all-female a cappella group called Whim ’n Rhythm. The girl patted the Haruspex’s forehead with a white cloth and melted back into the group.

Alex tried not to look at the man on the table, but her eyes darted to his face anyway. *Michael Reyes, age forty-eight, diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic.* Would Reyes remember any of it when he woke? When he tried to tell someone would they just call him crazy? Alex knew exactly what that was like. *It could be me on that table.*

“The Bonesmen like them as nuts as possible,” Darlington had told her. “They think it makes for better predictions.” When she’d asked him why, he’d just said, “The crazier the *victima*, the closer to God.”

“Is that true?”

“*It is only through mystery and madness that the soul is revealed,*” he’d quoted. Then he’d shrugged. “Their bank balances say yes.”

“And we’re okay with this?” Alex had asked Darlington. “With people getting cut open so Chauncey can redecorate his summer home?”

“Never met a Chauncey,” he’d said. “Still hoping.” Then he’d paused, standing in the armory, his face grave. “Nothing is going to stop this. Too many powerful people rely on what the societies can do. Before Lethe existed, no one was keeping watch. So you can make futile bleating noises in protest and lose your scholarship, or you can stay here, do your job, and do the most good you can.”

Even then, she’d wondered if that was only part of the story, if Darlington’s desire to know *everything* bound him to Lethe just as surely as any sense of duty. But she’d stayed quiet then and she intended to stay quiet now.

Michael Reyes had been found in one of the public beds at Yale New Haven. To the outside world he looked like any other patient: a vagrant, the type who passed through psych wards and emergency rooms and jails, on his meds, then off. He had a brother in New Jersey who was listed as his next of

kin and who had signed off on what was supposed to be a routine medical procedure for the treatment of a scarred bowel.

Reyes was cared for solely by a nurse named Jean Gatdula, who'd worked three night shifts in a row. She didn't blink or cause a fuss when, through what appeared to be a scheduling error, she was slated for two more evenings in the ward. That week her colleagues may or may not have noticed that she always came to work with a huge handbag. In it was stowed a little cooler that she used to carry Michael Reyes's meals: a dove's heart for clarity, geranium root, and a dish of bitter herbs. Gatdula had no idea what the food did or what fate awaited Michael Reyes any more than she knew what became of any of the "special" patients she tended to. She didn't even know whom she worked for, only that once every month she received a much-needed check to offset the gambling debts her husband racked up at the Foxwoods blackjack tables.

Alex wasn't sure if it was her imagination or if she really could smell the ground parsley speckling Reyes's insides, but her own stomach gave another warning flutter. She was desperate for fresh air, sweating beneath her layers. The operating theater was kept ice cold, fed by vents separate from the rest of the building, but the huge portable halogens used to light the proceedings still radiated heat.

A low moan sounded. Alex's gaze shot to Michael Reyes, a terrible image flashing through her mind: Reyes waking to find himself strapped to a table, surrounded by hooded figures, his insides on the outside. But his eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling in steady rhythm. The moan continued, louder now. Maybe someone else was feeling sick? But none of the Bonesmen looked distressed. Their faces glowed like studious moons in the dim theater, eyes trained on the proceedings.

Still the moan climbed, a low wind building, churning through the room and bouncing off its dark-wood walls. *No direct eye contact*, Alex warned herself. *Just look to see if the Grays*—She choked back a startled grunt.

The Grays were no longer in their seats.

They leaned over the railing that surrounded the operating theater, fingers gripping the wood, necks craned, their bodies stretching toward the very edge of the chalk circle like animals straining to drink from the lip of a watering hole.

Don't look. It was Darlington's voice, his warning. *Don't look too closely.* It was too easy for a Gray to form a bond, to attach itself to you. And it was more dangerous because she already knew these Grays' histories. They had been around so long that generations of Lethe delegates had documented their pasts. But their names had been redacted from all documents.

"If you don't know a name," Darlington had explained, "you can't think it, and then you won't be tempted to say it." A name was a kind of intimacy.

Don't look. But Darlington wasn't here.

The female Gray was naked, her small breasts puckered from the cold as they must have been in death. She lifted a hand to the open wound of her belly, touched the flesh there fondly, like a woman coyly indicating that she was expecting. They hadn't sewn her up. The boy—and he was a boy, skinny and tender-featured—wore a sloppy bottle-green jacket and stained trousers. Grays always appeared as they had in the moment of death. But there was something obscene about them side by side, one naked, the other clothed.

Every muscle in the Grays' bodies strained, their eyes wide and staring, their lips yawning open. The black holes of their mouths were caverns, and from them that bleak keening rose, not really a moan at all but something flat and inhuman. Alex thought of the wasps' nest she'd found in the garage beneath her mother's Studio City apartment one summer, the mindless buzz of insects in a dark place.

The Haruspex kept reciting in Dutch. Another Bonesman held a glass of water to the Scribe's lips as he continued his transcriptions. The smell of blood and herbs and shit hung dense in the air.

The Grays arced forward inch by inch, trembling, lips distended, their mouths too wide now, as if their jaws had unhinged. The whole room seemed to vibrate.

But only Alex could see them.