

LBRIS

We know
books

DEAD
BEAT
LEIGH
BARDUGO



LBRIS

We know
books

PART I

Inserviam Tibi

Early Spring

Alex knew she had a talent for mistakes, a way of turning error into outright disaster. Gift became curse, opportunity became some fresh chance at horror. There were violin prodigies, people who could pick up a language after hearing it once. Alex had mastered the art of the fuckup—elaborate, operatic, inevitable. But nothing in her long, pathetic résumé compared to the mess she had made of this moment.

She could hear the chorus of demon and human voices, though whether they were cheering or booing or groaning in dismay, she couldn't be sure.

"Darlington," she pleaded. "Danny."

But the monster before her did not understand. The bands at his wrists and neck had turned black. His gaze was flat and inhuman. If he recognized her, if he cared, there was no sign of it in the dark sheen of his eyes.

He snarled, stalking toward her, his head lowered, his curved horns gleaming. She had seen him crush a body with those horns, felt the prick of his claws sink into her hips.

At some point in the grim march of her life she had started to believe she might make something of it, that she could coax it into a less perilous shape. She had spent years balanced above a chasm and she had bobbed and weaved and shuffled and grunted her way across, always finding a way to regain her footing, to keep her many failures from turning into a permanent fall. But now? The final blunder.

She had known she might die tonight. She had believed she was ready. Her plans were made, her house in order. She could save the others and keep herself from the worst of it. At least that was the idea. But she was a two-bit criminal, a bottom dweller. She hadn't

been made for grand quests or hero's work.

And here she was in this dark place, at this late hour, and she saw it would be her last. Deep down she had known she couldn't keep walking the tightrope. She wasn't fast enough, smart enough, or rich enough to right herself in any permanent way. A bobble, a dip, the world swayed. The only surprise was that she had managed this feat of balance for so long, that she would not die in a filthy bathroom in Santa Cruz, or a run-down apartment in Van Nuys, or even in the arms of an overdressed vampire, but at Yale, its gargoyles and stone scholars watching in silent judgment, and at the hands of the one person who wasn't ever meant to hurt her, the man she had gone to hell and back to save.

Death was here at last and he was beautiful.

Wind chimes; screech owl bones, twine

Provenance: Lethe; 1899

Note: These chimes were wrongly categorized as Scottish prognostication bones and miscatalogued.

Records from Lethe House's earliest days are sparse, but these chimes were assembled in an attempt to monitor the flow of magic in New Haven, a goal bolstered by the hope of finding a new nexus. The ritual was created by Edmund Lazenbee ('01) and poetically titled the Sighing of the Elms (text and particulars available in volume three of the Lethe Compendium under "Original Incantations"), and it is notable for the short list of commonplace ingredients required—a boon at the time, given the cost of shipping and travel. While other trees can be used, the ritual was built around New Haven's elms, which hold a particular sensitivity to magic, a trait which unfortunately also renders them acutely vulnerable to disease.

The chimes were watched over by Dantes and by volunteers from the other societies, but when a new nexus failed to materialize, the practice gradually died out. It seems the chimes were left in place and forgotten. In 1952, when a new nexus (over which the Manuscript tomb would be built) appeared, a short news item appeared in the New Haven Register regarding a disturbance near the intersection of Elm and Broadway (clipping attached): A curate at Christ Church ran into traffic where he was struck by a Peter Paul Candy delivery truck. When questioned by authorities, he claimed he'd been trying to find the source of a "most peculiar sound." He survived his injuries, but according to Lethe records, he was eventually removed from office because he spent the majority of his days standing in the street, head cocked, waiting to hear that peculiar sound again. When pushed to describe it further, the curate answered, "It was angelic. I hope."

—*from the Lethe Armory Catalogue as revised
and edited by Pamela Dawes, Oculus*

1

Winter

When he had been a man only and not both man and monster, Darlington had understood his city and the bad bargains it had made. He knew the changing shape of its harbor, the scars carved into its old neighborhoods by a deluge of federal cash that had seemed inexhaustible—as most floods do, until the drought arrives. He'd loved this tidy square named for a revolutionary general, its steepled church, its row of brownstones with their welcoming stoops. He had marveled at the strangeness of New Haven that could take a pocket neighborhood nestled against the noise and fumes of a highway and make it so desirable. The man he had been noted these things. He considered the branches of each cherry tree, black bones that would soften with pink in the spring.

The demon thought only of bodies. Human hearts tucked safely away in their houses.

He could feel their longings—sharp spikes of ambition, the grind of simple appetite, lust like the heavy pull of a riptide. Their greed was everywhere, a buffet of gluttony. He hungered after their hunger, and it was maddening.

He forced his focus back to the golden windows of the brownstone before them. He was standing with Turner and Alex in the deep shadows of Wooster Square Park, waiting for a sign that they were in the right place. Turner remained motionless, a stone sentinel in a fashionable overcoat. Alex rocked back and forth on her heels,

trying to keep warm, her black hair gleaming in the lamplight, her hands jammed into the pockets of her cheap wool jacket.

It was hard not to keep looking at her, at the ruthless slice of her cheekbone, the grim set of her mouth. A pulse of desire passed through him, another thought he leashed, his own longing an unwanted companion, dogging his steps since they'd returned from hell. He would master this thing in him. He would become the man he'd been again. He would do it the way he had managed everything in his careful life, with the Arlington discipline his grandfather had taught him: *Manners, might, and know-how. One always did the trick.* For now there was the task at hand.

Through the glass he could see a family seated at dinner: a man in his thirties, a little boy rolling a tiny toy truck back and forth over the tablecloth beside his plate, a woman who looked sick and sad as she picked at her food.

"He's feeding on her," Turner said, shaking his head in disgust.

Sometimes the demons they'd been hunting showed enough restraint that their victims could be challenging to spot. But not tonight. The man—Ron Keep, thirty-four, associate professor of anthropology—split his attention between his meal and his son, but his eyes never strayed too long from his wife. Those glances might have indicated concern, or they might be watchfulness, a predator tracking his prey, making sure she didn't attempt escape.

Of course, she wouldn't run, not when he'd fed so well from her. She wouldn't have the will. And she wouldn't even know what he was doing as he drained the substance of her away, consuming her soul bit by bit, feeding on her fear or her love or her sadness. Every demon had its own appetites. That was what made them so hard to identify.

"I don't see signs of change," Turner conceded, the plume of his breath dissolving in the winter air.

But Darlington knew better than to hope. "We have no idea what he looked like before."

As demons fed, they took on the appearance of their hosts until

eventually they assumed their lives and identities entirely. It had happened to Linus Reiter, the ghoul lurking in his mansion miles away in Old Greenwich. It had happened to Tripp Helmuth, who was waiting back at Il Bastone and who was not really Tripp any longer, only the demon who had consumed him.

But will it happen to me? This was the matter that haunted Darlington's days and nights. The question of who he was and who he might become had ceased to be a purely philosophical one.

Again he reeled his thoughts back to the dark work before them.

The call had come from Turner that morning, when Darlington had been sanding down and restraining a portion of the sunflower staircase. Il Bastone was well over a hundred years old, and it was always crying out for repair. He knew he was lavishing the care on it that he couldn't give to Black Elm, but staying busy helped keep the demon in check. Idle hands and all that.

"Dawes was right," Turner had said over the phone.

Dawes was usually right, but Darlington still felt weary hearing the words. Almost three months had passed since they had made it out of hell, alive but not unscarred. Bruises and nightmares aside, they had also managed to leave the door open behind them. Since then, demons had been trickling through and with each day they grew smarter at staying hidden.

Clever, not smart, Dawes reminded them again and again, though Tripp always took offense.

But clever was enough to survive.

Turner called them parasites; Darlington knew that wasn't quite accurate. If a parasite killed the host, the parasite died too. But a demon simply slid into the dead host's life. In death the demon thrived.

Ron Keep looked like he was thriving. His wife could barely lift her fork.

"He'll be strong," Darlington warned.

Blue hellfire ignited over Alex's skin. "I'm stronger."

For how long? he wondered. She had always been skinny; now

she was jutting bones held together by determination and delusions about her own limits.

It had snowed last night, and the silence of the park felt thick and cold, as if the world had gone dormant, trapped in a slow-moving river, all of them sleeping under ice. Only Alex burned bright. She was already moving toward the front door.

Then he heard it. He touched Alex's sleeve. "Wait."

The sound was high and piercing. A baby crying.

"Janie—" Ron said, his voice muffled through the glass.

The little boy with the toy truck reached for his mother. "Mama, stay," he begged.

Janie Keep yanked her hand away. "Would you just fucking give me a minute?"

The boy shrank back in his chair, clutching the truck to his chest.

"She doesn't mean it," Ron said, laying a hand on his son's shoulder.

Janie pushed away from the table, hurrying down the hall and toward that high cry.

"I thought they only had one kid," Alex said.

Turner's face was bleak. "They do."

Something cold crept over Darlington, raising the hair on his arms. The flames around Alex banked.

Her eyes met his, dark water, an unknown sea. "Come on."

They moved in unison, three figures creeping toward the back of the house where they could see the pale blue walls of a nursery, a mobile of clouds and stars turning gently above a crib.

"Damn it," muttered Turner.

"Tell me we're wrong about this," Alex said, and Darlington could hear the raw pleading in her voice.

Janie bent over the side of the crib. "What is it, sweet boy?" she crooned, cradling the infant to her. "Are you hungry?" The baby's scream was too loud, and beneath that high, frantic sound, Darlington thought he could hear a counterpoint, a terrible harmony, the low thrum of a growl. "No, no, it's okay. Mama's here."

Janie lifted up her blouse. Her ribs were the shadowed furrows of a field awaiting planting; her breasts were shrunken pouches. Bruises bloomed like unfurling petals around her nipples, dark blotches radiating from swollen red punctures. Bite marks.

"There you go, sweet boy." Her eyes were glittering, full of tears. She looked both giddy and miserable. "Drink your fill."

The baby latched and Darlington tried not to wretch at the sound of it suckling.

It was feeding on her joy, her desperation, and on her blood too.

Turner pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and took a shuddering breath. "What do we do?"

Alex tucked her hair behind her ears. "What we came here to do." She strode to the front of the house without waiting to see if they would follow.

"She's going to burn out," Darlington said as Turner laid down a salt knot in case the demon tried to escape through the window.

"It's her mission," said Turner.

"We're all responsible for getting this done."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. She's been called."

This again. Turner hadn't relinquished his belief that this was some kind of holy war, and Darlington still didn't know what to make of it. They needed the detective on their side, not just because of his preternatural ability to suss out the truth, that shockingly accurate prickle that was better than any lie detector, and not just because his position with the New Haven PD lent him authority that stretched beyond the reach of the university. They needed numbers. Holy war or back-alley brawl, they had too few soldiers for the fight to come.

They followed in Alex's wake and joined her at the steps to the brownstone. Darlington could no longer tell if he was her shadow or a shadow cast over her, but they were all too tired, too hollowed out by the grim business of the hunt to think deeply on the roles they'd chosen.

Maybe Turner was right. Maybe they'd simply been called. It was a tempting thought, the idea that some wise and benevolent hand

had brought them together to stand against the tide. But there was magic and then there was magical thinking. One might help them build a dam against the flood. The other would get them killed.

“Stay close,” Alex said, the words a bare rasp, as if she’d been shouting. She knew what was to come.

He might have said *I will*. He might have told her not to worry.

Instead, he let a growl rumble through him, the demon’s voice, the demon’s strength. Tonight she didn’t need the man. She needed to know the monster was near.

2

Ron Keep opened the door with the harried air of a man who didn't want to be bothered—no, he did not want to sign a petition; no, he did not want his windows cleaned. He wore a snug sweater and collared shirt with his jeans and Sperrys, like a man auditioning for the role of sitcom dad.

"You left this on the stoop," Alex said.

His eyes lit on the gleam of gold in her fingers, and he reached for the coin of compulsion in her hand. Magpie impulse. Human curiosity. Good old greed. She didn't know why people reached for the coin, but they always did. The bit of persuasion magic was so valuable Alex almost didn't want to release it, but she needed to keep moving or she would never see the end of this night. As soon as Keep's hand closed over the coin, his face went slack.

"Daddy?"

The little boy was still at the table where his father had clearly told him to wait. Alex didn't love that there would be an uncompelled witness to this, but no one believed kids anyway. She should know.

"It's okay," Alex lied. "We just need to see your brother."

"I don't have a brother."

"He doesn't have a brother," Ron repeated, the coin nudging him past compliant to helpful.

"So what's in the other room?"

"I don't know. One day he . . . it was just . . . here."

Alex had learned a few things about demons since she'd gone to hell and back. Sometimes they took the form of your deepest fear. Sometimes they became what you most desired. But the end result was always the same: They ate your heart.

"Stay right there," Alex said to the little boy.

"Why?"

"Do you want your mother back?"

"Alex—" Darlington cautioned.

"I can give her back to you. But only if you stay put. Close your eyes. Cover your ears. What's your favorite song?"

"Love Rollercoaster."

"The Red Hot fucking Chili Peppers?" There was no way side-part-and-sweater Ron Keep was listening to the original.

"A little decorum, please," Darlington urged.

But the boy giggled. "You said a swear."

"You like shitty music."

Darlington sighed.

"You're going to sing that garbage song all the way through," Alex instructed. "Twice. And when we're done, your mom will be back."

"She'll be better?"

Alex thought about just telling him what he wanted to hear. But she suspected this kid had seen too much in the last few weeks to keep trusting fairy tales. "It'll take a while."

He nodded and clamped his hands over his ears. She and Darlington exchanged a brief glance. Kids were the easiest people to explain magic to. They didn't stop to question or to prove that they knew better. They understood that the rules most adults lived by were lies. Age, rational thinking, moderated expectations—all the things that made the adult world navigable made magic more difficult to grasp. Possibility died as you aged, pruned away by experience, and the ability to imagine a wider world faded with each of those lopped-off branches.

But maybe there was more to it. Maybe you couldn't go to work every day, send your children off to school, get through the mundane

business of living if you knew what was really lurking in the closet, under the bed, in every shadowed corner, what might just be waiting, biding its time for the moment the lights went out.

Ron Keep kept talking as he led them down the hall, the coin loosening his tongue. “Janie wanted another baby so badly. I said we should be grateful we had Caleb. Happy and healthy. But she wanted to keep trying. We burned through our savings. I told her we couldn’t afford another round, but she was so unhappy. It was eating her alive.”

“Apt choice of words,” murmured Darlington.

She could hear the tension in his voice. They’d been hunting for three months now, since that night in November when they’d emerged from Tripp’s apartment to see a demon crouched atop Harkness Tower. They’d known it wouldn’t be the last. The devil had his foot in the door, and he was going to find a way in. The problem was that they had no idea how or where the demons were entering their world.

At first they’d been sure it was the library where they’d walked the Gauntlet to enter hell, but their vigils and cameras had captured nothing. So Dawes and Darlington had put their heads together in the Il Bastone library looking for what they could use as an early warning system. Alex had felt the brush of her old resentment, the sense of being a mere onlooker in the life around her, always two steps behind. But then Darlington had glanced up from the book he and Dawes were perusing and for the briefest moment his eyes flashed gold—there and gone. He waved her over and in that natural gesture she’d been welcomed back into their circle. *You belong here*, she’d allowed herself to think, ignoring the refrain that always followed: *For now*.

“It’s going to be easier than we expected,” Dawes had said, tapping the page of what turned out to be a Lethe Days Diary from 1912.

“I’m not familiar with that turn of phrase,” Alex said.

Darlington laughed. “I doubt it’s ever been spoken in this house.”