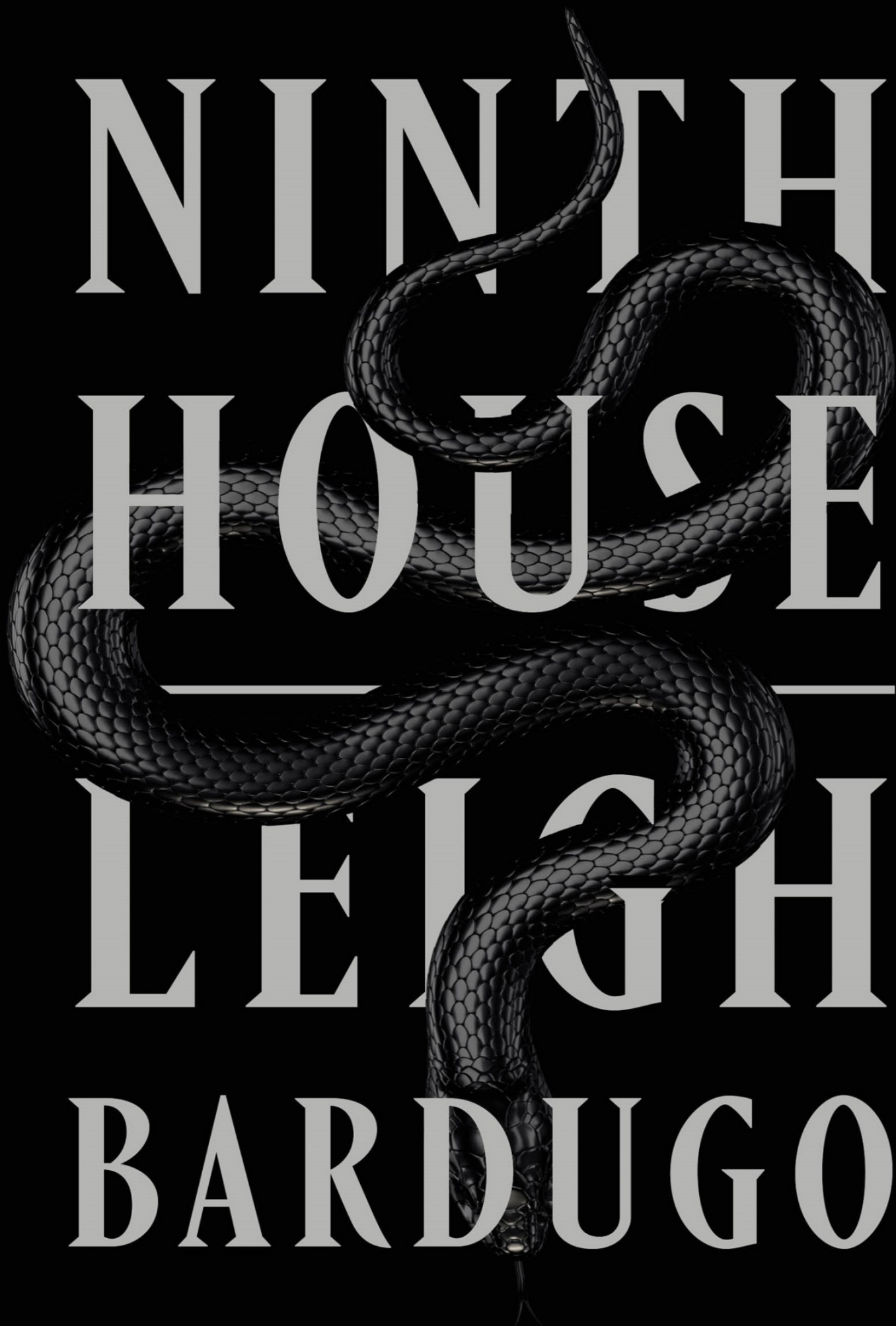


NINTH

HOUSE

LEIGH

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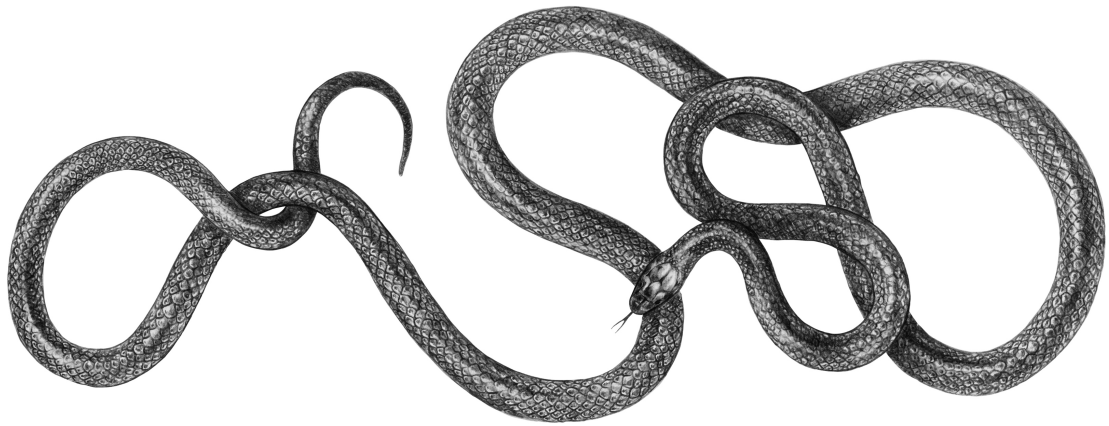
# NINTH HOUSE

Leigh Bardugo

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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 doge 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.

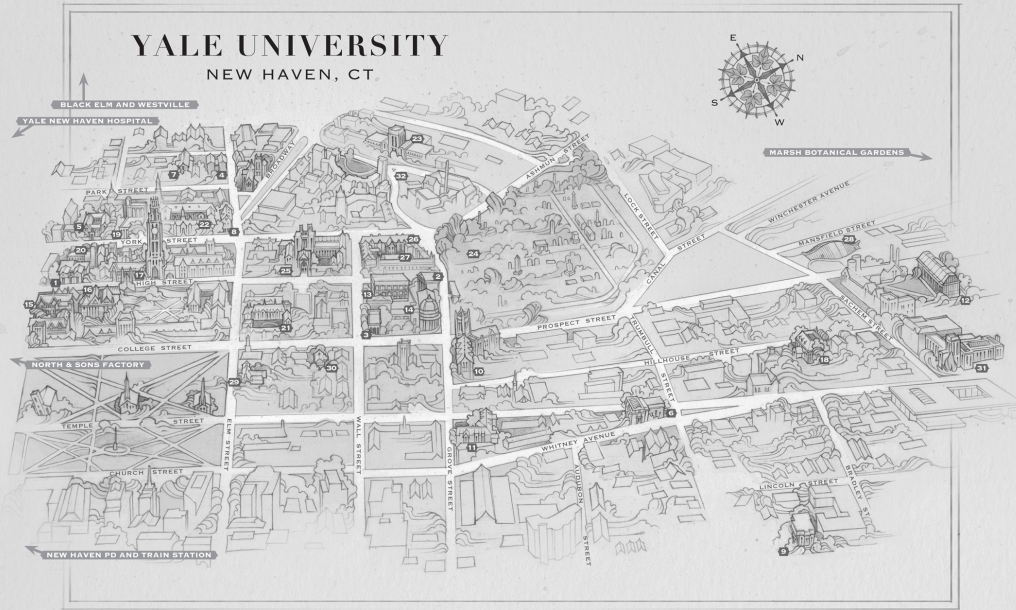
—*La Moza y El Huerco*

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



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32 TARA'S DEATH SITE



## 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)**