

A decorative archway with intricate scrollwork framing the word "RUINED" in a stylized, serif font. The archway is composed of two parallel lines with ornate flourishes between them.

RUINED

A NOVEL

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Point

PROLOGUE

New Orleans, the summer of 1853. Yellow fever ravages the busy port city. Bells toll for the souls of the dead. Boats on the Mississippi River are placed in quarantine, their cargoes left to spoil, their crews felled by disease. Before the summer is over, eight thousand people will die.

In the city, yellow fever is known as the Stranger's Disease. Immigrants — Italian, Greek, German, Polish, new arrivals from the great cities of New York and Boston — have no resistance to the fever. The Irish, who'd traveled to New Orleans to escape their terrible famine, soon fall victim, dying within a week of the first sinister chill.

During the day, the streets are empty. At night, mass burials take place all over town. Graveyards fill; corpses lie rotting in piles, swelling in the sun. Gravediggers are bribed with alcohol to ignore the putrid smell and dig shallow trenches for the bodies of the poor. New Orleans's black population — slaves and the free people of color — have seemed largely immune, but in August of 1853, even they start to succumb. Native-born wealthy families — Creole and American — suffer as badly as poor immigrants.

The ornate tombs in the walled cemeteries, New Orleans's famous Cities of the Dead, fill with mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. At Lafayette Cemetery, on the new,

American side of the city, bodies are left at the gates every night. There is no room to bury these unknown dead, and many of the corpses are burned.

In the last week of August, in the dead of night, a group of men unlock the Sixth Street gates to Lafayette Cemetery and make their way by torchlight to an imposing family tomb. Two coffins of yellow fever victims, both from the same family, had been placed in the vault earlier that afternoon, one on each of its long, narrow shelves. According to local custom, once in place, the coffins should have been sealed behind a brick wall for a year and a day.

But the coffins are still unsealed. The men remove the marble plate, covering their mouths, choking at the smell of the bodies decomposing in the heat. Onto the top coffin, they slide a shrouded corpse, then quickly replace the plate.

The next day, the tomb is sealed. A year later, the men return to break through the bricks. The two disintegrating coffins are thrown away, and the bones of the dead covered with soil in the *caveau*, a pit at the bottom of the vault.

The names of the first two corpses interred in the vault that terrible August are carved onto the tomb's roll call of the dead. The name of the third corpse is not.

Only the men who placed the body inside the tomb know of its existence.



CHAPTER ONE



TORRENTIAL RAIN WAS POURING THE AFTER-noon Rebecca Brown arrived in New Orleans. When the plane descended through gray clouds, she could only glimpse the dense swamps to the west of the city. Stubby cypress trees poked out of watery groves, half submerged by the rain-whipped waters, flecked with snowy herons. The city was surrounded by water on all sides — by swamps and bayous; by the brackish Lake Pontchartrain, where pelicans swooped and a narrow causeway, the longest bridge in the world, connected the city with its distant North Shore; and, of course, by the curving Mississippi River, held back by grass-covered levees.

Like many New Yorkers, Rebecca knew very little about New Orleans. She'd barely even heard of the place until Hurricane Katrina hit, when it was on the news every night — and it wasn't the kind of news that made anyone want to move there. The city had been decimated by floodwaters, filling up like a bowl after the canal levees broke. Three years later, New Orleans still seemed like a city in ruins.

Thousands of its citizens were still living in other parts of the country. Many of its houses were still waiting to be gutted and rebuilt; many had been demolished. Some of them were still clogged with sodden furniture and collapsed roofs, too dangerous to enter, waiting for owners or tenants who never came back.

Some people said the city — one of the oldest in America — would never recover from this hurricane and the surging water that followed. It should be abandoned and left to return to swampland, another floodplain for the mighty Mississippi.

“I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life,” said Rebecca’s father, who got agitated, almost angry, whenever an opinion of this kind was expressed on a TV news channel. “It’s one of the great American cities. Nobody ever talks about abandoning Florida, and they get hurricanes there all the time.”

“*This* is the only great city in America,” Rebecca told him. Her father might roll his eyes, but he wouldn’t argue with her: There was nothing to argue about. New York was pretty much the center of the universe, as far as she was concerned.

But now here she was — flying into New Orleans one month before Thanksgiving. A place she’d never been before, though her father had an old friend here — some lady called Claudia Vernier who had a daughter, Aurelia. Rebecca had met them exactly once in her life, in their room at a Midtown hotel. And now she’d been taken out of school five weeks before the end of the semester and sent hundreds of miles from home.

Not for some random, impromptu vacation: Rebecca was expected to *live* here. For six whole months.

The plane bumped down through the sparse clouds, Rebecca scowling at her own vague reflection in the window. Her olive-toned skin looked winter-pale in this strange light, her mess of dark hair framing a narrow face and what her father referred to as a “determined” chin. In New York the fall had been amazing: From her bedroom window, Central Park looked on fire, almost, ablaze with the vivid colors of the dying leaves. Here, everything on the ground looked dank, dull, and green.

Rebecca wasn’t trying to be difficult. She understood that someone needed to look after her: Her father — who was a high-powered tech consultant — had to spend months in China on business, and she was fifteen, too young to be left alone in the apartment on Central Park West. Usually when he was traveling for work, Mrs. Horowitz came to stay. She was a nice elderly lady who liked watching the Channel II news on TV with the volume turned up too loud, and who got irrationally worried about Rebecca eating fruit at night and taking showers instead of baths.

But no. It was too long for Mrs. Horowitz to stay, her father said. He was sending her to New Orleans, somewhere that still looked like a war zone. On TV three years ago they’d seen the National Guard driving around in armored vehicles. Some neighborhoods had been completely washed away.

“The storm was a long time ago — and anyway, you’re going to be living in the Garden District,” he had told her. They were sitting in her bedroom, and he was picking at the

frayed edges of her cream-colored quilt, not meeting Rebecca's eye. "Everything's OK there — it didn't flood. It's still a beautiful old neighborhood."

"But I don't even know Aunt Claudia!" Rebecca protested. "She's not even my real aunt!"

"She's a very good friend of ours," her father said, his voice strained and tense. "I know you haven't seen her for a long time, but you'll get on just fine with her and Aurelia."

All Rebecca could remember of Aunt Claudia were the jangly bracelets she had worn and her intense green eyes. She'd been friendly enough, but Rebecca had been shooed away after a couple of minutes so the adults could talk. She and Aurelia, who was just a little girl then, seven years old and very cute, spent the rest of the visit playing with Aurelia's dolls in the hotel bedroom.

And these were the people — these *strangers* — Rebecca was expected to live with for six months?

"Claudia is the closest thing I have to family — you know that. Everything's arranged. End of discussion."

"There hasn't been any *beginning* of discussion," Rebecca complained. Because her mother had died when Rebecca was small, and because she had no grandparents or any real family, she and her dad had always been a tight team — Brown, Party of Two, as they often joked. Now, all of a sudden, why was he acting in such a high-handed manner? "You never even asked me what I think. You're just shipping me off somewhere . . . somewhere dangerous. Haven't you heard about the crime in New Orleans? And there were, like, two other hurricanes this year!"

"Oh, Rebecca," her father said, his eyes murky with tears.

His whole body slumped, as though she'd taken a swing at him. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. His voice was soft. "Hurricane season is over, honey. I promise you, I won't let anything bad happen to you. Not now, not ever."

"Oh, Dad," Rebecca said, the words muffled by his shoulder. She couldn't remember him ever acting quite this way before. There were times when her father went quiet and broody, just sitting around the apartment gazing at photographs of her mother and looking morose, but she couldn't remember him crying. "I'm not really worried about bad things. It's just . . . I don't want to leave this apartment and my friends and school and everything, just to go somewhere messed-up and weird. It might be really boring."

"I hope we both have a very boring six months," he said. He drew back from her, and gave her a tired half smile. "Believe me, boring would be good."

Boring was exactly Rebecca's first impression of the near-empty Louis Armstrong airport. She'd wondered if she'd be able to see Aunt Claudia and Aurelia in the crowd, but trudging from the gate, listening to the piped-in jazz playing throughout the terminal, Rebecca spotted them at once. It would have been impossible to miss them, she thought, her heart sinking. Claudia was dressed in some sort of gypsy costume, including a bright headscarf and giant silver hoop earrings. She was darker skinned than Rebecca remembered, and her eyes were a strange sea green, her gaze darting around like a bird's.

Aurelia had grown — she was twelve now — into a round-faced cherub, her messy dark curls tied up in a ponytail. She

was dressed far more formally than her mother: a black plaid skirt, a black woolen blazer emblazoned with a gold crest, white knee socks, and lace-up shoes. This had to be the school uniform for Temple Mead Academy, the school Rebecca would be attending as well. The uniform was even worse than she'd imagined. Her friends at Stuyvesant High School would die laughing if they saw that prim outfit, not to mention Aunt Claudia's Halloween-style gypsy getup. If this was what people here wore every day, Rebecca wondered, what did they look like at Mardi Gras?

She walked as slowly as possible through the security exit and fluttered the tiniest of waves in Aunt Claudia's direction. Her aunt's face brightened.

"Here she is!" she said, reaching out for an effusive, jewelry-rattling embrace as Rebecca approached. She smelled of lavender and something smoky and Eastern, like incense, or maybe charred satay sticks. "Baby, look at you! You've grown so tall!"

"Yes," said Rebecca, suddenly shy. Homesickness churned in her stomach: She would be living in a strange house for months on end, with this odd woman she barely knew. Nobody called her "baby" in New York.

"We have a car," said Aurelia, not bothering to wait for introductions or greetings. She was wriggling with excitement.

"That's nice." Rebecca wasn't sure if that was the right thing to say, but Aurelia beamed at her.

"We've never had a car before, *ever*," she explained. Aunt Claudia caught Rebecca's hand and drew her toward the escalator, Aurelia scampering down ahead of them.

“FEMA money,” Aunt Claudia stage-whispered. Rebecca tried to remember what FEMA was exactly — something to do with the government, maybe. “I decided I needed it for work, before the streetcar started running again on St. Charles.”

“You work in the French Quarter, right?” asked Rebecca. Her father had given her a few pieces of information, in his usual scattered way. He’d been completely distracted for the past two weeks, ever since he announced that he was pulling her out of school and sending her to the Deep, Deep South for months on end.

“In Jackson Square.” Aunt Claudia nodded, breathless with the exertion of walking to the one baggage carousel surrounded by waiting passengers. “I read tarot cards. It was a quiet summer, but things are starting to pick up again. Tourists and conventions and all that.”

“Oh,” said Rebecca. Suddenly her aunt’s outfit was making sense: It was her office wear, in a way. Though why her decidedly nonsuperstitious dad thought Aunt Claudia would be an ideal guardian was even more of a mystery.

“Your father called me from Atlanta,” Aunt Claudia was saying while Rebecca hauled her heavy black duffel from the carousel, blinking hard so she didn’t embarrass herself by crying. It was too soon to be missing home and missing her father, but she couldn’t help it. They’d flown to Atlanta together, because he had to check in with his head office there before he traveled to China. They’d said a miserable goodbye, her father flagrantly sobbing like an overgrown baby.

Rebecca had to stop herself from thinking about how much she’d miss him and how useless he’d be without her.

Why he'd agreed to this stupid posting, she didn't know. Usually, he never went away for more than a week. The year she spent two weeks at summer camp in Maine, he looked like a crazy person, deranged with worry, by the time she got home.

"He goes to China on Tuesday," she managed to say. Traffic was hissing past the glass doors, rain thundering onto the road between the taxi stand and the parking garage. Aurelia helped lift the second of Rebecca's bags onto the cart, and they walked outside. Despite the rain, it wasn't cold at all, Rebecca realized, peeling off her NYU hoodie — her dad had promised her she could go to NYU for college — and looking around.

So this was New Orleans — small, wet, hot. The waiting cabs were black-and-white, really beaten up. Rebecca's father told her once that all airports looked the same, but she could tell she wasn't in New York anymore.

"Mama, should we wait for you here?" asked Aurelia, as springy as a raindrop herself. Aunt Claudia looked puzzled for a moment and then horrified.

"No, no! I don't want to leave you here alone! We'll all run across the road to the lot together. It's only a little . . . wet."

A grumble of thunder announced an even more intense burst of rain. Rebecca could barely see the grim concrete walls of the parking garage across the street. Her aunt was bedraggled as a patchwork rag doll by the time they found cover in the garage.

"Best to stay together," her aunt said in a quiet voice, almost to herself. She flashed Rebecca a bright smile. "Best

to keep close. Only a little rain. Now, Aurelia, what does our car look like? Is it blue or black?”

During the drive in from the airport, the city didn't look promising. An empty, sand-colored canal ran alongside the highway for a stretch, and there were billboards — one for Louisiana seafood, one for a strip club in the French Quarter — that were obviously local, if kind of tacky. But much of everything else looked like most other American cities: signs along the highway for fast-food restaurants, tangles of on- and off-ramps, a clump of tall glass buildings downtown. In the distance, the white-lidded Superdome looked like a bright bulb on this rainy night. Strange to think of it as a place where thousands of people had been stuck, with very little food or water or hope, for a whole week after the hurricane.

But once they were off the highway and the crowded main roads, Rebecca could see something of the place her father had told her about. The Garden District looked as beautiful as he'd promised, its narrow side streets shadowed by giant oak trees, its houses pristine and picturesque. Many had tall white pillars, painted shutters, and black iron gates and railings. Some had long porches — galleries, Aunt Claudia called them — on their lower and upper stories, extending down one whole side of the house.

“And this street we're driving along is Prytania,” Aunt Claudia explained.

“Britannia?”

“With a *P* — from the old *rue du Prytanée*. Based on the ancient Greek Prytaneum, the place they honored Hestia,

goddess of the hearth. The sacred fires were kept burning at the Prytaneum. It was the center of village life.”

“Here it’s just the way we walk to school,” Aurelia added. She tapped Rebecca on the shoulder, pointing to a magnificent coffee-colored mansion, set back from the street behind tall, wrought-iron gates. “That’s it there.”

Temple Mead Academy was grand all right, Rebecca thought, straining to get a good look at the sprawling pillared mansion. Although the building was only three stories, it seemed to peer down at its neighbors, calm and imposing, and a little snooty. It might be beautiful and old and all, but Rebecca wasn’t especially looking forward to her first day there.

Now they were passing a small old cemetery, the domed roofs of its tombs visible above the cemetery’s crumbling, mossy white walls. In New Orleans the dead were entombed in aboveground vaults like these, Rebecca’s father had told her, because it was the French and Spanish custom, and people in New Orleans liked anything that involved showing off their money. He also said the city had a high water table: Bodies buried in the ground might bubble to the surface after a heavy rain. Rebecca shuddered, thinking of corpses peeping out of the wet soil like inquisitive worms.

The car jerked to an abrupt stop on Sixth Street, outside a house much smaller and shabbier than either of its neighbors.

“Home sweet home,” announced Aunt Claudia, fiddling with the controls on her door: She couldn’t seem to work out how to open it. “At least it’s stopped raining.”

Rebecca climbed out of the car and stood for a moment

on the damp sidewalk. The Verniers' wooden house was not only tiny — it leaned to one side in a perilous and possibly illegal way, almost touching the house next door. The ramshackle cottage was painted a faded yellow, and the shutters and front door were blue. A colorful hand-painted sign that read VERNIER in pink letters dangled above the door. The tiny front yard was a dense mass of greenery speckled with a few white flowers; and a banana tree, fat rain drops balanced on its glossy leaves, drooped onto the small front porch.

“Our cottage garden.” Aunt Claudia gestured at the yard, her bangles rattling. Rebecca climbed the rickety steps to the porch and walked over to the rocking chair chained to the wooden railings. She didn't know about “cottage garden”: It looked like weeds. The view from the porch was of the cemetery across the street — or rather its high, dirt-streaked walls. Just down the street was an entrance with tall gates. Aunt Claudia, fumbling inside her giant crocheted bag for the keys she'd had in her hand just a minute ago, followed Rebecca's gaze.

“Lafayette Cemetery's not a safe place,” her aunt told her. “Unfortunately. You should keep away.”

“Why?” Rebecca had a sudden vision of dead bodies reaching up to grab her, their stiff fingers dark with soil.

“Criminals and derelicts,” said Aunt Claudia, pushing open the door. “They wait for tourists to wander in so they can mug them. Some poor soul was shot there just before the storm. Unless you're on one of the big guided tours, it's not a safe place. That's why all the gates are locked every afternoon. Really, you must promise me you'll never go there.”

Rebecca resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Aunt Claudia was just as overprotective as her father. Didn't she know that Rebecca was used to catching the New York City subway, walking through Central Park, hanging out with her friends downtown?

Her aunt stood on the threshold, door ajar, key still in the lock, as though she was waiting for Rebecca's solemn promise before they could move inside.

"Here's Marilyn!" cried Aurelia. A small, long-haired, black-and-white cat bounded through the doorway, past Aurelia's outstretched hands and down the pathway. As though she'd been listening to their conversation, the cat scampered down the street toward the cemetery gate. Without hesitation, she squeezed under the gate's lowest rung and disappeared into the darkness. Rebecca couldn't help laughing.

"That cat is setting a very bad example," sighed Aunt Claudia, shaking her head. She seemed to have forgotten about making Rebecca promise things, which was just as well: Rebecca was hoping to follow Marilyn's lead sometime soon. She was from New York, after all: A small cemetery in a tiny city like this didn't frighten her.