

Excerpt from Every Star in the Sky

Starr grabbed her pillow and wrapped her arms around it, trying to repress the intense longings surging up in her. For freedom from captivity. From fear. From having to do things every night that sickened and disgusted her. Most of all, from helplessly watching as the other girls, especially the young, confused ones like Willow, suffered with no hope of their unspeakable degradation ever ending.

What if she could change that—not only for herself but for all of them?

Starr rested her chin on the pillow. Longing was dangerous and, although it had sustained her since the night Brady's men dragged her here, so was hope. Normally she wouldn't have given that cop the opportunity to talk to her about what he was thinking of doing. He'd caught her at the right time, though, when her conversation with Willow was fresh on her mind.

And when she hadn't eaten in four days.

She'd been weak and vulnerable, or she would never have listened to a word Cole had to say.

Maybe he wouldn't come back. After he'd seen her in person—understood the kinds of acts she performed to avoid a beating, or worse—he might have decided she was not worth the risk. Which would be for the best. He'd stay away from her, and her life could return to the way it had been before he strolled into her hotel room.

Emotions sparked in her, as tangled as the Christmas lights her foster mother had pulled out of the box of decorations every year. Before Starr could try to sort them out, the doorknob turned.

Her head jerked in that direction. *Brady*. The door opened slowly and a little of the tension that had seized every muscle eased. If Brady or his men were coming after one of them, they always flung the door open, hard enough to send it crashing against the wall. The girls had adopted the habit of opening every door slowly so whoever was in the room would know she was safe. For the moment. No doubt Brady would figure that out at some point and use it to his advantage, but for now the system worked.

Ruby slipped through the opening and closed the door. Although Starr knew how risky it would have been for her roommate to bring her food, her heart sank at the sight of her friend's empty hands. Ruby walked over and dropped onto the mattress next to her. "Nine was loitering around the cafeteria, so I couldn't take the chance. I'm sorry."

Brady's men all looked and acted so similar, so much more like machines than human beings, that the girls simply referred to them by number. The men were all tall with the kind of muscles no one developed without regularly ingesting performance-enhancing drugs. Some were white, some black, some Latino, some Asian, but they all had hard faces, hard eyes, and hard fists.

Starr reached for her friend's hand. "I'm glad you didn't. I'm fine."

Ruby squeezed her fingers. "You're not fine. I don't know how he expects you to work when you haven't eaten for days."

Starr shrugged. Brady had countless ways to ensure she kept working—and kept her customers satisfied—regardless of whether she'd been allowed to eat. Every one of the rare times a john had complained about her, she'd been given the opportunity to experience a different one of those ways. Fed or not, she would do what she had to do that night, and she would do it well.

“Ruby.” Starr bent her head closer to her friend.

“Yeah?”

“If something happens to me, will you promise me something?”

Ruby frowned. “What are you talking about? What do you think is going to happen?”

“Likely nothing. But if it did, would you keep an eye on Willow? She has no idea how things work around here. I’m worried Brady will do something terrible to her one of these days, and I honestly don’t think she’d survive it.”

Ruby’s grip on her fingers tightened. “I don’t know, Starr. I’m not like you. I’m not brave enough to stand up to him.”

“No, don’t do that.” Ruby was so terrified of Brady she refused to say his name, only referred to him as *he* and then only if she absolutely had to speak of him. It wouldn’t help Willow if Ruby got dragged into the situation, and it would only make things worse for Ruby. “I only meant that if you see her heading for trouble, warn her she shouldn’t do or say something before it’s too late.”

Ruby bit her lip. “I’ll try. But I don’t know what I’d do myself if something happened to you. What would any of us do if—?”

Starr held a finger to her lips. Her muscles clenched at the sound of thudding boots in the hallway—never a good sign. A sharp rapping on the door confirmed her worst fear. Someone was coming for her. Was it Brady? Had he somehow found out she’d talked to a cop?

Before she could move, the door flew open, cracking against the wall. Brady’s broad shoulders filled the doorway. Ruby’s fingers, still clutching hers, went cold.

As they were expected to do, both scrambled to their feet and waited in silence for him to reveal the reason for his sudden appearance. Ruby stared at the floor, but Starr studied Brady’s

face. Did he know? He didn't look angry, but, as with everything when it came to Brady, she didn't trust that. She'd seen him appear perfectly calm at the start of an exchange, waiting until his intended target lowered her guard. Then he'd explode without warning into an all-consuming rage, the shock of it making the tirade—and subsequent punishment—that much more terrifying and effective.

Her heart thudded wildly. *Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.*

“Starr.”

When he barked her name, she stumbled across the room, stopping in front of him.

“Go get your dinner.”

It took a few seconds to process what he was saying, as the words were so opposite to what she was expecting. Then she nodded. He turned sideways in the doorway, waiting for her to go into the hall. When she reached him, he grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “You remember what I told you the other day?”

“Yes.”

“You're going to keep your mouth shut?”

She nodded, slightly, since he held her chin in such a tight grasp.

“See that you do. Next time you won't get off so lightly.” He let go and Starr brushed past him.

Her legs were weak from more than hunger, but, knowing Brady was watching, she made herself walk slowly and steadily to the lunchroom. Somehow he hadn't figured out that Cole worked for the Toronto PD, or Starr would have heard about it by now.

What did that mean, that they had checked him out and he passed whatever test they put him through? That it was safe for her to meet with him again to discuss the possibility of her

freedom? The thought sent competing shivers of fear and excitement rippling through her. Or maybe he hadn't passed, and Brady was simply biding his time, waiting to catch them both in some trap that neither would be able to escape. She couldn't repress the shudder this time or keep from lifting shaking fingers and pressing them against the wall. Hopefully Brady would attribute the sudden spell of weakness to low blood sugar.

Starr couldn't worry about what Brady did or didn't know. Right now, her priority was getting something to eat so she could think more clearly. And staying out of trouble for the next few days.

If Cole the cop came back to see her, she would hear him out. And then she would decide if the possibility of freedom was worth risking everything for.