

Excerpt from the first chapter of *The Stars Never Rise*

By

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The Grab-n-Go was playing the national news feed. The only other choice was the local news, which repeated on a much shorter, more annoying loop. Still, I kind of felt sorry for the night clerk, sentenced to listen to the same headlines repeated hour after hour, with few customers to break the monotony.

I couldn't actually hear the newscaster, in her purple Church cassock with the broad, gold-embroidered cuffs, but I could tell what she was saying because in the absence of actual breaking news, newscasters all said the same things. Tithes are up. Reports of demonic possession are at an all-time low. Our citizens are safe inside their steel cages—I mean, *walls*. The battle still rages overseas and degenerates still roam the badlands, but the Church is vigilant, both at home and abroad, for your safety.

It had been more than a century since the Unified Church and its army of exorcists wiped the bulk of the great demon horde from the face of the earth—the face of America, anyway—yet the headlines never changed.

I stuck to the shadows, walking along the windowless side of the convenience store. Old posters tacked to the brick wall read “Put your talents to work for your country—consider serving the Church!” and “Report suspicions of possession—the Church needs your eyes and ears!” and “Tithe generously! Every dime makes a difference!”

That last one was especially funny. As if tithing were optional. My mom owed several thousand in overdue tithes, from back when she was still working, and if the Church came looking for it, we were screwed.

Behind the store, I rolled the top of the bag tighter to protect the clothes inside, then tossed my bundle over the six-foot chain-link fence stretched across the width of the alley, shielding the Grab-n-Go's industrial trash bin from casual dumping by the adjoining neighborhood. *My neighborhood.*

The bag landed with the crunch of gravel and the crinkle of thick paper. I had the toe of one sneaker wedged into the chain-link, my fingers already curled around cold metal, when I heard a rustle from the deep shadows at the other end of the alley. I froze, listening. Something scraped concrete in the darkness.

I let go of the fence and took a step back, my heart thudding in my ears.

Dog. But it'd have to be a big one.

Bum. But there weren't many of those anymore—the Church had been taking them off the street and conscripting them into service for more than a decade.

Psycho. There were still plenty of those, and my mom seemed to know them all. But half past five in the morning was early, even for most psychos.

Something shuffled closer on the other side of the fence, and I saw movement in the shadows. My fists clenched and unclenched. My pulse whooshed in my ears, and I regretted throwing Sarah's clothes over the fence. I regretted not taking the even longer way home, through the park. I regretted having a mother who couldn't shake off chemical oblivion in order to feed and clothe her children.

The thing shuffled forward again, and two pinpoints of light appeared in the darkness, bright and steady. Then they disappeared. Then reappeared.

Something was blinking. Watching me.

Shit! I glanced at the paper bag through the fence, clearly visible in the moonlight, just feet from deep shadows cast by the building. Deep shadows hiding . . . a dog.

It's just a dog. . . . It had to be. People's eyes don't shine in the dark.

You know whose eyes do shine in the dark, Nina? Degenerates'.

My pulse spiked. There hadn't been a confirmed possession in New Temperance in years, and the last time a degenerate made it over the city wall, I was in the first grade.

It's a dog.

No stray dog was going to scare me away from a bag of uniforms that cost more than I could make in six months of washing and pressing them. That wouldn't just be the end of *my* work for the Turners, it would be the end of Marta's work for the Turners and the beginning of my conviction for the sin of stealing. Or falsehood. Or whatever they decided to call borrowing and laundering someone else's clothes under false pretenses.

I stepped up to the chain-link, mentally berating myself for being such a coward. I was halfway up the fence when the shuffling started again, an uneven gait, as if the dog—or the shiny-eyed psycho?—was injured and dragging one foot. I could hear it breathing now, a rasping, whistling sound, not unlike my own ragged intake of air. I was breathing too fast.

My hands clenched the fence, and metal dug into my fingers. I froze, caught between fear and determination. Injured dogs don't approach strangers unless they're sick or hungry. It couldn't get through the fence. But I *needed* those clothes!

One more shuffle-scrape on concrete and a shape appeared out of the shadows.
My throat closed around a cry of terror.

Part human, part monster, the creature squatted, a tangle of knees and elbows, stringy muscles shifting beneath grayish skin. The limbs were too long and too thin, the angles too sharp. The eyes were too small, but they shone with colorless light that seemed to see deep inside me, as if it were looking for something I wasn't even sure I had.

Degenerate.