

Girl Beneath Stars

By Abby Wilder

Chapter One

The Establishment has branded us as outlaws.

We hear it before we see it. Falcon's voice carries through the streets, that muted bubble still caught at the back of his throat, the promise of reward and leniency for handing us over dripping off his tongue like a sweet poison.

Garrett, Devon, Della, and I, hide down an alleyway and watch from our place shrouded in the shadows. The town is different than before. Guardians swarm the streets, their eyes lazily scanning the faces of the people who take a wide berth while passing them. I count two on the first corner, three on the next. The trade store across the street is clearly within their view, and from the repeated way the two closest Guardians keep flicking their eyes to the doorway, I know they are under instruction to observe it.

If we stick our heads out enough, we can see the giant billboard erected in the centre of town. A glimpse of life within the dome caught on the outside. One by one, the faces of each of us who escaped Nuovo flash across the screen.

"They are dangerous," Falcon's voice warns. "Any sightings should be immediately reported to the Guardians and anyone caught harbouring the outlaws will be punished."

The billboard labels Jake as the leader, and my mother as his accomplice. When it comes to me, though, the image changes. Unlike all the others, mine isn't taken in a grey jumpsuit with the bleak prison walls behind me. There is no warning of danger, and I'm not identified as an outlaw. I am branded a traitor.

Falcon's voiceover hardens when he lists my offences, as if there is a special level of hatred reserved just for me, though the steel to his voice still puts me second on his most wanted list. The position at the top is reserved solely for Jake.

The images dissolve away, replaced by propaganda endorsing Nuovo and the Establishment.

Garrett curses and scratches the stubble on his chin. "What are we supposed to do now?" he says to no one in particular.

"Leave it to me." Devon starts to walk from our hiding place, but Della grabs a fistful of her shirt and pulls her back.

"Like hell you will," she hisses under her breath.

Devon raises her eyebrows and plucks her shirt from Della's grasp. "I'm not on that list," she says. "You know I'm the only one who can walk out there without causing alarm."

"But the trader doesn't know you, does he?" Della shoots back. "That's why we've got *her* here." She jerks her thumb in my direction.

"Her?" I question.

"You know what I mean." Della scowls, a firm line creasing her pretty face.

"That's why I'm not suggesting I go into the store," Devon responds. "I will distract them while *she* goes into the store."

"She?" I question again. "I'm right here."

I look across the street to where the trade store sits forlorn and forgotten in the bustle of the town. There is no blue scarf fluttering in the breeze and the windows are boarded over. It doesn't look promising.

"And how exactly do you propose to distract them?" Della says, ignoring my outburst and turning her attention back to Devon.

"I've got my charms."

"Could have fooled me," Della mutters. Garrett reaches out and places a hand on Della's shoulder. The effect is visible as she relaxes and takes a deep breath. "It's too dangerous," she says more calmly.

"Have you got a better idea? How else are we going to get supplies?"

"I'm not even sure he's still trading," I say, and nod over to the store. "No one has entered since we got here."

"Maybe the Guardians got to him?" Della whispers, as though they are suddenly tuned into our voices.

"Jake assured us he'd help," Garrett says. "We've got to at least try."

Devon flashes a smile, shrugs out of her jacket and hands it to Della. "Watch and learn."

"What are you going to do Devon?" Della warns.

Devon smiles wickedly and runs her hands through her blonde hair, pulling the short, spiky tufts so they stick out even more from her head. The effect should be comical, but somehow Devon manages to pull it off. "What's that saying again?" She feigns a thoughtful expression. "Oh yeah, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

"Just be careful," Garrett warns. "They're not flies."

Devon winks and steps onto the street. She walks directly towards the Guardians who straighten their stances and adjust the pistols on their belts at her approach.

Della covers her face with her hands. "I can't watch."

Garrett nudges her with his shoulder. "She's a good kid, and she's got a better head on her shoulders than you give her credit for." Then he turns to me, his expression hardening. "You ready?" Garrett keeps his communication with me minimal. He may be grateful to me for getting

us out of Nuovo, but in his mind, I'm still the only reason we were there in the first place. He doesn't like me, or trust me, and I don't blame him.

I reach into my pocket and subconsciously stroke the strip of fabric hidden in the fold. It's blue, and has Jake's handwriting scrawled across it. I haven't read it. Jake said it informs the trader to release his credit to me in his absence, but I haven't checked to see if he's telling the truth. To be honest, I don't care. I just want to do my part and leave. Being this close to Guardians is bringing back memories I'd rather forget.

I had jumped at the chance to come when Jake mentioned it. Dune has been hovering by me like one of the sand flies in the Protected Area ever since we left Nuovo. At least with the sand flies I could hide behind the safety of the screens across the door and windows. There is no escaping Dune. And even though she hasn't left me alone for longer than a few moments at a time, we've barely spoken. She tried once, late at night when the others were asleep, but I pretended to be asleep too. I don't want to hear what she has to say, not yet. The only words we've exchanged are things like, 'hand me that bowl,' and 'roll over and quit breathing in my face.' Hardly the stuff strong mother-daughter bonds are made of. And nothing of my father. Nothing of her life before Nuovo. Nothing of her lies.

Devon has the Guardians full attention, laughing loudly and batting her eyelashes. She's an attractive girl, so it doesn't take much for the Guardians to forget all about the trade store, and instead relieve their boredom with some harmless flirtation. With a deep breath, I take the opportunity to sneak across the dusty street and slip into the store door. With the windows boarded over, it's dark inside. Stumbling over something left on the floor, I hold my hands out in front of me, wary of what else may be in my way. After my eyes adjust, I can just make out the upturned tables, shards of glass, and stray playing cards scattered across the counter. There are dark stains splattered on the floor. They are brown, and they look like dried blood.

"Hello?" I call out gingerly as I step across the broken remains of a bicycle.

There is movement in the back of the store and soon the double barrel of a shotgun appears in the doorway. "What do you want?"

I raise my hands, catching the faint reflection of the man in a shard of broken mirror. "I'm here to talk to . . ." I let my voice fall, realising I have no idea what the man's name is. "I'm looking for the store owner."

"We're closed."

"A Mr C. Redit sent me," I say, remembering the name Jake used last time we were here.

The barrel of the gun lowers a fraction and the man steps around the corner. He seems older than before, although that did not seem possible

at the time. It seems so long ago now, but it was only a few short months ago that Jake brought me here and exchanged my bag of rhineharts for a sack of flour. The man grins, showing only one tooth left in his mouth. His smile does nothing to warm me.

"You," he says.

"You remember me?" I ask, still with my hands raised.

"You cost me a dog."

"Excuse me?"

"My dog, he's dead."

I shake my head and lower my arms. "I'm sorry, but I know nothing about your dog."

He doesn't put the shotgun down, just leaves it hovering, the barrel aimed in my direction. "You may not, but your Guardian friend sure does."

I grit my teeth together. "Have you not seen the billboards? I'm no friend of the Establishment."

"Are you sure? Because the Guardians were awfully keen to find you."

I reach into my pocket, and the man lifts his weapon. Watching him with cautious eyes, I slowly pull out the strip of blue material. "Jake—I mean Mr Redit—would like to cash in his credit. I can tell you what he needs."

The man lifts his bushy, grey eyebrows but doesn't take the material. "You can tell Mr Redit I want nothing to do with him and that his credit is all gone. Consider it payment for my dog."

"Look," I say, stepping closer and mustering all the courage and defiance I can. "We need supplies. And I have no idea what happened to your dog, but I can assure you I had nothing to do with it."

"But that's where you're wrong. Three Guardians came in here looking for you. They beat the crap out of me, ransacked my place, and killed my dog. I think I've given up enough for you."

I close my eyes and think of Bracken. I knew his bouts of aggression had been bad, I just had no idea that they were this bad. I try not to picture the scene, but I can't help but imagine him kicking the dog. I picture it as Joss and my stomach twists. But there is nothing I can do about it, and we are in desperate need of supplies, so I swallow any pity I feel and harden my glare. "I'm sorry about your dog, truly, I am. I like dogs. But if what you are saying is true, then you betrayed us and told the Guardians where we were. Something I do not believe Jake will take kindly to."

"Jake," the man spits out his name, "can do whatever the hell he likes. I didn't betray anyone."

"Then how did they know where we were?"

"Not from me. I didn't have a clue where you'd gone, and I still don't. I never told them where you were, only where you'd been." He still has the gun aimed in my direction, though there is something less threatening about it now, it looks more like a thing and less like a weapon.

"We need supplies. Knives, a rifle, something, anything," I plead. "And I'm very sorry about your dog," I add, hoping to soften him.

Sighing, the man lowers the rifle and leans it against the wall where the danger dissolves completely and it lies useless and without purpose, just another piece of junk in the rubble. "Jake's been good to me in the past. I guess I owe him something for that." He reaches for the strip of material and starts to read.

"And he always will be," I say, attempting to reassure him. "When he finds out about your loss, he will feel so bad. I know he will." I have no idea if he will or not, but it seems like something I should say.

The toothless man sighs again, a sound which appears more lazy and fumbled without any teeth to shield it, and slips the material into his pocket. "Follow me."

I pick my way across the floor, behind the counter, and follow him out the door and down the hallway. Cluttered junk is crammed into every available space. Clearly, the accumulation of stuff, or things, parts and bits, is woven into this man's nature even after the purpose of running a store is gone. He leads me through another door and shuts it firmly. The windows are boarded over, blocking the light, but a lamp hangs from the ceiling illuminating the small kitchen. The sink is piled high with dirty plates, and an overstuffed armchair by a lopsided table is the only furniture in the room. The cardboard covering the window over the sink has a crudely drawn jungle-like landscape on it.

The man sees me studying it. "One can wish," he grunts. Leaning down, he crawls into the cupboard under the sink, brandishing me with an unwanted view of his backside. After fishing around for a while, he wriggles back out, a leather sling in his hand. "Here," he says, holding it out. "Tell Mr Redit we're even."

Taking the sling, I unwrap it to find three knives encased in the leather. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I look up at the man. "It's not enough."

He lifts his eyebrows, the ones that look like hairy caterpillars crawling across his face, and steps threateningly towards me.

My heart beats faster, but I step towards him and match his expression, concentrating on those eyebrows, and assuring myself that someone with such distracting features could never be capable of inflicting pain. At least, I hope he isn't. "It's not enough," I repeat. "Jake would not consider this even."

Whether Jake would consider it even, or not, doesn't matter. He isn't here, and I am. I have no idea what Jake did for the man to have him in his debt, but I have long given up knowing the secrets of my family. All I know is this man has things we need, and Jake trusted me enough to retrieve them. Somehow, I've earned his trust, and I'm not going to let him down.

Without a word, the man turns and walks out the door. Heavy banging reverberates through the room, startling me. My heart thuds harder as he returns and shoves a rifle and a box of ammunition into my arms. "Here, it's all I've got." His eyes dart towards the front of the store and then to the corner of the room behind me. "You've got to go now."

I follow his gaze and see a small screen showing the entrance to the store. A Guardian is waiting impatiently. He bangs again. "Open up! I know you're here!"

"Stupid fool doesn't have the brains to try the handle." The store owner shakes his head dismally. "There's a door out back." Showing me, he jerks his head, indicating the direction. I stumble, my arms full of knives, the rifle, and the boxes of ammunition. "Tell Jake this is it. I don't owe him anything. Nothing more, you hear?"

I nod as I follow him down the hallway, and stop as he cracks open the door. It leads into the alleyway that had hidden us before. It would have been handy to know about earlier. It would have avoided Devon needing to use her charms, or the honey, or whatever it was she used to distract them.

The toothless, hairy-browed man all but shoves me into the alley. "I never want to see you again," he says. He pulls the door shut, and I hear him calling out to the Guardian. "Keep your knickers on, mate. Can't a man take a dump in peace these days?"

Down the other end of the alleyway, Garrett and Della are leaning as far into the street as they can without being noticed. They whisper to each other as I creep up behind them. "Psstt," I hiss, trying not to bring any unwanted attention.

Della turns around slowly, holding her hand to her heart, eyes wide and full of white. "I thought you . . ." Relief floods over her. "Never mind. We need to get out of here."

Without uttering a sound, Garrett takes the rifle and slings it over his shoulder, tucking the boxes of ammunition under his arm.

"What about Devon?" I ask, as they begin to creep down the alleyway, careful that their steps don't bounce off the walls and alert the Guardians.

Garrett's eyes flick to Della before answering. "She'll be fine. She knows how to handle herself." His dark eyes flick to Della again, and I look at him, hoping it reflects my disbelief. "She'll be fine," he says again, but I can hear the uncertainty in his tone. Della does too, but she doesn't

voice her concerns. There is no point. Our only choices are to alert the Guardians of our existence, or trust Devon to get herself out of the situation. Neither sound appealing.

Footfall echoes around the alleyway, but it isn't coming from us. It is too loud, too unified, too clipped.

"They're coming," Garrett says.

They round the corner a block up from where we stand, a perfect line of clones. For a split second, I forget who I am, and relief, not fear, is the first emotion that passes through my mind. Then, I remember I'm no longer in Nuovo. I'm no longer the girl who wants to become a Guardian. I'm the girl running from them.

"Halt!" one shouts.

"Run!" Garrett grunts, before breaking into a run. Della and I follow, heading towards them, aiming to get to the next street before they do.

"Which way?" Della asks, her voice tight with panic.

"Split up!" Garrett orders.

I have no time to think and immediately turn left, certain that the Guardians are close on my heels. Both Della and Garrett turn right, and I am alone. My breathing comes out in laboured huffs as I pound the pavement. The street is deserted, nothing filling it apart from the footsteps of the Guardians behind me, and the yells of the others wanting to join the hunt. My eyes scan the doorways but I'm too scared to try one in case it's locked. In the second it would take to test a door handle, a Guardian could easily catch me. So I cannot stop running, but I know I cannot outrun them.

"Halt!"

Despite their frightening tone, I'm deaf to their calls. I didn't risk escaping Nuovo to be caught now. With the Guardians on my heels, following my every move, I turn corner after corner, slipping down alleys and running over cobblestones, hoping and willing that this next turn will be my saviour. Already my muscles are starting to ache and my breathing is laboured. Life hasn't prepared me to be on the run. Hiding is my only option.

Above me, a ladder meant as a fire exit, clings to the brick of the rear entrance to a shop. I can just make out the window above it, cracked open a fraction. With all the energy I can muster, I lengthen my stride and turn the next corner, trying to get even the smallest of leads. In the moment before they turn the corner and discover me, I rip off a piece of my shirt and hang it over the corrugated iron fence to my left. Then, I lift the lid of an old rubbish bin and take a deep breath before climbing in. The smell is overwhelming. My stomach heaves and I hold back the bile threatening at the base of my throat. I don't breathe. I don't open my

eyes. I sink into the rotten garbage and listen as the Guardians stomp around the corner, until their footsteps halt.

"Where did she go?" one says. "Look," the voice says again.

Clanging iron lets me know they have fallen for my feeble plan, and I let go of the breath straining to be released from my lungs. I stay, soaking in the foul rubbish until the sound of their voices is long gone. I stay, soaking in the foul rubbish until there is silence. I stay, soaking in the foul rubbish until it is dark. Then, I lift the lid and breathe in fresh air. Retracing my steps until I find the escape ladder, I climb it, swinging the leather sling over my shoulder, until I reach the crack in the window. The window is stuck, and when I push against it the rusty metal of the bolt holding it to the brick gives way. The ladder lurches out from the wall. With one hand I cling to the windowsill while I try to prise open the window with the other. After a few panic filled moments, when I was certain the ladder would detach and I would fall to the street below, the window opens enough for me to climb through, and I tumble to the floor. My heart thumps in my chest while I lie and wait for the butterflies in my stomach to settle. There is a creak and a crash as the ladder falls, but no one comes. Still, I lie on the floor panting and waiting.

When I finally get to my feet, the sun is long gone and the moonlight is my only illumination. There is nothing inside the room, and my shoes leave patterns in the dust as I carefully cross the floorboards, scared that one creak will alert the Guardians to my hiding place. I descend a spiral staircase, the railing missing on one side, and make my way over to the window. There is what used to be white lace, but now resembles something closer to grey, shielding them. I move it aside to peer out. The Guardians have not abandoned their posts for the night. They are gathered beneath the sporadic street lights dotted along the footpath, two to each lamp. Two are right outside my window, and I drop the curtain, my pounding heart returning. Slowly, I pull the curtain aside again and study their backs. I wonder if I know them. I wonder if Bracken knows them. I wonder if one is Bracken. An unbidden sigh escapes me and I press my head against the glass, looking out at the men who have me trapped. There is no way I will be able to slip past them. But surely they can't stay there all night.

My stomach grumbles and reminds me that it's been hours since I've eaten. The others will expect us back soon. Hopefully Devon, Della and Garrett have made it out safely.

After examining the building for some other way out and finding only a locked door at the rear, I sink to the floor, lie on my side, form a pillow with my hands, and wait.

On the stroke of every hour, Guardians march past the window and I draw a mark in the dust. Their footsteps are loud in the stillness of the

night, and each time they approach, my heart beats faster. They never bang on the door though, and I stay frozen on the ground, too scared to move, too scared to look outside.

Six marks are drawn in the dust when daylight dawns, and it brings with it a little bravery on my part. I pull myself up from the floor, stretching and testing my stiff limbs, and approach the window, pulling the lace aside so I can peer out the crack. Dark camouflaged material presses against the window, and I drop the curtain, startled by its closeness. Unaware of my presence, shielded by a thin panel of glass, the Guardian whistles merrily. Silently, I move to the next window and hold my breath as I pull aside the curtain, knowing that if the Guardian glances this way, I will be caught. The street is quieter than the night before. Either they have called off the search, or they think they have found what they are looking for. My heart clenches as I think of Della and Devon and Garrett, and hope that the latter isn't true. As far as I can see, there is only one other Guardian on the street and he is stationed down the next block.

I know what I must do, I'm just terrified of doing it. Reaching over my shoulder, I take off the leather sling. Three knives are inside, one so small, it's more like a pocket knife. I take it and tuck it into the side of my shoe. The biggest, sheathed in a firm leather pouch, I take in my hand and pull the cover off slowly, examining the thick metal. It's heavy, and a moment of panic passes over me. Can I really hold this to someone? Am I really that person? I shake my head, knowing that if it came down to it, there is no way I could inflict pain on anyone else. I just hope that the Guardian stationed outside doesn't know that. I hope he believes everything he's ever heard about the Rebels, and assumes I'm one of them. I balance the weight of the blade in my hand, and after twisting my wrist, decide to put it back into its sheath and remove the next one. It may not look as menacing, but at least I will be able to brandish it without dropping it.

Fraction by fraction, I open the door steadily, so it moves without sound. The Guardian faces away from me, still whistling and staring down the street. With my back pressed against the wall, I move slowly, my eyes flitting from the Guardian to the street, determined not to be caught unaware. The knife is heavy in my grasp. My fingers are wrapped so tightly around the handle, my knuckles turn white. I know I must move quickly, before he has time to notice me, before I have time to think about what I'm doing, so I dart behind him, press the blade to his throat and reach into his belt to remove his weapon. His skin catches against the blade. Firm enough to threaten, but not hard enough to cut. I fumble with his pistol, and pull off the safety before pressing it to his back and removing the knife.

"Hands on your head," I order, in what I hope is my most threatening and demanding voice. But with the way I'm shaking, it comes out more like a nervous squeak. The Guardian moves his hands and splays them, before placing them on his head. "On your knees." He lowers himself, and I remove the ciid from around his wrist before facing him.

He peers up at me, squinting from the sunlight poking over the building behind. One cheek is slightly caved in. It's been reconstructed, but they didn't do a very good job and the area is darker than the rest, making it more noticeable. Cocking his head to the side, he smiles with sinister delight. "I know you."

"You may have seen me," I say, "but you do not know me."

He grins again, an all over wicked grin that speaks of amusement, not fear, and all it does is annoy me. I am, after all, the one holding the weapon.

"You're Bracken's girl."

I shove the pistol into his chest but he just grins some more, revealing a row of white teeth, one twisted and out of place. "You messed him up pretty bad, didn't you?"

"I'm no one's girl," I spit back at him, trying not to let the pistol tremble in my hands and reveal how much his words affect me.

"You're a little feistier than last time I saw you." Getting to one knee, he tries to stand, and I push him back down forcefully. He lifts his chin in defiance, but doesn't attempt to stand again. "Last time, you were playing up to the cameras. I see things are different now. I'm grateful to you though, the reward for finding you will be worth any slight discomfort on my behalf."

I flick the switch on the pistol to taser, grateful for the brief training Bracken gave me, and shove the barrel hard into his chest. "You've got it the wrong way around," I say. "I found you," I look down to the name stitched into his uniform, "Cadet Spray. And now you are going to get me out of here."

I secure his hands and nudge him to his feet. He walks ahead of me, his wrists tied behind him, and I stay close with the pistol pressed against his back. We duck into an alley when the repetitive thud of the Guardians boots hitting the pavement echoes off the walls. Keeping the weapon pressed close to his back, and my mouth pressed against his ear, whispering words of warning, we watch as they pass by.

My breath catches. "Joss," I gasp as she walks past, tied on a lead and following one of the Guardians dutifully.

Cadet Spray chuckles. "We found her howling outside Nuovo. Figured she had to be something to do with you Rebels. I guess you just confirmed that."

I drag him to his feet roughly, not caring when his knees scrape against the concrete. "Keep moving."

We wander through the streets, ever vigilant for approaching Guardians. I keep the pistol pressed to him the whole time. It would only take one yell, one wayward noise, and he could alert them to our position. But he doesn't even attempt escape, his bravery reserved for words rather than actions.

"He would have nightmares and call out your name. Did you know that?" Sprays says.

If his intention is to get under my skin, it's working. I shove him forward. "Keep moving."

"There was this one night when he was thrashing about and yelling out for you." He stops walking. "Or maybe it was at you." I shove him again, and he stumbles forward. "We had to restrain him. What did you do to him, girl?"

I ignore him and look over at the flutter of red in the window, up at the idle wires strung above, then over to the rusted mound that used to be a car. I look anywhere but within, where I know guilt festers at the role I played in Bracken's ruin. Others don't see it that way, but I do.

"Must have been something bad, the way he reacted and all. And then, to be embarrassed by letting you and your friends escape." He shakes his head and lets out a low whistle. "Doubt he'll forget that in a hurry. Neither will Governor Falcon. You know he'll find you, right?"

"Shut up," I order.

"Shut up or what?"

We've reached the outskirts of town. The rendezvous point isn't far from here, but it's as far as I want, or need, to take my Guardian escort. "Or this," I say, and press the trigger. Spray lets out a strangled cry and falls to the ground, his body stiff and rigid, yet quivering. I watch, holding my breath, scared of what I've done, as his body convulses with the shock. It seems like an eternity before he stills and regains his breath.

"You want some more?" I say, standing over him and waving his pistol, ignoring the panicked beating in my chest and the shouting in my head.

He grins and spits onto the ground. "I can see why he likes you. You're very similar."

"I'm nothing like him."

I leave him fragile and quivering on the ground and scavenge for something to restrain him. Finally, I come across a bundle of wires and use them to tie him to the signpost welcoming people to the town. I don't look at him again. I take my knives and my newly acquired pistol, and turn away.

"You can't hide forever!" he calls out. "He'll find you!"