

Stars Above

A LUNAR CHRONICLES COLLECTION



MARISSA MEYER

#1 NEW YORK TIMES—BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE LUNAR CHRONICLES



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For Sloane and Delaney

The Keeper

Michelle slid her fingertip across the portscreen, flipping through the album of photos her granddaughter had sent that morning. Luc had taken Scarlet to see the ruins of the Musée du Louvre, and Scarlet had taken dozens of pictures of the crumbling statues and still-standing wreckage. There was even a photo of Luc and Scarlet together, huddled in enormous wool coats beside a statue with one missing arm. The stone woman looked like a third member of their party.

Michelle kept coming back to this picture, the only one of the album that had both Luc and Scarlet in it. Though Luc wore his usual detached expression—always trying so hard to look sophisticated—Scarlet’s grin was effervescent. Her eyes sparkling, one of her front teeth missing, her curly red hair half tucked into the collar of her jacket. She seemed happy.

For once, Luc was trying, and that warmed Michelle to her core. It was a welcome change from the usual comms she received from her granddaughter. Home life had been difficult for the child since her mother had left ... no, Michelle knew it had been difficult long before that. She had known from the beginning that her son was ill-suited to parenthood. Too vain and selfish, and his young wife had been every bit as bad. Their relationship had been passionate and dramatic and doomed from the start. They’d been arguing since practically the moment they started dating—big arguments, with screaming and smashed dishes and law enforcement called by the neighbors more than once. When the pregnancy had been announced, Michelle had struggled to feign joy for them. The disastrous end to their marriage had been inevitable and she’d known that the poor child would be the victim of it.

Usually she was forced to read between the lines of Scarlet’s comms, as Luc certainly never told her anything. “*I’m bored and waiting for Papa to get home*” translated to “Luc is out at the bars again and his six-year-old daughter is home alone.” Or, “*Thank you for the birthday gift. Papa said he’s going to take me to a theme park to celebrate once the weather is better*” translated to “Luc forgot his daughter’s birthday again and hopes she’ll forget all about his promise by the time spring rolls around.” Or, “*The*

neighbor brought ratatouille for dinner again—the third this week. She uses too much eggplant and I HATE eggplant, but Papa said I was being rude and sent me to my room” translated to “Luc gambled away their food budget this week, but at least this kindly neighbor is paying attention—unless she’s been charmed by Luc’s smile and hasn’t yet figured out that he’s a spineless rascal.”

Michelle sighed. She loved her son, but she had lost respect for him a long while ago. She knew she had to accept part of the blame herself, though. She had raised him, after all. Maybe she had spoiled him too much, or maybe not enough. Maybe he’d needed a father in his life to guide him. Maybe—

A knock startled her. She lifted her gaze away from the portscreen, where she’d been staring into the shadowed face of the son she hadn’t spoken more than a dozen sentences to this year. Probably one of the neighbor kids hosting a fund-raiser, or someone from town wanting a few eggs from her hens.

Setting the port on the table beside her favorite reading chair, she pulled herself to her feet and ducked out of her bedroom, down the narrow stairs that creaked familiarly every time, into the small foyer of the farmhouse. She didn’t bother to look, just opened the door on its ancient hinges.

Her heart stalled. The entire world seemed to hesitate.

Michelle took half a step back, bracing herself on the door. “*Logan.*”

His name struck her with the full force of an asteroid collision, stealing the air from her lungs.

Logan stared back at her. *Logan.* Her Logan. His eyes searched her, every bit as rich and fathomless as she remembered, though they were lined with wrinkles that hadn’t been there before. More than thirty years before.

“Hello, Michelle.” His voice was a wearier version of the one she had adored all those years ago, but it still filled her with memories and loneliness and warmth. “I am so sorry to intrude on you like this,” he said, “but I am in desperate need of your help.”

* * *

She had been both proud and terrified when she’d been invited to attend the Earthen diplomats on a visit to Luna—the first in generations. She was one of four pilots for the mission, and the youngest by nearly ten years. It had been an honor, even though most of the people she’d mentioned the mission to prior to departure looked at her like she was crazy for even considering it.

“Luna?” they would ask in disbelief. “You’re going to Luna ... willingly? But ... they’ll *murder* you. They’ll brainwash you and turn you into an Earthen slave. You’ll never come back!”

She laughed and ignored their warnings, confident that the horror stories surrounding Lunars were based on superstitious nonsense more than solid facts. She believed there would be good Lunars and bad Lunars, just like there were good and bad Earthens. Surely they couldn’t all be monsters.

Besides, she was only a pilot. She wouldn’t be involved in any of the political discussions or important meetings. She didn’t even know what the mission was meant to accomplish. She would spend the monthlong visit enjoying the famed luxuries of Artemisia and she would return home with plenty of stories to tell. She wasn’t about to let some absurd urban legends keep her from being part of such a historic event.

She was given leave almost as soon as they reached Artemisia, and she soon discovered that the white city was everything she expected it to be and more. Lush gardens and courtyards filled the spaces between white-stone buildings. Trees towered over sprawling mansions—some reaching nearly to the domed enclosure that covered the city. Music poured out of every alleyway and no glass was left empty of wine and everyone she met was carefree and full of laughter. Somehow they all knew she was Earthen without her having to say so, and it seemed that every wealthy merchant and aristocrat in the city made it their personal obligation to show her the grandest time she could imagine.

It was only the fourth day since her arrival and she was in the central square of the city, dancing around an enormous sundial with a strikingly handsome man, when she stepped too close to the edge and tumbled off. She cried out in pain, knowing instantly that her ankle was sprained. Her dancing partner called for a magnetic levitating contraption—similar to a gurney—and took her to the nearest med-clinic.

That was where she met Logan.

He was a doctor, a few years older than she was, and Michelle had known instantly that he was different from the other Lunars she’d met. He was more serious. His eyes more thoughtful. But more than that, he was ... *imperfect*. She studied him while he studied her ankle. Average build. Light brown, untidy hair. There was a mole on his cheek and his mouth drooped on one side, even when he smiled. He was still good-looking, at least by Earthen standards, but on Luna ...

Only when it occurred to her that he was *not* using a glamour did she realize that everyone else she’d met had been.

He offered to let her rest in a suspension tank, but she shook her head.

“It will heal quicker,” he said, confused by her refusal.

“I don’t like being confined to small spaces,” she replied.

“Then you must hate being trapped under the biodome here.” He didn’t press her as he began to wrap her ankle the old-fashioned way. For years to come, when she thought of Logan, she would remember his gentle hands and how deftly they had worked.

“It’s so beautiful here,” she said. “I hardly feel trapped at all.”

“Oh, yes. It’s a very pretty prison we’ve built.”

It was the first unpleasant comment she’d heard about Luna from a Lunar.

“You think of your home as a prison?”

His gaze flickered up, clashing with hers. He was silent for a long, long time. Instead of answering her question, he finally asked in a hushed whisper, “Is it true that the sky on Earth is the color of a blue jay’s wings?”

After that day, Michelle no longer had eyes for the aristocrats and their flashy clothes (especially once Logan told her that the man she’d been dancing with on the sundial was in fact old enough to be her grandfather). She and Logan spent every possible moment together during her stay on Luna. They both knew it was a temporary affair. There was a ticking clock for when she would return to Earth, and she never entertained hope that he might be able to return with her. The rules against Lunar emigration were strict—Luna didn’t like its citizens leaving, and Earth didn’t want them coming.

Perhaps their romance was more intense for its brevity. They talked about everything—politics and peace and Earth and Luna and constellations and history and mythology and childhood rhymes. He told her horrifying rumors about how the Lunar crown treated the impoverished citizens of the outer sectors, forever ruining the glittering allure that Artemisia had first cast over her. She told him about her dream to someday retire from the military and buy a small farm. He showed her the best place in the city to see the Milky Way, and there was a meteor shower on the night they first made love.

When it was time for her to leave, there were no parting gifts. No tears and no good-byes. He had kissed her one last time and she had boarded the ship to return to Earth and that was the last she had ever seen of Dr. Logan Tanner.

When she’d discovered her pregnancy nearly two months later, it had not even occurred to her to try and find a way to inform him of his child. She was sure that it would not have mattered anyway.

* * *

“We were told of her death months ago,” Michelle said, pressing her palm flat against the glass lid of the suspended animation tank that had been hidden beneath a pile of old horse blankets in the back of a rented hover. She was trying to keep from heaving. She was not easily disturbed, but never had she been so close to something so sad and horrific. Judging from the size of the body, the child was only three or four years old. She looked more like a corpse—disfigured and covered in burn marks. It was unbelievable that she was alive at all. “There have been rumors ... conspiracy theorists have speculated that she may have survived and Levana is trying to cover it up. But I didn’t believe them.”

“Good,” said Logan. “We want people to believe she’s dead, especially the queen. It’s the only way she’ll be safe.”

“Princess Selene,” Michelle whispered. It didn’t seem real. None of this seemed real.

Logan was on Earth. Princess Selene was alive. He’d brought her *here*.

“A fire did this?”

“Yes. It happened in the nursery. Levana claims it was an accident, but ... I believe it was planned. I believe Levana wanted her dead so she could have the throne for herself.”

Michelle shook her head in disgust. “Are you sure?”

His dark eyes stared at the form of the princess encapsulated beneath the glass. “Matches and candles are rare on Luna. Under the domes, any sort of air pollution is a concern we take seriously. I don’t see how or why a nanny would have had one, or why she would have had it lit in the middle of the day, in a child’s playhouse.” He sighed and met Michelle’s eyes. “Also, there was a peer of mine. Dr. Eliot. She was the first doctor to examine the princess, and the one to proclaim her as dead and have her body removed from the palace. Her quick thinking saved the princess’s life.” His gaze slipped. “Two weeks ago, she was accused of being a traitor to the crown, though details of her crime were never released. I believe she was tortured for information and then killed. That’s when I knew I had to run. That Selene and I had to run.”

“Who else knows?”

“I ... I’m not sure. There’s one other man, Sage Darnel, who worked in bioengineering. He was beginning to act suspicious of me before I left. Asking questions that hinged too close to the truth, but ... I don’t know if he figured anything out, or was only guessing. Or maybe I’m being paranoid.”

“If he does know, would he ... is he an ally, or...”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. We’re all so caught up in the mind games of Artemisia, I can never tell who’s happy under the regime and who hates Levana as much as I do.” He released a frustrated breath. “There’s nothing I can do about it now. They’ll no doubt be suspicious that I disappeared, but I couldn’t stay there. *She* couldn’t stay there.” The tank made a low gurgling noise, as if in agreement.

“What if they come looking for you?” Michelle’s heart was starting to pound. The burden of it was settling over her shoulders. Queen Levana was the most powerful woman in the galaxy. If Logan’s theories were true, then she wouldn’t stop looking for the princess. And anyone who helped the princess was in danger.

“I don’t think they can trace me here,” Logan said, though his expression was unconvincing. “I’ve changed spaceships and hover cars six times since arriving on Earth and manipulated everyone I’ve seen so that they wouldn’t be able to recognize me.”

“But what about our...” She stumbled over the word *relationship*. “... connection? We weren’t discreet before.”

“It was a long time ago, and affairs happen so frequently on Luna, I doubt anyone was paying attention to us.”

Affairs. He said the word too casually, and Michelle was surprised at the sting of hurt it caused.

Logan’s expression softened. He looked exhausted and too gaunt, but he was still handsome to her. Maybe even more handsome now than when they were young. “You’re the only person I trust, Michelle. I don’t know where else to take her.”

It was the right thing to say. Her pain diffused. She inhaled deeply and looked down at the child again. “My house is small,” she said. “I couldn’t hide her if I—”

She hesitated. The house had been built in the second era. It had survived the Fourth World War. She swallowed.

“The bomb shelter,” she said. “There’s a bomb shelter under the hangar, wired for a generator and everything.”

Logan pressed his lips together until they turned white. There was regret etched into his face, but also hope. It took him a while, but eventually he nodded. “You understand the danger you’ll be in if you keep her here? She is the most valuable person on this planet.”

For some reason, this comment made Michelle think of Scarlet, her granddaughter. Only a couple of years older than the princess before her.

Scarlet—*Logan's* granddaughter.

She opened her mouth, but shut it again.

"I'm sorry," said Logan, misinterpreting her hesitation. "I'm sorry to ask this of you."

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"I will help you until I know the princess is stable and you're confident in caring for her. Then I'll go into hiding until ... until she's old enough to be removed from stasis."

She wanted to ask him where he would hide, and how, and when he would return. But she didn't say any of those things. Instinct told her that it was better not to know. *Safer* not to know.

"And once she's awoken from stasis?"

His gaze became distant, like he was trying to peer into the future. Trying to imagine the woman this child might become.

"Then I will tell her the truth," he said, "and help her reclaim her throne."

* * *

Though Scarlet had taken the maglev train between Paris and Toulouse a dozen times before, she'd underestimated how different it would be traveling by herself. Her body had been wound tight from the moment she'd boarded the train. She hadn't had much money for her ticket, so she was in the cheapest car and the seats were uncomfortable, especially for such a long trip. She dreaded the idea that someone would sit next to her and ask where she was going and where were her parents and did she need help. She already had a speech rehearsed in case it happened. She was going to visit her grandmother, who would be picking her up from the station. Of course her parents knew where she was. Of course she was expected.

But of course she wasn't.

The train entered a new station and she squeezed her backpack against her side and tried to look grouchy as new passengers boarded. She exuded her best "leave me alone" vibes.

It worked. No one sat next to her, and she exhaled in relief as the train rose on its magnets again.

Unzipping the top pocket of her pack, she pulled out her portscreen and stuck a pair of wireless headphones into her ears. Maybe some music would help her forget about what she was doing.

She had left Paris. She was never going back again. She was going to live with her grand-mère and no one could stop her.

She wondered if her father had even realized she was gone yet. Probably not. He was probably still drunk and unconscious.

She shut her eyes and tried to relax as the music blasted into her ears, but it was no use. She was hyperaware of the movements of the train, the chatting of passengers, the announcements of upcoming stops. She was waiting for the chime of her portscreen—a comm from her father demanding to know where she was. Or a nervous, worried comm, begging her to come home. Or even a missing child alert from the police.

She listened to the entire album and no alerts came.

She watched the cities come and go, the fields and vineyards disappear over the hills, the sun sink toward the horizon, and no alerts came.

The car became more crowded as time passed. A man in a suit eventually sat next to her and her whole body tensed, but he didn't try to talk or ask any questions. He busied himself reading a newsfeed on his port and eventually dozed off, but Scarlet had heard enough stories about bag snatchers and child-nappings that she dared not let down her guard.

The album started over. The notice board at the front of the car announced that the next stop was Toulouse, and an entirely new bout of nerves writhed in her stomach. She had to wake the man up to get past him, and he startled and said something about almost missing his stop again. He laughed. Scarlet ducked past him without meeting his gaze, clutching the straps of her backpack.

"Hey, kid."

She clomped down the steps to the platform.

"Kid!"

She quickened her pace, panic and adrenaline rushing through her veins. She looked around for someone who would help her if she needed it. Someone in uniform or an android or—

"Kid, wait!" A hand landed on Scarlet's shoulder and she spun around, ready to scream.

It was the man in the suit. "You left this on the bench," he said, holding out her water bottle.

Her pulse immediately subsided and she grabbed the bottle away without a thank-you. Turning, she jogged across the platform and up the escalators. She felt embarrassed for her overreaction, but still unnerved. She was alone and no one knew where she was or that she was even missing. She doubted she would feel safe until she reached her grandmother's house, and even then she'd have to persuade Grand-mère to let her stay.

She found an empty taxi hover and climbed inside, giving her grandmother's address. The screen asked her to approve the cost of travel,

and the price blinking at her made her stomach drop. It would almost deplete her savings.

Swallowing hard, she scanned her wrist and approved the payment.

* * *

Michelle had been caring for the princess for almost two years, and the regular ministrations had become second nature. Just another chore to check off her daily list. Feed the animals. Gather the eggs. Milk the cow. Check the princess's diagnostics and adjust the tank's fluid levels as needed.

The child was growing. She would have been five years old now—*was* five years old, Michelle reminded herself. Even after all these months it was hard not to think of the girl as a corpse she kept locked up beneath her hangar.

She wasn't a corpse, but she wasn't exactly alive, either. The machines did everything for her. Breathed. Pumped blood. Sent electrical signals to her brain. Logan had told her it was important to keep her brain stimulated so that when she awoke she wouldn't still have the mind of a three-year-old. Supposedly she was being fed knowledge and even life experiences as she lay there, unmoving. Michelle didn't understand how it worked. She couldn't imagine how this child could sleep for her entire life and then be expected to become a queen upon her return to society.

But that would be Logan's job, whenever he returned. There were years still before anyone would know who this child was going to become.

Michelle finished recording Selene's vital statistics and flipped off the generator-powered lights. The bomb shelter, which had been converted into a makeshift hospital room and scientific laboratory, remained lit by the pale blue light from the suspension tank. Michelle clipped her portscreen to her belt and climbed the ladder to the hangar above. She grabbed one of the storage crates that she shuffled between the hangar and the barn—a useful excuse in case anyone ever saw her coming and going. The bomb shelter and its occupant were a secret, a dangerous one, and she could never allow herself to lose caution.

This was the direction of her thoughts when she stepped onto the gravel drive and saw the taxi hover waiting there. She wasn't expecting visitors. She never had visitors to expect.

She squared her shoulders and settled the crate on one hip. The pebbles crunched beneath her feet. She glanced into the hover's windows as she passed, but it was empty, and no one was waiting on the porch, either.

Setting down the crate, Michelle grabbed the only weapon she passed—a pair of rusted gardening shears—and shoved open her front door.

She froze.

Scarlet was sitting on the bottom step of the foyer's staircase, a backpack tucked under her legs. She was bundled up in the same wool coat that Michelle remembered from the Louvre photos, but now it was fraying at the shoulder seams and looked two sizes too small for a growing girl.

"Scarlet?" she breathed, setting the shears on the entry table. "What are you doing here?"

Scarlet's cheeks reddened, making her freckles even more pronounced. She looked like she was on the verge of crying, but the tears didn't come. "I came to live with you."

* * *

"This is just another one of her cries for attention!" Luc spat. His nose and cheeks were tinged red, his words slurred. He was outside and on the screen Michelle could see the puffs of his breaths in the night air. "Just put her back on the train and let her figure it out."

"She is seven years old," Michelle said, aware of how thin the walls around her were. No doubt Scarlet could hear her father's raised voice, even from downstairs. "It's a wonder she made it here safely at all, being all by herself like that."

"And what do you expect me to do? Fly down there to pick her up? I have work in the morning. I *just* got this new job and—"

"She is your *daughter*," Michelle said. "I expect you to be a father, to show that you care about her."

Luc snorted. "You're lecturing me on how to be a good parent? That's rich, Maman."

The comment struck her straight between the ribs. Michelle stiffened. The knot of tension in her stomach wound so tight it threatened to cripple her.

It was her biggest regret, not being there for her son when he was little. She'd been a single mother trying to balance a newborn son with a military career—a career that had been full of potential. She had long ago realized how badly she'd failed in balancing anything. If she could do it all over again ...

But she couldn't. And while Luc's flaws were partially her doing, she wasn't about to see the same neglect happen to her darling Scarlet.

She looked away from the portscreen. “She can stay the night, of course. I’m not sending her back on a train by herself.”

Luc grunted. “Fine. I’ll figure out what to do with her tomorrow.”

Michelle shut her eyes and squeezed them tight. She pictured the secret door to the bomb shelter. The half-alive girl in that glowing blue tank. She pictured a faceless woman—*Dr. Eliot*—being tortured for information on what had happened to Princess Selene.

She gulped.

“Maybe she should stay here,” she said, and pried her eyes open again. Her mind was already made up by the time she looked back at the screen. “Maybe I should take care of her, at least until ... until you’re on your feet again.” Even as she said it, she wasn’t confident it would ever be a reality.

Scarlet deserved more. More than a nonexistent mother and a careless father. Scarlet deserved more than Luc had been given.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow,” Luc said. He still sounded angry, but there was also a hint of relief in his voice. Michelle knew he wouldn’t fight her on this.

She disconnected the comm link and left the port on her bed before making her way back down the stairs.

Scarlet was at the dining table, curled around a bowl of pea pods—the first of the season. She had a pile of empty shells growing beside her, and a pod open in her fingers.

Scarlet popped a pea into her mouth when Michelle entered. It crunched between her teeth.

She was pretending to be unconcerned, a look Michelle recognized immediately. It was an expression she herself wore more often than she cared to admit.

“You can stay,” said Michelle.

The crunching stopped. “Forever?”

Michelle sat down opposite Scarlet. “Maybe. Your father and I have more to discuss, but ... for now, at least, you can stay with me.”

A smile—the first Michelle had seen since Scarlet’s arrival—broke across her face, but Michelle raised a hand. “Listen carefully, Scar. This is a farm, and there is a lot of work that needs to be done here. I’m getting older, you know, and I will expect you to help out.”

Scarlet nodded eagerly.

“And I don’t just mean the fun stuff, like gathering eggs. There’s manure to shovel and fences to paint ... This isn’t an easy life.”

“I don’t care,” said Scarlet, still beaming. “I want to be here. I want to be with you.”

* * *

“Happy birthday, dearest Scarlet,” Grand-mère sang, carrying the lemon cake to the table. Eleven candle flames flickered and danced over the white frosting. “Happy birthday, my dear.”

Scarlet closed her eyes for a moment of consideration. She had been waiting for this moment all day. Well, mostly she’d been waiting for the delicious lemon cake that her grandmother had made for her birthday every year since she’d come to live with her, but there was something special about making a wish, too.

She wasn’t superstitious, but she loved the sense of possibilities that came with wishing.

I wish ...

Even having thought of it all day, though, she hadn’t made up her mind. It was a struggle to come up with a decent wish. A worthy wish.

That they wouldn’t lose any more chickens to whatever predator had gotten into the coop last week? That her father wouldn’t forget her birthday again, like he had last year, and the year before that? That Padgett Dubois would stop making fun of her freckles, or that Gil Lambert would actually notice her at school one of these days?

No. None of those were worthy enough.

She knew it was a long shot, but ...

I wish that Grand-mère would teach me how to fly.

Opening her eyes, she leaned forward and blew out the candles in one impressive breath. Grand-mère applauded. “Well done! You get those powerful lungs from me, you know.” She winked and pushed two wrapped presents across the table. “Go ahead and open these while I dish up the cake.”

“Thank you, Grand-mère.” She pulled the larger gift toward her. It was heavier than she expected, and she took care as she untied the ribbon and peeled open the worn pillowcase it had been wrapped in.

Scarlet opened the box. Stared. Lifted one eyebrow.

She looked up at her grandmother, who was licking the frosting off each burnt candle. She couldn’t tell if the “present” was a joke. Sure, her grandmother was eccentric, but ...

“A ... gun?” she said.

“A Leo 1272 TCP 380 personal handgun,” said her grandmother, picking up a carving knife and making the first cut into the cake. A moment later she lifted a perfect slice from the pan and deposited it onto Scarlet’s plate. She passed it across the table along with a fork, the layers of yellow cake and white buttercream as flawless as any bakery dessert Scarlet had ever seen.

Her grandmother’s skills in the kitchen weren’t nearly as wide praised as they should have been. Mostly, when people talked about Michelle Benoit, they joked about the slightly crazy woman who never wanted any help running her farm. Who chased off unwanted solicitors with a shotgun. Who sang when she gardened and claimed that it made the vegetables sweeter.

Scarlet loved her grandmother for her quirks, but even she found it a little off-putting to receive a weapon—an actual, deadly weapon—for her eleventh birthday. Sure, she’d used the shotgun before to chase away wild wolves or shoot clay pigeons when she was bored. But a handgun? This wasn’t for hunting. This was for ... protection.

“Don’t look so disappointed,” Grand-mère said with a laugh, cutting herself a slice of cake. “It’s an excellent model. Just like the one I’ve carried for years. I’ll show you how to load it and empty it when we’re done eating. Once you’re comfortable carrying it, you’ll find that you never want to be without it again.”

Scarlet licked her lower lip and nudged the box away with the gun still sitting inside. She was hesitant to touch it. She wasn’t even sure if it was legal for someone her age to carry a gun. “But ... why? I mean, it’s a little...”

“Unorthodox?” Grand-mère chuckled. “What were you expecting? A baby doll?”

Scarlet made a face at her. “A new pair of tennis shoes would be nice.”

Her grandma pulled a bit of cake off her fork with her teeth. Though she was still grinning, there was a heavy seriousness in her gaze when she set the fork down and reached over to remove the gun from the box. Her movements were confident, controlled. She looked like she had picked up a thousand guns in her life, and maybe she had.

“Don’t worry, Scar,” she said, not looking up. “I’ll teach you how to use it, although I hope you never have to.” She gave a little shrug and set the gun on the table between them, the barrel pointing toward the kitchen window. “I just want you to know how to defend yourself. After all, you just never know when a stranger will want to take you somewhere you don’t mean to go.”

Her words were foreboding and Scarlet found herself eyeing the gun as goose bumps scrabbled down her arms. “Thank you?” she said uncertainly.

Her grandmother swallowed another bite of cake and pointed her fork toward the second box. “Open your other present.”