

## STARSTRUCK: HUNTER

Book One of the Celestial Lovers series

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### CHAPTER ONE

Adrenaline surged through Noah Benson as he stared at the weapon lying on the makeshift table that separated him from the three detectives.

“It won’t bite you, kid,” sneered the burly man to his right, Detective Johnson. “This baby hit the market at around five grand. It’s called the *Sonar 6000*. It goes from infrasonic to ultrasonic frequency.” He flipped a switch on its side. Immediately, a low hum filled the van. “You aim this at the ocean and you could beach six whales. Aim it at the sky—”

“You could ground six stars.” Noah made no move to take the gun. Johnson glanced at his partner, a broad, dark-skinned man in his late forties.

“You sure the kid can handle this, Earl?”

“This isn’t a routine sting for him. Tonight is personal, right Noah?”

Noah looked up, his pale brown eyes almost colorless. A grim smile parted his lips. Tonight went beyond personal. Tonight was about revenge. Revenge for a betrayal ten years old but as achingly fresh in his mind as the knife scar in his back. Revenge on the man who sent him to prison for a crime he didn’t commit.

Joel Whitaker.

At the time, Noah had been nineteen and in desperate need of cash to pay off his debts and finance his goal of becoming an astronomer. He hadn’t questioned when his friend offered him a chance to do both in one night. The job? Capturing a falling star.

In a city like Neptune, West Virginia, a place populated by creatures that went bump in the night, catching and selling a few stars for their life-prolonging energy seemed like child’s play.

Joel didn’t tell him star hunting was illegal, or that it carried a minimum sentence of seven years in a state penitentiary. He didn’t tell him no astronomy program would accept a convicted star hunter.

Worse, he didn’t tell him stars were sentient creatures.

When Noah realized this, he tried to stop Joel. All it got him was a double-edged knife in the back, driven so deep it punctured his lung. He had lain in the grass, bleeding and helpless, while he listened to the star’s dying screams as Joel and his cronies drained her of energy. The only evidence of their crimes had been a handful of cosmic dust.

Even now, at the age of thirty, Noah would never forget those screams. *Tonight, Joel will finally pay for his crimes.* He looked up when Earl, his mentor and friend, touched his shoulder.

“I know tonight will be tough for you. After all, Whitaker was your friend.”

“Not anymore.” A thread of steel entered Noah’s voice. He grasped the gun.

“Watch it!” Johnson yelled, losing some of his cockiness. “The concentrated energy in that could blast a hole the size of a Buick in a man.”

“Good to know.” Noah flicked off the energy boosters and slid the weapon inside a black duffel bag, which he slung over his shoulder. After adjusting the microphone embedded in the

top button on his shirt, he exited the van.

“Don’t worry. The microchip implant in your arm will let us know where to find you. The wonders of technology, huh? Good luck.” Detective Johnson started to close the van doors.

“Wait! What’s the code word when I need backup?”

“Stardust.”

The doors slammed in his face. Noah shook his head. *Cops have such weird senses of humor.*

Glass crunched under his boots as he walked down Wythe Avenue, Neptune’s main street. Sweet gum and white mulberry trees lined the sidewalk between graffiti-sprayed brick buildings. The words “Life is short. Why wait?” flashed across a sign atop a twenty-four hour chapel adjoining a motel.

Suddenly, his senses prickled in warning. He spun toward the alley on his left just as a figure separated from the shadows. Broad and hirsute, it topped his 6’3” frame by at least five inches. It peered down at him with a predatory expression in its yellow eyes.

*A werewolf. I should have known.*

They were a fact of life in Neptune, one of the charter cities in the government’s program to foster unity between humans and paranormal creatures. The groups maintained a fragile peace that hinged on one rule: during the day, it operated like any other town. But at night, it belonged to creatures like this.

He eyed the shifter. They got more aggressive this close to the full moon. In a lightning quick motion, Noah unsheathed the knife strapped to his inner forearm. Its silver blade glinted in the moonlight.

Still growling, the creature faded back into the shadows. Keeping the knife out, he crossed behind the chapel and headed to the designated field to wait. Ten minutes later, he was running out of patience when a hand gripped his shoulder.

In a move born from years of training, he spun, breaking the grip. His knife flickered, slicing through the silk shirt of his attacker and nicking the blond’s throat. Noah jumped back as several other men surged forward.

“Hold it!” Blood trickled between the blond man’s fingers as he touched his throat. “I see you finally learned how to use one of those, Noah.”

“Watching my back was the first thing I learned in prison, Joel. I never knew when someone would try shoving *another* knife in it.”

“Touché. Shall we get down to business?”

Noah nodded and stood. His brow arched when Joel summoned the five thickly-muscled men forward. “Friends of yours?”

“Security. You know how it is. If you’re legit, you have nothing to worry about. Show me the merchandise.”

The dagger slid into its sheath with a hiss. Noah unzipped the bag, revealing the weapon inside. He smirked when Joel whistled. “When we make the swap, I want sixty percent of the profit.”

“That was not our arrangement. They’re *my* clients. Thirty-five percent.”

“Forty-five or I walk.”

“Well, well. Looks like you grew some balls in prison. Forty. That’s my final offer.”

“Done. Who are the clients?”

“One is a rich geezer who wants to screw his relatives out of an inheritance by living forever. The other is an actress who wants to look younger so she can stop getting cast as the

mother in films.” Joel rolled his eyes. “They want at least three stars. Mature ones, if possible. Think you can handle that?” Challenge glinted in his gray eyes.

With deliberate casualness, Noah aimed the *Sonar 6000* at his former friend. He smirked when the shorter man flinched. “Yeah. This thing aims itself.”

“Good. Let’s go hunting.”

Noah hung back as the group tromped ahead. “Stardust,” he murmured before following. Two of the men stretched a thin silver net across the grass. It had a spider web design and a pair of hooks secured with a heavy-duty padlock. One of the other men withdrew a gun.

“Tranquilizers,” Joel explained. When Noah frowned, the blond chuckled. “I forgot; you’ve been out of the business awhile. The stars channel more energy this close to the full moon. They might fight us. The clients want the merchandise delivered by tomorrow morning so we don’t have much time.”

Noah nodded. He settled the gun over his shoulder, surreptitiously flicking on the safety. *What are the police waiting for, a signal in the sky? Joel’s signed confession?* Closing one eye, he focused on a particularly bright star and squeezed the trigger. The gun shook but nothing happened. He affected a puzzled look.

“You never could use these. The safety’s engaged.” Joel flicked a switch. A low hum filled the clearing as the *Sonar 6000* powered up. “Let me aim. You’re more likely to shoot one of us than a star.”

He tugged on the gun. Noah jerked away, accidentally squeezing the trigger. The rebounding energy knocked both men to the ground. Light exploded in the sky. Noah watched in horror as a star rushed toward Earth, glowing brighter as it neared. Seconds later, tremors shook the ground. Triumph glinted in Joel’s eyes.

“Bull’s eye.”

\* \* \* \*

When Noah pulled up to the Twilight Motel later Monday morning, it was almost two. He killed the engine on his motorcycle and dismounted, slinging the duffel bag over his shoulder.

The mission had officially gone to hell in a flaming hand basket.

Not only did Joel get away, but since the microphone in Noah’s shirt had malfunctioned, the police didn’t have enough evidence for a conviction. *What a colossal waste of time. I should have just beaten a confession out of him.*

Noah unlocked the door to his room and reached for the light switch. Nothing happened. Too late, he remembered he hadn’t paid the rent yet. This was the motel manager’s way of reminding him to pay up or do without. He crossed the stained carpet and grimaced when his boots crunched over a roach. He shed his shirt and started unbuckling his jeans as he stumbled into the bathroom.

Right now, all he wanted was to clean up, then fall into bed and forget tonight ever happened. The showerhead gurgled, then spat out a stream of icy water that quickly turned scalding. Noah ignored the pain as he thrust his head under the spray.

His mind returned to the fallen star. Joel had a dozen hunters tracking its energy trail. They would probably make a capture by dawn.

*And I will have another innocent life on my conscience.*

The knowledge weighed on Noah’s mind. After toweling off, he pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants and a black cotton T-shirt. On his way past the window, something in the motel building’s pool caught his attention. He looked closer and gasped.

A naked woman floated facedown in the water, long black hair spread around her. Instincts took over as he leapt onto the fire escape and rapidly descended the stairs. Water soaked all the outdoor furniture and chunks of concrete littered the ground.

*Something more than her must have fallen in the pool to cause that much damage.* He dove into the water and gasped. It was freezing. Grasping the woman around the waist, he pulled her to safety and stretched her body beside the pool.

Ignoring her nudity, he scanned her for injuries. She couldn't have been in the water long because her cuts were still fresh. Blood trickled from a gash on her forehead and she sported a black eye. He checked her arms and relaxed slightly when he didn't find the usual needle marks he saw on jumpers. *At least this isn't drug related.*

"Hey lady, can you hear me?" Grasping her wrist, he felt for a pulse. Sluggish, but it was there. He pinched her nose and blew air into her lungs. He started chest compressions, but she didn't respond. "Come on, fight!"

He lowered his mouth to continue CPR. The soft lips came alive beneath his as the woman sputtered. Her body jerked, and she rolled onto her side, expelling water from her lungs. Noah reached out to steady her. He blinked in surprise when she shrank away from his touch.

"I won't hurt you. Don't move. I'll go call an ambulance."

Thick lashes fluttered and hazel eyes pinned him before he could move. She had the largest pupils he had ever seen, like those sported by characters in anime cartoons. When she tried to sit up, he overrode the effort by placing a hand on her stomach.

With the immediate danger over, Noah suddenly became aware of the intimacy of their position. His eyes drifted down her body, lingering on the swells of her breasts and the dark areolas of her nipples, visible through the cottony curls plastered to her chest.

"Is this heaven?"

Her voice, husky and rich, rolled over his senses. It took a moment before the question registered. It surprised a laugh from him. Noah shook his head. "Far from it, sugar. This is Neptune."

"Oh. What constellation is that in?"

His blood froze. "What did you say?"

She touched her temple, drawing his attention to the ring glittering on her left hand. "Something hit me when I was leaning out the window. I must have fallen." Her expression morphed from confusion to terror as she stared at him.

"Where do you live?"

She pointed a trembling finger at the sky, cementing his suspicion: she was the star. His eyes closed. Of all the places she could have landed, why here? Should he contact the police? At least they would place her in protective custody. Then again, that was worth about as much as Confederate money these days. Noah knew from experience that Joel didn't mind spilling a little blood to get what he wanted.

"Where am I?"

"Earth. I guess you've heard of it?" he said drolly when she gasped. He got the feeling that she would have run if she'd had the strength. He purposely gentled his voice. "Don't worry; you're safe with me. What's your name?"

"Miranda."

Leaning forward, he captured a tear as it slid down her cheek. It shimmered on the tip of his finger and crystallized. *Amazing.* "My name is Noah. Whoa!" He caught her as she fainted. He scanned the area, realizing for the first time how exposed they were. "Come on, sugar. Let's get

you inside.”

He carried her up the fire escape to his room and settled her on the bed. Moonlight streamed over her body, highlighting her delicate features. Unbidden, a memory leapt forward, that of pale eyes begging him for help. With grim resolve, he focused.

Ten years ago, he failed to protect a star. He would not fail again. He would protect this one no matter what. His lips ghosted over hers.

“You’re safe with me. I promise.”

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