

LAURA KREITZER

PHANTOM UNIVERSE

BOOK ONE

SUMMER CHRONICLES



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Phantom Universe
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*Dedicated to Lisa Langdale.
Without you no one would ever see
my writing come to fruition.
This is for you, bb.*

Other books by Laura Kreitzer

Timeless Series

Shadow of the Sun

Soul Stalker

Abyss (March 31, 2011)

Fallen Legion (Fall 2011)

Halo of the Sun (Spring 2011)

Summer Chronicles

Phantom Universe

Forsaken Harbor (July, 01, 2011)

PHANTOM UNIVERSE

PROLOGUE

Doctor Mindy Waverly sprints up the stairs to her apartment near the University of Oxford. She constantly glances over her shoulder as terror bleeds into her every pore like an inferno of all seven hells synthesized. She knows it will happen this Sunday—the termination of the experiment. Overheard it, actually. And now she has to hide because they’ll kill to protect their secret. The same secret Mindy will desperately try to protect *against* them. Termination isn’t an option anymore; not after four years.

She slams her key into the door’s deadbolt and twists the knob frantically. The door has jammed so often that she knows to hammer her shoulder into it. When it flies open, the alarmed babysitter, Amy, jumps to her feet.

“Jesus, Mindy! You scared me half to death. Why are you—” Amy’s words are cut off by the frantic look in Mindy Waverly’s dilated eyes.

“Where’s Summer?” Her breath is short and her tone’s laced with panic.

Amy approaches her, uncertain. “She’s taking a nap. Is everything all right?” Her eyebrows crease in concern.

Mindy’s eyes are still wide in terror from overhearing the dreadful news, though relief washes over her in a cooling wave. *She’s okay!* “Wake her!” she insists. When Amy doesn’t move she shouts, “Now!”

Amy shoots down the hallway to little Summer’s bedroom like the proverbial wildfires of hell are on her heels. She doesn’t know why Mindy sounds and looks so panicked, but it rubs off on Amy as she shakes the sleeping child.

Mindy, on the other hand, becomes a frantic tornado through the house, sucking up what she needs and throwing back what she doesn’t. She shoves random clothes into suitcases, snatches precious jewelry out of her bedroom, and opens her safe to seize the money she has saved through the years. She also grabs Summer’s blanket and a few of her favorite books and stuffed animals. *They said Sunday. That will give me two days to run and hide before they realize we’re gone*, she rationalizes. Amy returns with Summer who is sleepy-eyed and snuggled into Amy’s shoulder. Before the babysitter understands what’s happening, she’s standing alone in the Waverly’s apartment with her mouth ajar in the aftermath of the storm that is Mindy Waverly.

Mindy's long, brown hair twists wildly as she speeds away, the windows down to help calm her strained nerves. Summer, oblivious, giggles at her mum's peculiar haste, but is excited to be leaving the house to go on some adventure. It isn't like her mum to take her out during the day. But what Summer doesn't know is that her life's in danger and her mother's vigor is to save and protect her.

How can they even flirt with the idea of termination? Mindy wonders as she speeds south towards Portsmouth where she has friends they can stay with for the night while she tries to figure out what she'll do. *She's just a child.* Mindy glances in the rearview to see Summer's huge smile, one of her front teeth loose and crooked. *An innocent.*

As they drive along the coast, Summer sings out gleefully, unaware of the seriousness of the situation. She sings the *Happy Birthday* song over and over as she recalls her fourth birthday party the previous week. She makes her stuffed bunny dance on her lap as the scent of the ocean fills the car the closer they drive to the water—warm and inviting. It's been so long since she's seen the ocean and remembers the salty feel of the water along her skin. She loves it, but her belly rumbles. Hunger starts to show its ugly face and the singing and ocean view loses its luster.

"Mummy, I'm hungry!" Summer whines.

Mindy tries to keep the panic from her voice so she won't scare Summer. "Sweetie, can it wait?" she asks and glances in the rearview mirror, silently cursing herself for not throwing some snacks in her purse. It isn't like her to be so careless of Summer's needs.

"Please?" Summer almost cries. She learned how to manipulate her mum at a young age, and polite manners always make Mindy crumple. Even today, when they are running for their lives, the added "please" breaks her.

"Okay sweetie, but we have to make it quick." Mindy pulls into a small bistro's parking lot near a shipyard.

On the veranda, Mindy shoots furtive glances in every direction as she bites her nails, unable to eat. Summer, on the other hand, has the freshest fish and chips ever and pats her stomach contentedly. This is also strange—her mother normally doesn't let her eat such greasy food. They are quick to pay and exit the small bistro. Mindy holds her hand as the salty air assaults their noses on the way to the small black car. A man with oily, charcoal-black hair stops them on their way in an attempt to sell some freshly cut fish.

"Fifty percent off for you, pretty lady," he entices, his black, beady eyes glowing.

Mindy, distracted, looks up and says, "What?" Her voice is startled and she becomes suspicious as she takes in his scarred face. She pushes Summer behind her.

The man repeats what he said with a wink, and in that small space of time,

the few seconds that the wink draws Mindy's attention away from Summer, everything changes.

"No thanks," she says and reaches behind her to take Summer's hand again, but she's gone. She looks back at the man but he's nowhere in sight, like a giant hook in the sky came down and yanked him into the air. The fish market is mysteriously empty of people. Her heart picks up pace as she circles around and around in fear at the vacant scene. The world spins but is devoid of Summer. The afternoon's air fills with Mindy's cries and screams of desperation, each sound tearing and ripping from her throat. But Summer is nowhere that she can see.

Realization seeps into her like a fast-acting poison. *They found her—the Secret Clock Society*. And there is no competing with them. They are law.

That isn't going to stop Mindy, though. Her blue eyes narrow as she wipes the tears away. *Termination isn't an option. It's war.*

*He who does not understand your silence
will probably not understand your words.*

Elbert Hubbard

PART ONE

CONQUERED

1

SURVIVAL

15 YEARS OLD

Summer Waverly's observant. She's so quiet that most people pass her by with no notice whatsoever. There isn't a single crew member of the *Cosmos* that isn't under her watchful eagle-eye. It's not that any of this information is useful to her—quite the opposite, really. Who honestly cares about Phil's chip-stealing middle-of-the-night-binges, or Peter's habit of wearing his underwear for a week straight? This isn't the reason she surveys the area like a sentry; it's because at any moment of any day she might be the target of the whip.

This particular whip has personality. Its leather, smooth and aged, sings with glee as it cracks through the air with a *thwack* right before it slices into the depths of her skin and rips the very essence of her soul. It's unnatural how it knows exactly where to attack next. There isn't an inch of unscarred skin on her back. This is why she watches. But there is one thing that can stop the whip's excited leather from breaking her. Silence.

Summer hasn't spoken a single word in almost eleven years. As she slaves away on the *Cosmos*, she scrutinizes the free men working diligently. Jealousy consumed her once, but after all these years of slavery she's given up on freedom. It's just not in the cards for her. So she watches them and gains knowledge by eavesdropping on their conversations. Now it's all about survival on the rough seas as the pirates attack and pillage one ship at a time.

2

STORM

15 YEARS OLD

The Cosmos gently rocks in the raging seas as a flash of blinding light illuminates the dark, dingy kitchen cabin. The dishes rattle as thunder roars like a hungry beast through the electrically charged air. Summer hides under the prep table instead of cooking dinner for the entire crew like she's supposed to be doing. This type of behavior's not normal—unless it's storming. Landon, her only friend and ally, boils the water for rice then places rolls in the oven. They know if dinner isn't served at exactly nine that evening they will be punished. And the whip is to be avoided at all costs.

"Ducky, ye all right?" Landon asks distractedly in his Scottish accent before dumping chicken in a skillet.

She taps twice from underneath the prep table where she hides. One tap for yes, two taps for no. It's their signature language. Before he taught her to read and write, he was great at playing twenty questions.

Summer's silence never falters. Along with her voice, she also left a part of herself back on land. In eleven years, she has yet to place a single toe on solid ground—Captain's orders. She's adjusted to being a slave on the Cosmos, the massive ship she calls home. Sometimes she still loses her breath when the reality hits her, but for the most part she's accepted her life here.

"Ye can't be scared of storms forever," Landon notes.

Two taps and a *I know you're right and I'm being irrational, but it doesn't change a thing* sigh. He chuckles, understanding.

She's considered talking to Landon before—he's a slave on the ship too—but the fear of her spoken voice is so deeply rooted that she almost has a panic attack when she tries. He's always been sympathetic and never pressures her to speak, which is one of the things she likes about him so much.

A flash of lightning, another rolling boom of thunder, and she searches around frantically—irrationally—for Jarvis, once a crew member on the Cos-

mos. There was a time when storms didn't scare her. In the past, when it rained, she would run to the upper deck of the ship to dance in the delightful feeling of water tumbling down her abused skin. Dark, ominous clouds with bright blue lightning bringing the world to a massive, windy chaos—storms once fascinated her like that.

Not anymore. Jarvis made sure to ruin that. *Not that the storm helped either.*

“Ye know I'm not as good at makin' chicken as ye are. Captain's gunna know.” Landon adds butter and smoke rises into the air with a sizzling noise. “I can't remember how this goes, Ducky. Help me out. Two tablespoons garlic and one cup Italian dressing? Or was it the other way around?” He knows she takes pride in her cooking and would be offended if he did it wrong.

A little screech erupts from under the prep table as her head pokes up. There's a smear of dirt under one of her brilliant blue eyes, and her blonde hair falls in greasy tendrils around her too-thin face. A light smattering of freckles covers her cheeks from too many days spent scrubbing the upper deck, exposed to the elements. Landon's coffee-brown eyes meet hers from under a mop of dark blonde hair and he smiles. He's not as tall as most of the crew members, but he's much taller than she is. He holds the garlic powder over the measuring cup and pours it in. “This sure is a lot of garlic,” he remarks with a smirk.

What is he up to? she wonders, jumps to her feet, and dashes toward him like he's about to pull the pin from a grenade. The ship rocks in the chaotic seas and she tumbles into Landon. Her ragged dress (rags, really) catches on a hook and rips. It's just another hole to add to the collection. He holds her at arm's length and searches her eyes for the alarm and panic he expects any second, but she composes herself quickly. He beams with pride at her confidence and lets her go. Summer snatches the measuring cup and the garlic powder from his hands with a slight smirk. Her knuckles rap twice on the counter as she shakes her head, serious now. She's about to pour the garlic back into the container until she realizes it's empty. He tricked her. She purses her lips at him and he chuckles playfully.

You think you're funny, do you? Summer puts a hand on her hip and gives him her best glare—which isn't very menacing.

He nods like he can read her mind. Sometimes she thinks he can.

She may not speak, but they have a surprisingly close relationship. They have ways of communicating that no one else on board understands. Landon can read Summer like the words are written across her forehead, and she trusts him to keep them both safe. Being a female on a ship of thieves is dangerous—especially when she's the only girl on the whole ship.

“It was way too easy,” he says with a laugh. “There's nothing to fear here; this is our space, Ducky.” He's always reassuring her, but he doesn't hold it against her. It's just another reason why she likes him.

Her shoulders slump in defeat and Landon triumphs over another battle

won. Four years ago he joined her on the *Cosmos* as a slave. It took months for them to get into a rhythm, but only minutes to fully understand each other. Plus, he saved her from her worst fear—there isn't anything she won't do for him. She would probably even speak for him if he asks her to, but he doesn't. He knows it will only make her have an anxiety attack.

She reaches for Landon's arm to catch his attention and points at the skillet. He places his elbow on the counter and leans in to watch. The way he looks at her is always surprising to Summer. It's always in wonder or fascination. In silence, she shows him exactly how she expects the chicken to be cooked. Her hand gestures and questioning glances amuse him so he just grins at her animated moves, nodding when necessary.

She stabs a fork into the chicken to check tenderness and turns to face him with a raised eyebrow, the gesture asking, *Are you paying attention?* Landon nods with much enthusiasm as she flips the chicken over in the skillet and adds more Italian dressing. Without glancing up, she points toward the bottle of honey. He immediately hands it over. She squeezes the bottle, dumping it all over the chicken and flips the piece over and over, making sure she covers all sides.

When the chicken is done cooking, she wraps it in foil to keep warm and stares up at Landon again. Her expression is triumphant and his amused.

"Rub it in—you're better than me at cookin' and I know it!" He wraps a sturdy arm around her shoulders and gives a tight squeeze.

A clap of thunder booms overhead and Summer slips from his grip like a greased pig and dives underneath the prep table again, shaking. She still hasn't forgiven the storm for its traitorous actions four years ago.

Landon reaches down and holds her quivering hand. "The storm will pass and I'll still be here," he says, suppressing a sigh. "Ye can't let that troll ruin your life. It's just not like ye to let him."

She grips his hand with more strength than someone her size should have before she lets go and clicks her tongue once. Landon doesn't hold back his sigh this time because when she clicks her tongue it's meant as a sarcastic remark. Once she wrote on a piece of paper "If you can't see, I'm rolling my eyes" and then she clicked her tongue at him. He shakes his head and continues to make the dinner for the crew. It's progress that she came out for even a few minutes. She hopes the storm passes before nine so they can both serve dinner. It's best if questions aren't asked and weaknesses aren't shown. Summer knows that you won't survive long if you're weak, and she is anything but. Still, she must keep up her image of stamina, endurance, and show no fear. She's proven herself on this ship, but mistakes can be major setbacks in the slave-crew relationship. Even minor sickness is considered weak.

Summer only needs thirty minutes; she hopes the storm passes by then.