

LAURA KREITZER

PHANTOM UNIVERSE

BOOK ONE

SUMMER CHRONICLES



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Phantom Universe
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PRAISE FOR PHANTOM UNIVERSE

“I really got wrapped up into Summer’s story. I could not believe how much her back-story tugged at my heartstrings.” – Cici’s Theories

“Laura truly brought Summer’s world to life with her very descriptive writing and, quite literally, page-turning adventure.” – Cesia Cuono, author of *Elemental Reality*

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“Laura Kreitzer’s words and descriptions are amazingly vivid, keeping me glued to the page in a feverous attempt to learn more. You could almost smell the brine, hear the creaking of the ship, feel the tension ...” – Jennifer Murgia, author of *Angel Star*

“I love Laura Kreitzer’s passionate and evocative writing style, her creativity and her exceptional ability to draw very real, interesting characters.” – Tahlia Newland, author of *Lethal Inheritance*

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“Once again, Laura writes a captivating and complex story. Her characters are very real and complex.” – PonyTail’s Reviews

“One of the greatest things about this series is the casual narrative style, which makes the novel feel very authentic and personal.” – The Bookish Type

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TIMELESS SERIES

Shadow of the Sun

Soul Stalker

Abyss (March 31, 2011)

Fallen Legion (Fall 2011)

Halo of the Sun (Spring 2012)

SUMMER CHRONICLES

Phantom Universe

Forsaken Harbor (July 01, 2011)

PHANTOM UNIVERSE

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

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 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 *from* 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 with 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 is 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 mirror 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 warm, inviting scent of the ocean fills the car the closer they drive to the water. It's been so long since she's seen the ocean and she 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 peeks 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 have 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 as they tear and rip from her throat in desperation. 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 is tossed by the raging sea 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 looks around

frantically—irrationally—for Jarvis, once a crew member on the *Cosmos*. 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 gonna 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 gaunt 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 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 sea 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 smile. 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 asked 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.

3

SALVATION

12 YEARS OLD

The air is so ungodly hot Hades himself finds the weather comfortable to down-right pleasant. This is how it's been for a month as the *Cosmos* cruises through the Indian Ocean while the crew scours ships and steals their merchandise like sweet-tooth trick-or-treaters after the biggest, most divine piece of melt-in-your-mouth chocolate. There isn't a cloud in the too-blue sky, but it makes Summer's skin burn and blister under its insatiable inferno.

Today there are two crew members who tease her as she cleans the dirt away from the top deck. One of them has only just arrived on the boat, but is evidently close friends with the other crew member, Karl. She worries because they are being more touchy-feely than she's used to. She has seen many slaves beaten and raped in the past and doesn't want to be one of them. Captain Travis kicks those types of men off his ship to protect his property—which is exactly what she is—but that doesn't mean incidents like rape don't happen when he's not around.

There are no other women left on the ship; her young age of twelve never stops them from their obscene and lewd advances. Not surprisingly, the older she gets the more they show interest. Summer is alone on this ship, no matter how many crew members live there. No one has lasted as long as she has, and her lack of communication skills automatically put her in the *Don't Even Bother With* pile, therefore she's been friendless for as long as she can remember.

The new crew member, Jarvis, could potentially be a man who will rape her regardless of any warning from the Captain. There is just something off about him that puts Summer on her guard immediately. Between his eagle-like eyes and the smug grin permanently etched into this pointed and angled face, lies something sinister. She's seen more repugnant, vicious, vile, immoral men than she cares to admit. She prefers to not think about them at all. Regardless, she has never felt anything like this before. It's like he's dead inside—cold, stiff, and empty. Like he has no soul.

"Hey sweetheart," Jarvis sneers at Karl like he's so clever for that line. Karl is already on her list of *Least Favorite Crew Members*, and it seems that Jarvis

will soon be joining it. “I’ve been awfully lonely these past few weeks. Could really use some company in my bed.” His fingers trail in her hair and she jerks away in disgust.

What? Don’t the fleas keep you company? she internally mocks, knowing she’ll never say it aloud. She can only imagine the punishment for that insult.

“I heard she dun’ speak at all.” Karl elbows Jarvis, though Summer wishes he would have aimed higher and hit Jarvis’s stupid, shiny bald head.

“Really? Nothin’?” He smiles like a mad scientist who’s just had a brilliant idea, and lets the decay of his teeth show. His breath is so gag-worthy that she almost loses her breakfast all over his dirty, old boots. Though, honestly, she doesn’t know if he would even notice with how grimy they already are.

His black eyes seem to lick across her skin as he examines her, his too-shiny head blinding her as the sun glares angrily back. His face is all rough and hard angles—not in a handsome way, but in a he-looks-like-he-eats-babies-for-breakfast kind of way. He winks at her and her eyes snap down to the ground so she won’t have to stare into his emotionless eyes.

Summer shudders with the thought of them doing the awful things to her she has nightmares about. She’s always hopelessly dreaming for salvation that she knows will never come. *Maybe today will be the day*, she daydreams.

The men chuckle as they watch her, their gazes like slimy, foul caresses across the back of her neck.

Or maybe not. She sighs internally, trying her best to ignore them. She continues to scrub the lower deck like it will wash their filthy minds away. Maybe add some Comet to Jarvis’s mouth while she’s at it, though she’s not sure it’ll do the trick. *Add a bottle of bleach*, she thinks disgustedly. *No, not even that will be enough.*

“Ya know Karl, she’d be perfect. No screamin’.”

Jarvis and Karl exchange a knowing—disquieting—look. Summer, trying her best to fold into herself and become invisible, subtly moves farther away from them. In the distance she sees storm clouds rolling in and can’t wait to wash the sweat and grime from the long day off of her skin. Maybe a wave will crash over the side and take Karl and Jarvis with it. She sends a silent prayer to the sea gods.

It’s been one of those days spent partially in the sun and partially cleaning the crew’s bathroom. And the men don’t aim to please. The thought of water cleansing the day away is the *only* thing she has to look forward to. She doesn’t know if she should laugh or weep at how pathetic that is.

Jarvis slides down to the ground and leans toward her. “I’ve been watchin’ ya, by the way. From afar.”

She trembles and hastily moves away to clean somewhere else, not caring how obvious it is this time. The thought of him watching—noticing—her when she didn’t know herself makes her stomach want to heave. Actually, she’s pretty sure everything about this man makes her want to lose her stomach acid—just

like some creepy alien Aaron, another crew member, once told her about. She still doesn't believe him, but the imagery works for this situation.

Jarvis follows her, his butt sliding through the cleaning product she leaves behind. "Ev'ry year ya get prettier and ya look old 'nough now." His fingers lift a ruffled scrap of her clothes with interest. She freezes and catches his expression, clearly saying his interests lie in ripping it off. "How 'bout we have some fun? Whad'ya say?"

Summer jerks free, part of her rags rip under his grip, and moves away to scrub farther down the lower deck. Maybe if she ignores them they'll go away. Maybe. Pouring Comet in his mouth begins to seem more and more like a feasible—and satisfying—idea. *His creepy eyes need a good scrubbing too, don't forget them*, she adds silently.

"She dun' speak, stupid!" Karl says loftily and hits him upside his dim, slick-with-sweat naked head. Summer bets Karl doesn't even know what "loftily" means—probably thinks it has something to do with faeries and pixie dust. More creatures Aaron told her about that she still doesn't believe are real.

Thunder booms above them as droplets of water splash against Summer's face. It's the most refreshing thing she's felt in days, though Karl and Jarvis are ruining her favorite thing. Her only *thing*.

"Dibs," Jarvis claims pompously and fist-bumps Karl. "Now get the hell out of here. We don't need no audience."

Summer is already on her feet and running towards the doors that lead below deck and to her room—where she can lock the door and hide away. Lightning fills the sky in a show of magnificent power and beauty and then the thunder rumbles out a joyous cry.

"Might wanna get off yer lazy ass and catch her. I bet she's a slippery one," Karl says through his chortling. All jokes aside, she wishes the Comet really was within her reach—they both need an unnatural amount of it in their pants. It's too late to do anything, though. All she can do now is run.

Rain starts to pour down on them as Summer slides to the door, her heart pounding and sapphire eyes dilating in fear. In a fit of trembling panic, her fingers clasp the handle but slip because she's already soaked with the storm's pitiless tears. Lightning flashes again and this time it's full of menacing splendor, the thunder rolling in seconds later with a clamorous laugh. Spluttering steps pound behind her and she shakes so fiercely she's unable to grip the door to open it.

She loses her only hope of escape when arms encircle her waist and yank her backward so forcefully it knocks the breath out of her. They land on the deck and she fights Jarvis by clawing and striking over and over to no avail. Lightning strikes again, and all the luster and radiance the electrical blue glow used to hold for Summer vanishes. The accompanying thunder is a booming, detached entity witnessing it all. She feels betrayed by the storm, nothing but a worthless

bystander in the sky. Jarvis seizes her wrists and, with one hand, holds her arms behind her back. He's too strong for her to fight.

"You can't get 'way that easily," he declares, his toothpaste-lacking breath greedy on her neck as he puts his weight on her. Her face is pushed into the soaked deck as his free hand travels under her tattered clothes and begins to trail across her skin with perverse abandon.

Summer whimpers and struggles in his grasp as tears trail down her freckled cheeks, but it's no use—she's trapped. Each stroke of his hand is like sandpaper, rough and irritating to her skin. The feel of him touching her turns her stomach sour, like curdled milk. She wants to yell out, but knows it will cause more trouble than staying quiet. Her silence has kept her alive in the past, and this time is no different. If she yells he might knock her out, and though she doesn't want to witness or feel what he's about to do to her, she doesn't want to be unconscious either. Or he might kill her. She doesn't have the best life, but she's still willing to fight for it; no matter how pathetic it is, she's not about to give in.

Jarvis's hand leaves her skin and sweet relief floods her. But then she hears the sound of a belt buckle clink against the ground and the blood-chilling sound of his pants being unzipped. Absolute terror crashes into her with the momentum of an asteroid falling from space. She shakes uncontrollably and her breathing becomes so shallow her vision fades in and out. She thinks back to the Comet and knows when this is all over she'll be scrubbing her body with it. Will the oily, body odor of Jarvis ever be rinsed from her nose? Vomiting might not be an option anymore—bile rises into her throat, burning and coating her mouth.

Wind swirls around them, and the once creamy, velvet tendrils of the breeze are now flustered and full of malignant need. Sinister, somehow, like Jarvis, who taints the very air with his repugnant perversity. He lifts the back of her rags to claim her. The storm above, even in its wild fury, remains passive like an unjust warden with all the authority of lightning but settles for the intimidation of thunder. She thought her life was awful before, but now, in this second, as his bare skin sickeningly touches hers, she realizes she is so unbelievably wrong. This is as low as a person can get. In this horrifically foul moment of utter torment, Summer sobs loudly. The loudest in eight years.

"What the—" she hears right before she slides across the soaked deck forcefully. Her head slams into the side of the deck and she gasps. She's not quite sure what game he's playing, or what to think. Then she sees a figure in the rain. *Did he do this?* She shakes her head. *Would you rather have a hurt head or lose the only virtue you have left? Hurt head, hands down.*

Rain drenches her as she stares through the large water-droplets at a blonde-haired boy with such dark, deep eyes. The boy straddles Jarvis whose arms are crossed to cover his face to ward off the pummeling by the blonde. Even in the heat of the moment, she seriously considers finding the Comet. Anything

to scrape the filth of Jarvis from her every pore. She can't help but relive him touching her. When blood joins the puddles of water and gathers around them like a crimson river, she's strangely satisfied. The boy suddenly stands and kicks Jarvis in the ribs three times with swift, concise hits. Though she's grateful for the blonde rescuing her, she's not sure who to fear now.

Summer shivers as she curls into a small ball, afraid of what this boy will do to her when he's done hurting—or killing—Jarvis. One fear just replaces the other. The boy takes a couple of long strides to her and drops to one knee. He holds his hand out, but this startles her even more and she lurches away. *Don't hurt me*, she tries to beg with her eyes. *Maybe he came here to kill me and Jarvis was just in the way*, she thinks irrationally. *Or maybe he wants to take me before Jarvis—this could just be a play for possession.*

The boy hesitates when he notices her reaction, his eyes flashing back and forth in an attempt to read her. "I won't harm ye," he says so softly his voice might as well have been a big, comfy pillow. "I'm Landon. Who're ye?"

Summer's sapphire eyes glance over her folded arms to look into those dark eyes—kind eyes, she realizes—and reaches for his extended hand. Regardless of her need to speak to him, to give her name, she stays silent; still afraid to utter a single syllable. He doesn't act like he notices the absence of her voice as his warm fingers enclose over her hand to pull her to her feet.

"I'm new on the Cosmos," Landon informs. She jerks her hand from his; she has a no touching policy when it comes to the crew. "I'm not a crew member," he says quickly, "I'm like ye. The captain told me where to find ye—said ye'd find me quarters to sleep in and teach me the ropes."

He holds his hand out again and she slowly takes it, uncertain. It's been so long since she's had any kind of human contact she isn't quite sure how she feels. But she's pretty sure it's a pleasant sensation and that if her stomach wasn't still fermenting from Jarvis's oily fingers touching her, she'd be full of fluttering excitement.

"Let's get ye cleaned up, Ducky, before ye float away in this storm," he says charmingly in an accent she'd never heard before.

When she doesn't say anything, thoroughly frozen in shock, he turns serious. "Aye, I thought it'd be this way. He won't hurt ye anymore." To emphasize his words, Jarvis groans loudly and painfully to Summer's satisfaction. "Shall I lead the way? I must admit we'll probably get hopelessly lost."

Summer snaps from her daze and shakes her head.

As they walk to the door leading to the lower levels, she notices the unyielding ruthlessness of the storm; the crashing waves, the bitter sky kissing the water on the horizon, the keening laments of the sharp, cutting wind, and the relentless liquid deliverance of its somber showers. She'll never forgive the audacity of the storm's neglect.

They descend into the lower levels of the ship and take several turns in cramped hallways that stink of rust. Some spots on the ceiling leak water from rusted holes. She's not sure if she should show him where she sleeps, but for some reason she feels like if she can't trust someone like him, then who can she trust? Honestly? She longs for a human connection—any kind of human connection that doesn't include a whip or torture—so extremely that she's willing to take a risk. They stop in front of her door. She pulls from under her rags a long, small chain that is wrapped around her neck. She lifts it over her head, palms the key that dangles at the end of it, and offers it to Landon who hesitantly takes it. She's too shaky to try and coordinate actually putting the key in the lock.

After he unlocks her door, they both enter and she immediately searches for something warm and dry to wear. In the air conditioning Summer's wet clothes quickly turn so cold her teeth start chattering. She comes across a long, white T-shirt she's been saving for . . . well, she isn't sure why. But this seems like an occasion if there ever was one. Landon turns to give her privacy as she quickly tosses her torn and dirty clothing to the floor and replaces it with the nicest thing she owns. She isn't used to someone being so polite to her, or to someone even caring if she's uncomfortable or not. But this boy . . . she isn't certain about him. Saving her, giving her privacy . . . What's next? Caring? It isn't feasible.

She sits on the edge of the bed and waits for him to turn back around. But he doesn't. So she leans back and raps once on the wall her bed is pushed up against. He jumps slightly.

"Are ye . . . dressed?" he asks tentatively.

She knocks once against the wall again, finding his hesitation endearing.

So, so slowly he turns around until he takes her in and blows out a relieved breath. "Are ye okay?" he asks. He seems cautious as he takes deliberate steps towards her. "He didn't . . . did he?" His expression is so crestfallen that she can't look at him. "I mean . . ." he trails off, his voice slightly choked. "That bastard!"

With the weight of years of torture, pain, and misery heavy on her shoulders, Summer beings to cry, shoulder-shaking, hiccup-inducing, choke-on-your-own-tears kind of cry. Landon, no longer cautious, rushes towards her and wraps his arms around her too-tiny frame. For a moment she is stiff in his embrace, but soon discovers the salvation she thought she'd never find. She holds back the tears after a few minutes of letting them go. She's already shown too much weakness. Landon finally backs off and perches at the end of the bed, a presence about him like the calming waters of a lake in the rough seas of the ocean.

"What's yer name?" he asks as he rubs the light, blonde stubble on his chin.

Several minutes tick on by as she stares at him with pleading eyes, hoping he'll understand. It's been eight years—she doesn't know if she'll ever be ready.

"Do ye speak at all?" He laughs, not being serious.

She shakes her head vigorously and knocks twice on the wall behind her.

His laughter is quickly cut off. “Wait . . . ye really don’t speak?”

She repeats the double knock and head shake.

Landon leans back on her bed so they are both up against the wall. “Well. That’ll be a change. My sister speaks non-stop.” His smile slowly fades and a frown replaces it. She knows what he’s thinking—he’ll never see his sister, or the rest of his family, again. She wishes she could reassure him, but that isn’t the case. Still, she gently takes his hand in hers and just holds it. She sucks in a shuttering breath at the feeling. A person, a real, live person is holding her hand and is asking nothing of her. She considers never letting go.

4

INTRUDERS

15 YEARS OLD

The storm passes and the ship quiets to more lethargic undulations. Dinner is served with cheers tonight as the crew celebrates their newest pirating conquest. Right now the ship is literally swimming in small boating equipment: water skis (which blows Summer's mind), floats, tubes, bumper guards, life jackets, fish finders, among other larger, more expensive things that she doesn't know the names of. Captain Travis is so thrilled with his crew that he breaks out the good beer. It's thicker and creamier than what's normally served. Apparently this stolen load is better than the one full of flat screen TVs from Japan.

As Landon and Summer dump food onto each of their plates, the crew continues to toast to weird and random things. She's pretty sure they are getting drunk and wonders if beer makes everyone this incredibly cheerful.

Phil holds his beer high in the air. "To Peter's new medication!"

They all shout and cheer and clink their glasses together as someone shouts, "I can actually light up without fear of blowing the ship up!"

"Aye, Aye!" they all shout with laughter. Even Peter joins in.

Aaron, her favorite crew member, stops her to tell her how delicious the chicken is. She points at Landon to give him credit while at the same time Dale puts him in a headlock and rubs his fist in Aaron's flaming red hair.

"Quit flirting, ya wanker!" Dale teases, his brown eyes shining with mirth.

Aaron's freckled face turns the color of his hair and the whole crew bursts into laughter. They begin to make kissing faces, smacking their lips, and moaning with too much creativity. A few of them turn around, wrap their arms around themselves, and pretend to be kissing someone. Peter and Phil act like they are kissing each other with their hands over their mouths. Karl, refusing to join the fun, remains emotionless with his arms folded and green eyes glaring at a spot on the table. He's still bitter about Jarvis being kicked off the ship and blames it

on Summer. He makes sure to tell her this often, and a few times he's even hit her for no reason. Landon found out when she showed up outside his door with a bruised face and black eye. Landon's reluctant to leave her side even though she reassures him she's fine.

Embarrassed by the crew's reactions, Summer backs away from the table and seeks Landon. He's grinning from ear-to-ear as he holds the kitchen door open. They can hear Captain Travis trying to calm the rambunctious crew, but his deep laugh slips through and joins in. The flimsy door vacillates behind them until it settles shut. Landon hops up on the prep table and immediately starts making fun of the crew members.

"All hail, I be Karl, kin' o' punishin' myself," he jokes and tucks on, "Wish I could help with that."

Summer giggles—like actual giggles with sound and everything. Even she's surprised. Landon can't help but beam proudly at her, his face lighting up. He's been working diligently to help her learn to read and write . . . and maybe, hopefully, one day speak. He even tells her she's the fastest learner he's ever seen. Not that he's ever taught anyone else how to read and write. She is just so ready to try and decipher the last bit of her destroyed journal, which she keeps hidden, and so she can finally fill out the pages of her new one with actual words.

"Just stole a boat load o' goods but still canna manage t' shave me beard!" Landon continues, making fun of the Captain and his ridiculous beard.

In the background they can hear the men clink their glasses together for another toast. It reminds her that she wants to ask Landon a question. She pulls her small notepad and pen from a drawer in the kitchen and begins to scribble down her question. She's still kind of slow at writing, but she's reading huge chapter books now. The most recent is a romance novel that makes her blush.

Does beer make you happy? the paper reads.

He grins, his dark eyes full of delight. "Aye! Ye bet yer arse 't does!"

She lightly punches him and gives him the Be Serious look that he knows so well. He raises his hands in concession.

"Aye, it can make ye happy. It can also make ye sick or angry or sad. Why?" She shrugs and he shakes his head at her. "Hey, ye can't just keep stuff in, Ducky. Ye got away with it before, but now ye know how to write." He folds his arms and stares down at her; she knows he'll wait for her answer all night if he has to.

She quickly scribbles on the paper again. *Can I try it?*

His dark eyes go wide when he reads her question. "Wait, ye want to try beer?" His expression seems to be stuck between concern and amusement.

Summer nods firmly, but when he doesn't say anything she raises her eyebrows in question.

"Ye ain't gunna like it," he says, his lips forming a straight line. "But if yer curious, I guess it won't hurt."

She gives him a small smile and there's no need for her to say "Thank you," because he already knows she's thankful for everything he does for her.

He hops off the prep table and wraps his arm around her shoulders in what she calls the Sideways Hug. He's only about five feet, eight inches, but that's still four inches taller than Summer. "Ye can tell me anything, but ye know that already, don't ye Ducky?"

She wraps her arms around his waist and holds him close. She hears him sigh before he wraps his arms around her too. There are so many things she wants to say to him, but she's never had the courage to do it. He would never punish her for speaking, but it causes her such intense anxiety that words refuse to form.

He gives her one last squeeze before heading to the over-sized fridge.

A few years ago Landon convinced Captain Travis to provide him with books to teach her how to read and write. Apparently, slave owners don't want their slaves educated, so Landon was surprised when boxes began to show up outside his door weekly with different supplies and books. One day he came across a psychology book and found the disorder associated with Summer's muteness. He researched it extensively, including techniques to help her speak again. He finally came to her with his findings and has been working with her ever since. But the number one, most important thing about her disorder is that pressure to make her speak will only bring anxiety. She was so impressed by it all she agreed to let him work with her on it. Landon talks with her constantly, even when she's not receptive at all. Summer knows she's blessed to have such a wonderful person in her life and wishes she could do more for him in exchange.

"Al'right! Here it is."

He slams a mug of beer on the table and foam dribbles over the side. It looks like liquid honey and her mouth waters at the thought of it. She gingerly picks up the mug with both hands and takes a sip. Her face puckers immediately at the bitter taste. Just in case she got a bad sip, she tries it one more time with the same result. Well, that isn't what she expects. She carefully places it back on the prep table before chancing a glance at Landon.

His fist is pressed against his mouth in an attempt to not laugh at her. She gives him a big eye roll and he can't help but chuckle.

"Not what ye were expectin', ay?" he asks through his amusement.

She shakes her head. *Why do they make it look like honey, but have it taste so bitter?* she wonders—just another mystery of many for her. She snatches up the notepad and he waits patiently. The notepad is still new to her; she's not used to such freedom with answers. She's yet to decide if she thinks this is the greatest thing to ever happen to her, or if she should forget how to write.

How do you know about beer? And how do you know there aren't really aliens, vampires, faeries, and pixies? She rereads her two questions, hoping she formed them right. Then she adds, *I'm pretty sure you can't see them because of their magic glamour.*

She slides the notepad across the prep table and Landon picks it up.

He snorts loudly then has a coughing fit. “Ducky, not this again!”

She shrugs, waiting for his answers. You see, before Landon joined the Cosmos, Dale and Aaron would tell Summer of these creatures. Sometimes she had gotten so wrapped up in their stories that she would stop cleaning. Many of these creatures fascinate her, and she even has dreams about them. Aliens and faeries she finds the most intriguing. She didn’t believe at first, but after reading some of the books Landon’s given her she can’t help but assume that these creatures are real—much to Landon’s chagrin. When she was first learning how to write, she brought up faeries and Landon thought she was joking. She wasn’t and that only made him laugh even harder. He’s been trying to convince her ever since that the creatures are fictional, and that Aaron and Dale were having fun with her lack of knowledge.

“They’re fictional characters, Ducky. They aren’t real.” He pauses, looks her over carefully, and then sighs. “Ye win. But one of these days ye’ll realize I’m right.” She stabs the word “glamour” with her finger.

“I don’t even know where ye got that word.”

She grins widely and writes, *A book.*

“Of course!” His hands fly into the air. “What have I done?”

The both laugh.

“Actually,” he says suddenly, perking up. “I always thought ye looked like a little faerie.”

She puts a hand on her hip and rolls her eyes. *Don’t be silly*, her body language conveys.

“I’m pretty sure ye are a faerie now that I think about it! First, there was that one time I found a bunch of glitter under yer bunk.”

Her lips are between a scowl and grin, twitching like she’s trying not to do both, and her sapphire eyes glare at him humorously. He can’t help but laugh, though she really is trying to put on a Serious Face. She flippantly punches him in the arm again.

“I swear it wasn’t me!” He raises his hands in the air in a Don’t Shoot Me gesture.

She reaches for the notepad and writes, *You had glitter on your face the next morning.*

His face goes slack, surprised he’s been caught—not red handed, but sparkle-faced. “Fine, Ducky. Ye caught me. But then there are these pointy ears!” He gently clamps his fingers at the tips of her ears. She shakes him off as he beams down at her. “And don’t forget the tiny nose. What the hell is up with that? It’s unnaturally button-sized. Definite fae material.”

She bites her bottom lip, thoroughly embarrassed because he’s making fun of her. Her face even flushes into a soft rose color. Only he could fluster her so

meticulously. Landon's not like anyone she's ever met; he makes her have all these emotions she never knew existed. Or she forgot about them. She's certain she loves him, but when she reads romance books she can't relate to the romance part. He's not romance . . . he's salvation. Her protector and best friend. After four years, she'd be honored to call him her brother.

Cheers come from the dining room and she knows that they'll all be piss drunk tonight. They'll probably have to help a few of them to their rooms, though she's versed in Landon Reasoning—he'll want to play the part of the knight and not let her help. It's because of what Jarvis did, so she can't hold it against him. She doesn't want a repeat of that horrific day either.

Ignoring the crew, Summer points at the first question on the notepad.

"Aye, how do I know about beer? My father liked to drink a pint or two sometimes. He let me try it when I was just a wee tyke." He rubs his neck in discomfort and she hopes she didn't overstep her bounds.

There is one thing he doesn't talk about, and that is his family. She wonders why but doesn't feel like she has a right to ask. Just like with her speech—or lack thereof—it's one of those things they just don't talk about.

His brown eyes are fixed on the ground so she lightly touches his face to gain his attention. His eyes meet hers and she tries to read what secrets are in the depths. Since the beginning she's wanted to just dive right in, but he's always kept up a wall even she can't penetrate. He frowns, which is the last thing she wants. The day, besides the arrogant storm, has been a good one.

Then she does something that she hasn't done since she was four. She mouths, "I'm sorry." No sound comes out, but the gesture is so huge he just stares at her intensely for a few seconds, like he's trying to convince himself of what he witnessed. Though honestly? She tries to persuade herself that she just mouthed two whole words. Three syllables. Where are the trumpets? The heavenly chorus singing Hallelujah?

"Did ye just . . . ?" His eyebrows scrunch together.

She nods and covers her mouth, disbelieving. It's a mile stone; a new feat!

"Listen, Ducky. My family—" He's abruptly cut off.

There's a loud bang and the whole ship shudders like they've run aground hard. They both go flying across the kitchen and land against a metal shelf. The contents crash over them and Landon's secrets are hidden beneath.

"Summer? Summer?! Are ye okay?" Landon asks frantically from below the rubble.

She taps once on a pan over her head and he sighs in relief. They both struggle and eventually crawl out of the debris, unscathed besides a few bruises. The kitchen, on the other hand, looks as if it got sick and vomited its contents.

The crew members in the other room sound like they are still cheering and carrying on like nothing happened. She wonders *What did just happen?* while get-

ting to her feet with Landon's help. They exchange questioning glances then make their way across the destroyed kitchen. She mentally curses because she knows exactly who'll have to clean up this mess.

This is going to take all night, she laments as she steps over a broken mug.

Landon arrives at the kitchen window first. Right before she stands on tip-toe to catch a glance too, he ducks and pulls her down with him. His finger goes to his lips to tell her to be quiet. A smile over takes her at the gesture. *I don't speak*, she thinks and then covers her mouth, trying not to laugh.

He shakes his head and closes his eyes briefly, realizing his mistake. "Sorry," he mouths. He points at the door and whispers, "Intruders with guns."

Her sapphire eyes go wide. Guns, unlike whips, kill instantly. As she backs away in a waddling position, the nickname Ducky suddenly fits the situation perfectly.

"She's like a ticking time bomb!" a woman barks with venom.

"There're no women on this ship besides you, lady!" Captain Travis argues. This surprises Summer.

"Sit your drunk ass down," a man commands. Something clicks.

The intruder's voices grow louder as they come closer to the door. Landon takes Summer's hand, pulls her up when they aren't in the window's view anymore, and sprints down the hallway. She continually glances over her shoulder, wondering if they are behind them. Her heart is pumping rapidly and her palms grow sweaty. Landon doesn't let go, only picks up pace. Her blonde hair flies behind her like a waving curtain. She's running out of breath quickly—living on a ship doesn't exactly provide much exercise. As they round the corner, they both come to a skidding halt. He swiftly pulls her behind his back and tries to keep her out of view. She looks under his arm at the girl standing in the middle of the hallway—the reason they stopped.

5

JADEN

15 YEARS OLD

Long, shiny black hair, beautifully bronzed skin, and eyes so dark you can't even call them brown. The girl is about her age, she notices. But who is she? They've never seen her before. Around her neck is a leather necklace with five wooden button-like beads that look like they're choking her. The girl holds her hands up to say that she means no harm and whispers low in an American accent, "Follow me if you want to live." The voice is familiar.

"And why should we?" Landon interrogates, his voice low and sure. His muscles are stiff and he's on high alert.

"Did you not understand the part about living?" the girl asks in disbelief. "Suit yourselves, but when you're flying around as ghosts remember I told you so." The girl turns, flips her black hair behind her back, and strides away.

Summer pulls at the back of Landon's shirt. When he looks back she can tell he's not certain of what he should do. She points at the girl's back and gives him a little push.

"Wait!" he calls out and the girl freezes.

She pivots around while a smile creeps up her face. "Ah, thought you'd change your minds, but you had me thinking otherwise for a second."

"What's yer name and what're ye doing on this ship?" he asks sharply.

"My name's Jaden, and I'm here to capture Summer," she says simply, like this is normal for her.

"*Pft!*" he huffs, but a surprised Summer peeks around him and points at herself in question. He sidesteps so she's not in view anymore.

"Yes you, silly. Remember me? We used to have cells next to each other."

Summer steps the other direction and looks around him again. The memories of her time as a four year old are some of the worst of her life. The only part she remembers without physically flinching was when she and Jaden would sneak

in conversations when the guards left. They never saw each other besides through a slot in their doors, but her voice sounds so familiar. She nods at Jaden.

“I see you never got out of the slave business. Well, neither did I.” Jaden frowns and absently rubs her scarred wrists.

Landon steps back to look between the two girls and their interactions. “Ye know her?” he asks Summer.

She nods, her eyes not leaving Jaden who’s almost Landon’s height. She has scars up her arms that remind Summer of her own burn marks. Her eyes look haunted, though her face is unruffled. Her body is not quite as small as Summer’s, but clearly her diet isn’t that healthy.

“And can we trust her?” Landon asks out the side of his mouth like Jaden can’t hear them.

Summer glances at Landon and then back to Jaden. The years of slavery are etched into Jaden’s skin. This is the girl who gave her advice to stop the beatings—she’s partially the reason Summer’s mute. But beneath the haunted exterior of Jaden’s eyes, there is a spark of hope. It’s the one thing Summer lost long ago. She raises her hand slowly and shakily to the rusted metal wall of the hallway and raps once. The noise reverberates eerily down the empty hallway.

“Lead the way,” Landon says to Jaden.

“We’ve wasted too much time already.” Jaden begins to run down the hallway. “They’re looking for you, Summer. We need to find a place to hide so I can explain what’s going on, and so we can find a way off this ship!”

Landon gives her instructions on where to go until they stop in front of Summer’s room. She quickly pulls free her key and he takes it to unlock the door. All three of them enter and Jaden quickly falls on Summer’s bed like she’s known Summer all her life.

“All right,” Jaden begins. “Here’s the deal—apparently these people have been tracking you since you were taken.”

Hope, for the first time in forever, blossoms inside Summer like a vine reaching toward the sun in a dense forest. *People have been looking for me?*

Jaden sees the look in her eyes. “These aren’t people you want to find you, Summer. We’re slaves—considered property. We might as well be a lamp in the corner for all they care, which means I’ve overheard a lot more than they realize. This is some secret society that believes if they terminate you, all will be well in the world.”

“They?” asks Landon.

“The Secret Clock Society,” answers Jaden with a grim expression. “They have power like I’ve never seen. I don’t know why they want Summer, but she should stay far, far away from them.”

“Wait!” Landon cuts in. “Are ye sayin’ they want to kill her?” He quickly wraps an arm around Summer’s shoulders. “No way!”

Jaden and Landon quickly talk with each other, but Summer can't seem to hear them. Her blood is pounding in her ears as she remembers back to the last time she saw her mum. When she replays the day again it all starts to make more sense. Her mum wasn't acting like herself, and they were in the car for quite some time. Was her mum running away from these people? And why are they after her? What is so special about her?

"Summer, did you hear me?" Jaden waves a hand in front of her face.

Summer shakes her head no and tries her best to put on her Apologetic Face.

"They bought me from my previous owners." She shudders and absently rubs her wrists again. "Anyway, they've been searching for you, but your captain, Travis Jones I believe it was, has been dodging them, apparently. So this is where I come in—they knew we were in that house at the same time. When they found out I had known you they wanted me to help them capture you."

Summer begins to tremble in Landon's arms and he pulls her in for an infamous side-hug. "So is that what you're doing? Keeping us in this room until they come?" he asks vehemently. Summer can feel the tension in his body and only hugs him more. Like always, he is her salvation and protector.

"Of course not," Jaden says smugly. "I'm just playing their little game, when in reality I plan on all of us escaping. You think I like this life as a slave?"

Summer stiffens and turns around so fast she almost stumbles. *What does she mean? Escape? It isn't possible . . . is it?*

"No, but maybe you're doing this so you'll be free!" he disputes crisply.

Jaden thrusts her arms out, and in the light you can see even more scars. "I wouldn't wish this life on my worst enemy. I'm not going to help them with this. They let me free so I could find her." She points at Summer. "We're getting off this ship with or without your help!"

Summer practically falls over herself trying to get to Jaden before she wraps her tiny arms around her. Those words are the most beautiful thing she's ever heard. Freedom is like one of the creatures she reads about—mythical. She wants to tell Landon that if it's possible for them to be free, then it's sure as hell possible there are faeries!

"Whoa there!" Jaden giggles. "I know it's been bad—for all of us. But this is our chance to escape."

"If Summer's going, so am I," declares Landon.

"Great! I've got an idea," says Jaden. And with that, they begin to plan.

6

HELL

4 YEARS OLD

Jag is a jack of many trades: black market, smuggling, pirating, bootlegging, and—his favorite—the slave trade. He especially loves it when he finds the young ones because they are easily trained to do as you wish. To his disappointment, he won't have the time he wants with the young girl he's trapped in his human market. The people who want her, whoever they are, offered to pay for him to capture her specifically. He finds that very interesting and is only intrigued more by the little blonde girl who cries too much for his liking. When he had finally caught up with her and her mother, he was worried about the open space. With the help of his crew, the kidnapping went better than he would have predicted. He grins at the fond memory as he opens the door to the long hallway full of boys and girls for sale. It's feeding time.

A tray full of orange peels, an empty yogurt cup, and a moldy piece of bread is shoved through a slot in the door. Summer scoots away from it to sit in the corner and weep. When she was first shoved into the small room, she didn't understand what was going on. A girl's soft voice had informed her that she will never see her family again. Summer refuses to believe it.

"That's your supper," the voice informs her through the wall.

The room is full of dirt and straw, like she's some barn animal. Summer gathers the straw around her and squeaks, "That's supper?"

"Yes. It doesn't get better so eat." The girl keeps quiet after that.

Summer kicks the tray away from her in a tantrum. As the room grows dark she curls into a ball, shaking and crying. She doesn't know where she is or why. But she does know one thing—she misses her mummy.

"Jezz'us!" a male voice growls out. "Keep your ruddy mouth shut."

She's hiccupping now and rises to bang on the door. Fear and anger are beginning to rise up like a monstrous tidal wave in her. Her tiny fists slam over

and over into the door. There is no knob on her side for her to turn. She screams and shouts, "Let me out! I want my mummy!" Her hands grow sore quickly so she resorts to kicking with all the strength she can muster.

"Bloody hell," the same man barks, his voice closer now. "I hate new arrivals. Always causin' us trouble."

"You have to stop," the girl's quivering voice in the other room begs quietly. "They'll punish you."

Summer ignores the threat. At home punishment means sitting out for five minutes in shame. Her mum never raised a hand to her. If sitting out for five minutes is all she'll have to do she'll take it, as long as they open the door.

"Let me out," she screams at the top of her lungs, her throat sore from shouting, but refusing to give up. "Let. Me. Out!"

"It's always the new ones," mutters the man as the door flings open.

Summer sprints under his arm and takes off down the hallway.

"Blimey," the man grumbles in surprise.

Summer turns down another hallway, constantly glances over her shoulder, and picks up speed. If she can get outside she'll be okay. Her mummy taught her how to call the police in emergencies. *If this isn't an emergency*, Summer thinks, *I don't know what is*. Without warning, she slams into a body and comes to a dead halt. The tall, lanky man looks down at her and a crooked smile creeps up his lips. Jag's black eyes shine over with excitement as he holds Summer by the tops of her arms.

"And where'd you think yer going?" He chuckles darkly, his rotten breath filling the air.

The other man rounds the corner, out of breath. "She's a fast bugger."

"Is she?" Jag glances down at her and his scarred face twitches. "Take care of it, Johnny." He thrusts her into Johnny's arms, bruising her skin in the process.

Summer gasps, her blue eyes wide as her neck cranes to see Johnny. "My mummy will be angry if I'm not home after dark." Her voice lacks the defiance she'd hoped for.

"I'm sure she will be," he says with a laugh and yanks her back down the hallway.

Instead of taking her back to her room, he throws her into a chair outside her room, and makes her face away from him and straddle it.

"It's time for yer punishment. Take the shirt off," he commands pompously.

Summer visibly shakes, unable to move. Will she have to sit there for five minutes for punishment? The thought of her small prison almost seems welcoming. She catches movement to her right and sees brown eyes peek out of the food slot in the cell next to hers. Tears are visible in the girl's eyes and it only makes her more scared. Can't she sit in timeout in the room?

"Bloody hell," grounds out Johnny when she doesn't remove her shirt.

He jerks it over her head violently and tosses it on the straw-littered ground. There are sounds behind her but she doesn't dare look back. The flap covering the slot of the other girl's door clinks shut, and that's when the sound of a crack breaks the still air.

Thwack!

Something sharp connects with her back and she straightens in reflex to the unbelievable pain. She screams without conscious thought as she hears the crack through the air and something connects with her skin again.

Thwack!

She flinches away as it strikes again. Another scream erupts from her like a roaring volcano, the stinging force cutting her very essence.

Thwack!

She can feel the welts down to her spine, all the way to the tips of her toes. The shock of each hot, flaming force against her back makes her instinctively reach for her back in protection.

Thwack!

Her fingers catch the next stinging blow. She grinds her teeth together and brings her hands back around to hold close to her chest, writhing in the sensation. One hand bleeds while the other has a red welt that begins to rise on her skin immediately. She gasps for air through each strangled cry as she's hit again and again. She chances a glance behind her as the whip comes down again and finally wears the top layer of her skin out. It slices wide open like her whole body will crack under the pressure.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! She swears the whip is whispering its manic joy as it slices the air again. *Thwack!*

She screams out with every crack of the whip, her sensitive skin splitting more with each stinging blow. Soon she can feel blood trickle down her back and soak her pants. Her muscles are in knots, threatening to rip apart as the whip collides with her exposed flesh.

Thwack!

Johnny laughs joyfully as the whip bites into her skin for the tenth time. Summer is no longer able to hold herself up as the throbbing agony consumes and immobilizes her. Her nerves shriek and protest their overwhelming need for the excruciating cracks of the whip to cease. With one more blow against her torn flesh, Summer realizes she has no more screams left in her; throat raw, her last bit of strength melts. Tears are scattered across her face as she lies limply over the chair. When she's close to passing out the whip ceases. The relief is so pronounced it's like a flavor on her tongue.

Tearful red eyes peek from the slot on the door next to hers. They speak a million different words, but right then they say, "Welcome to Hell."

7

DRIFTER

15 YEARS OLD

Jaden cracks the door open and glances down the hallway; first to the right, then to the left. Summer and Landon stand behind her as they wait to hear the verdict. She finally peeks over her shoulder and whispers, “It’s clear. Remember the plan.”

They all nod at each other. During their planning, Landon decided it’d be best if he stuck with Jaden to make sure she isn’t setting them up. He voiced his disgruntled opinion of leaving Summer to her own devices, but knows if anything were to go awry that she’ll be able to find the best hiding spot until he’s able to find her.

Jaden is the first to step foot into the hallway and quickly goes left toward the kitchen. Landon and Summer are next.

“Be careful,” he whispers to her.

There are no words to say, even if she did speak. Instead, she gives him a tight hug and takes off down the hallway in the opposite direction. The plan is for Landon and Jaden to distract the Secret Clock Society. Summer has no idea who they are or what they do exactly, but when Jaden speaks of them, she does so carefully. Like she’s seen something she can’t comprehend or form into words.

Summer flies down the corridor and runs into the end of it where she knows that just outside there are steps that lead to the Captain’s area. Carefully, she peeks out of the door and sees someone she doesn’t recognize. He definitely isn’t part of the crew. The man has short, dark hair, a closely shaven face, and is wearing the nicest looking black coat she’s ever seen. This guy must be part of the Society. She’s not quite sure how she’s going to get past him until her eyes land on a broom that Landon must have left on the deck earlier today. She slips her shoes off to prevent making any noise.

Thanking the Captain for his pet peeve of never having a squeaky door, she

pulls the door forward when the man's back turns to her. There are a few lights out on the deck which makes excellent shadows for her to hide in. She hugs the wall and scoots along, her fingers outstretched for the broom's handle.

The man pivots back around and she freezes. Her breath is already heavy from running down the hallway, but she doesn't want to move her hand to cover her mouth. Her lips seal in an attempt to make herself as quiet as possible. Her heart slams into her ribs roughly as the man's eyes—almost glowing in the dark—rake over the shadows. A bead of sweat rolls down her face as he focuses on a spot next to her. Tears fill her eyes in an effort to hold her lips shut. Her lungs feel like they aren't receiving enough oxygen and her muscles are pulled so tight in her current position that she's waiting for them to rip and tear free from her bones.

The man shrugs, lights a cigarette, and turns back around. She is so relieved that she almost collapses. She continues to hug the wall until her fingers find the broom. Most of the cleaning supplies on the *Cosmos* are old and worn down. There isn't a broom on the whole ship that doesn't come apart at the base. This is the first time she doesn't mentally complain about the crappy cleaning supplies—she's actually thanking the Captain again.

This is the hard part. With more grace than she even knows she has, she squats next to the broom. Afraid it'll make a noise, she gently holds the base and the stick, her lips still sealed to prevent any excess noise. Another bead of sweat rolls down her nose and plops onto the ground. Then she begins to twist the stick until it breaks free from the base. She softly lets the broom lean against the wall. Her heart's palpitations speed up and her eyes dilate as she holds on to the wall to help her get up.

In mid-motion, the man turns around again, tapping the ashes free from his cigarette before he takes another drag, the tip lighting orange in the dark. His eyes trace over the shadows again, but this time he thinks he sees something. She's so convinced it's her that she grips the stick with overwhelming force; her fingers ache from it. The man slowly makes his way over to her, though he seems to be unsure of what he's looking at. When he's merely a few meters away, Summer raises the broom's stick and brings it down over the man's head.

There's a grunt as he falls to his knees, though he's still conscious. She starts shaking at what she just did, but knows if he's given a chance to call out he will. She brings the stick back down on his head with a *thwack* that reminds her of the whip cutting viciously through the air. Tears burst from her eyes as she hits him one last time before he collapses onto the ground, blood soaking his nice coat and hair. The stick drops from her hands and clanks on the deck, bouncing a little. She can't believe she just did that.

Heavy footfalls echo not far away. A woman's frenzied voice calls out to the man and Summer's eyes snap up from the unconscious man. The shadow of the

woman extends across the deck. She has no idea where the light is coming from, but it's insanely bright.

Summer takes off up the stairs, her steps muffled by the fact she isn't wearing shoes. Each breath brings in the smell of smoke and she tries not to cough and bring attention to herself. She's now at one of the highest points of the ship, and up here she can see where the kitchen is on the other side. She's so mesmerized by what she sees that she forgets about the woman who is just now rounding the corner.

The ship is on fire, a glowing beacon in the ocean's wide abyss. She also notices there is another ship, and it's partially sticking into the side of the *Cosmos*, which is much lower in the water than Summer's ever seen. *We're sinking*, she realizes in horror, freezing in place. If the woman looks up she'll be able to clearly see Summer standing there. A few seconds pass with her mouth wide open, her mind frantically trying to put the pieces together. But all she can think about is Landon, and if he's okay.

Unexpectedly, arms wrap around her and fling her backwards into a room.

"It's me," Landon whispers when she starts to fight him, a movement she knows would warrant a punishment. She quickly relaxes in his arms and knows she's going to be safe now. Landon never punishes.

When she looks around she notices that they are in the room that's filled with the small boating supplies. Landon reaches into a box and pulls out a life vest.

"Put this on," he commands urgently.

She does as she's told, but looks up at him questioningly. He's covered in black ash and his hair is partially singed. On his left shoulder is a horrifically nasty burn that's gone through his shirt. After this she quickly looks over him for any more damage, but he seems to be okay.

With the vest on, he says, "I lost Jaden. I need to find her."

She grasps his lower arms and shakes her head. *You can't leave me again*, she tries to convey with her eyes.

"Listen, Ducky. Ye need to go to the boat that hangs off the side of the ship. Wait there for me, okay?"

Tears litter her eyes as she hangs her head as it shakes back and forth. He snatches her chin and makes her look at him. "Be strong for me. I know ye—the pepper story is legendary." He smirks down at her. "Put on that brave face and go!" He points toward the door.

She gives a tight nod, takes a deep breath, and holds out her chest.

"That's it," he says proudly.

Summer opens the door and just outside is the woman. Summer backs away and into Landon who seizes her and moves her to the side. A gun flies up and points at Landon's head.

“Give me the girl,” demands the woman in a cold voice.

“Hell no!” he spits.

The gun clicks as she holds it steadier in her grip. “Fine. You mean nothing to me—your life is forfeit.”

Right before she is able to put pressure on the trigger, Summer pushes Landon into the woman. She stumbles back as the gun goes off and parts of the ceiling rain down on them. Landon is able to yank the gun from her grip as he punches the woman in the stomach.

“Go, Ducky! Run!” he shouts.

Summer jumps over them and down the stairs. The man at the bottom is sitting up, dazed, holding his head. She kicks him in the gut—though without shoes she’s not sure how much it actually hurts. He grunts and falls back down to the ground anyway.

She feels silly wearing the life vest as she rushes towards the side of the ship where the boat overhangs. Before she can reach it something explodes and she’s thrown overboard. Her hair flings wildly into her face as she flies through the air backwards. It happens so quickly that she isn’t sure how to react, then her back smacks against the ocean water. She plummets several feet into the depths until her life vest yanks her back to the surface. She spits salty water from her mouth and goes into an immediate coughing fit. The water is a little chilly, but it’s not too cold. Her biggest fear? She can’t swim. *Silly*, she realizes, *considering I’ve lived on a ship in the middle of the ocean for most of my life.*

She glances up to the ship that is now halfway in the water, the other half an insatiable, eager fire. The dining table drifts by and she attempts to swim over to it, all the while thanking Landon for making her put the life vest on. Perhaps he knew the ship would sink. It takes several tries before she is able to get onto the table, but she finally does. She drifts for a while, wondering where Landon and Jaden are and hoping they aren’t hurt. Hoping they’ll find her before she drifts too far from the wreckage.

To her chagrin, the ship breaks into several pieces until it’s overtaken by the ocean’s fearless water, swallowing every last inch of the fire with it.