Chapter One

~Surprise~

Oh my gosh. It was *sooo* hard to keep my eyes open in Miss Tripside’s algebra class. Partly because my roommates and I had worked tirelessly all week preparing for our group sweet sixteen party tomorrow night. Actually, it was only Harmony’s birthday, but we’d all been putting off our birthdays for one really giant one. And partly because Harmony was up later than usual talking to Bane on her con, short for convenience. It’s this device that fits in your pocket and opens into a small TV screen type thing at your command. Then it hovers in front of you and does pretty much whatever you ask.

Bane graduated from Southland Cinder High a little early so he could dive right into some secretive job he’s had his eye on in L.A. for a while, working for an old SCHS graduate. Ever since he and Harmony figured out how to video chat with his very regular cell phone and her con, it’s become a nightly thing, and they’ve gotten really into each other.

Even with so much going on, it shouldn’t have been that difficult to stay awake in class. There was also so much to be excited about. Luke would show up tomorrow morning and stay for a few days. We were lucky our ambassador days for June fell on Harmony’s birthday. And next week was our last week before a month-long break from school. I’d been counting down the days for weeks!

In spite of all these thrilling upcoming events, I just couldn’t keep my eyes open. With my cheek leaning against one hand and my chair scooted way back, I finally gave up the fight and drifted off to a scattered dream of my old orphanage. Lately I’d been having continually worsening dreams about the old dump and its wardens, like life wasn’t allowed to just be sweet and simple. Something had to be going wrong.

Ms. Wendy stomped through the hall in my dream, slamming all the group bedroom doors shut and locking them from the outside. Everyone would go to bed without supper and without access to a restroom because someone got up the night before and snuck a Twinkie. Sweets such as these were reserved solely for the adults in the home.

A horrible, sinking feeling settled into my stomach as I dreamt that I climbed into the hard bed where I used to sleep, before North Haven and my bff roommates and Luke… I laid down to cry a moment before something scratched softly across my back.

“Kristine,” someone whispered.

My mind was brought partially back to reality. I realized Harmony was rubbing my back and trying to get me to wake up. She sat right behind me in algebra. “Hm?”

“Kristine,” Miss Tripside said much louder than Harmony.

I sat up when I realized the kids sitting in the three rows of desks to my left were all staring at me. “What? I’m sorry, Miss Tripside.” I tried sweeping back the blond hair that had fallen into my face. So embarrassing!

My teacher straightened her square spectacles and nodded to the open classroom door.

It was like Fourth of July fireworks exploding inside my chest when I saw who stood watching me from the doorway, holding a black jacket in one hand and looking as gorgeous as ever with his spiked black hair and powerful muscles. “Luke!” I jumped from my seat and ran down the aisle to throw my arms around him. I felt his smile against my neck when he hugged me with his free hand. “I can’t believe you’re here early.”

“Headmaster said she could cut out of class,” he said to Miss Tripside.

“I suppose that’ll be all right.” Miss Tripside folded her arms. “She’s just been sleeping through our *very important* review for next week’s final exam, anyway.”

Harmony was already carrying my purse and books to the front of the class. “See you at lunch,” she said, handing them to me.

“Sorry,” I said again to Miss Tripside. I bit my lip to hide the smile on my way out the door.

Luke was nice enough to let it close before he started laughing. He took my books from me and spread his arm across my back as he led us down the spacious, white hallway toward the elevators. I definitely matched our surroundings in my school uniform, a white full bodysuit. “A North Havener sleeping in class. That must be a first,” Luke said.

I put an arm around his waist. “I couldn’t help it. Harmony was up half the night talking to Bane. I don’t know how *she’s* staying awake. But why didn’t you tell me you were coming early? I could have been looking forward to this all morning.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

We stopped next to the nearest spherical glass elevator door. There was a whole row of them side by side. Luke punched the up button.

I didn’t have to ask where we were going. There was a small veranda we were known for sharing on the highest student floor. This was always the emptiest and quietest floor of the west wing. There was nothing to find here but fluffy chairs and pillows and rugs laid out everywhere in the open area, and a few enclosed verandas protruding from the walls. It was busier this week than usual, with everyone cramming for next week’s finals. No one would be there dead in the middle of third hour, of course.

I turned to face Luke so I could wrap both arms around him and lean my heart against his. My eyes closed happily. “I missed you so, so much, Luke.”

He pressed my books against my back, resting his head against mine and holding me close. “I missed you, too.”

The elevator *dinged* and the glass door beside us slid open. Luke turned, still holding onto me, and walked me backwards into the elevator.

“Good morning, Kristine and Cinder Knight. Where can I take you?” Connie, the very human-like computerized control system for NHHS, asked. Aside from me and my roommates, everyone called Luke by his last name.

“To the study floor, please,” I answered. We were instantly zooming upward.

Luke leaned over to kiss me. Elevators were such a perfect, secluded place for these tender moments. It took a while, but I’d learned to ignore the invisible guy Luke’s headmaster always had watching over him. Unfortunately, his plans to fly north every weekend to see me fell through, with the secret Cinder bodyguard shadowing him twenty-four seven. Initially, Luke learned how to fly a jet, but figured out pretty soon that his shadow was reporting back to his Headmaster from time to time and sneaking away to North Haven High—Southland Cinder High’s rival school—wouldn’t go over well with him. That made traveling to each other’s schools as ambassadors every month that much more important to us.

The elevator began slowing down. Our blissful kiss ended when Luke took a step back.

“We have reached the study lounge, destination of Kristine and Cinder Knight,” Connie announced as the door slid open.

We ignored the empty open area, and walked beside the tranquil, light blue wall to our veranda. It was in the back corner of the giant room, parallel to the elevators. I always loved gazing through the windows at the world of white below us.

“I’ve got another surprise for you,” Luke said as we walked.

“Yeah?” I waited for him to answer but got nothing. “Well, what is it?”

“I’ll tell you on our balcony.” He held the door open for me when we got to the glass-enclosed room. Then he stopped in the doorway and held out an arm to stop his shadow.

The unseen person grunted and pushed against his arm.

“The whole room’s bulletproof,” Luke hissed. “No one’s gonna kill me out here.” He slipped through the opening and shut the door. Then he pulled our padded, wicker sofa over in front of the door and sat on it. He slid my books under the sofa before he held out an arm for me.

I smiled and snuggled into his side. “Being alone with you has been so rare since Winter Competitions.”

“I know; I hate having Hyde following me around like some kind of child. Armstrong’s been gone long enough that my headmaster should just cut him loose.”

I hated when Luke talked about Roman Armstrong, because the attempted murder on him and being forced to live with a bodyguard following him around was all because of me. “I’m sorry, Luke, but I’m glad you’ve got Hyde protecting you. I don’t think I could sleep at night if you didn’t have him. Of course I’m losing plenty of sleep over Harmony talking to Blane all night, anyway.”

Luke kissed my forehead and gave me a little squeeze. “Don’t be sorry, Kristine. I’d take a hundred more bullets for you if it meant keeping you safe and keeping you with me.”

“I would too.” I leaned up to kiss him. “So, what was your surprise?”

“My headmaster wants me to suggest a little mid-year competition to your headmaster. If he’s okay with it, I’ll be here for the next three weeks.”

“Wait, really?!”

“Yeah.” He looked so darn gorgeous when he smiled. “I’ll stay this week to do ambassador stuff, then our competitors will come next weekend and stay two weeks to play against yours before school starts back up.”

Our schools’ short, midyear breaks only overlapped by two weeks.

“Like Winter Competitions? Good versus evil high?” That’s how I liked to refer to them.

“You’d love another chance to beat us, wouldn’t you?” he smirked, because we’d beaten them three years in a row now.

Of course, after how crazy the last Winter Competitions were, that was the last thing anyone was talking or thinking about this year.

“What? I’m not competing, but I would love for my school to win.”

“No.” He kept his beautiful smile as he shook his head. I loved that he generally reserved it only for me. “Just unorganized pre-competition games to give everyone a chance to size each other up, I guess. No one gets competition points or medals.”

“Oh, well I think that’d be cool. And I hope they turn it into a tradition so I can spend three weeks with you every summer… Hey wait, does that mean I don’t have to go back to Southland Cinder High as ambassador this month?”

“Well, it’ll be July by the time it’s over, so I guess you don’t have to worry about coming for June.”

“Yes!” I jerked my arms to my sides excitedly.

Luke raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, it’s not that I don’t want to spend extra time with you, Luke, I just *hate* SCHS, no offense.”

He shrugged.

“When are you gonna ask my headmaster?”

“Tonight. My headmaster said he’d set up the meeting with yours. I’m supposed to give him an answer before midnight. But I was hoping you’d come, too. It might help to have another person in favor of it there.”

“Yeah, I love going to see my headmaster. And I bet he’ll be onboard.”

“I hope so.”

“Me too.” I laid my head on Luke’s chest and inhaled his alluring guy smell. “I can’t imagine anything on this earth making the next three weeks better than spending them with you, Luke.”

He took in a deep breath and let out a long, contented sigh before he said, “Neither can I.”