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Series by Australian Teen Fantasy
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Timesurfers

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1

THERE'S A BOMB ON THE BUS

“IS THIS SOME KIND OF JOKE?” CATE POINTED AT THE TEXT.

“Not a joke. Sorry honey.” Eve gave her a sad smile.

“And *everyone* knew about this before me?”

Eve grimaced. “Pretty much.”

Cate checked her phone again.

ZACH: “WITH BRITTANY NOW. WE R DONE.”

The text message came five minutes *after* Eve arrived to console her about the breakup. Cate was the last person to know she'd been dumped *and* replaced by a perky cheerleader. She brushed a mix of sad, embarrassed, but predominantly angry tears from her cheeks. Zach was part of her witness protection deal.

“I guess they can be one giant bubble of popular fizz together,” Eve said.

“Huh.” Cate absently twirled her blonde hair.

Eve patted her arm. “Popularity is so overrated. He traded down in the looks department. Cheerleader be damned. I'd choose you over Brittany any day. I never got you and Zach.”

Eve was perceptive. Cate's witness protection rules required a boyfriend. She followed all the rules regardless of how unpleasant or annoying she found them. They kept her hidden and safe. No one would be impressed she was the talk of the school for all the wrong reasons yet again. There was definitely another long lecture on “blending in” and “staying under the radar” pending.

Her breath, mixed with the freezing air, created smoke as she exhaled. She was in the slowest-moving bus queue ever. Seriously, how hard was it to pay the driver and find a seat? It was always such a nightmare to get home from Sunday paintball.

Something didn't add up. Cate's handler had chosen Zach to groom for her boyfriend because he had no other friends. He was a sure thing because he *wasn't* popular. After a few years of a carefully manufactured and managed “good friends” relationship they moved to “officially dating” last year. Apparently fifteen was the “right” age for acquiring a boyfriend. “How did Zach transform overnight into this übercool dude guys high-five and girls flip their hair for?” Cate demanded.

“And...delete contact!” Eve landed a vicious stab at her phone. “Zach is officially dead to me. You're delusional, sweetie. Zach's been popular forever.”

“What? You're joking, right?” Eve's blank look was yet another thing that made no sense. “I've stepped into some alternate universe, and it totally blows.” Cate dragged her hands down her face. This was weirding her out, and that was saying something. Five years in witness

protection had made her the Queen of Weird.

Eve's blue eyes narrowed. "You're using a kinda whiney voice, which is very unattractive."

"I've been dumped by text." Cate yanked at the ringlets the damp air had created.

"And I get that you're dealing with embarrassment on a totally epic scale."

Cate sent Eve her best death look.

Eve grinned. "I see your emerald stare and raise you my sapphire glare."

Cate fought back a smile as Eve returned her gaze. She was a little sad. Zach had been nice to her, until the twerp dumped her by text. Mostly she was concerned. Sure, she had to deal with all the stares and whispers at school tomorrow, but her Handler and mother were going to insist she made good on all the rules. She needed another boyfriend, ASAP.

"What the...?" Eve's eyes widened. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. The colour leached from her rich honey-toned skin.

"What?" Cate automatically followed Eve's gaze. A head taller than her friend, she had an uninterrupted view of what had caught Eve's attention.

"Um...Ah..." Eve mumbled as a supertall boy who could have walked straight out of a Ralph Lauren advertisement stepped between them.

He wore a loose, black silk shirt with leather cuffs and black trousers. His height held Cate's attention, and he got better the more she looked. The tousled griminess of his rich chocolate hair promised finesse in the most wicked of ways. He had distinct cheekbones and an angular jaw.

Women were suddenly attentive. Their eyes intense, heads high, and bodies alert, enthralled by the potent swirl of pheromones and lust that trailed in his wake. Her eyes, along with everyone else's, followed him until he disappeared around the corner. She was trained to remember faces. That face she had never seen around Tempus Falls before.

In this small town, an unfamiliar face was cause for concern. She needed to get home. Something was amiss. "Let's just get on the bus and focus on how I'm going to live through the next few days of humiliation at school." She dug her elbow into Eve's rib cage when her friend didn't answer. "Eve!" She flapped her hand across Eve's vacant face. "Eve—hello!"

A prickle of apprehension scuttled up her neck. She stepped closer to Eve. When their noses were nearly touching she stuck her tongue out. Nothing, nada, zip! Her friend seemed...frozen, like a statue.

Turning in a circle, Cate's uneasiness ratcheted up to fear. A woman was perched awkwardly with one leg on the ground, the other halfway out of the car she was exiting. A group of people were poised midstep on the crosswalk, and a street performer, his mouth open, stood silently, frozen midsong. The entire street resembled a photograph. All the people were still, petrified statues. An icy chill rippled across her skin. What was going on?

"H...H...Hello..." The word was barely audible. "Hello," she shouted toward the inky black clouds smeared across the sky.

She placed a trembling hand on Eve's red wool coat near her heart. *Please don't let anyone see me feeling up my friend.* The rise and fall of Eve's chest confirmed she was alive. She poked her friend, gently, then harder. As Eve toppled backward, Cate grabbed her. Eve was a dead weight and Cate struggled to stand her back up. Out of the corner of her eye, she sensed movement.

Two hazy figures flickered like static, their grainy outlines solidifying with each purposeful stride through the unmoving crowd. Tendrils of fear coiled around her heart and squeezed. A girl and boy prowled into focus. She'd never seen them around before either. *Run! Run! Run!* Her brain shrieked. Her feet remained nailed to the ground with fear.

The two figures were close now. The girl's black mermaid hair shimmered as she executed the perfect do-not-mess-with-me head toss. Cate knew instantly they would never be friends. Their genes were designed to repel one another. Aggressively.

The girl reached the bus shelter and surveyed the unmoving crowd, hands on hips. Her tartan

coat parted to reveal black velvet knee-high boots with a surprisingly sensible low wedge heel and crimson jeans. She tapped her foot impatiently. "Where is he?"

The voice of self-preservation spluttered through Cate's panic, urging her to stay utterly still.

"Chill, Rose, you know Rafe likes to make an entrance." The guy brushed a hand over his combat-short brown hair and slouched nonchalantly against the bus-stop sign. He looked underdressed with his fleecy red and white chequered shirt and worn blue denim jeans ripped through one knee. His fingers drummed the bus-stop signpost as his eyes roamed the frozen crowd.

A determined ray of light pierced the black clouds, spotlighting him at the exact moment he smiled. Even totally freaked out, his killer smile registered with her. That smile would get him anything that he wanted.

"We need to disarm this bomb, pronto." Rose's tone matched her head toss.

Bomb? Cate's stomach contracted.

No. There would be a logical explanation. Maybe she was being *Punk'd*. Hmm, while that would explain Zach's sudden popularity it would never happen. Tempus Falls went crazy when there was a population explosion of one. Hiding an entire TV crew would be impossible.

Okay...no need to overreact. She tasted bile. Who was she kidding—considering the bizarreness of the situation, overreaction was impossible. She wanted to run, but if she left Eve frozen in the street, that would make her the *worst* friend ever. As the self-proclaimed queen of weird, there was only one thing to do. She wove through the frozen people. "Um...excuse me."

A heartbeat later, two pairs of grey eyes turned her way. She gasped. The boy had three vivid crimson marks that traced down his cheek. A matching mark curled around his ear. All four marks continued down his neck and disappeared under his shirt. It looked like something had swiped an enormous claw down his face. Her spark of bravado flickered and vanished.

"What the...!" Rose tapped her watch and gave Cate a look that could cut diamond.

Cate flinched and took a few involuntary steps backward. "We still have twenty-seven minutes, Austin." Rose stabbed an accusing finger at Cate. "*She* should be holding like everyone else."

The calm, curious gleam in Austin's eyes as he appraised Cate made her pulse spike. Were they here for her?

"I'm..." A dryness edged down her throat, making speech impossible.

"I don't remember a girl on the marked list at these coordinates back in 2014." Rose pulled out a piece of paper. "No, definitely no girl. You don't have a bizarre guy name, do you?"

Cate shook her head, because her mouth refused to move. Rose's upper-class British accent matched her English-rose complexion. She was Pilates lean and around six foot tall.

"You're an unexpected complication, aren't you?" The red slashes on Austin's cheek glistened as he stepped toward her.

She took two rushed steps backward. Austin wasn't typically good looking or beautiful. He certainly wasn't unattractive through, and he had buckets of swagger.

"What *is* your name?" Austin asked.

"Cate," she squeaked, and swallowed the bile rising up her throat. *Please don't throw up*. She was handling this like a total wimp. *Show no fear*, she chanted silently and angled her chin upward. "Don't come any closer. I'm a black belt, and I *will* hurt you."

"Black belt, hey?" Austin took a long, deliberate step toward her. "Do I know you?" His grey eyes narrowed as he examined her face.

Not the response Cate expected. A hysterical giggle escaped her mouth. "Nope. I'm excellent with faces."

"Whoa! Rain Man flashback. I'm sure you're also an excellent driver. Does she look familiar to you, Rose?" Austin asked.

Rose circled Cate. "Hmm. A five foot ten, big boned, flat-chested teenage girl, whose dirty, scraggly blonde hair has cheap rainbow hair extensions."

"Rose," Austin cut in.

Rose held up a finger. "I'm not finished. Freaky green eyes, freckles, and dressed...well...badly. Don't know her." Rose smiled a tight smile and returned to study her list.

Bitch. Cate had been so right; she could never be friends with Rose.

"Ignore Rose. Normally she reserves that type of venom for someone she's had at *least* one previous encounter with. Clearly you're special. What intriguing little secrets are you hiding?" His eyes sparkled with mischief as he contemplated her.

A sonic boom and fireworks exploding at the end of the street saved Cate from responding. A ribbon of red streaked toward them. A monster silver and black motorbike slithered to a halt at her feet, splattering mud on her Doc Martens. The glare from the rider's shimmering red jumpsuit made her eyes water. His mullet would have made Billie Ray Cyrus jealous.

"Centimetre perfect! I'm so good I scare myself," he proclaimed, adjusting his headband.

"Rafe, *how* lovely of you to join us. Nice low-key entry there. And you've gone for an understated look today," Rose said.

"We're in a time stop. How often does that happen? I'm going for bold." Rafe flicked his red, sequined cape over his shoulder. "I would have worn fluffy earmuffs if I'd known it would be this cold. I have some that match this, you know."

Okay! Enough! "What the hell is going on?" For once, Cate was glad her angry young teen lurked so close to the surface.

"O-M-G! She's talking." Rafe flapped his hands toward her.

"And somebody better start answering me."

"Feisty." Rafe grinned and proceeded to ignore her. "What's her deal?"

Austin shrugged.

"And before you ask, she's not on the list," Rose said.

"Outrageous! Let me have a go at her." Rafe scrambled from the motorbike.

Cate tensed and put up a guarding block. She manoeuvred so the three of them were in her line of sight.

"Careful, she's a black belt." Austin returned Cate's glare with a cheery grin.

Rafe smiled big at her.

"Stay away from me," she growled. How spooky; she could hear—well, more like *sense*—Rafe speaking, but his mouth wasn't moving. A dead calm settled over her, which was far from normal, considering the situation. Her brain became sluggish, and her head clouded with dense fog.

Colours, shapes, and sounds dissolved in her head, replaced by a blank, transparent canvas. She flinched as Rafe's face burst into view. The sharp focus of his face contrasted with the muted colours and shapes now swirling behind him.

Ignore us. You won't remember anything about us. Sit at the bus stop while we get this done.

Cate shifted her weight backward, working against the fact that her feet wanted to walk toward the bus-stop seat like Rafe said. Her conscious mind told her feet to stay still, but they seemed to have a mind of their own. She pressed her knuckles to her closed eyelids, trying to relieve the pressure inside her brain. As quickly as it arrived, the fog vanished.

As Rafe reached for her, she blocked his arm with hers, while her other fist connected with his jawbone. There was a loud crack, and pain speared up her arm and exploded in her shoulder. Rafe stood his ground and shook his head.

A normal person would be sprawled at her feet, but he barely swayed. Her arm hung limp by her side, refusing to move no matter how much her brain demanded. "I told you—stay away." Close to tears, she brushed her eyes with the back of her other hand.

"Ouch!" Rafe rubbed his jaw.

"That right hook must mean she's immune to your talents too," Rose said. "Ignore her and get the bus."

"I'm on it." Rafe traipsed past Cate. Using one hand, he hoisted the front of the bus off the road. He rested the bumper across his chest and used both arms to test its weight.

Cate's jaw fell open. The bus wheels now hung in the air. The few people who had made it onboard toppled down the aisle like bowling pins. The bus creaked and groaned as Rafe pushed it further above his head. "That is so not normal." Too bewildered to resist when Rose shoved her toward Rafe, Cate complied. Her shoulder was on fire. It had to be dislocated.

"Watch her," Rose snapped, and ducked under the bus with Austin.

"The intel was good. There's a bomb with Jonah's name written all over it," Austin called from underneath.

Alarm prickled along Cate's spine. There *was* a bomb on the bus. She wheeled around to run. Rafe's fingers encircled her bicep in a vicelike grip before she could take a step.

"Oh, no you don't." Rafe smiled, relaxed as he stood, one hand holding her while the other balanced the bus.

A wave of pain rolled along her arm and shoulder as small silver stars exploded behind her eyes. She clutched her shoulder, pleading in her mind for it to pop back in. "Let me go!" She clawed with her good arm and smacked at Rafe's wrist and fingers.

"You have the cutest accent," Rafe said. "Where are you from, England?"

Cate glared and kept trying to pry his fingers from her arm. She turned and stepped into him, scraping her heel down his shin before grinding it into his foot.

He grunted with pain but didn't let go. "Spirited little thing, aren't you?" He shook her so hard she bit her tongue. "Stop it."

Cate spat blood and deliberated her next move. She gave her shoulder a tentative roll. Huh. It seemed better, so it must have been a dead arm or something.

"Don't insult *me* like that. Her accent's Australian, you drip," Rose called from under the bus. "Cut this wire, Austin."

"There's something hardcore sexy about a woman disarming a bomb. It doesn't top the time Rose hotwired a helicopter. Ah, good times," Rafe sighed.

"This is insane. You're all *insane*," Cate murmured.

"Secure the target, Rose," Austin said.

Cate tensed. They *were* here for her.

Rose emerged. "With me," she ordered and yanked Cate's arm.

Waves of nausea rolled through Cate. They'd found her. What were they going to do with her?

Rafe grinned one of those lovesick puppy grins. "Nice work, Rose."

The look Rose gave him would have made Medusa proud. "Okay. Let's find this budding nuclear physicist extraordinaire." Rose tapped her wrist, and a globe of light flickered, crackled, and disappeared with a hiss. She groaned. "Those holographs never work."

Rose walked down the bus queue. She glanced from the faded photograph to a thin man with straggly brown hair. "Well, hello there. Got him!"

"He's their target?" Cate mumbled. After another sonic boom a black sports car flickered like a holograph and then solidified at the end of the street. It hurtled their way.

"We've got company." Rose squared her shoulders and stretched her neck from side to side. She shrugged off her tartan jacket to reveal a fitted black singlet. The silver handles protruding from the knife sheaths strapped to her outer thighs glinted as she moved. She jabbed her index finger at Cate. "Stay back and immobile. I'm sworn to protect Innocents, but in your case I might make an exception."

Cate's eyes flicked around, searching for an escape path.

"Run...and I'll let him catch you, kill you, whatever he wants," Rose warned. "Innocent be damned."

Cate stood dead still. Her cover seemed to be intact. They didn't appear to be here for her.

The car spun 180 degrees, screeching to rest inches from the bus shelter. The word "Maserati" gleamed in silver along the back. The smell of burning rubber and smoke stung Cate's nostrils and throat, making her cough and splutter. Rose remained impervious, her jaw set as she clenched and unclenched her fists.

As the car door opened, Cate rocked forward, wary, but still curious. An ultratall guy stepped out. It was the Ralph Lauren model from earlier. Now "dangerous" flashed like a neon sign through her mind. A piece of his perfectly tousled hair fell over his forehead as he stalked toward Rose. An attack of uncontrollable shivers hit Cate.

"Jonah," Rose said. "You're just in time to thank us for disarming your bomb."

"If I want a bomb to explode, it does." Jonah shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "Hey, Rafe. Showing off that super strength again, I see. It won't impress Rose. Take it from someone who knows: she's not worth it."

Rafe growled through his teeth, but Jonah continued, undaunted. "I'm getting a strong Little Red Riding Hood vibe from your outfit. You might want to rethink it."

Cate tensed when Jonah turned her way. She hugged her body in an attempt to control her shivers.

"And what do we have here?" Jonah looked from Rafe to Rose and raised his eyebrows. "One of yours?"

"Some random Innocent." Rose rolled her eyes. "But, maybe she's important to you?"

Jonah's grey eyes glittered with menace.

Cate gulped. Had Jonah come for her? With two quick strides, he was close enough for her to feel his warm breath on her hair.

Jonah trailed a thumb along her jaw and wrapped his fingers around her throat. The leather from his shirt's cuff was cool against her skin. "We'll laugh about this in a few years, I promise," he breathed in her ear.

Her knees buckled and the ground lurched as he applied pressure to her throat. She gagged as black spots exploded behind her eyelids. Her fingers raked at Jonah's hand and her boot made a resounding thud against his shin.

"Feisty." He tightened his grip.

Cate thrashed, her eyes pleading with Rose for help. Rose's eyes remained fixed on Jonah. Cate could have sworn she actually smiled.

Austin came into view from under the bus looking perplexed. Cate gurgled an indecipherable "Help me."

His eyes widened as he surveyed the scene. He bolted towards Cate. "Let her go!"

Jonah released her seconds before Austin reached them. She staggered as her legs crumpled. The rough surface of the road stung her knees like a shower of tiny, hot needles. She coughed and rasped some quick breaths.

"You...you...dick!" Cate sputtered. It was lame, but all she could come up with.

"Ouch, that cuts me up." A predatory smile tilted the corners of Jonah's mouth.

"What's your deal?" Austin glared at Rose and hoisted Cate to her feet. His grip stopped her from collapsing again.

"Settle. She's fine," Rose said.

"No thanks to you." He pointed to Jonah. "Does taking an Innocent's life mean so little now?"

"Watch yourself." Jonah moved toward Austin.

Rose stepped between the two boys and separated them with her arms. "Put your hackles

down, or I'll knock you both on your butts. Austin's disarmed the bomb, and we have secured your intended target, so let's all return to our separate corners. This round is ours, Jonah."

"Actually, I didn't have to disarm the bomb," Austin said. "Someone disarmed it remotely before I cut the wire. My money's on you, Jonah. There's no doubt you put it there. Now you turn up and hey presto, it's disarmed. The timing's too coincidental."

Cate realized that when she saw Jonah earlier, he must have been planting the bomb.

Jonah shrugged and turned to Rose. They spoke too quietly for Cate to make out their conversation. Rafe leaned against the bonnet of the bus and glowered at Jonah. No one was interested in her anymore. If they weren't here for her, what had she stumbled into?

Austin's eyes swept back and forth across the sea of frozen faces like a giant searchlight. They narrowed as he contemplated someone a moment before recommencing his scrutiny. The thick red scars down the side of his face and neck glistened as he moved.

"You know it's rude to stare?" Austin smiled a superior little smile.

"Don't flatter yourself." She met his eyes for a few seconds with the most defiant stare she could muster and then looked everywhere but at him.

"Okay. Killer punch by the way, Cate, was it?" Austin's eyes continued to rove the sea of frozen faces.

"What?" Cate asked.

"With Rafe before, that was an impressive punch. Someone's teaching you well."

"Umm...thanks." What else could she say?

The air shimmered, and some of the frozen people twitched and became still again. "There's your two-minute warning." Jonah stepped back and leaned against the Maserati. He shouted something, and he and the car melted from view.

"Where'd he go?" Cate asked, mouth gaping.

"To get his butt kicked. Jonah would only disarm his bomb to protect something or someone extremely important." Austin contemplated her. "Do you know him?"

"No. I did see him before everyone except me froze and you guys appeared out of thin air."

Rafe grinned. "I bet that's not a sentence you ever expected to hear yourself say."

"I knew he came back to disarm that bomb." Austin pointed at Cate. "How do you fit into the puzzle though?"

Everyone's coming round," Rose said. "The target's safe, so let's get back."

Austin scratched his head and assessed Cate from head to toe. "What shall we do with you?"