



The first instalment in the Timesurfers Series by
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Timesurfers

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MIND CONTROL

“I’M THINKING OF GETTING MY HAIR CUT IN A MOHAWK.” EVE tweaked one of the numerous green bows scattered through her hair.

“Is that so?” Cate stared at Zach’s empty seat. Ditching school must go hand in hand with being popular. Or he was too scared to show his cheating face.

“I’m going to dye it white, with a black strip down the middle.”

“Hmm.” Cate tapped the wall with a fingernail.

“And stick my head in the bushes at the front of the house and see if I can catch a skunk.”

“Oh...WHAT?” Cate turned to Eve.

“So you were happy for me to make the biggest hair mistake ever, but worried about me catching skunks? *Nice.*”

“Where do you think Zach is?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care, and neither do you,” Eve said sternly.

“I don’t care.” Which she didn’t. Unless Zach lay beaten and bloodied, or even dead, *because* of her. She knew firsthand how brutal the people were who forced her into witness protection. He would be a soft target into her life and routine. “You don’t think something’s happened to him? His folks are still out of town.”

Eve gave her a sad little smile.

“I’m curious. He’s never missed a day of school.”

“Ms. Oliver?”

“Yes, Mr. Leckie.” Eve snapped to attention and saluted.

“I assume you have a class you *should* be in?”

Eve rolled her eyes and flounced off.

“Inside please, Cate,” Mr. Leckie said as he entered the classroom.

She pulled out her phone and texted her mum.

ZACH NOT AT SCHOOL??? WEIRD.

“Hey, Cate.”

Austin was back with Rose and Rafe. If she ignored them, they might all go away. Austin smiled, and she gave an involuntary sigh. *What was with that?* She needed to stop that immediately. Should she smile or feign indifference? With a head toss and a ramrod-straight back, she strode into class. Indifference it was.

The murmurings of Zach, Brittany, dumped and text weren’t unexpected. Neither were the looks and snickers. That didn’t make them any easier to take. Her books hit the desk with a dull thud. Her eyes flitted around the room as students in the class smiled and greeted Austin, Rose,

and Rafe as they wandered behind her. A high-pitched buzzing filled her head. She stuck a finger in her ear and ground her teeth. A metallic taste crept along her tongue. The buzzing vanished.

"Done," said Rafe.

She opened her history book to the list of Egyptian emperors she'd hastily scrawled and sat, pencil poised. She would ignore these three or die trying.

"I'll sit with Rafe." Rose tossed her ink-black hair, which hung in a plait past her very shapely behind. Where Rose's face was delicate and fair, Rafe had a washed-out, pasty complexion with a nose a little too big for his face. His gangly, skinny frame was at complete odds to him being able to lift a bus. His dirty-blond hair had a wave to it, and his mullet was certainly impressive.

Rafe's excitement at Rose sitting with him reminded Cate of a small puppy. As he wriggled in his chair, she pictured him wagging an imaginary tail. His ears practically pricked up at the sound of Rose's voice. Those two had a strong unrequited-love vibe going on.

Rafe had changed out of his outrageous Hawaiian shirt. *Wait a minute.* "How come you're all wearing school uniforms?" Cate demanded.

Austin gave her a quizzical look. "They're compulsory."

"But you weren't wearing them this morning. And they're only compulsory if you go to Socrates."

"Like we do," Austin replied.

"No! You don't." It was infuriating he could lie so effortlessly.

"The fact I'm wearing the Socrates uniform, in history class, at Socrates Private School, does seem to indicate I'm a student here."

Brittany wiggled her fingers at Austin from across the room. She made an *L* sign on her forehead and pointed at Cate and then her mobile phone. Her posse of friends burst into fits of laughter.

She had a finger she'd like to show that boyfriend-stealing whore. "Brittany doesn't know you! She's never met you. You've never gone to this school." She heard desperation in her voice.

"She waved hello." Austin stretched his arms over his head. "I'm not trying to be antagonistic, but that supports she knows me."

"Antagonistic?"

"You know, aggressive, hostile, deliberately opposing someone's point of view."

"I know what it means," Cate seethed.

Austin's eyes scanned the classroom. His fingers tapped the table as he jiggled a knee. Each time someone smiled or nodded hey to him, Cate's irritation ratcheted up a notch. She glanced his way more times than she would ever admit to anyone. Austin had...charisma. That was the right word. It radiated from him. He gave off a ready-to-party vibe. His scars were intriguing. Butterflies fluttered in the pit of her stomach.

The teacher called on her four times to name different emperors. Each time she failed. The fact Austin answered them all correctly irritated the crap out of her. According to her teacher, "he was a fabulous student she could learn much from." *Whatever.*

"So..." Austin's voice broke into her dark mood.

She looked his way before her brain remembered that was exactly what she was trying not to do. *Look! Don't look!* A private little war raged in her head. He smiled that infectious smile and she sighed.

Now that simply had to stop. She pulled some hair from her bun and twirled it around her fingers. She yanked her hand away, and separated a large chunk of hair from her scalp. Her eyes watered. What was wrong with her?

"Are you crying?" Austin asked.

His long, jet-black eyelashes curled at the ends. Why did boys always get the good eyelashes?

"Um, no...I have allergies." She fumbled, fighting a weird urge to lean in and rub her cheek against his. That would be creepy. "This time of year is rubbish for them."

"Winter?"

Even the seasons were against her now. "Yes." She waded deeper into her creative mess. "I have terrible winter allergies."

Austin raised an eyebrow.

Damn him for being able to do that. She couldn't.

"Okay." Austin nodded. "Tough break. So you moved here from Australia?"

"Yep." Cate kept her eyes forward.

"Lived in the thriving metropolis of Tempus Falls, California, for long?"

"About five years." Cate tapped her pencil on the desk and glanced at her flashing phone. Her mum had finally replied.

ZACH ALIVE AND KICKING ☺

Relief washed through her.

Austin covered her fingers and stopped the pencil tapping. She tried to yank her hand away, but he held fast.

"Let go," she hissed.

He moved his hand away. "Do you want to get lunch today?"

That came out of left field. "Lunch?" Cate processed a zillion scenarios in her head of how lunch might play out. Some ended well, but most ended with her dead, or in a straitjacket. "No."

"Think about it. Eating lunch with me makes a strong 'I've moved on' statement to everyone. If Zach doesn't see us, he'll hear about it."

Austin was back on the Zach thing again. She did need to find a boyfriend. Fast. A little voice told her Austin would be trouble in that department. Trouble with a capital *T* she was more than a little interested in.

"You do eat lunch, I assume?" Austin said.

"Yes...always. Eating is like one of my favourite things to do. Mum is constantly on my case about how much I eat." That was probably too much information. "Eve and I can both eat an entire dinosaur steak from The Bedrock. Our names are on the walls." Why could she not stop herself from talking?

"Impressive." He looked more wary than impressed.

The bell rang.

"Hallelujah." She groaned and hurried to pack her books before racing out the door.

"Eve!" Cate dodged around students. "Make a path, people, make a path," she muttered, surprised when a path of sorts opened up along the grey and white tiled floor of the busy school corridor. Something had finally gone her way. "Have you seen the three new kids?" *Shit!* The annoying buzzing in her ears was back.

"No," Eve stopped at her locker to swap books. "No one's mentioned any new kids. Three, you say?"

"Cate, I wanted to check we're on for lunch." Austin slouched against the lockers. "Hey, Eve."

"Austin," Eve replied, her eyes not leaving the books in her locker.

"You know him?" Cate asked.

"Of course I know him." Eve smacked Austin on the arm.

"But he's never been here before today," Cate said.

"You've been so weird today, even considering the Zach debacle."

"I'm not the weird one. You've never met Austin before. He doesn't go to school here. Yesterday you were in a catatonic state while he disabled a bomb under a bus." She lowered her voice when heads turned her way at the mention of bomb.

Austin rolled his eyes, and Eve shook her head.

"I refuse to feel guilty when I say I have no idea what you're ranting about." Eve slammed her locker shut. "See you at lunch, Austin."

"*Magic*," Austin mouthed as he left.

"What was that?" Eve said with a tight smile.

"Huh?"

"That crap about bombs and frozen people. Are you on something? That's not okay. Ever." Eve's voice and face were devoid of humour. She looked, well, fierce.

"Of course I'm not on something."

Eve had her best parental look on.

"It's only ten o'clock. I never take anything before lunch. It makes me queasy." Cate wriggled her eyebrows and smiled. "Oh, come on! That was hilarious."

"Do you see me laughing?" Eve turned on her heel. "Calculus calls."

The screeching in Cate's ears vanished as she glimpsed Rose's shimmering black hair disappearing around the corner. Rafe must to be nearby.

People *making* you do and think things with their minds was insane. *Hang on*. What if these three weren't people? Vampires did the whole mind-control thing. Actually, she may have made that up. She had a feeling it was the fallen angels who had cornered the mind control market. Cross off werewolves. They could only read one another's minds, and they had to be in the same pack. Wizards, could they read minds?

Calculus took forever. Whatever derivative they derived was lost on her. She was desperate for and dreading lunchtime simultaneously. She packed her things, dawdling behind Eve. Her mind raced while her feet dragged. "I need some air." She took a sharp right turn into the empty science block hallway lined with glass cabinets filled with vintage science equipment. She hurried to the end and pushed the glass door marked "exit" in faded green letters.

Smack! She walked straight into the glass. "Open, for Pete's sake!" She aimed a vicious kick at the door. Glass exploded, and she slid down the grimy white wall, her head resting in her hands.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" Eve gazed down at Cate, her blue eyes wide with shock.

"I'm having an epic bad day," she answered. "The door wouldn't open."

Eve walked past and with one finger pushed what remained of the doorframe open. "Well, there you go. Violence was in fact the answer in this case. You've frightened the door into opening."

Cate glowered at the door. Everything was against her today.

"Are you hurt?" Eve bent and examined Cate's leg.

"Stop fussing." Cate brushed Eve's hands away. "It was glass. I can break concrete and bones. Glass is a no brainer."

"Hmm. Maybe you need something to eat," Eve suggested.

"I'm not hungry."

"Don't be stupid—you're always hungry. It's our thing. When all else fails, we eat." Eve grabbed Cate's hand and yanked her off the ground. "I for one don't want to have to explain this little scene to anyone. We should skedaddle."

"Skedaddle?"

"Cool word, hey? Come on, Austin will be waiting in the cafeteria."

"Awesome," Cate muttered.

Cate spotted them straightaway, a bubble of stylish cool floating in a sea of try-hard fizz at

the table next to the cheerleaders. Eve waved across the cafeteria with zealous abandon. Rafe nudged Rose, who smiled and motioned they should join them. Eve nodded and pointed to the long food line. Rose gave a thumbs up and returned to chatting.

"She's so nice." Eve smoothed a few stray strands of hair off her face.

"Rose?" Cate would never use *nice* to describe her.

"Yep. I'll get your lunch. Go sit with them." Eve bounced off and grabbed two plastic brown lunch trays. At least someone was enjoying this alternate universe. She would wait for Eve's moral support before she joined the *nice* Rose and the others.

She scrutinized the three people who had invaded her life. Rose, Austin, and Rafe chatted easily. Their bodies were relaxed, but their eyes glowed with intensity. Rose stood to borrow some sugar from the table behind her. Six pairs of hands fought for the honour of handing it to her. Her shapely figure made the school uniform look like couture. Austin sprawled in his chair, oblivious to the admiring looks coming his way. Everything about him promised a good time.

Cate wove her way closer through the noisy cafeteria, careful not to draw their attention. She strained her ears to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Casanova you aren't!" Rose laughed and glanced up. "She *ran* away from you."

Cate ducked to tie some imaginary shoelaces. Unoriginal, but the best she had.

Rose searched the food line for Eve. "Eve's quite exotic looking. With that caramel coloured skin and golden blonde hair. She has to have Asian and Scandinavian heritage."

Close, thought Cate. Eve's father was Scandinavian, but her mother was Egyptian, not Asian.

"Hmm, well she likes you," Rafe muttered "Cate won't be far from her. Those two are joined at the hip. They've no other friends."

Harsh, but true. She changed feet to tie her other imaginary shoelace.

"Cate's legs may have been running from Austin, but he pushed all her buttons." Rafe nudged Austin. "If you get my meaning?"

"Who could *not* get your meaning?" Rose answered.

"You've totally scrambled her brains," Rafe added. "The lusting, loathing, feigned lack of interest and general mayhem going on in her head are giving *me* a migraine. I think you've woken up her teenage hormones, big time."

Gross! And not true, she lied to herself.

"Spare me the details." Rose screwed up her beautiful face with dislike.

A brick landed in Cate's stomach as Austin gave Rose's shoulder a quick squeeze.

"What do you think her deal is?" Rose asked. "Make sure you listen out for her, Rafe."

"She thinks like an elephant. I can hear her from a block away." Rafe checked his hair in a spoon.

"Son of a..." Cate itched to think "vomit" super loud as payback for that comment. She slid onto the edge of a bench filled with people and peered through a small gap.

Rafe busied himself confirming the symmetry of his eyebrows and grimaced at Rose. "I apologise in advance for these next words. Cate's not the only one lusting after Austin. I'm at a loss as to why no one is thinking hot, sexy thoughts about me. What's not to like?"

Rose opened her mouth and closed it before she spoke. "That's too easy. My Austin is pretty much every girl's cup of tea."

Her Austin? Cate's stomach lurched. The plastic from the seat bit into her backside. She was about an inch away from ending up sprawled on the floor.

"I'm convinced I saw Jonah this morning," Rafe said.

Jonah, Jonah? The Ralph Lauren model from the other day who nearly killed her, while Rose did nothing. He said something to her before he started choking her, but she couldn't quite remember it.

"I think someone is a bit Jonah paranoid." Rose rolled her eyes and checked her nails.

"You should be nicer to me." Rafe fluttered his eyelashes. "You rely on me to make people think they've known you for years. No one said anything about them having to *like* you."

Well, that explained why everyone at school knew them! If you could get past the fact it involved Rafe using mind control. Why did Cate see something different from everyone else? It was like the bus stop all over again. Was there a problem with her brain?

"You wouldn't." Rose raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow at Rafe. That figured. She could do the eyebrow thing too.

"While your constant rejection would be ample incentive to a lesser man, I choose to take the high road."

"Stop bickering," Austin snarled.

"Someone's testy about having to coerce Cate to be his special friend," Rose said. "I'm the only one who has the right to take issue with being involved in this."

Cate's chest tightened. Austin had to make her like him. That completely explained the "let's be an item and make Zach jealous" plan.

"There's a lot to like about her. She's feisty, athletic, and she knows how to throw a punch. I've had worse assignments and it'll be fun messing with Zach. The loser dumped her by text."

She grabbed her phone, ready to text the distress word to her mum and Pip. Her finger hovered over the button. Once it was done, it couldn't be undone. These three had had ample opportunity to kill or kidnap her, but they hadn't. She didn't love her life, but she certainly didn't want to relocate and start again.

"Do you think it's her?" Rose asked.

Austin shrugged. "Mortez wasn't pruning the roses at her house this morning, and I didn't recognise anyone else, so no leads there. But you saw her at the bus stop, and then there's her name." Everyone nodded and murmured their agreement.

What's the deal with my name?

Austin shrugged. "Even if it is her, Natinui will never sanction an intervention. We could be tracking her indefinitely. Are you listening for her, Rafe?"

"Yes! Get off my case. If she is who we think she is, why would Jonah try to strangle her?"

"That's exactly what I'd do," Rose said quickly. "To cover up Mortez ordered him to abort his mission to protect her precious Catherine. Mortez would only do that if someone crucial *and* irreplaceable to her plans was in danger. She's sacrificed hundreds of her people at a time without flinching. There's only two people that important to Mortez, Jonah and Catherine. So my money's on Cate here being *that* Catherine."

Who did they think she was? She'd never heard of anyone called Mortez, and the only person who called her Catherine was her father. She'd had no contact with him since they relocated.

"What *are* you doing?" Eve said near her shoulder.

Cate overbalanced and tumbled onto the floor. She scrambled to her feet.

"And who are you texting? I'm right here. Come on, I've got our food." Eve marched past and settled between Rose and Rafe.

Cate let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Her finger hovered over the send button. She was in a crowded cafeteria. How dangerous could it be? Texting the distress word would be a last resort. She wouldn't set those wheels in motion unless she absolutely had to.

Rafe's head jerked up. He tilted his head to the side, listened, and rubbed his ears.

She surveyed her new lunch group. Rafe was preening. Eve gabbed at a million miles an hour to Rose, who added an appropriate nod and occasional word when required. Austin cased the cafeteria. He sized up everyone in the room and noted all the exits, possibly identifying potential weapons and arranging them alphabetically in his head. No, alphabetically would be lame. Potential deadliness would be much cooler, and much more Austin.

For now, she would play along. It was time to be herself, not the manufactured bland girl

who blended in that witness protection required her to be. She chomped on her hamburger and fries and stared at Brittany and the other cheerleaders. Rose tapped Brittany on the shoulder.

"So, Brittany, being a cheerleader must be really fun?"

Austin groaned. His fingers brushed the back of Cate's neck as he lay his arm along the back of her seat. Rose glanced at Austin's hand and shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"I'm not *a* cheerleader. I'm *the* cheerleader. Cheer captain," Brittany replied with a tight smile.

"Impressive," Rose said. "I'd love to try out for your team."

"You missed tryouts." Brittany flipped her hair.

The buzzing started in Cate's ears again. She heard a soft snick and the static disappeared. Rafe's voice came in loud and clear, *inside* her head.

Let her try out. Insist she bring her friends along. Having Cate and Eve on your squad is a lifelong dream.

"Over my dead body," Cate muttered.

Austin's hand squeezed her shoulder, wrapping her in a blanket of tingly warm feelings. He bent his head and whispered to her. "So you can hear Rafe doing his thing now? Interesting. I know you couldn't hear him this morning, because he kept throwing in requests for you to flash your boobs at him, and you didn't smack him."

Cate kicked Austin hard in the shins under the table.

"I've changed my mind," Brittany said. "I'd love for you to try out. Bring Cate, and Eve with you. Bring all your friends."

Eve spat her drink over the table. "You cannot be serious!" she spluttered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. The other cheerleaders stared in astonishment.

"I *never* joke about cheerleading," Brittany replied. "We meet on the oval after school, Thursday."

"Nice going." Rose high-fived Rafe.

"I aim to please." Rafe winked.

"So Eve, are you up for some cheerleading?" Rose smiled. Red crept along Eve's latte cheeks as she stared at the table, pushing strands of golden-blond hair behind her ears.

Eve has such a crush on Rose! Cate thought.

"You two are prettier than all those cheerleaders; how come you aren't on the team already?"

"Well," —Eve preened as she spoke— "I am gorgeous but disliked because I hang with Cate, who is *more* gorgeous than me, but has a foul temper she often has trouble controlling. People keep their distance. So pretty yes, but popular, not so much. I'm also extremely uncoordinated."

"Cate!"

Well, well, well. "What do you want?"

"I wanted to say hi," Zach replied.

His eyes were puffy and his blonde ringlets rumped. That could be his new *popular* look though. Her desire to smack him around dwindled as she took in his shabby look. She still wanted to get even, but not like that.

"Oh," she replied. "Well, hi." Zach's eyes followed Austin's fingers, which had begun to trace circles on her neck. Cate's entire body below the waist filled with butterflies. She was surprised and a little pleased at how *unpleased* Zach looked. She snuggled a little closer to Austin. Hello, new boyfriend!

"Well, bye," Zach finished.

"Bye." Cate mustered the brightest "I am so over you" smile possible.

"Bye, Jack," Austin called.

"It's Zach," Zach replied.

"I always get that wrong. Sorry." Austin didn't look remotely sorry. Zach's eyes flashed with anger.

"Eve, could you be a dear and get me a glass of water?" Rose asked with a dazzling smile. "I feel a little warm."

"On it!" Eve's face lit up, and she zoomed to the servery.

Austin's hand dropped from Cate's neck as Zach sat next to Brittany. "That would be our cue to report back."

"I have questions," Cate said.

"And when we confirm who you are, we'll consider answering them." He stood and hoisted his leg over the back of his chair. "Oh, Cate?"

"Yeah."

"I guess we're an item now."

She took a deep breath, but the three of them were already halfway to the door.

"I really like them." Eve's face beamed as she watched Rose leave. At five foot five, Eve was three inches shorter than Cate and far more slender. Her lack of curves and boobs was a constant source of angst. "So you and Austin looked cosy. Now you two together makes far more sense than you and Zach ever did."

Cate gave a noncommittal shrug.

She stewed all afternoon about all things Austin. Eve left straight from school for an appointment, so Cate headed to homework club to finish a pesky essay. She left school at a different time and from a different building each day. Witness protection frowned on routine.

As the sun disappeared behind the buildings, she shoved her books away and headed home. She'd make a loop around the boarders' house for the required deviation as she left the school grounds.

The minute she stepped out of homework club, the short hairs on her neck stood up. She put her head down and power walked to the iron gates and hesitated. After checking behind her, she deliberated whether to call her mum to collect her.

"You're being paranoid," she muttered, crossing the road at a jog. A huge ginger cat raced past her. It looked like Polka Dot, the neighbourhood stray. She looked behind again. Someone with a tangle of blonde hair disappeared around the corner.

The shadows from the old boarding house started dancing, extending dark, damp fingers her way. One particular shadow held her attention. It crept along the ground toward her. She froze. Was that someone breathing in the shadows? She gulped air and stood still. The tip of the dark shadow slid closer. She made a decision.