



The first instalment in the Timesurfers Series by
Australian Teen Fantasy Author Rhonda Sermon

Timesurfers

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For further information please email
Rhonda@RhondaSermon.com.au

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AFTERSHOCKS

HIS CARELESS TONE MADE CATE LIFT HER CHIN A LITTLE. "I'M excellent at keeping secrets. I'm also fabulous at denial. We could pretend this never happened." She blasted him with an overly bright smile. Her ability to use sarcasm at such an inappropriate moment surprised even her. She had too much to lose to breathe a word of this to anyone.

Rafe let out a long breath. "Let me sort her."

"Leave her, Rafe. Who'll believe her if she does talk?" Austin called. "Set this situation right in everyone else's mind."

A fierce buzzing filled Cate's ears.

Austin stared hard at her. "It'll come to me how I know you. Natinui!" he called and melted from view.

Rafe and Rose climbed on the motorbike. They flickered and vanished.

With a flurry of movement and noise, people started going about their business again. She scooted over to Eve.

"Are you well enough to take the bus, or should we lash out and take a cab?" Eve asked.

"What?"

"You've been feeling unwell all afternoon," Eve said, concern etched on her face.

"Give me a second." She took a deep breath.

"Cab it is." Eve marched toward the road and let out an ear-piercing whistle. "You look pasty. Let's get you home."

The ride to Cate's house was a silent one.

"You should go wild and dress in a colour other than black once in a while." Eve interrupted Cate's thoughts. "It's very goth."

"What? Oh!" She looked down at her black leggings, top, and felt jacket. "You wear enough colour for the both of us!"

Eve smoothed her red tulle skirt, dotted with silver stars. Her black tights finished just above her shiny, cherry-red lace-up boots. Her outfits always reminded Cate of that eclectic mix five-year-olds wore when they couldn't decide if they wanted to be a tomboy or ballerina, or whether to go with patterned or plain. They went with a bit of everything.

"I wear black because everything else clashes with my hair." Cate braced an arm against the seat as the cab skidded to a stop.

"That's a whole other fashion discussion. See you at school tomorrow."

"Indeed."

"Zach's not worth it, you know."

She regretted for the millionth time not being able to tell Eve about witness protection. "I know." Cate slammed the cab door and pushed the iron gates under the rose covered arbour so hard that they bounced back and smacked her knees as she hurried through. The wooden boards creaked as she powered up the front steps and the security lanterns flooded the porch with light. Goose bumps rippled across her skin as she wrestled the key into the lock.

She shouldered the white door open and stepped into the dark house. The short hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She swiped her hand over the light switches. The bright light slowed her heartbeat marginally. With a cheery wave and forced smile for Eve, she closed the door. Her blasé front crumpled as the cab vanished.

She screeched when her phone beeped, startled by her daily 6:00 p.m. reminder to check in with Pip, her Handler. She slid down the wall and sat on the smooth, cold terracotta tiles, waiting for her heart to stop threatening to come out of her mouth. Her fingers hovered over the phone. Instead of physically meeting Pip each day, Cate had to check in daily by text to confirm all was well. Did she text the distress code or feign business as usual? When the alert level went up for any reason Pip also surveilled her for a good portion of each day and night. That was a complete nightmare.

She went with the standard text. If the people at the bus stop were here to take her, they would have done it this afternoon. Who were they? How did they vanish like that? And what about the frozen crowd?

CATE: "HOME WITH BREAD AND MILK"

PIP: "? YOUR DAY"

CATE: "FINE" She replied and held her breath.

PIP: "MINE UNEVENTFUL"

Obviously the news of her recently single status hadn't reached Pip yet. An eerie quiet filled the house. Her mum and brother went bowling on Sundays. She deleted her conversation with Pip, pounded up the steps into her bedroom, and leapt the last few feet onto the bed. If ever a monster were going to reach out from under the bed and grab her feet, it would be today.

She clicked the bedside lamp on and hugged her pillow to her chest. The tin roof popped and creaked. Someone might be up there.

Her phone beeped again.

PIP: "SLEEP WELL, SINGLE ONE..."

Of course Pip knew. She probably knew before Cate. If there were a middle-finger emoticon, she would have replied with it. She yanked off her Doc Martens and stripped off her clothes. After jiggling into her satin boxer shorts and T-shirt, she scooted under the bedcovers.

The iron bed creaked each time she moved. Her eyes shifted between the window, hidden behind the heavy gold curtains, and the door. The need to brush her teeth wasn't enough to make her walk up the dark corridor to the bathroom. In the movies, things never ended well when people walked along dark corridors. A loud crack outside made her heart rev. She pulled her patchwork quilt higher, her knuckles shining white as she tightened her grip.

Cate staggered out of bed, shattered after a night filled with more tossing and turning than sleep. She tripped over her antique bedside table and sent her alarm clock and the only photo she had with her dad tumbling to the floor when she smacked her knee on the corner. "Ouch." She hissed through gritted teeth. That would leave a mark. She stomped hard on her blaring clock, which someone had set on maximum beep. Little brothers sucked. "Xavier is so dead."

She drank in the silence smashing her alarm clock had achieved. Now her foot hurt. She rubbed her temples and waited for her heart to move out of her mouth and back to her chest.

Her fear of someone creeping around the house last night had morphed into a repetitive, gruesome nightmare. The guy with the shimmering red outfit, Rafe, rampaged through her school on his motorbike, while she giggled as Rose—that name was etched in her brain forever—gave her a makeover. All the while Jonah, the Ralph Lauren model lounged in the corner, dressed like 1950s gangsters, playing cards with Austin. Each time Austin’s scars started to drip blood she had woken with a start, drenched in sweat.

A migraine threatened behind her left eye as images from the bus stop bombarded her brain. Her heart spluttered and sprinted. No. She would repress those memories or die trying.

Her foot throbbed where she had stomped on the clock. With a grimace she lifted her foot for a closer inspection. A drop of crimson blood rolled off her heel and seeped into the shag-pile rug. She hopped around, searching for her mobile phone amongst the mess on her floor. The text message from Zach stared back at her. *What a loser!*

“WHERE R U?” she texted Eve, stabbing the phone buttons and muttering some choice words about Zach and his miraculous overnight transformation. She hobbled to the bathroom, mobile phone in hand, and carefully balanced it on the pedestal basin. In an effort to wash the horrible vomit flavour out of her mouth, she brushed her teeth twice. Her phone beeped.

EVE: “ON BUS. U OK?”

CATE: “YEP.” She lied.

She glanced in the art-deco mirror, and ripped the coloured braids from her blonde hair and twisted it into a high bun. She clipped a small green bow at the bottom. The principal at Socrates Private School was pedantic about hair and uniforms. Hair longer than your chin had to be up and off your face, and only natural hair colour that didn’t draw undue attention was permitted.

Her foot had stopped throbbing, so she gave it a quick twist on the white bath mat to remove any blood that might still be lurking and chanced a peek. “What the...?” She examined her foot from different angles. No blood, no cut, not even a mark. Did she imagine it?

“Cate, breakfast,” her mum called. “You’ll be late.”

She bolted to her bedroom, tearing her school uniform from hangers and wrenching it on. Where was her left shoe? She dropped onto her hands and knees and scanned the floor.

“Ah-hah!” She crawled to the end of her bed. As she retrieved the offending black school shoe, her hand brushed something wet and tacky. “Gross!” A crimson spot on the rug caught her eye. How could there be actual blood from an imaginary cut?

“Now you *are* late,” her mum bellowed.

Crap! She tugged on her socks and shoes as she hopped down the stairs.

Her mum stood at the bottom of the stairs. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine.”

Her mum touched Cate’s forehead. “You worried me, being in bed so early last night. You look pale. Is this about Zach?”

She bit her lip. “You know about that?”

“He posted a picture with Brittany on Instagram, and Pip texted me.” Her mother brushed her arm. “Did something else happen?”

Cate shook her head. Her mum definitely suspected something.

“You know the rules.” Her mum shrugged. “You require a boyfriend *and* a close friend as a minimum to stay under the radar. You have a week to find a new boyfriend. Loners stand out too much.”

Cate rolled her eyes. “Plenty of strong women go years without a man. Look at you.”

“I’m not a teenager. You can always find three more friends instead.”

Like that was going to happen. “Did anyone ever stop to think I might be more noticeable if I jump straight from one guy to another?”

“Lower your voice. Your brother will hear.”

Cate envied the fact Xavier was oblivious to the witness protection arrangement. He thought they moved because their parents separated and their mum got a job opportunity too good to refuse here. He never even questioned the overnight move. "It makes me look desperate and is guaranteed to create an enormous amount of unflattering rumours."

"I don't make the rules. Find yourself a new boyfriend or they'll find one for you."

"I got dumped by text. Cut me a little slack." She stomped to the kitchen.

"All dressed up today, Mum. You look nice," her brother said. "Hey, Cate?"

"Um..." Cate looked up from wiggling her foot inside her shoe. It didn't hurt at all. Xavier was right, pale pink suited her mum. "You should wear that colour more often, Mum." The grey trim on the outfit matched her mum's eyes.

"Thanks." Her mum pushed one side of her perfectly bobbed black hair behind her ear. Her pale skin and fine features were so different from Cate's and Xavier's sun kissed skin sprinkled with freckles. She was the principal at the detention centre that dominated Tempus Falls. Cate thanked her lucky stars her mum wasn't the principal at Socrates Private School where *she* attended.

How was she going to bring up her there-one-minute-gone-the-next cut foot? Did she even dare? She definitely needed to wait until Xavier left. There was no way she wanted him bringing up that conversation for the rest of her life. She opened her mouth a few times as her mum kissed her then Xavier and headed to the garage. Nothing came out. She couldn't do it. It was way more feasible that she was half asleep and dreamed she cut her foot than it miraculously healed.

What about the blood? She couldn't rationalise that disturbing fact. "Xavier..." She stared at her brother. Nope, no way she was confiding in him. Her brain whirred for something to say. "Don't you think it's weird Zach's all popular now?"

"Zach's always been cool. Dumping you...smart move."

"He hasn't always been cool." She banged her spoon on the kitchen bench. The bus stop was the most terrifying experience *ever*. The bizarre foot thing was freaking her out, and Zach's sudden popularity was plain irritating.

"Like we haven't always had a blue SUV and that imaginary golden retriever you insisted we'd always owned last Thursday?"

She glowered at Xavier, whose green eyes, so like hers, sparkled back at her. His blonde, wavy hair had a distinct boy band vibe with the long fringe.

"When you raced in screaming a *stranger* tried to abduct you, and it was the next door neighbour taking you to school like she did every Thursday?" Xavier grinned. "That's my favourite freaky Cate moment."

"Hilarious." Cate hadn't recognised the car, the driver or anyone else inside. Her mum drove her to school because she was so freaked out, calmly telling her everyone made mistakes.

"So, you're like a super loser now Zach's given you the flick, hey?" Xavier said.

How *was* she going to deal at school today with everyone knowing she'd been dumped by text? She gave Xavier her most dangerous stare and cracked her knuckles. He stood his ground for three seconds before he bolted.

"Muuuum, Cate's threatening to use her overrated black-belt skills on me," he yelled through the open door into the garage.

"Cate," her mother's stern voice called back.

Damn it. Her mum was still home.

"Those skills are for protection, not terrorising your brother. Or your ex-boyfriend."

Cate glowered at the open doorway. It was like her mum could read minds. What good were badass black-belt moves if she never got to use them?

Xavier's blonde head popped back around the door and she speared her spoon at him. He

dodged it.

"Not even close! I'm getting a ride with Mum." He flashed in, snatched his backpack from the bench and slammed the door behind him.

A few minutes later the door opened again. "Xavier, step inside and I promise to break all your fingers and maybe an arm." Now spoonless, she slurped the last of her cereal straight from the bowl.

"Take your best shot, black-belt, Cate."

Her bowl slipped through her fingers, splashing breakfast over her face and down her school uniform. There she sat, milk dripping from her chin, looking at Austin from the bus stop yesterday. She pinched herself hard, adding a twist for good measure, and squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, he was still there. Her stomach lurched and her heartbeat surged.

"I'm Austin. I don't think we officially met yesterday."

"I know your name." She resisted the urge to poke him and check he was real. "Are you actually here?" *Way to interrogate an intruder.*

"Yep." The light flashed against his scars. He wore them with such self-assurance, not so much as a glimmer of insecurity. His grey eyes danced with laughter as his mouth turned up in a crooked smile, which took some of the edge off his brutally short hair.

She collected her scattered thoughts. Her mum had an assortment of atypical friends who dropped by unannounced. She had moved past being scared of strangers, even in her house, a long time ago because she could hold her own. Still, she sat extra straight, her muscles tense, prepared for a quick exit if required. "Get your stalker self out of my kitchen," she demanded.

"Put your hackles down." He patted her shoulder.

She leapt off her stool and put as much distance between them as possible. "Touch me again and I *will* break all your fingers *and* an arm for good measure."

"I'll consider myself on notice." He sat on the kitchen bench and swung his legs, tapping out a tune with his hands on the bench top. "How're you holding up after yesterday?"

"I've already moved on." She wiped muesli and milk from her face and clothes, eyeing her mobile on the bench near Austin, and the house phone behind him.

"Didn't plan that too well, did you?" Austin tossed her mobile in the air. "I'm pretty sure to call for help, you need a phone."

She snatched at the phone, but he was quicker.

"Let's see what you've told your friends. Hmm." He tapped in a password and smiled. "Got it in one. You texted Eve this morning and...ouch! Dumped by text! Want me to beat him senseless?"

"Nope." If anyone pummelled Zach, it would be her. She held out her hand. "Give me my phone and leave, or I'll scream the house down."

"Would that be before or after you make good on your threats to render me helpless with assorted broken bones?"

What a smart ass. "After, so I can watch you writhe in agony while I make the call."

"To show I'm the bigger person, I'll wait outside. We'll chat on the way to school. I can maybe help you get even with, um..." Austin checked her phone and placed it on the counter. "Zach."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, and I certainly don't need your help. Save us both some time and leave."

"I've got plenty of time. I like you better without the rainbow hair, by the way."

Even with his face turned away, she knew he was smirking "News flash! I don't care what you or anyone else thinks about my hair!"

Austin lounged on the veranda as she walked out in a clean school uniform. He was rocking some tattered jeans and a fleecy blue and black chequered shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal blue numbers tattooed down the inside of his bicep. He was tall. Not as tall as the Ralph

Lauren model dude, but over six foot and...*oh crap!* He was watching her check him out.

"I told you to leave." She dug in her backpack and retrieved her phone.

"But you didn't mean it."

"Yes, I did." She took the five steps at the front of the house in one stride. Austin soared with easy grace over the handrail and landed soundlessly.

"Come on. I can help you put loser Jack...."

"It's Zach."

"Fine, put loser *Zach* in his place. I would have had my way with you by now if I was going to."

"Clearly you overestimate your abilities. Don't follow me or I'm calling the police." She hurried down the path, glancing over her shoulder before crossing the road.

Austin sat on the steps to her house and gave a big friendly wave. She checked her watch and sped up. Hating herself for doing it, she stole another look back. He'd gone.

"Hey," Austin said from near her ear.

"Ahhh..." She glowered at him. "What is your deal? The whole world stops. You people appear out of thin air, you disarm a bomb, someone attempts to strangle me and then everyone vanishes again. Now you're stalking me. What the hell?"

"Most of that was magic, plain and simple. All the normal people froze in the time stop, but not you. *I* want to know why you saw everything. What makes you different?"

"Magic?" Now he was trying to piss her off.

"Ah-huh."

"Fine. Play your stupid games. Just count me out." She checked her watch again. "I'm going to be late."

"I'll come with." Austin started an instantly annoying tuneless whistle.

"So, this whole surreal experience, how insane does it make me?" she asked.

"Define surreal."

"The *magical* frozen people, ridiculous strength, vanishing people..." She ticked them off on her fingers. "I mean, how real can they be?"

"All as real as I am. Want to touch?" he wriggled his slender fingers at her.

She kicked a few tufts of grass to buy time. "Pass."

"Has anyone in your family ever mentioned anything about wizard blood or mutant wizards?"

She gave him a filthy look.

"It was a long shot." Austin walked in silence. He went to say something a few times, but shook his head and thought better of it. "I'll give you a heads-up with Rafe. If you think the word 'vomit' hard enough, he throws up."

"Stop! I don't want to know any more about you and your magic. You aren't a super smart kid who graduated high school at ten and then medical school at thirteen, who works undercover at schools befriending at-risk teens and using your psychiatric degree to lock them up, are you?"

"What?" Austin looked puzzled.

"Never mind." She was thinking of *21 Jump Street*, but with doctors. Her mum watched reruns incessantly and Cate liked to point out the tragic fashion sense and ogle a young Johnny Depp, who was hot for an old guy, and had been *super* hot when he was young, even with his daggy hair.

Austin's tuneless whistle was like nails down a backboard. She halted, contemplating her options. "Right—I'm pretty sure I'm on the edge of a complete mental implosion; regardless, I'll go there. I cut my foot this morning and it just vanished. Like *magic*."

"Interesting. First time that's ever happened?"

"Strangely, yes."

"You're perfectly sane. Don't sweat it. I'll hang around and investigate. Do you want to hear my ideas for this Zach guy? We could kill two birds with one stone."

"I'd prefer if we forgot the whole thing and you left me alone."

"That's not going to happen."

Loose rocks crunched under her feet as they passed the back entrance to her school.

"So, I've got two ideas. I could beat Zach to a bloody pulp."

"I could do that without any help from you," Cate said.

"That's a whole other argument for another day. My second idea is we can pretend to be an item and make him insane with jealousy."

"Desperate much? Not likely." Her mum's reminder she needed a new boyfriend rolled around in her head. Nothing in the rules said it had to be real, only believable to people. Austin and her pretending to be an item would tick that box. "Why do you want to help me?"

"Because I'm a great guy and I like to keep busy."

"What complete crap. My brain aches from all this weirdness." She pressed her knuckle hard against her eye socket. "To be honest, I have no freaking idea about anything today."

The idea of Austin smacking Zach around made her smile. Technically her mum couldn't go ballistic if someone else pounded him. The thought of her and Austin as an item was not entirely unpleasant.

"Surf's up, dude!" Rafe greeted them with some surfer-type, one-handed wave from the front steps of Cate's school.

Here she stood between two strangers, possibly imaginary ones, who could do even stranger things. Rafe was a big ball of enthusiasm wrapped in a nauseating yellow, green, and brown Hawaiian shirt. *What if I'm losing my mind?*

"You aren't losing your mind," Rafe said.

Cate blinked. He read her mind.

Austin's I-told-you-so look piqued Cate's curiosity. *Vomit, vomit, vomit.*

"Childish and plain nasty," Rafe replied between deep breaths and dry retching.

"Then get out of my head." She shot him an innocent look laced with what she hoped was a vicious mental shove.

He staggered and winced. "Ouch, that hurt! You're freaky. First you're all bright eyed and not frozen at the bus stop, and now you did whatever that was to *my* head." He nudged Austin. "Watch the brunette."

Cate's eyes followed where Rafe pointed. A fierce gust of wind sent the brunette's skirt swirling, exposing her yellow G-string.

"You read minds and see the future?" Cate asked.

"Big leap there," Rafe said. "No one can predict the future."

"If he reads minds and lifts buses, what do *you* do?" Cate asked Austin.

"The list is long and impressive. Alas, I'm not a big sharer." His eyes sparkled as he smiled.

What an infuriating, arrogant—

"Yikes! We should go, Austin," Rafe said. "Natinui is waiting at the Break."

"I suppose it would be too much to ask who, what and where Natinui and the Break are?" Cate asked.

"Your perception skills are excellent! Think about my offer to help with the Zach situation." He brushed her shoulder with his hand as he walked past. "I'll see you very soon."

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath, uncomfortably warm all over. A quick glance

down confirmed she had not burst into flames. As Austin and Rafe disappeared down the street, her brain buzzed.

"Cate, wait up!" Eve hobbled toward her. She'd separated and twisted pieces of her high blonde ponytail and clipped them to her head with numerous green bows like some type of crown.

Cate hugged her friend. "What happened to you?"

Eve pulled away first like she always did. "Too much hugging and the new gossip around school will be *we're* an item."

"Let them talk." Cate grabbed Eve and kissed her on both cheeks. "Oh, wait...they're already talking about me."

"You've got a weird vibe going on today." Eve lifted the back of her skirt to reveal a bloody scrape at the top of her thigh. "I skidded down the bus steps about two seconds ago. I can't see anything. Is it bad enough to get me out of gym?" she asked hopefully.

Cate crinkled her nose with distaste.

"Come on," Eve whined. "Who else can I ask to look up my skirt? I've got my good underwear on."

This was when they needed to be part of a popular posse, so one of their other four BFFs could volunteer to help. Now five years on, she continued to pay for breaking Zach's nose on her first day at school. Zach forgave her because she said she'd be his girlfriend, and Eve had thought it was cool. Everyone else had given her a wide berth ever since. The video of it showed up every year, which thrilled her mum.

"Fine—if I throw up, don't say you weren't warned." She took a few deep breaths and bent down. Eyes closed, she placed both hands gently on Eve's leg. *Please don't let there be too much blood.* She opened one eye and peeked under her fingers. "Hmmm." Eve had shown her a bloody graze. Now...there was nothing.

"Is that a 'You need to go home' hmmm? Your hands are making my leg feel good, by the way."

"Dykes..." Jeff, one of Zach's new friends, called, walking by with a group of boys.

"Rack off," Cate replied as she glanced at her palms. This was bizarre.

"Didn't waste too many brain cells on that response now, did we?" Jeff said.

Exasperated Cate grabbed Jeff by the jacket "You want articulate? 'How do I loathe you, let me count the ways...I loathe thee freely, I loathe thee purely.' Articulate enough for your pea-sized brain, you tool?"

Jeff shook off her hold. "Losers!" His jibes were reassuring. This was how a normal day unfurled.

"You are the daughter my mother wishes she had," Eve said. "That quote would be heaven to her literature teacher's ears. Any updates on the Zach front to report?"

"We're done. The end. Everyone move on." Cate hooked the strap of her green backpack over her shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with your leg. You're spectacularly good to go for another thrilling school day."

"I'm surprised." Eve turned in circles as she tried to examine the back of her thigh.

"You and me both," Cate muttered. She smiled and, keeping her hands out of view, trudged to class. There were smudges of blood on them. Eve's blood. From her now nonexistent grazed thigh. What was with that?