Jade Dor

Jade Dor lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. She has completed two undergraduate degrees in Public Relations and Creative Writing and recently completed a Master of Professional Practice (Creative Writing) from the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Jade is an avid reader and writer, having her short stories, poetry, academic essays and blogs published both online and in print. Her role as Chief Editor of USC Journal of Arts (JAB) and copywriter for Rejuvenate Marketing has taught Jade how important editing and proofreading is in the publishing world and how to adapt her skills to suit many writing styles.

Jade is project manager for eMerge, an upcoming anthology to be published early 2019 featuring writing from students of USC Master of Professional Practice (Creative Writing). She is also working towards publishing her first YA novel.

Email: jaded1993@gmail.com
Synopsis

The first seven chapters of Alex's Destiny follows the protagonist, 17-year-old Alexia (Alex) Freya after he comes out to his parents and is evicted from his suburban home in Everton Park, Brisbane.

In Alex’s world, the Republic of Australia is in chaos with an extreme fundamentalist Christian politician, Simon Essenger, holding power. Discrimination is rife and only those who comply with the fundamentalist laws prosper. Alex meets Mary, the keeper of the Portal, who holds the key to Alex’s and Australia’s future.

At the end of chapter six, Andria (Mary’s sister-in-law), tells Alex that Mary and Timothy are his biological parents. The building is raided and Mary is captured for conspiracy while Alex and Andria hide in the sanctuary of the hidden Portal room. Instead of facing the issue, Alex retreats through the Portal where Timothy is believed to still be alive.

Alex’s Destiny is a novel of endurance, love, self-discovery and adventure. Chapter eight starts with Alex’s adventure through the Portal to change Australia’s future and find his biological father. This novel is polyphonic—each chapter alternates from Alex’s point of view (while Alex is in the alternate universe) to Andria’s point of view (back home in the Republic of Australia).

Chapter 8

First came the darkness. Then the heat. I will not die here. Die an unknown man, a stranger without fulfilling my destiny. Suck it up, Alex. Push through the pain. I screamed, feeling my scorching skin and burning bones. The invading thoughts continued as I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath: there was no air in my lungs. Panic set in. My throat clenched as I tried to breathe. Shock hit me like a bullet train of emotions.

I was going to die.

My resolve weakened. I didn’t want to die there. What about Mary? Would she miss me if I disappeared? What about Timothy? Who would search for him if I failed? Would he be lost in this alternate world forever? What about the rest of my life? Opportunities? Fulfilment? No. I will not die an unaccomplished 17-year-old. I want to die holding hands with my husband being surrounded by those who love me. Don’t give up, Alex. Not now. Not ever.

With my face on fire like a furnace, lungs like a dry, dirt road, I held my breath and counted. One. Two. Mother always said counting takes your mind off things. Three. Four. I felt tired and imagined my spirit escaping my body: a lifeless teenager floating inside the Portal, forever. Five. Six. Crack. The sky opened beneath me and I fell, gaining speed; now my terror focused on a crash landing. Closing my eyes, I almost gave in and sent a prayer to live before I landed on a pile of rough plastic and cardboard, smelling of leftover pizza, rotten apples and used baby nappies. It was an industrial rubbish bin. I was alive. Don’t worry about how foul it tastes, just breathe.

Seven. Eight. The first two numbers I saw when I opened my eyes, splashed in red across the cement wall. I patted myself down; everything was where it should be. Pulling myself out of the bin, my feet hit the cement and
knocked me off balance. Fuck. Feeling dizzy, I collapsed and passed out.

My best friend Sarah stared at me, her face caked with makeup. She didn’t need it. She was beautiful the way she was: cute, adorable, with a turned-up nose, her head tipping to the side when she spoke. While glancing around the room, I noticed cabinets that contained football trophies and swimming medals. I spun around, orientating myself. A familiar scene: hallway, classrooms, closed doors and neglected school notices which had been piled on top of each other, fighting for a space to make themselves known. Grade 12 formal.

‘Alex? Are you okay?’ she placed her hand on my shoulder. I turned back towards the entrance to the school hall, which now had a huge sign plastered across it: “Welcome class of 2011!”

Yeah, thanks, Sarah. Just nervous.’ I gave her my most convincing smile before we moved into the hall, saying goodbye to reality for the rest of the night. The walls and dance floor vibrated from the loud, punk-rock music. On the stage a local community band, AllzGood, tried way too hard to make it into the music industry. Disco balls lit up the hall and reflected off streamers which hung from the ceiling in an assortment of colours. At the far end stood long tables, set ready for the all-you-can-eat buffet, with spare chairs scattered around the sides of the hall to make space for a dance floor. Class mates danced with partners, a mixture of girls in long dresses and boys in suits and tie. I’m not sure if I can call us that. Girls. Boys. There’s always someone hooking up with someone, having teenage hormone-induced sex in the back seat of their car. Adults? No. But not children. Not anymore.

Sarah took my hand and I followed her towards the edge of the room. ‘I’m going to go ask Matthew to dance.’ He was her crush. ‘Why don’t you go ask Aaron? I know you like him.’ She giggled, punching me in the side. I told her my secret years ago. She promised to keep it forever.

I shook my head. ‘I can’t. Not here.’

‘Why?’

I fumbled on my words, ‘it’s a public place, Sarah. Jimmy and his friends are over there. What if they saw us dancing together? It’d be a nightmare.’

‘Be yourself, Alex. Be who you are. Let loose. It’s the high school formal. It’ll only ever happen once!’ She kissed my cheek and danced over to Matthew. Her hips swayed with the music as she drifted across the floorboards like a magnificent ghost.

I gulped. Maybe she was right. I needed to take risks. If I didn’t do it now, I’d miss the opportunity forever. I straightened my tie and strode over to Aaron. He saw me approach and my stomach turned.

‘Hi, Alex.’

‘Hey, Aaron. I’m just wondering... would you like to dance?’

Laughter erupted behind me. It was Jimmy. My face went white to match the colour of Sarah’s dress.

‘Aw, isn’t this sweet. Alex is asking his boyfriend to dance.’

I turned around and stared at the bully. His stance was confident, his eyes alight, eager to pick a fight.

‘Go away, Jimmy.’

‘Why? What are you gonna do, faggot?’ He pushed against my shoulder. Here we go.

‘Leave me alone.’

More laughter. ‘Or else? I’ve never seen you fight, faggot. Are you going to start now?’ He pushed me again, this time harder. I almost lost my balance.
‘Forget it.’
Fight or flight. Better to run and be a coward than stay and die trying to be a hero. I turned around towards the bathrooms and took a step forward.

‘Hey, faggot, don’t come back.’
Unwanted tears streamed down my cheeks as I ran into the male toilets and hid in a cubicle. Sobbing, I held my head in my hands, defeated. Why did I have to be born a failure?

I woke to a cold, damp cloth resting on my forehead. A grey painted stone wall now replaced red numbers. The smell of bacon that wafted into the room much more appetising than rubbish. I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the light in the room. Where the hell am I?

The sound of empty pots and pans echoed from the hallway. A faint whistle, like a butcher bird, accompanied it. Sitting up, I shifted to the edge of the bed and stood, my legs now holding my weight. The air against my bare chest felt refreshing; I must be running a temperature, still burning up from the fall. I stepped towards the corridor and saw a stranger standing at the other end.

‘Hey, you’re up.’
I froze, unsure of whether I’d been kidnapped by a serial killer or taken by an angel. The stranger was in his mid-20s with brown, gold-flecked eyes that sparkled under the light. Atop of his head sat a thick pile of jet-black hair which framed his face and led to his muscular body. He walked towards me.

‘Chill out, it’s okay. I saw you alone in the street, so I brought you home. You were unconscious, and I didn’t think it was a good idea for you to be alone so late at night.’

‘Why didn’t you take me to a hospital?’ The man came closer. I took a step back.

‘Hospitals mean questions you may not be able to answer. Look, I saw you appear from the sky and land in thatheap of rubbish. Unless you fell from a plane with a parachute—which somehow miraculously disappeared—you’d be dead falling from that height. I’m just here to help, okay? I won’t hurt you, I promise. Now what’s your name?’

Should I be giving out my personal details to a stranger? Trust had to be built somehow.

‘Yours first.’
‘I’m Mason.’
‘Alex.’

‘Alright, great. Nice to meet you, Alex. The bathroom is to your right if you want to clean up. Breakfast is almost cooked. Come down to the kitchen when you’re ready. Take your time, but the bacon will go cold.’ He gave me a smile and disappeared. The whistling recommenced.

I walked into the bathroom and closed the door. At first glance, the room looked like your average bathroom: shower, toilet, sink. It smelled of lemongrass and soap. The walls were lined with iridescent white tiles, just like in hospital—but these were speckled with blue, as though someone had thrown blue paint on a black canvas with their eyes closed. I pinched my shirt between my fingers and lifted it over my head. Holding it in my hands, I gave it a sniff and understood why Mason suggested cleaning up: I smelled like the rubbish I landed in earlier, only this time it included my own body odour. Gross. Throwing my shirt on the floor, I undressed and took a shower. The pressure felt like my brain was going to explode, scattering millions of thoughts across the white tiles; I’d watch as they seeped down until letters disappeared into nothingness, into a dark hole hidden from this world. What had I done? Where was I? Who was Mason? Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to this, to this going-through-a-Portal idea. No one will ever believe me when I return. If I return. Mary could be dead. Gone. What about Timothy? What would he say? Would he blame me for all of this? I held my head in my hands allowing the water to run over my hair.
and down my back. Timothy must be here, somewhere. Alive. I didn’t want to be alone.

I turned off the taps and stepped out of the shower, grabbing the nearest towel off the rack beside me. I dried myself off and realised the room looked different: no vanity, no mirror. Just the sink. Shrugging it off, I got dressed in the clothes Mason supplied: long skinny jeans one size too big which made them sag and a grey sweatshirt. With no way of telling how I looked, I hoped for the best and emerged from the bathroom, following the scent of bacon down the hall. The smell of fried food made my stomach rumble.

The marble table in the centre of the room was set for breakfast, the kitchen minimalistic in style containing just the necessities: steel fridge, freezer, stovetop, oven and dishwasher. Mason stood over the stove, cooking the bacon as I pulled out the metal-framed chair at the end of the table and took a seat. Can’t be too careful around strangers.

‘Feeling better?’

‘I guess so.’ At least I didn’t smell like rubbish anymore. A folded newspaper sat at the other end of the table.

‘Can I look at that?’

‘Yeah, sure. Go ahead. Bacon’s ready.’

Leaning over the table, I retrieved the newspaper and searched for the date: Tuesday, September 25, 2012. What? I read it again.

No. Not possible.

‘Is this today’s paper?’

‘Yeah.’

I stuck my hand in my pocket, forgetting the jeans weren’t mine and panicked.

‘My backpack.’ Standing up, I looked around the kitchen, ‘where’s my backpack?’

‘Don’t worry. It’s in your room, at the foot of the bed. I haven’t touched it. Everything is there.’

Not sure whether to believe him or not, I ran down the hallway to my room and found my backpack, on the floor, right where he said it would be. Bending down on my knees, I pulled it close and unzipped the main compartment. My fingers searched inside and found the orange file, a set of spare clothes, some muesli bars, a water bottle, my sketchbook and my phone. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm myself. Even though I was lost in an alternate world, I could still be myself, right? I took the spare change of clothes from my backpack and got changed, leaving Mason’s clothes on the end of the bed. Returning to the kitchen I glanced at my plate: bacon, eggs and toast. A typical Australian breakfast.

‘I said you can trust me, Alex. Dig in.’

‘How long have I been unconscious?’ Stuffing my face, I stared at Mason from across the table.

‘About half a day. I found you last night. How long did you think you were out?’

‘I don’t know.’ I took a sip of coffee; the warm liquid slid down my throat and I wanted more. Within moments, I finished the entire mug. Best coffee ever.

‘Where are we?’

‘Brisbane.’

‘And it’s September 25, 2012? You’re sure about that?’

Mason chuckled. ‘Of course.’ I watched as he raised his eyebrows and took another bite of bacon. ‘Is there anything you want to tell me, Alex? Like where you came from?’

I hesitated, unsure if I could trust him. I continued to eat as I glanced down at the newspaper. The small column on the side caught my attention. It contained a picture. A woman in a long, white wedding dress stood inside a chapel. Holding her hand was another woman dressed in a tailored white suit. Both were standing underneath an arch of white roses, surrounded by people in formal attire, all smiling in their direction.
‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ Mason pointed towards the newspaper. ‘They were lucky to get mentioned, let alone have a photo. Not many weddings in the paper these days.’

‘Why?’
‘There’s no need. It’s not news anymore.’

I wondered what made these two women so special – why they had an article written about them. Maybe one day I’ll be in the paper, holding hands with my husband, showing off our love to all our friends. Sarah. Sarah must be there, in the crowd, cheering us on.

Mason cleaned the table, placing the dirty plates in the dishwasher and retrieving clean ones to set the table with. He poured another coffee and placed it down in front of me.

‘How about this? If I tell you about myself, will you let me know about where you came from?’

Mason seemed like the kind of guy I could easily become friends with. But instead of sharing memories over a late-night Netflix binge with popcorn and Coke, my brain thought how beautiful his eyes reflected the light; how his lips, with their perfect shape, might melt against mine; how his voice, the voice of an Angel, might sound calling my name.

‘Alex?’

‘Yes. Yes, sorry. Okay. Who are you?’

Mason talked. He spoke for a long time about his life. He started with his childhood, when he lived in Massachusetts, USA and his studies at MIT. He moved to Australia for a fresh start after he lost his parents to a house fire and applied for a postgraduate degree at the University of Queensland. I watched him speak, mesmerised: the way he smiled when science was mentioned, how he lost eye contact, and his voice wavered when he spoke of his family. I watched the enthusiasm in his expressions the longer he spoke.

‘Alex?’
Chapter 9

Alex’s silhouette disappeared. Andria stared at the Portal. Its iridescent surface glared back, soundless. Alone. The room fell silent. She didn’t realise her hands were clamped together until her knuckles turned white. Lost, she didn’t know what to do. She always knew what to do. Alex walked through the Portal, which everyone wanted and needed him to do, but it shouldn’t have happened that way.

What will she tell Mary? That she forced him to go because she told him the truth about his parents? That Mary might never see her son again? Andria felt defeated. Ashamed. Andria selfishly missed her brother, but now she worried both their lives were in danger. Panic coursed throughout her body and she felt lightheaded. Her throat constricted, making her sweat. Andria was prone to panic attacks. Brisbane’s current state of chaos didn’t help her. ‘Stay calm,’ she told herself, ‘breathe.’ She remembered what her sister taught her when she was little: think positive. She thought about the rose garden in the backyard of her childhood home, about her father pushing her on the swing, about her pet dachshund, Bubbles. Andria relaxed her muscles and shook her body, ‘just like shaking off water. Be Bubbles.’ The attack faded and her breathing returned to normal. Mary couldn’t be mad. How could she be mad at her sister-in-law?

Andria reached into her pocket and searched for her keys. She strode out of the Portal’s room, out of the building and locked the doors. Her nerves made her clumsy. Her fingers fiddled with keys until she found the right one. The tarnished silver key missed the keyhole one too many times until it slid into the lock, keeping Brisbane’s secret. The air was thick with the smell of ash and Andria found it difficult to breathe. She untied the purple headband from around her auburn hair, allowing strands to wander free against her face. Over time, Andria learned to deal with the smell, covering her mouth with the band, but it continued to irritate her lungs, just like cigarette smoke, making her cough each time she stood outside in the city streets.

Andria scrambled down the front stairs of the building, her black high heels clicked against the cement, the sound oddly loud for such a quiet evening. Too quiet, she thought. Andria stopped, her eyes fixed on the black Audi parked down the street. She heard a voice in the distance and saw a flash of footsteps behind the car. A Protector still roamed the street from the raid, waiting for her. Andria’s paranoia grew. She glanced in the other direction; her green Toyota Corolla was still parked across the road, abandoned. Andria froze, her back pressed against the nearest brick wall. She only thought of two viable options: run, or walk, silent, in the shadows. She felt her jeans pocket, the small bulge of her car keys comforted her. After quietly removing her heels, she swallowed her nerves and walked down the footpath, staying close to the shadows of the buildings and out of direct light. The street remained empty except for the Protector’s car and her own. She followed the shadows, ducking behind half-dead Eucalyptus trees on the sidewalk and retreating to side alleys between buildings. Adrenaline kicked in and her steps quickened. ‘Stop panicking.’ She said to herself, ‘Only a few metres left. You can do this.’ Finally reaching her vehicle, she yanked the keys from her pocket, trying not to be as clumsy as she had been when she locked the building, and unlocked the car, jumped in and re-locked it. Safety. Relief. Andria unhooked the headband from her neck and tied it back around her head. She cleaned her glasses with a soft cloth before readjusting them to sit upon her nose. Deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out. Her shaking hands relaxed and she avoided another panic attack until she heard a loud knock of knuckles against the glass window.
‘Miss. Miss, can you please step out of the vehicle?’ Andria had no choice. She must obey the Protector or risk becoming a sinner, like Mary. She gave him a nod and opened the door, climbing out of the driver’s seat and inhaling the putrid air.

‘Good evening, Miss. It’s quite dangerous to be out here alone so close to curfew. Can I see your license, please?’ ‘Yes, of course, sir. I was just finishing work. You know how it is, the world keeps on moving and the good Lord keeps protecting.’

The Protector wore a face mask which muffled his voice and made it difficult for Andria to see his face. She handed him her license from the glove box compartment, trying to keep herself together. Lying is key. ‘Ah, Andria, is it?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘You didn’t see anyone leave that building over there, did you?’ He pointed across the street.

Andria stared at the building she knew so well, shaking her head. ‘No, sir. I just park here because it’s safer. These days you never know who might try to steal what’s yours. You can’t be too careful.’ ‘I agree,’ The Protector paused, staring at Andria’s license before handing it back, ‘well, everything seems to be in order here. You take my card and give me a call if you ever see anything suspicious. May God protect.’ ‘May God Protect.’

Andria couldn’t breathe. She fell back into the car seat and watched the Protector walk to his Audi. Hypocrite. Bastard. Words she wished to say out loud echoed in her brain. She loathed the Protectors, but most of all, the President. Essenger’s actions had destroyed freedom and personal liberty, only to have it replaced with a city that harboured suspicion and distrust. ‘The weak shall perish while the strong shall rise,’ Essenger said in his acceptance speech. Everyone was on their own.

Wishing she could tell Mary the news—also afraid of how Mary might react to the news—she drove past the only coffee shop allowed to be open during the evening. Officers of the law still needed their fix. The moon shone through patches of darkness created by broken streetlights. With the new curfew introduced last year, the government hired more officers to patrol the city to keep the peace. Instead, the loots in uniform terrorised the Betrayers, the Sinners and those under their protection. They instilled fear and terror into all. It was not safe outside after curfew. Those who backed Essenger agreed with his conservative ways and lived in luxury: high-rise apartments, never setting foot upon the ground of the Betrayers. The rest of the populous occupied whatever safe space they could find: an empty warehouse, an abandoned building, the back seat of a car. Essenger said, ‘those who follow shall live in paradise. The good Lord will protect us, as it says in the Bible, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one”’.

Andria tightened her grip on the steering wheel. The Republic of Australia had become a deep dark nightmare impossible to escape. A strong determination for change fuelled her actions. All shops, restaurants and fast food outlets closed at eight o’clock; their front doors chained and deadlocked, their windows boarded up, newspaper filling the cracks to keep unwanted visitors from seeing inside. As Andria stepped inside the shop, the first thing she noticed was a rubbish bin full of newspapers. Intrigued, she rescued one. She read today’s date. Her hands shook, eyes fixed upon the photo placed in the centre of the front page. A mugshot of Mary. She looked ragged: her lips a thin line, her makeup smeared, her skin sallow. She had been crying. Andria wished she could reach through the pages to give Mary a hug.
to let her know everything would be okay. She wished she could pull her in close and bury her face against her neck. Andria imagined Mary weeping, the feel of her body shaking against her, the way her tears would stain her blouse. She remembered when Mary argued with Timothy years ago. Mary retreated into the comfort of Andria’s arms. Andria’s promises of safety could no longer be met. No one knew what the future held. Discouraged, she continued reading.

Andria’s heart raced as she gritted her teeth while reading the final paragraph. The Brisbane Prophet now only gave news from Essenger’s point of view and each article ended with a quote from the Bible. ‘The wrath of God is bullshit. There has to be something I can do to save Mary.’ She tore the article out of the paper and threw the rest in the bin.
buildings, carparks and even local cafés during opening hours.

Andria climbed the stairs from the carpark and retreated into the comfort of her apartment. She spun around and proceeded through each individual lock, once, then twice, double-checking to make sure none were faulty or left unsecure. She placed her car keys in the bowl next to some lip balm, her mobile phone and a half-empty packet of cigarettes. Andria’s OCD took hold and she used her fingers, arranging each item to sit in equal proximity to the other. Her material possessions must always match her outward appearance: neat, calm, equal and together.

When Essenger banned the public from using internet, she found something else to occupy her time. Apart from rigorous cleaning rituals, Mary always brought Andria new books from Imaginarium. Books on animals, archaeology, biology, architecture or psychology filled her shelves, their spines damaged from constant handling. Her apartment seemed even smaller with towers of books occupying small spaces. Inside, it smelt of musky old paper, mildew and rotten fruit, which she was now accustomed to. ‘Better than ash and dead rats,’ she’d always tell herself.

Taking her coffee, Andria walked into her office and sunk down into the black, leather chair. She rescued the newspaper article clipping from her pocket and set it down on her desk. ‘I’m going to save you, Mary.’ She ran a fingertip over Mary’s picture, tracing the outline of her head thinking of ways she could help her sister-in-law escape prison. The walls of her office were crowded with pictures: family portraits, pictures of when she was little, a photo of her in a graduation gown. Andria’s eyes grew wide: graduation. University. ‘I studied law for fucks sake. God damn it, Andria. You can do this.’ Within the next ten minutes, Andria’s desk was piled with dust-covered law books. ‘Hang in there, Mary. I’ll get you out.’

Chapter 10

‘Hey, Greg, it’s Mason. You got a minute?’

I saw Mason retreat into his bedroom for privacy, his clumsy attempt at closing the door left a crack so I overheard the conversation.

‘Yeah, I know. I just need a few days that’s all. Can you do that for me?’

Quietly stepping closer, I peered through the crack, watching Mason as he sat on the edge of his bed. His free arm stretched out behind him, giving me a good view of his muscular frame. The phone call fuelled my paranoia: who was he talking to? Was he reporting me to the authorities? If so, would they lock me up in prison for the rest of my life? Fear and despair washed over me as I listened to him talk to Greg.

‘I never ask for time off, you know that. Sparkles will have to deal with it. Tell her to call in Murry.’

‘Alright, Alright. I’ll do extra time next week. I promise. Thank you.’

Creeping forward, my head rested against Mason’s bedroom door. When he opened it, I fell – losing my balance and landing face-first on the floor.

‘Alex?’

‘Sorry, I’m sorry. I was just...’

‘I know. It’s fine. But after last night, I thought you might have trusted me.’

I followed Mason back to the kitchen and watched him place his phone and keys in his back pocket. Sharing the story of my life took courage. I told Mason almost everything, about my parents, Sarah and Mary, but I left Brisbane’s secret a secret: I couldn’t trust him with the Portal. Not yet.

Mason grinned and I watched as he sized me up, ‘what are you wearing?’ He finally noticed my change of clothes.
Compared to Mason, I looked like a homeless man who'd been living on the streets for the past year eating leftovers from the rubbish bin for breakfast.

'This is what a normal teenager would wear, you know, back home.'

Mason shrugged, 'suit yourself.'

I stared at Mason: sophisticated, smart, sexy. He wore polished black leather lace-up shoes which matched his crisp, black suit. Underneath, a gold vest covered his collared white shirt, reminding me of a man who was ready for the races. Preppy, but stylish. He walked back down the hall towards his bedroom, 'are you ready?'

'For what?'

I heard a loud clink. Curious, I followed the noise and snuck down to peek into Mason's bedroom. Another attempt at figuring out who I was now living with. Standing with his back towards me, I noticed what he was doing: along the end wall of his bedroom stood a cabinet, full of floor to ceiling of glasses placed in neat, even rows. Not the kind you drink from, but the kind you use to read. Mason's selection, bigger than my local Specsavers, ranged from pink frames to frames that sparkled under the light. Surprisingly, a rectangular mirror hung in the centre of the display. Mason carefully picked up a pair of green wire-framed glasses, set them upon his nose and looked in the mirror. He caught me staring at his collection from the doorway.

'What, you don't have a hobby?' he pressed a button and the glasses disappeared, sinking into the wall as though they never existed. Mason turned back towards me and entered my personal space, the smell of Calvin Klein and spice intoxicating. 'Don't tell anyone about that, okay?' He leaned in closer, his lips almost brushed against my cheek, 'we all have our secrets to keep.' His breath ghosted my ear. I shivered. Stop it, Alex. Keep your pants on. You need to gain his trust, not give him more reasons to hand you in.

swallowed, took a deep breath and followed Mason back to the kitchen.

'Let's go.'

'Where?'

'I promised I'd show you around, so you can get a feel for this world.'

'Do you have a car?'

'No, it'd be too dangerous. Here,' Mason passed me a helmet, 'we'll take my bike.'

I'd never been on a motorbike before. The closest I'd ever been was walking past them parked in the city while their riders grabbed a beer at the local pub and seeing posters of them through pub windows. Magazines were off-limits when I was younger, except during school where I would swap one for my Vegemite sandwich. Father would say magazines were the Devil's rubbish—that they were full of lies. He'd make me read the Bible instead, always watching my every move, just like Big Brother. I imagined what it would feel like riding a bike with Mason: the wind enhancing his cologne; my arms wrapped around his waist, purposefully pressing my body against his; my fingers finding a button undone and running across his smooth, perfect skin, gliding up his chest. The thoughts grew louder as I followed Mason down to the garage. Back in my world, public affection between two men would get you killed. Am I allowed to express my feelings here? Am I allowed to be myself? Unsure, I shook the thoughts out of my head and instead focused on the most magnificent bike parked in the middle of the garage: a Triumph Thunderbird. Its sleek black and crimson panels glistened under the light and I felt a magnetic pull, drawing me forward. I couldn't resist. I stepped closer and reached out, running my fingertips along the handlebars.

'Alex, meet Virgil. Virgil, meet Alex.'

I chuckled. 'You named your bike?'

'Of course, I did. Every rider gives their bike a name.'
‘Why Virgil?’

I watched as Mason shook his head, raising his brows. ‘It’s a Thunderbird, Alex.’

Confused, I shrugged.

‘You’ve never seen the movies?’

‘No. Should I?’

“They’re a must watch, my favourite movies of all time. Tomorrow night. I’ll get popcorn.’

Rolling my eyes, Mason threw me a helmet and I buckled it under my chin. My excitement rose like a volcano, ready to blow.

‘You’ve been on a bike before, right?’

I hesitated, not wanting to look like a loser in front of Mason but decided against lying.

‘I wish.’

Mason chuckled. We climbed onto the bike and as I settled on the pillion seat, he turned on the ignition, gunning the throttle. ‘I should have known, considering you’ve never heard of Thunderbirds. You’re in for it, kiddo. Grab hold on my jacket, don’t need you falling off while we’re doing 110 kilometres an hour.’

I disregarded his comment about calling me a kid and wrapped my arms around Mason’s waist, taking every opportunity to touch him.

‘Thunderbirds are go!’

We shot out of the garage faster than I’d ever been before. Virgil roared down the street and flew past people, houses, shops and high-rise buildings. I began to recognise the area, Annerley, just south of the Brisbane CBD. The city’s ambience felt different. The sun’s rays illuminated every area of the city, defeating shadows and replacing them with brilliance; the roads, crowded with traffic, became a sea of cars in all colours of the rainbow. The scent of star jasmine and honeysuckle overpowered Mason’s cologne, a smell I’d missed since the burning and ash started to become commonplace back home. We followed Annerley Road down towards Vulture Street then rode into the city. Mason found a park close to Queen Street Mall and took off his helmet.

‘Coffee time.’

Like riding a bike, my parents never allowed me to drink coffee. When I woke up in the morning I could always smell the beans brewing as Mother made Father a cup before he went to work. Left alone at the house once, I managed to lick the bottom of the glass kettle; it tasted just as good as it smelled.

‘Is it different where you’re from?’ Mason and I stood side by side, strolling down towards Starbucks in the Myer Centre.

‘The city?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very.’

‘How?’

‘At home, there is no happiness, only darkness and lost hope. Instead of traffic, cars sit abandoned on roads because their upkeep is too expensive. Shopping malls, like this, are boarded and closed for fear of the Protectors. The air smells of smoke and ash from constant fires: cars, buildings, trees. It doesn’t matter to them, the life of others. As long as they succeed.’

Mason stopped walking and stared down at me. ‘I’m sorry.’ He reached out, his hand gently cupped my cheek, his fingers brushed away my tears. He pulled me into a hug and we embraced. His closeness enfolded me. The world faded and it was just Mason and I. ‘It doesn’t have to be that way anymore.’

I allowed him to think that. Staying here would be a dream, but I’d have to sacrifice my own reality and everyone in it. I squeezed Mason, then pulled away from him as the world came flooding back. ‘Thank you.’

We soon reached the coffee shop and I analysed the people inside: cheerful, smiling and happy, often found in
groups of two or more, wearing vivid clothes, mostly blue, red and pink, all enjoying their morning coffee.

‘Everyone is so happy here.’

‘Why wouldn’t we be? Everyone here is allowed the same opportunities as everyone else. If you want to become a teacher, then become a teacher. If you want to become an astronaut or scientist or cleaner, you can. No one is stopping you from being who you want to be.’

I took a seat along the outside of the café while Mason ordered coffee and observed my surroundings. Unhooking my backpack, I retrieved my sketchbook and began to draw: trees, buildings, people, faces. A family standing across the street stole my attention, the sketchbook soon filled and became a portrait of them: two men, similar age and two children, a boy and a girl. A mesmerising display of lollies in the shop window held the children’s attention while their fathers, leaning above them, progressively became closer and kissed. In public. In front of the thousands of people who must have seen them. My pencil dropped to the floor and I stared at the family like an alien without blinking. That’s what I want. To be happy. To have a family. To be free. I imagined what would happen back home if I encountered the same situation. The constant 24/7 camera footage would capture the couple. Within minutes, they’d be swarmed by gun-wielding Protectors and if any of the Protectors hadn’t pulled the trigger by now, ending their lives, they’d be taken to jail and locked away for treason. Essenger made it impossible for such a scenario to occur. No one would dare risk their life for a kiss.

‘Are you alright?’ Mason returned with two coffees in hand and passed one over. ‘I hope you like coffee. One espresso con panna, coming right up.’

‘Thanks. Just taking it all in and loving the fresh air. What do I owe you?’ Pulling out my wallet, I retrieved a five dollar note from the pocket, ‘will this do?’

Mason stared at the note like a foreign currency, unsure on what to do with it. ‘We don’t use that here.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Put that away, Alex. We use a different currency. If they see you using that...’ his tone of voice changed to sound threatening, fear swept over me as I quickly threw the money into my backpacked and zipped it up. What the hell? Who are they? The government he keeps talking about? Spies? Maybe it’s not so different here after all.

‘What do you want to know about our world?’

‘So many things.’

Mason took a sip of his coffee. ‘But if you could go anywhere in Brisbane today, where would you go?’

I thought about his question and drank my coffee; the bitter taste made me cringe, but the flavour was delicious. ‘I want to learn about your politics, about your government. I want to know how Brisbane became such a free world.’

Mason stood, staring down and towering over me like one of the skyscrapers outside. He gave me a smile and ushered me up from my seat, ‘To the library.’

Taking off down Adelaide street, the differences between the worlds became more evident. I gazed towards the sky. On top of every skyscraper sat a giant electronic screen, staring down at me with an intimidating look. Each screen addressed different items in the community from local events and trusted businesses to advertising products and traffic control. Brisbane glowed like Times Square, the buildings reflected an array of bright, vibrant colours. As we turned down George street, the overpowering scent of flowers grew and Mason slowed to a crawl. Foot traffic crowded the street along with multiple stalls backed with freshly cut flowers.

‘What is this?’

‘The city’s weekly flower market.’ Mason didn’t sound phased.
‘It’s so beautiful.’
‘You don’t have flowers back home?’
‘We used to.’

Mason parked the bike outside Brisbane Square Library. Turning off the ignition, we dismounted, and I made a bee-line for the flower stalls. An array of colourful roses, sunflowers, gerberas and chrysanthemums stood in barrels of water, ready to be bought.

‘Alex.’
A faint voice called my name from the crowd. I turned around and saw Mason holding a large bunch of roses.

‘Mason...’ I watched as he grinned, his smile always so bright. ‘For you. Here.’ He held them out and I accepted them with glee, their sweet scent overwhelming. My face puffed up and I began to cry.

‘Why are you crying?’

Mason took hold of my free hand: callouses made his fingers rough, but his gentle touch outweighed the masculinity of his skin. Mason pulled me to the side to escape the crowd.

‘Everything is so beautiful here.’ The roses he gifted me had been tie-dyed in pastel colours of blue, pink, yellow and purple. ‘I wish this was home.’

Mason tugged me into a hug, holding me tight. He whispered in my ear, ‘it could be.’

Retreating into the quiet of Brisbane Square Library, I clung to Mason’s side as we walked through the foyer. The building, adequately named, sat six storeys’ high and held a large carpeted space in the middle with towers of books surrounding it. The library’s most prominent feature, however, was its skylight: stained glass coloured patterns scattered light down onto the floor, creating a mesmerising assortment of colours. I caught Mason in the centre of the square with his head tilted back and his mouth agape. His black suit now a mural of colour. The peace and quiet within the library provided a comforting barrier against the outside noise, peaceful, as though nothing in the world could ever hurt me. Hurt us. I closed my eyes and breathed in the old book smell, the faint hint of coffee and roses. Mason took hold of my hand and we weaved through rows of books until we reached a small, dark corner of the library. Above us, an old dusty sign reading “history” stared down like a warning: enter at your own risk. I thought about the ghost of Eleanor Twitter from Ghostbusters.

‘Why is it so deserted here?’

‘We have no reason to seek out information about the past. Everyone is happy with how things are now.’

I stepped through the invisible threshold and focused my attention on the books: dusty, worn spines protruded from wooden bookcases. Running my fingers over them, I read each title: Brisbane’s Technology, Advancing Automobiles, Queensland Firefighters... my fingers stopped when I reached a book of interest: Brisbane Prophet Articles. Retrieving the heavy leather-bound book from the shelf, I sat down cross-legged on the carpet and blew the dust from its pages. Mason lurked from a distance: I felt his gaze on me. Glancing towards him, I shot him a smile and noticed his glasses had changed; a brown, wide-framed pair now sat upon his nose and made him look even more adorable. Blushing, he caught me staring at him.

‘You better get to work,’ he winked, ‘I’ll be around. Come find me when you’re done.’

Returning my attention to the book, I started to flick through its pages. Newspaper articles dating back to the 1990s were stored inside; a treasure locked up in the dark, just waiting to see the light. As I read each article, I lost track of time, immersing myself in this world’s history. Articles ranged from car crash incidents to the changing of equality laws to local weather catastrophes. It wasn’t until the last page that I noticed something familiar. The final newspaper
article, a short column dated 1996 and titled 'Scientist Receives University Medal for Excellence', contained a picture of a man accepting the award. Retrieving the file from my backpack, I found the photo and compared them: the same man smiled back at me. Could it be? Could Timothy still be alive? My biological father? With this realisation in mind, I read the article.

Scientist Receives University Medal for Excellence

Timothy Bold, 41, was today awarded with the University of Queensland's excellence award. The award is for Dr Bold's dissertation in the research area of temporal anomalies. In his acceptance speech, Dr Bold referred to the creation of alternate timelines. Dr Bold has been granted tenure and will continue his research at the University of Queensland.

I couldn’t believe it. He was still alive. I stared at the article, overcome with the urge to keep it, to keep the picture of Timothy close. Tracing his face with my fingertip, I wished he were here, sitting beside me; that I could reach out, hug him and tell him I’d never leave again. A tear fell from my cheek and landed on the page, smudging the black ink. Running my fingers along the edge of the page, I tugged; the binding was loose.

With little effort, the page tore and slipped into my hands. I glanced around the room: empty. Convinced I was alone, I closed the book, hid the article within the confines of the file, placed it in my backpack and slid the book back onto the bookshelf. Just the way it was before. Untouched. Determined to find my biological father, I searched for Mason. Wandering around the library, I found him spread out on a couch, reading a book. He looked peaceful; lost in his own world, an alternate reality. Being careful not to interrupt, I took a seat next to him on what little space was left.

‘Did you find what you needed?’ I watched as Mason dog-eared the page he was on and closed the book.

‘You said you study at the University of Queensland?’

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Do you know a Timothy? Timothy Bold?’

Mason moved into an upright position, his leg resting against mine. ‘He’s my supervisor.’

I froze. Supervisor? Here? He was actually here? I thought I was going to faint.

‘Alex?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s a cool guy. Good at his profession and I envy his research. I can introduce you to him if you’d like, but he’s away on business at the moment. Perhaps when he gets back?’

‘Yes.’ The word flew from my mouth faster than my brain had thought of it.
‘Okay,’ I saw Mason glance at his watch, ‘it’s getting late. Best we head home.’

Nodding, I followed Mason back to his bike. The sun was setting overhead turning the clouds pink above the bustling street; people who had just finished work heading home to their family for the night, ready to start again tomorrow. Family. I don’t know who to call family anymore. Mother. Father. Mary. Timothy. Wrapping my arms around Mason’s waist, I squeezed him tight. At least I’m not alone.