Mason's quiet as he considers. 'It might be possible,' he says softly before looking over again. 'Would you go backwards if you could?'

'I don't know,' I think for a bit. 'It doesn't make sense to me. Going backwards. Like, if you travel back and kill your younger self. Except now you're dead, so there's no future self to come back and kill you.' Mason's smiling by now, nodding, so I join in. 'So now you survive, but that means you're alive to come back and kill yourself …'

'Yeah, yeah.' He's still smiling, but he glances away, almost sad.

'My brain hurts,' I grab the backpack and breathe in as I stand.

'Right now, all I can think about is getting into a decent school.'

Mason stands with me while I walk to the door. 'Listen,' he calls out. 'The way things work these days? It's all about how much you contribute to the state.' I must seem a bit unsure because he keeps going. 'So make sure your plans for the future sound useful, okay?'

'Yeah. Thanks.'

We arrive five minutes early for the interview and have to wait for ages, our backs slowly sagging with each click of the clock.

We're still there when the next interviewee after me arrives with her dad, and our backs snap straight again. She's one of those bouncy people with a ponytail that flicks when she moves. I return her grin nervously and try not to look at her A2 art folio. Architecture, perhaps? Disaster co-ordination?

When it's finally my turn, I'm already on the other side of nervous. We enter the meeting room to find two empty chairs at a round table with about seven or eight people in business suits sitting around the circle. They all have labels in front of them: important community members, school staff and the principal opposite me. I think it's meant to feel inclusive and equal. I just feel sick.

Everyone stands when we come in and I resist the urge to curtsey. It's all so formal. The year nine co-ordinator introduces herself as Ms Leoni and asks us to take a seat.

No-one speaks while we all shuffle into position. I make a point not to let myself focus anywhere near Mum because I know she'll be smiling so hard that I might throw up.

'Courtlyn Roche,' Ms Leoni taps at her keyboard and all faces lean towards their compads. 'Now, Your test scores were good across the board. Very good, in fact. You're starting with the exact broad base that we're looking for. And your references are solid, too.' She pauses to peer at her screen. 'I've had some trouble chasing one of your teachers for a phone reference … Miss Smythe?' She looks over at us. 'Is that it? With a y?'

Mum and I turn to each other: 'Isn't it with an i?'

'I think it's a y but no e.' My heart's beating so hard that I'm sure the guy from Orion Energy sitting next to me is about to ask what the noise is.

We mutter about the spelling some more and then I shake my head. 'Actually, you know what? I just remembered. She got married last year and changed her name.'
‘Oh! That explains it.’ Ms Leoni smiles. ‘What’s her married name?’

Her married name, it turns out, is even harder to spell than her maiden name and we only have to disagree twice about the spelling before Ms Leoni tells us not to worry, she’ll sort it out. I don’t let her know that the only teacher in the city with that name is on an extended holiday.

The whole room relaxes after that. Especially me. A woman from the Disaster Co-ordination Centre keeps nodding at everything I say, so I find myself speaking to her and just glancing around the table here and there.

They ask about my goals after leaving year twelve, and the guy from the CSIRO grunts something like *yaar* when I list the universities that offer Bioengineering.

I’m even able to take a full lungful of air by the time they ask about my hopes for after uni. I have heaps of ideas about ways that food technology might help us feed more people and I’m only at the start when a man at the edge of my sightline shakes his head.

‘Feed more people and you’ll also have to house them. Not to mention the extra energy and water.’ He’s skinny with age, red flaky skin. This guy is old.

My eyes flick to the name label in front of him: Minister for Resources and Rationing. I take a breath. ‘True, but … we can find ways to deal with that, too.’

‘We already have tighter rationing because of the problems with the Murray Darling. How would we cope with another disaster like ’79?’ He’s talking about the fire that went through the city’s water treatment plant. ‘Why feed illegals when we already struggle with the citizens we have?’

My lungs have gone empty. I glance at Mum, and immediately turn away. She was gripping her seat so hard that I could see the network of veins in her neck. I try the woman from the Disaster Co-ordination Centre but she offers only a pained smile before glancing down and I’m left staring back at the Minister for Resources and Rationing. Just him and me.

‘Try to help everyone, Coutlyn Roche, and you might end up helping no-one.’ His voice seems stronger than it should be and I find myself imagining a younger man behind the dry skin and wrinkles.

‘But that’s no reason to stop trying?’ I can’t help the little lift at the end: don’t you agree?

The Minister slowly clasps his hands together and rests them on the table. His eyes stay on me the whole time.

My lips are dry. I’ve been breathing through my mouth. I shuffle awkwardly in my chair, searching for an answer.

*Why feed illegals? I want to say. Because we’re human beings, that’s why. We’re meant to look out for each other.*

And because I’m one of them, of course.

The silence has lasted way too long, but I have no idea what to say next.

‘The reason to stop trying, Coutlyn,’ says the Minister finally, ‘is that now more than ever we need to use our resources wisely. And that especially includes our human resources.’ He pauses,
and I feel the whole panel watching me. ‘You and your peers here today are our future, you realise that, don’t you?’

I’m not sure if he expects an answer, but I sit taller in the chair and nod as agreeably as I can.

‘Some would say that you owe it to your country to work where the need is greatest. Judging from your IP, Coutlyn Roche, I’d say you were best suited to medicine. Or disaster co-ordination, perhaps.’

‘Okay.’ Still nodding. ‘Yes, that would be okay.’ It’s weird how he keeps using my full name.

‘If you spend your time trying to help people that can’t be saved, others are placed at risk.’

I guess. Yes, that makes sense. I could work in medicine.

I’m saying the words but they feel empty.

‘Well,’ Ms Leoni breathes in and glances around the table.

‘Any more questions from the panel?’

Everyone shakes their heads. My eyes stay locked on the Minster for Resources and Rationing as he clicks something on his compad. He lifts his head to examine me again, and crosses his arms.

By now Mum’s standing, so I do too, bowing my head and thanking everyone. Then we’re out the door into the dusty school grounds and it’s all over.

It’s over.

Swirls of wind and dirt outside make it difficult to talk, so it’s not until we’re heading along the train concourse that Mum speaks. ‘I can’t believe –’

‘It’ll be all right.’ No way I’m going to hear her say it out loud. You messed up.

‘Yes.’ But her head tilts down. ‘I’m sure it’s fine.’

Neither of us says anything for ages. If she started yelling about the interview, then at least I could yell about it too. But how would that help? Screaming about it isn’t going to change anything.

In silence, we let the crowd pull us along. I never imagined that I might mess up the interview. I’ve been preparing for the test for years, but the interview never worried me. I can’t even work out what annoys me more, the fact that I stumbled so badly over my answer or the way I backed down.

As we step through security, I slip a hand into my pocket and grip the lump in the corner, pressing it hard, angrily, into my palm. The sensors go tuk as I pass, but somehow the sound has changed.

I used to think that if I could make it into a good school, I’d become a normal citizen. Fit in. But I see now that’s not how it’s going to work, even if by some freak fluke I still make it in.

No matter how many times I swipe that chip, it’s always going to belong to someone else. I’m always going to be illegal.

We’re almost on the platform when I turn towards Mum.

‘Can I go over to Mason’s?’ Right now, I can’t stand the idea of spending the afternoon with her. It would be a constant reminder of the interview.

A pause as she blinks two or three times. ‘I guess so.’ She seems dazed.
I'll catch the train home before it gets late.'

'Yes.' Only now does she lift out of her thoughts, placing a hand on my shoulder. 'Watch the weather, okay? Call a taxi if the storm picks up.'

'Yeah.'

Her eyes begin to soften and I spin the other way, her sadness even worse than silence. Numbly, I make my way over to the next platform. School wouldn't have finished yet but I send a message anyway. Can I come over?

The reply comes back two minutes after finish time: Sure.

Mason's still in uniform when he opens the side door, navy tie tucked into a thick blazer. For a moment I'm unable to speak. I'm not even sure why I'm here. I can't tell him what just happened, not the whole story. I can't say how I really feel.

'Hey!' He steps back to let me in.

A gust of wind bursts up, bringing dust and leaves inside with me. Mason swipes the door shut. 'Crazy day.'

'You can say that again.' I let myself sink to the edge of the couch, my body suddenly heavy.

'How'd it go?'

I manage a shrug. 'Not great. They didn't like my plans to work in food technology.'

'You should take the computing stream. You can pretty much work in any industry from there.'

'Yeah.' A sigh. 'If I get in.'

'Don't worry. You'll be fine.'

He seems so sure. And it's only now that I realise how close to the fire I've been playing. Until the interview I didn't recognise how much being illegal is part of who I am. The way I think, the words I say. I've been living this life for so long that I don't know how to think like a citizen. I thought I could fool everyone, but maybe I've been fooling myself.

'Listen, I've been thinking—'

Mason sits on the armrest across from me, hand resting on one knee.

'-- maybe I should stop coming round.'

'What?'

'I'm sorry. It's just ... I really have no idea how it works. I wish I could help you, but I don't think I—'

'No.'

'But maybe I'm making it worse.'

'No,' he says again, a shake of his head. 'Hang on.' Mason slips off the armrest to kneel beside the couch, one elbow on the seat and the other on the coffee table. 'Look, stop coming if you want, but don't do it because I can't time jump.'

My head shakes, a sad smile. The fact is that the longer I hang out with Mason, the closer I come to letting the truth slip out. 'I know why I can't do it, and it's nothing to do with you.'

He inhales and turns to tap one finger on the coffee table. 'I'm scared. That's the reason. Not you.'

'I know. I knew that already. But still I don't know how I can help.'