

THE FUTURE WORLD PRESIDENT'S

*FIRST TRUE LOVE*

A novel in the here and now.

By JJ Alexander

# EUTOPIA

Sure, okay, he was gorgeous enough to catch any girl's eye, with that curly black hair, broad shoulders and those deep, dark eyes. He sure caught Ariel's as he came across the dance floor, sidestepping a swinging arm, shimmying a gap between two wild-haired women, gliding around an unraveling knot of clumsy, foot-stomping students. He found a space at the bar and leaned over, a hundred-Euro note in a sculpted hand.

So okay, he was hot, and she was young and beautiful and all that, but that doesn't explain what happened next in this club swirling with hot, young, beautiful people, for when their eyes met something amazing happened, a honey thunderbolt of delicious connection, then a warm shiver right through her body. She saw – no, *felt* – it go through him too. He lost his cool and gaped at her as everything, the pulse of the music, the rhythmic lights, the hubbub of voices, everything else ebbed away. A smile came to his eyes in the quiet, and she felt it in her own.

Then the barman moved between them, and the world came throbbing back.

*This is it! Love at first sight. This is what they mean. The myth is confirmed!* She took a shaky breath and then a sip of her juice, willing the barman to hurry up. But he stayed rooted, legs spread wide, leaning forward and yakking away to the beautiful boy, ignoring the waving hands to his left and right. So Ariel's flustered mind had opportunity to interfere and over-analyze everything, as usual.

*No, just chemistry, that's all. Genetic compatibility. Biology. Animal instinct. Maybe five years ago I dreamed about this, but now I know–*

His head bobbed up over the barman's shoulder. A flash of eyes and he ducked back again. Her heart actually fluttered. *Animal reaction, that's all*, her mind went on and on. *A spike in blood pressure, reacting to the oxytocin, dopamine, adrenaline ... oh, shut up already.*

She giggled, giddy as an idiot, then had to freeze and compose herself as the barman jumped aside, leaving her once again in the light of his dark face. This time no smile. They hung loose, chill, breathless.

A hand dropped onto his shoulder from somewhere out there and he broke away. A psycho-ugly rat-faced guy, who glanced over and caught Ariel's shock and horror. His face hardened. She looked quickly down into her drink, and when she peeked up again, they were both gone.

She hopped off the bar-stool, craning her neck. Then she realized that people along the opposite bar were staring at her. A gangly boy, leaning sideways and leering drunkenly, a couple of sleek, pouting teenage girls, their chic style identical and their mouths tight blossoms of envy. Two older guys in who-cares leather jackets, watching with frank amusement. *They saw the whole thing!* In a flush of sheer embarrassment she plonked back onto her barstool, swinging her long dark hair forward to hide her face.

After a few seconds she looked out again. All gone back to their business, show's over. All except one strange-looking man, a cruel face carved with lines of suffering, pain, loss ... she shivered again, cold this time, spider up the spine. He sat alone at the far curve of the ovoid bar and stared at her, unblinking, a stray shaft of red light – it must be – worming in his shadowed eyes. She frowned but still he stared, so she stood and walked away.

Where was Noodle? Her best friend, last seen grinding away on the dance floor with a very tall and sexy black guy. Ariel searched for her and, of course, for Thunderbolt, drifting past the alcoves and dark recesses, circling the dancers. In the far depths of the club she saw a raised level, an off-set room with walls of white Roman pillars. A subtle blue-neon sign glowed above the arched entrance: VIP. Two bouncers in dark suits reinforced it. Out of bounds for mere mortals like Ariel.

She drifted closer, and saw between the pillars, at last, her Thunderbolt-boy, her beautiful boy, sitting at a low marble table with a gang of guys in very trendy,

expensive-looking clothes. He looked distracted, not joining in their raucous talk, stealing occasional glances out into the club.

*He's looking for me, too. Hasn't noticed me here, watching him. Let's see if he feels it.* She settled back against the wall. The nearest bouncer gave her a contemptuous glance.

As she watched, she began to get a feeling that she knew him from somewhere. Like, he'd been at her school before he grew up and became gorgeous? Or maybe a rock star, something like that? Almost all the guys in his group had distinct hairstyles, expensive do's from top salons. Except for poor Rat-face, short-back-and-sides. Next to him sat an angular, dark-skinned boy with dreadlocks, then a shiny skinhead, then a gleaming flow of shoulder-length locks. *Interns at a fashion house?* She was pleased that Thunderbolt's style seemed the least self-conscious, curls so natural it could well be the most expensive of the lot. *Oh, I hope not.* She realized that others in the group were also vaguely familiar to her, especially Rat-face. *So, celebrities?* It was frustrating. She needed Noodle's help here as an expert in such things.

She slipped out her phone, switched to camera and held it between the pillars. The light in the VIP lounge was brighter than the rest of the club but the screen image was still murky and grainy. She found Thunderbolt, zoomed to the max and clicked. A wall-spot shone directly above him and he kept his head still, gazing out into the club, so the photo came out a disembodied head on a platter of dark. She attached it to a text:

Noods wru? Who is this guy? Why I know him?

and sent it. Within seconds a reply:

Wait coming.

'Thanks, Ariel. You saved me.' Noodle had two bright red spots on her cheeks, and her long blonde hair had been mussed around by the wind. She looked radiant. 'Bastard asked me to come outside with him, and we kissed, then he starts, like, "I love you, I love you," with his hand on my tit! I mean, we'd only just met.'

'Where is he?'

'Following me. Then his whole tragic life story, how they're going to deport him back to ... Djibouti or, or Timbuktu or whatever godforsaken hole unless some dumb German cow like me *marries* him, which sort of put the whole "I love you" thing in perspective, right? Wow!' She stared between the pillars, eyes shining. 'He's even cuter in real life. Why are you taking photos of football stars?'

'Footba-?'

'His name's Juan Baptista. Don't you *know*? He's everywhere. Bayern Munich just bought him for zillions. The other guys are also Bayern. He's, um third, I think? Munich's hottest young eligible bachelors? *Tease* magazine?'

'Third hottest, youngest or most eligible?'

'Eligible is eligible, no?' Noodle giggled, and then groaned without pausing for breath. 'Look. The Djibouti Desperado.' The tall black guy was wandering among the scattering of tables between the VIP lounge and the rest of the club, looking lost. 'It seems *I* got the most eligible. You know what they say?' She pointed to Thunderbolt. 'It's tough at the top ...'

Ariel finished the sentence, at Desperado. '... but really crowded at the bottom.' And in a twinkle of laughter and disco-light Noodle was gone.

No matter how intensely she watched him, he still didn't sense it. *Here. I'm right here. Juan. Juuu-aaan. Juan! Baptista. Juan Baptista.* Nothing. She sighed, getting bored now. The bouncer gave her another look. *Damn it. Juan! You're supposed to get a strange feeling that someone is watching you, then you look over and we connect, like magic.*

She took a few more pictures, just for something to do. She saw in the screen that the footballers had fallen quiet. She looked up. A door at the back had opened, and an astonishing girl was making a grand entrance. Petit, with huge breasts and a perfect, hour-glass waist. A mane of big hair – definitely a wig – and a dress so weird, tight and

slutty it must come from some haute couture collection. Her face was difficult to see under the make-up and all that hair, but she looked Asian and very young.

The footballers applauded. But not Juan, thank God. She took a few more pictures without really thinking about it. The Doll striking a pose before the boys, arms raised to accentuate the impossible breasts, one foot forward. The Doll leaning over to kiss Rat-Face, her breasts bulging out. Juan staring at them. *Slut!* She stabbed her thumb down. The next photo appeared and she gasped. Rat-face, glaring straight at her.

She looked up. He was already through the pillars and upon her. With frightening speed he reached out and grabbed the phone. She closed her fingers around it. He took her index finger and bent it back.

‘What are you doing?’ she squeaked.

‘Give it,’ he grunted. ‘Give it to me or I’ll break your finger.’

‘No!’ She was angry now, and held on hard. ‘It’s mine!’

‘Frank, what’s going on?’ Juan the Thunderbolt had swept to the rescue, a restraining hand on Rat-face’s arm. He spoke English, Ariel noticed with surprise, with a lovely Cockney twang. ‘What are you doing, mate?’

‘Fucking paparazzi.’ Rat-face switched to English to reply, in a whiny French accent. ‘Taking pictures of my birthday present. I’m gonna smash her fucking paparazzi camera.’

‘I’m NOT paparazzi!’ Ariel pulled free and kicked Rat-face as hard as she could. His eyes bulged in astonishment. Then he squealed, fell to the floor and rolled around clutching his knee, his mouth a wide O of agony.

‘Oh come on, you baby.’ Ariel brushed her hair back from her face and slipped her phone back into her pocket.

‘Are you paparazzi? Were you following me?’ Juan looked sick. His eyes held hers, pleading.

‘No! I took a picture of you to send to my friend, because I recognized you from somewhere, I promise.’ She was babbling. ‘Look, look here.’ She took out the phone again, stumbled her thumb for a while – for a moment of freak-out she couldn’t even remember how – then showed him the text. ‘See? How could I be paparazzi? I didn’t even know who you were. In English this means, who is this guy? How do I know him? See, the picture? Here, read.’

He read it, leaning close to her, even though she was holding the phone at arm’s length. A couple of inches taller, just right. His scent was nice, clean man-smell, the subtlest hint of expensive aftershave. She brought the phone in closer. It took him a long time to read the text, or maybe just a few seconds.

‘Well, that’s alright then,’ he murmured into her ear. ‘So what ... happened at the bar, that wasn’t because I’m famous? It was ... you know, natural?’

‘Yes,’ she breathed back. ‘I don’t even like football. It’s boring. You’re nobody to me.’ A hint of challenge as she glanced up. He smiled back.

A low, plaintive moan came from below.

‘Frankie? Mate? Relax, she’s cool. But the real paparazzi might see you lying around like that, so get up.’

In a flash Frank was on his feet. Ariel reached out a hand to him, but with a glare he whirled and stomped back to the VIP lounge. The Doll was sprawled out on a couch, batting her false eyelashes at the boys. Frank took her arm rather roughly, lifted her up and led her off to the door at the back.

‘Who’s she?’

‘Some hooker. Birthday present from his agent.’

‘Really? That’s awful.’

And he shrugged. It was a gesture she would later remember, although it meant little to her at the time, being all caught up in his scent and his shoulders and his hair and those deep, dark eyes. Her mind had an inkling, a premonition, and could have spoken

up and warned her that before her lay a world where flesh was bought and sold, where bodies and their talents were valued only in money, but her mind stood no chance. When he held out his hand to lead her into the VIP lounge, she took it without hesitation.

Behind her, the strange man with the cruel face was now seated at a table in a dark corner, a faint red glow still worming in his eyes.

He watched her enter Juan Baptista's world, and he smiled.

Not only the pillars separated us from them, there were two marble steps as well, so Ariel was lifted above the rest of the club. Not much, but enough to feel, if not very, at least more important. She let go his hand, looked out and saw that most of the people at the tables were turned towards them. She laughed, 'It's a stage.'

'What?'

'Nothing. I said—'

'Yeah,' he smiled. 'All part of the ego trip. That's why I came down to get a drink at the bar. Sometimes I just want to, you know ...'

'Be ordinary?'

'Yeah, I'm just a guy, you know? Frank bent my ear, he said some nutter's gonna stab me or something, but my Dad was just a hotel porter, so all this ...' He gestured around. The other boys were all standing up, gathering their jackets. 'Listen, we're going to another club. Please come.'

'I, um. My friend ...'

'Oh, friend, a, a boyfriend?'

'No. She. The text?' She waved the phone.

'Oh, okay. Where is she?'

She scanned the club, one hand shielding her eyes. 'Don't know.'

'Call her again, tell her come with.'

She hunched over her phone and texted, then noticed a loose thread in the waistband of her skinny jeans. And a seam by the knee unraveling. *And* a splash of brownish paint on her sneaker. *This is terrible. I'm so scruffy.* 'Juan? I'm not really dressed to go to—'

'You look fantastic. Name's Johnny. Okay? What's your name?'

'Ariel.'

'Ariel.' It caught in his throat. His hand twitched. Their eyes met and then glanced away, met and glanced away, shiny stones skipping over the surface of a pool of deep excitement. Then her phone thrilled in her hand and she dipped her head to read Noodle's reply.

'She's outside, being ...' Ariel shook her head and laughed.

'What?'

'She's being ...' she searched for the English word, 'um, wooed?'

'Wooed?'

'Never mind. She'll meet us on the street. Look, your friends have already left.'

'Yeah, let's go.'

The door led to an alcove and then through heavy velvet drapes to a darkened room. It was like stepping into another, long-past century. Wooden floors, Persian rugs, swirling Paisley wallpaper, ornate wainscoting, a large framed mirror mottled orange with age. Fabric lampshades cast a yellowish light over a cluster of leather armchairs at the far end of the room, where a dark-haired woman in a long red dress was slowly gyrating before an enormously fat man, his face in smoky shadow. In one hand he held a bundle of money, the other was murky in his lap. Some sort of bizarre growly jazz music was playing, barely audible above the thump-thump-thump coming through the wall. Johnny grimaced at Ariel in mock-horror, took her hand and hurried her through a further door, to a landing with a large semicircular desk and an elevator door, closed, red-light numbers blinking to show where the other boys had gone. Alongside, another door led to a steep enclosed stairway. It was too narrow for both of them, so he let go her hand and went ahead, jostling down two stairs at a time, his hair flouncing. Ariel followed, slower, step by step. There were ancient framed photographs down the left-hand side, portraits, posed family groups, women with starched bodices and blank faces, goateed men in long-tailed jackets, stiff in their dusty elegance. The last portrait hung askew below a red light bulb, a girl child in a pinafore, her hands behind her back

and her eyes fierce and solemn. She looked remarkably like Ariel at that age, the same dark hair, the same intensity. Two words were scrawled in an archaic cursive in the bottom corner. She stopped and peered closer: *Rachel Edelstein*.

‘Hullo, Rachel,’ she whispered. ‘I wonder what happened to you.’

Johnny swept open the door at the end of the stairs and Ariel felt the wind waft through her hair, tugging her on. She hurried to catch up. It opened into a small parking lot. A *VIP* parking lot, presided over by another big guy in a black suit, who nodded approvingly and smiled at Ariel as she came through. It gleamed with luxury cars, Mercs and BMW’s, Bentleys, a beautiful dark-blue Jag E-type, hulking black SUV’s, a Ferrari in a child’s-toy bright yellow. The boys were dispersing to their cars, laughing and shouting. Johnny waited for her with an arm held high. For a moment she thought he was going to drape it over her shoulders, but then he beckoned and walked on ahead.

She prayed that the Ferrari wasn’t his, but no, a new, black Mercedes. *Nice. Classy, expensive. But not flashy.* It beeped and flashed as he pressed the remote. He opened the passenger door for her, and she was pleased, despite herself.

The scent of new leather. The sheer beauty of the glossy consol, its space-ship reds and blues. *Aaaaah*, she allowed herself a smile as he walked around the back of the car. *When I woke up this morning, I didn’t think the day would end like this.* Then, as he opened his door, *It hasn’t ended yet. How are you going to get home, exactly? Do you trust him?*

He settled in, fiddled the key into the lock, opened the cubby and traced a finger over a row of CD’s. She had to speak up:

‘Um, Johnny? Where are we going? I don’t mean to ... it’s just that, we took the, the U-bahn, how do you call it, the, the Tube! So ...’

He looked surprised. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll give you a lift.’

‘Okay. So you’ll take us home?’

‘Yes, of course. Whenever you want.’ She realized that he was as nervous as she was, every action, every word he spoke – and even the music he chose - a window open wide to her judgment. He bit his lip and turned his focus back to the CD’s. She wanted to help, just pick any one at random, get on with it already. But part of her also enjoyed watching him squirm a little bit, and she was curious about his taste in music. *Not to be cruel and judgmental or anything, but if it’s big-dick rap or metal, I’m getting out right now.* In the end he pleased her again, choosing Seal, early nineties. *Cool over trendy. Nice. Even if a bit obviously sexy.* She relaxed and settled back into her seat.

The parking garage opened out into a side-alley and he braked, put the gear into neutral and took his wallet out of his leather jacket. The card had only one word – **oh!** – over tiny print. He activated the GPS on the consol and typed in the address, then slid into drive and purred up to Leopold Street.

‘There she is. The blonde, standing next to that tall guy? Just past the-’

‘Yeah, I see her.’ He angled across the traffic and pulled up into an empty space just beyond Noodle. She was standing with her head down, lost in the screen of her phone. Despite her body language, Desperado continued to hover at her shoulder, his teeth bright in his face as he talked.

Ariel rolled down her window. ‘Noooooods? Over here.’

She looked up with a quick smile and strode over, Desperado close behind. Johnny unlocked her door with a flick of a switch and she opened it and slipped into the back seat. As Desperado reached out to take the door and follow her into the car, she leaned over and whispered urgently to Johnny, ‘Go go go!’

He took off without hesitation, the back door swinging and slamming shut with the impetus. Ariel saw Desperado in the side mirror, his hand still outstretched and one foot suspended in the air, staring after them. Johnny looked in the rear-view mirror and laughed. Then he glanced over at Ariel, sensing, perhaps, her twinge of dislike, the first

sour note of the evening. One song faded on the CD and another, with a thrum of bass, began.

'*Gott sei dank!*' Noodle stretched out in the back seat. 'I thought I'd *never* get rid of him!'

'Sorry,' said Johnny. 'Sorry, I don't speak much German yet. What you say?'

'She hardly speaks any English. She—'

'Ariel be us ... *was ist Übersetzer?*'

'Translator. She says I must translate for her.'

'Yeah, come to think of it, why's your English so brilliant?'

'I want to study languages at university. They're a big obstacle in the EU, so I think—'

'Hang on. You *want* to? How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'What, you still at school?'

'Yes. Final year.'

'Shit. Management said we must never touch school kids. The tabloids go crazy.'

'So who is touching?'

'Ahaha. Quite. But just being in my car is enough for them, bloody vultures. To *insinuate*. Hey,' he looked in the rear-view mirror again, as the GPS told him, in English, to turn left at the next intersection. 'We haven't been introduced.'

'This is Noodle, my best friend.'

'Wazzup. Noodle?' He swung left. 'Your parents call you that?'

'No,' answered Ariel. 'Her real name is Heidi. She hates it because it sounds like ... you know ...'

'Yeah, the pigtails. I get it. The yodeling.'

Ariel laughed. 'Noods? This is—'

'Juan Baptista.' Noodle read from her phone. 'Brilliant attacking midfielder, recently transferred from West Ham to Bayern Munich for eighteen million Euros! Earns a

weekly salary of ...' she whistled. 'Horny monkey! If he wants to attack your midfield, Ariel, I'd let him.'

'Yeah yeah. Call me Johnny.'

'Promising teenager in the junior leagues, much talked-about,' continued Noodle. 'Selected for the England squad in the last European Championship, but injured his knee. His favorite color is red. Favorite movie is *Braveheart*. He drives a ...' she paused, frowned and looked around at her surroundings. 'No, no he doesn't. Stupid internet.'

'Any juicy stuff?' asked Ariel.

'Just a minute.' Noodle scrolled. 'Um ... here we go. Girlfriend. Betty Blonde. Model and pop singer. Bitch. Should I search her?'

Johnny, already glum, looked glummer when he heard the name. 'I broke up with her,' he muttered.

'Oh wait,' said Noodle. 'They broke up.'

'Why?' asked Ariel.

'Doesn't say. Hang on.'

Ariel smiled at Johnny. 'One thing I don't understand. It says you're English, but your name is, what, South American?'

'Portuguese. My Dad. He got work in an English hotel, met me Mum. She's a schoolteacher. I grew up mostly with her, but they were married for a while.' The GPS told him to turn right.

'Aha!' said Noodle. 'I knew it. Nasty little slut. Says she slept with another footballer, name of Ernst Thorverson.'

Johnny groaned.

'He was devastated. Poor Johnny. His form declined. There's a picture here, unshaven, wearing a hoodie. Kinda sexy, actually. This is sweet, says he has a heart, which was ... roasted on the fires of celebrity! Woman writer, you can see she's hot for him, and who can blame her? I mean, honestly. Ooh, smoldering dark eyes. Blah blah

blah ... mmmm, great six-pack. Then his manager told him to get a grip and dropped him from the team, um, okay. Triumphant return, scored a goal against Chelsea. Sweet left foot. Ah, a photo of Betty Blonde, charging by the hour. Oh my, you should see this, there's a picture of him without his shirt on-

'Okay, eenough!' He shook the steering wheel. 'It's bad enough she should read this crap, half made up anyway. But when I don't even *understand* what she's saying-' The GPS interrupted him in its silky, feminine voice, instructing him to turn right. 'Aaah, shut it already!' He slapped the off-button on the GPS, swung the car to the empty, tree-lined curb and slammed on the brakes. 'Look, I broke up with *her*. She rebounded onto Ernie *after*. Okay? What's she been reading about me?'

'It says you're gay,' said Ariel sweetly. 'That you had an operation to castrate yourself, because you were lusting after your teammates.'

'*What?*' He twisted back and lunged for Noodle's phone. Noodle hardly reacted, just sliding it away to avoid his grasping fingers and carrying on scrolling with her thumb. She giggled as he grunted and twisted further, fending him off with her elbow.

A photo opportunity just too good to miss. Ariel tugged her phone out and lent back for a good angle. With his arm bent back at the shoulder he was facing her, and he saw her fiddle the buttons and aim. A passing car splashed headlights onto the impish wickedness in her face and he sighed and slumped, dropping his head, his arm still bent behind him.

*His hand*, she thought. *His hand is so eloquent*. It hung loosely above Noodle's knee, no longer trying to grab her phone but still claw-shaped, the fingers curved and trembling, grasping at empty air. *So expressive. It's saying ... frustration?*

*If I could just get a picture of that hand*, but she closed the phone and put it away. He raised his head again, and his eyes were moist. *They hurt him. They wound him with their sick fascination*. She raised a soft hand and caressed his cheek. *He's too beautiful, and still just a boy*.

*We just became his worst nightmare.*

'Oh wow,' said Noodle. 'That old David Beckham underwear advert? They just offered it to Johnny here, like the new Beckham. There's speculation—'

'Noods, keep quiet. Put it away.' Ariel switched languages, 'I'm so sorry, Johnny. I was only joking. No-one thinks you're gay.' She leant forward and gently kissed him on the corner of his full, red mouth. He sighed and brought his arm forward, and then they were kissing, their lips pressed hard together but still soft and yielding. Her breath caught and she drifted away, but he slid his hand into her hair, pulled her back and kissed her again.

'Tum-te-tum,' murmured Noodle in a sing-song voice. 'Don't mind me.'

They broke off, laughing, swimming in each other's eyes.

'No, I mean it. Don't mind me. That was super-sweet. I think I'm going to cry.'

'What did she say?'

'She said ... never mind. Let's just go to the club.'

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