

**Kill me again**

Young Adult thriller

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Free first chapter

## One

My first day in an all-American high school ended with my death.

I drowned because two members of the school's swim team pushed me into the school's pool by surprise. Two more kids waited for me underwater and pulled me roughly down by my legs, keeping me there with their firm hands. I was fully dressed, unaware of their hazing plans for me.

It was supposed to be an innocent prank; a classic initiation, organized after I had made it into the school's famous swim team. They couldn't have possibly known what would happen next: That my body become completely paralyzed, caused by sudden fear that I was going to die.

My startled mind forced me back to the moment that my mom died to save my life. That event had defined the course of my life. Memories I had tried to push back from her death, resurfaced. I remembered what it was like to face death, what it felt like to be pulled away from life's tethers in the spur of a moment. Anxiety overwhelmed me and took away any common sense.

There was no strong current pulling me down, no current pushing me underwater. I'm a pretty good swimmer, water being my natural habitat for as long as I can remember. Yet I couldn't save myself. My mind completely short-circuited. I had literally forgotten what to do.

My new teammates, hitting the surface as soon as they let go of my legs, would have undoubtedly roared with laughter. They might have thought it was hilarious that I hadn't seen their hazing ritual coming. They would have joked about my surprised look or the way I splashed into the water fully dressed.

After slapping each other's backs, the kids would have undoubtedly eagerly awaited the moment where I would break through the water surface gasping for air, pull me out and pat me on the back. I would be officially welcomed into the team and I would break into a big smile, knowing I had made friends for life.

It didn't work out that way though. Long after their hands had let go of my legs and I was supposed to make my way up on my own, I stayed underwater, floating in it like a drifting log. I was numb. It felt as if my body was unconscious already, losing the battle against the deep. I was powerless. I just sort of ... drifted. All coordination that would get my legs and arms moving again, was lost to me. My brain froze; my body seemed to belong to someone else.

I drifted until my lungs burst and my lips opened automatically to find air, but I ended up swallowing the pool's water instead. The taste of chlorine in my mouth and throat choked me; my eyes stung painfully. I was alone in the water, with the pranksters waiting impatiently next to the pool. They were like ghosts to me, hovering next to the pool. I saw their shapes, but didn't hear their voices or saw their faces.

Something changed then. I saw the shades of my schoolmates above me, hovering near the water, until they pulled away like fading spirits. A moment later, the building emptied. Everyone left; lights shut down. The pool water became eerily dark and I just drifted below the surface, all sense of time lost on me. I was dying.

Someone jumped in, but I couldn't see who it was. It was simply too dark. For a moment, I thought everything would be okay, that my savior would pull me out and I would be fine. My mind freaked out. Something was off.

Instead of rescuing me, a strong set of hands pushed down hard on my shoulders, making sure I was kept underwater. Strong fingers clawed into my skin. They hurt me, pushed into my flesh and made me gasp in pain. The ache brought me back to my senses.

Survival instinct kicked in. Instinctively, I fought back, struggling hard against the person trying to murder me. The strong grip of my attacker won the battle easily. I was already weak; it didn't take him long to kill me.

When my lungs filled with water, I lost all sense of reality. My body forgot what it was like to breathe. Complete darkness finally came. I died.

## Two

My first day at Sunny Valley High was going to be the scariest day of my life. This school was just one of the many things that I needed to get used to. It was also the beginning of a complete different life in another continent, a new country and a town I knew nothing about.

Everything about America felt and smelled differently. Gone were my relaxing days at the beach after school hours, surrounded by tanned bodies enjoying the ocean while Australia's gorgeous sunset settled down on us. Gone were the familiar faces I grew up with in beautiful Melbourne, where life thrived and people seemed happier.

My mind still hadn't gotten used to quaint and boring Alice Town. It was one of these places you read about but don't want to live in. I would never have picked it out for myself, but my dad was born and raised here and I had no choice in the matter.

We moved here little than a week ago. Today, I was ordered by my family to grow accustom to an American High School with its typical hierarchy, as if everyone assumed I could handle the change with ease.

I had a certain idea of what life would be like between the walls of these massive buildings from television shows and movies. All the impressions fed by us through the silver screen or on a television set, were supposed to make me believe how easy it was supposed to be. How you could just grow accustom to it in a heartbeat.

The footage fed to the outside world was fake though, driven by the hunger of television makers and movie producers to prove how American schools were filled with loads of attractive

teenagers, strolling down the hallways of their artificial buildings as if the world lay at their feet. Every kid in front of the camera would look perfect, with glossy hair and make-up, sporting the ultimate teenage look as if they were sponsored by major brands. Reality was quite different, except for one thing: its natural school hierarchy.

I knew about the chain of command that existed in schools like these: Jocks, cheerleaders, nerds and loners. Some didn't fit in anywhere and were treated like outcasts. Others became leaders without the slightest effort. Some kids bullied others, while good-hearted teenagers cared enough to help their peers overcome these grueling coming-of-age years.

I had no idea yet to which category *I* belonged. I wasn't eager to find out either. All I wanted to do, was survive the day. To stick my head in the sand, avoid curious gazes and move invisibly in the shadows.

Dad told me all about life in the States, even though the info he shared was scarce, with too little detail. He grew up in this town, had spent years in these very buildings. He reassured me that nothing much had changed since those days, that Sunny Valley High still had a very strict non-bullying policy and organized a lot of social activities. Since it was a relatively small school according to American standards, everyone knew each other's name. The school board and its teachers truly cared about their students. Or so he said.

"Don't worry about it, Lon," he said whenever I asked questions about my new life to mentally prepare myself. "Everyone will know you soon enough. They'll love you; you'll be fine."

Well, that's just it: I *didn't* want everyone to know me. In Melbourne, I had attended a school with over a thousand students, where privacy was respected and kids left each other alone. Anti-bullying was a big thing too between those walls; its Principal had made it her personal pet project.

It helped: The school became a worldwide example of how to deal with diversity. Kids from different color, gender and financial background blended in perfectly. We had a few transgenders who were treated like human beings. We had studies and events and charities we worked for.

I loved it there. It wasn't always okay of course, but it felt like a second home. I had my friends, my teachers and of course my swimming.

The school's Olympic swimming pool had been my second home, just like being in water felt natural to many other Australians. We grew up by the seaside and spent hours swimming and surfing in it. A lot of teenagers at my old school were interested in doing these things more seriously.

I became part of the swim team at a young age, transitioning naturally to the next level as I aged. I knew the pool by heart, befriended my team mates and coaches. My friends and peers respected me for my talent; my teachers encouraged me because I kept my grades up. When I left the school, I felt a part of me stayed behind inside the compounds of that pool.

I knew that Sunny Valley High School would be completely different. Melbourne didn't have the modern classroom technology they had, which dad was impressed by. Sunny Valley invested a lot of money in digital boards, laptops and tablets for all student. Alice Town was a rich community, where most people

lived in huge houses and had good jobs. When you lived here, you didn't know poverty. You never had to beg for a dime.

This school, with its limited number of students, had enough funds to support this kind of extras, thanks to its sponsors.

My dad explained to me that Alice Town was rich because of its perfect location. People could travel commute to Los Angeles, San Diego and even San Francisco if they wanted to. A lot of its townfolk are *nouveau riche*, making their fortune in Silicon Valley. The men worked long hours; the woman stayed at home and volunteered at charity events.

I had already spotted the fancy cars and swimming pools in everyone's backyard. Aunt Sarah, who took us in, had one too, even though her pool remained empty and unused in the huge garden behind her gigantic house. I did not look forward to going to these school, even though my dad made enough money not to fall out of place with the other parents. I had no complaints at all about my life. It still felt as if it wouldn't be enough. What if they absolutely hated me?

"Hey kid, don't look so scared," Aunt Sarah said, shaking me from my reverie at the breakfast table. I hadn't even noticed how scared and nervous I behaved, until I spotted three sets of worried eyes gazing back at me.

"You won't be alone, you know that. Nick will guide you around," she added.

That was true. My cousin's brown eyes smiled openly genuine at me, losing their concern. Immediately, my shoulders relaxed. Nick was cool and genuinely nice. If all kids were even half like him, I would be just fine.

I attempted a smile and moved aside the bowl of cereal. I knew what Nick was trying to do: He was trying to be mentally

protective, like his mom told him to. But I didn't want protection; I just wanted my old life back.

"I'll get ready," I muttered, feeling my family's eyes in my back as I rushed down the hall to my room. I stopped when dad called out my name with such emotion, it made me turn around.

"I'll drop you off," he said uncertain, as if he was afraid I would say no. I wanted to tell him I could manage, but I knew it would break his heart. Instead, I just nodded.

"It's okay, I'm driving today," Nick stopped his uncle. "We'll be fine, uncle Tom, I promise."

"Are you sure?" I heard dad say. "I can drive too, you know."

"Tom, they'll be fine."

Aunt Sarah stopped my dad by placing a gentle hand on his wrist. We both knew what she meant by that: *Leave your son be, you'll both be okay. We're here now, you're not alone anymore.*

Nick drove a second-hand Chevrolet that barely had any miles on it since its former owner was an old man who had kept the vehicle in his garage for years. It wasn't a fancy car, but my cousin was crazy about it. He paid for the car with years of weekend work, because my aunt told him he should learn the value of money.

The car was nothing much. It even had tapes instead of a Bluetooth connection, but Nick adored it. I was just happy to catch a ride with my cousin. Driving wasn't for me yet, I needed to get my American license. Since I didn't trust myself behind the wheel yet, I hadn't bothered looking into it.

"You doing okay?" Nick asked, not taking his eyes off the road. Just like everything else he did in life, he was careful with his precious car.

"Perfect," I croaked.

“That bad, huh?”

“Yep.”

“You’ll be fine, Lon. You’ll see. My friends will love you.”

I shrugged, not knowing just yet if I even wanted that. My brain hadn’t said goodbye to my former friends yet, so how could it adjust to a new social circle?

“So, you’re still going to do it?” Nick asked.

“Yep,” I replied again.

*That* was the only thing I was sure of. I would not leave this school without having tried out for the swim team.

“Your dad will freak out if he finds out,” Nick remarked.

“Nobody says he needs to know, right?” I smiled.

Nick grinned broadly and parked his car at the school, right next to an Audi and a BMW, the standard vehicles for this school. *Time to face the troops.* I shrugged and pulled my backpack protectively against me.

As soon as we got out of the car, the buildings all seemed to descend on me. I felt the throes of a panic attack build up. Nick was already chatting with someone, while I lingered by his car and looked around with a sinking feeling. On my right was the small white office building I was supposed to go to, so someone of the staff could show me around. To my left was the first of three large buildings, where all the kids headed towards. Sunny Valley High School was embossed above the double-door entrance.

Curious teenagers openly stared at me. Girls whispered, giggled and scrutinized me openly. The boys would smile briefly and pass me by after a small nod.

“Hey man,” someone said, bumping into me by accident.

Someone else said, “Hi.”

Nobody introduced themselves.

I stood out. That was the first thing I noticed. Years of living in Australia had tanned my skin. Even in California, my color was darker than most. I was tall and lanky, with a slender but firm build. My exceptionally slender hands and large feet helped me to swim faster, but they were telltales of an illness I wanted to keep secret. Nick and Aunt Sarah knew about it of course, but I had made them promise not to tell anyone else. My condition didn't define who I was.

“Let's go.”

Nick patted me on the shoulder and I followed him quickly towards the principal building, avoiding everyone's stares. I didn't dare to look around me too much anyhow. New students stand out, especially in small communities like these. Nick knew how I felt, so instead of introducing me to every single person he knew, he just nodded at his closest friends without stopping once.

Of course, everyone at the school already knew that I, part Aussie, part American, was making my entrance today. I could tell by their reaction. There goes my privacy.

At the secretary's office, I waited uncertain at the entrance since I didn't know what to do. Nick immediately took the lead again. He talked to a man in his early twenties, who beckoned me closer to his desk. Two kids my age sat in chairs by the door and watched while Nick took out his phone and sent a quick text message.

“I'll leave you to it,” he told me. “See you in class, dude.”

Before I could react, Nick was gone and I was in the hands of the twentysomething guy.

“You must be Leonard,” he said, “welcome!”

Immediately the kids on their chairs snorted. I kept my eyes focused on the clerk. Their reaction wasn't that new to me.

“Lon,” I muttered softly.

“Excuse me?”

“My name is Lon. Everyone calls me that. Lon, never Leonard. Not exactly suitable for a teenager, is it?”

The man smiled briefly, as if he understood.

“I’m afraid you’ll be hearing the name Leonard a lot, my friend. Welcome in our small, but wonderful, high school. Matilda, our student counsellor, will bring you to your first class to get acquainted with some of your fellow students and teachers. She’ll also pick you up this afternoon for some practical briefings and of course the planned conversation about your mother.”

The way the man casually mentioned my mom, broke my heart. I swallowed away my stress and sadness and avoided the kids’ curious gazes. Not everyone knew that mom was gone, that this was the reason why I moved to Alice Town in the first place. If they didn’t already know of my sad history, they would find out soon enough. Lack of privacy and all.

“Thank you,” I croaked, still not able to glance at the kids sitting behind me.

“Why don’t you wait here for Matilda?” the guy said. “My name is Andrew by the way. I run the school’s administration office. Just come in if you need anything, alright?”

“Thanks.”

I turned around to find a seat away from the other teenagers. Before I could sit down, one of the kids stood and offered me his hand.

“Lon was it, right?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, shaking it without really looking at him, grateful that he didn’t use my full name.

“I’m Dan. I think we’re sitting together in Math. If you want, I can take you there.”

“Thanks, but I have to wait until Matilda gets here,” I said, looking up for the first time. “Thanks though.”

The kid smiled knowingly. I noticed genuine concern in his eyes, as if he seemed to realize that I was a stranger in a strange land, not by choice but by fate. The other kid, about the same age, just stayed where he was and didn’t say a word.

“It’s not a bad school,” Dan smiled reassuringly. “You’ll get used to our lifestyle pretty easily, even though we don’t have those fancy beaches your country is known for. Just holler if you need me, okay? My dad works at the school, so everybody knows me.”

“Thanks,” I smiled, finally relaxing a bit.

The kid left me to my own devices when a tall man came in and hugged him fiercely. The man quickly gazed at me and then left with his son. Soon after, the second kid received some paperwork he had been waiting for, stood and left too.

For a while, I was left to my own devices. I sat down without bothering to take out my phone and pondered again about how this became my world. I felt lonely, sad and depressed. Above all, I missed my mom.

### Three

Ten minutes later, the wait was over. An older lady showed up and introduced herself as Matilda. She handed me a school map and then escorted me to my first Math class. She pushed a schedule in my hand which would be my roster for the next months.

To my joy, there was several large sections blocked on my itinerary for sports. The first of those was planned in today at two-thirty. I had told Nick in confidence that I wanted to try out for the swim team. Since he was already a part of that same team, he knew if I had what it took to join them.

My cousin had told his Coach I was pretty good and would be of great value to the team. Obviously, talking to the man who ran the successful school team worked, seeing as I was expected at the pool today for a try-out. That prospect alone would keep me going throughout the day.

Matilda took me through the building, showing me practical details here and there that I forgot almost instantly. I memorized where to find the pool, the tennis courts, the soccer and lacrosse fields and of course the cafeteria. It wasn't that different from my old school after all, I thought relieved, praying that the tour would last forever so I could bide some time.

Unfortunately, she then took me to the main building again, where we ended up in a large classroom. Fifteen kids my age sat together, each on a seat behind a separate bench. The students silenced as soon as we opened the door.

Sixteen sets of eyes, the teacher's included, gazed openly curious at me. Nick wasn't amongst them. He had told me this morning he would be in Spanish class. Immediately, I felt naked,

vulnerable and exposed, standing in front of the teenagers like a zoo animal, waiting for anyone to make the first move.

Oh god, I wanted to get the hell out of here; I missed my Australian friends so much. As if she expected me to flee, Matilda grabbed my arm tight and pulled me further inside.

“So, Mr. Harris,” Matilda smiled broadly, “this is Leonard Anderson. You’ll take further care of him, as we discussed.”

Snorts in the classroom were followed by whispers. I’m used to these reactions to my name. Like I said, Leonard isn’t exactly a common name for a kid my age. *Lon*, I want to scream, but that will have to wait.

“Did your parents love Leonard Cohen?” Mr. Harris smiled sympathetically.

I just nodded, because the truth is far worse than that. I wasn’t named after the world-famous singer, but after the actor who played the legendary Mr. Spock. My parents were avid Star Trek-fans who met at a convention in Sydney during a panel with Leonard Nimoy.

Dad came dressed as Spock, with wax ears he had custom made and fake eyebrows that brought out his fierce eyes. My mom came as Uhura, huge earrings and curly wig included. They were seated next to one another. Apparently, it was love at first sight.

Not that I was sharing this tale with anyone. It was bad enough seeing my folks prance around in their red and yellow outfits during conventions. I was the odd one out, refusing to dress up in anything. Those conventions were the one thing my dad would never abandon, no matter how serious his job became. He was a geek by nature. He binge-watched series before the word was even invented.

He won't do ever dress up like Spock again, I think sadly, knowing he will never go to another convention without mom. It's another thing added to the list of things that will never happen again.

"Everyone calls me Lon," I muttered.

"Sure, Leonard," Mr. Harris smiled. "Why don't you take a seat?"

I looked around helplessly, spotting the kid that spoke to me earlier at the office. He was chatting with a fellow student without looking at me. Besides, there wasn't a seat next to him available anyhow. There was one behind him though.

A kid sat alone in the back row, twitching his thin fingers. He was as pale as a sheet, with hair and eyebrows so light that almost made him seem like a cancer patient who had lost all his hair. I immediately realized that his pallor could only come from the lack of sun, typical for someone who never came outside.

He's one of the nerds, I thought, someone who spends his time behind laptops and games. Great. The kid padded the empty seat to his left. He smiled broadly, happy to have someone sitting next to him. The contrast between us couldn't have been larger.

"So, you're the Aussie kid," he said loudly, for everyone to hear. "Your name is Leonard, like the actor who played Mr. Spock. Do you prefer *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*?"

Flushed scarlet red, I wavered. I didn't want to sit down here, with only him as company. He wouldn't stop talking if I did. I took two hesitant steps towards him. Before I could slide down in the seat next to him though, a girl got up and moved to the back row too. Relieved, I slipped down next to her, with him on my left and her on my right.

“I’m Leia. And yes, before you ask, I was named after the Star Wars-character,” she smiled brightly. “That, at least, we have in common already. I like your name, Lon. That crazy kid there is Liam, my foster-brother.”

“Thanks,” I muttered gratefully, discovering with her words that it wasn’t so difficult after all to make new friends.

Liam tapped my shoulder. His eyes flashed with excitement.

“We are the three L’s,” he grinned. “Leia, Liam and Lon. Next thing you know, we’ll be forming a band. Can you sing by any chance? I play a mean drum.”

I shrugged and opened my backpack, digging out the Math-book Nick had brought home yesterday. Mr. Harris continued his class as if nothing had happened. Dan turned and smiled at me, waving slightly. It would be okay, I told myself. If only I could stay calm and composed, I would be just fine.

That was easier said than done though with this extraordinary girl sitting next to me. The first thing I noticed, was that Leia smelled fantastic. She wore a light flowery perfume that suited her somehow. Her black hair danced on her shoulders, her face felt like near perfection to me. Her clothes were just as expensive as those of the other kids, but she didn’t seem like the bragging type to me.

When she spoke, she sounded like an angel to me. When she looked in my direction, she showed her gorgeous smile every single time. Her name suited her, even if she had nothing else in common with the character.

“So, are you really named after Princess Leia?” I whispered.

“Yep, my parents are kind of ethereal who genuinely believe in an interplanetary universe,” she whispered back, with her eyes still fixed on the board. “When they saw Star Wars, they actually

believed that this would become our future. My dad has been into interstellar things since then.”

“My parents were geeks too,” I confided. “I spent my childhood visiting conventions with them all over Australia, where they forced me to dress up in a Star Trek Red Shirt. Fortunately, I didn’t to wear any fake ears or eyebrows. Those were the days. Beautiful memories.”

Leia laughed quietly. Then she became serious, seeing the haunted expression on my face. I had used the word *were*.

“I’m sorry about your mom.”

I swallowed away my anxiety. It became clear to me then that the entire school knew about her. It wasn’t a secret to keep anymore and in a way, that was okay. In a different way, it felt horrible that these people knew all about me, while I knew nothing of them.

“Thanks,” I croaked, blindly searching for the right page in my book. Leia placed her hand on my wrist as if it was the perfectly normal thing to do.

“You’ll be fine,” she whispered. “I promise.”

I knew I would be. Somehow, I truly would be.