

Run

A short story prequel to 'Lethal Inheritance'



Tahlia Newland

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by Tahlia Newland

A short story prequel to *Lethal Inheritance*

Nick runs from the hidden realm of Diamond Peak to the ordinary world to try to forget his failed battle with Cugin, head of one of the Rasa demon clans. Will immersing himself in the distractions of our world exorcise the terrible memory, and will making a new life for himself away from the hidden realm free him from the attentions of the demons?.

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<http://tahlianewland.com>

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Smashwords edition

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Run

The door slammed. Footsteps sounded inside. Lynlee raced into the hallway. 'Nick! You're home,' she cried.

'I'm leaving,' he said, brushing past her.

'But you've just arrived.' Lynlee's voice dropped along with her heart. His dark brown eyes, usually warm and smiling, were hard and cold, his handsome face unreadable.

'Yeah well, I'm just passing through.' He opened the door to his room and went inside. She followed him and watched, leaning on the door frame as he dumped the contents out of his pack. Crumpled clothes—were those blood stains on his T-shirt?—chocolate bar wrappers, his tattered old sponge bag, a knife in a sheathe. Where was his sword? 'Go away,' he said.

'How far did you get?'

He didn't reply, just went through his drawers, pulled out clean clothes and stuffed them into his pack.

'Cogin, huh?' she said, imagining the demon's green eyes spitting flames from his slimy twisted face.

Nick stopped, sighed, ran his hand through his golden brown hair then slumped onto the bed. 'He had me. If it wasn't for Walnut, I'd be dead.'

Lynlee nodded. 'I'm sorry.'

Silence. His jaw set hard.

She wanted put her arm around him, but she knew he'd just shrug her off. 'It's nothing to be ashamed of,' she said. 'A lot of people would be dead if it wasn't for that old Guide.'

'I'm not ashamed, I've just had enough.' He stood. 'I'm out of here.'

'Out of where? It's not like you live here any more, anyway.'

'Off the mountain. I'm leaving. For good.'

'That's how you're repaying Walnut? By giving up?'

He stared at her. Something flickered in his eyes. Sense, maybe? No. It had already gone.

‘I’ll never get past that demon, Lynlee, you know it as well as I do. It’s pointless fooling myself.’

The tortured look on his face cut her to the core. Reminders of a dark time. No, please, don’t go back there, big brother. ‘Don’t talk like that, you know it’s just a matter of training. Walnut believes in you. He knows you can do it.’

‘Yeah, well he’s wrong.’

‘I doubt that.’

‘Give it up, Lynlee. I’m going.’ He grabbed his pack, stuffed some more clothes in the top and drew the string tight.

‘At least stay the night. Have some dinner.’

‘No.’ He put his bedroll on top and tugged hard at the straps.

‘A shower, at least’ He looked like he’d come straight down via the portal after the battle.

He shook his head. ‘I’ll have a swim.’ But he did rip his T-shirt off and rub it over the grime on his forehead before throwing it onto the laundry basket.

Lynlee smiled. Becky was right, her brother had a wonderful physique, golden skin, smooth muscles, not too bulky. Her best friend had told her how hard his abs were. Pity it hadn’t worked out for them.

‘What?’ he said, catching her watching him.

‘Nothing.’

He grinned and pulled on a button up shirt. Blue suited him. ‘You need a boyfriend.’

‘And you need a girlfriend.’

‘No way, but some sex would be good.’

Lynlee pursed her lips. ‘Mum’s in the garden. You’ll see her before you go, won’t you?’

‘Why? Since when did she ever want me around?’

‘Oh come on, Nick, she’s still your mother. She’ll be upset if you leave without saying hello.’

‘Hello and goodbye. It’s better I don’t bother her, and if you don’t tell her I was here, she won’t know.’

‘Until she finds your clothes in the washer. Don’t you think she might be concerned?’

‘Don’t give me that crap. She wants me dead as much as he did.’

Lynlee sighed. He could be so stubborn sometimes and so self-depreciating. He’d battled and defeated, Emot, the Major red eyed demon, yet he’d not managed to exorcise his wounded memory of his father from his heart. No wonder he didn’t fell Cugin. ‘Fine. If you’re determined to hold onto that stupid idea, who am I to try to open your eyes to the truth?’

He glared at her. ‘I’d hoped you wouldn’t be here. I really don’t need this.’

‘Hey. I care about you. Come on, you’d be disappointed if someone didn’t try to convince you to stay.’

He lifted his pack and threaded his arms through the straps, then turned to her. A slight smile played across his lips, a hint of the real Nick. He opened his arms and she walked into his embrace. They cuddled in silence until he pulled back and looked into her eyes.

‘I have to go. I really do. I’m so sick of demons.’

She opened her mouth, but he put his finger over her lips.

‘Shhsh. I don’t want to hear it.’

She smiled, at least he knew.

‘Anyway, I doubt I’m worthy of their attention.’

She bit her lip. Walnut wouldn’t have fast-tracked him if he’d thought that. No, her brother had talent. She was glad he had his knife. ‘Where are you going to stay?’

‘Bob will have me until I find something.’ He hugged her again. ‘Goodbye.’

‘You’ll be back.’

‘I might come to visit, but I’m not going to climb that mountain again.’

Lynlee smiled. He wouldn't be able to stay away.

He narrowed his eyes at her, shook his head, gave her a quick smile then left the room. She followed him to the door and watched him stride down the corridor. A flash of sunlight penetrated the gloomy hall as he opened the door. Then he disappeared into the glare of the day and the door slammed behind him.

Silent thunder rocked the core of Nick's being as he stepped out of the bush and through the invisible wall between the realms. He strode across the parking lot to the lookout, leaned on the railing and casting his eyes over the beach suburbs below and the towering skyscrapers of the city behind them. The water sparkled in the midday sun and waves foamed on the edge of the white sand. If it wasn't for the houses, it could have been the beach in the Lures.

A gentle finger tapped the edge of his consciousness. He ignored it. No, this wasn't another Lure masquerading as reality. Why was he waiting? Walnut, his guide on the mountain, obviously wasn't coming to haul him back. Nick sighed and turned down the path, determined to enjoy the rest of the day, a perfect one for the beach, just what he needed to wash off the stains left by that sleazy demon. His heart lightened and his steps became more buoyant. He'd never have to go back and face him again. No more demons. Ever.

A middle aged couple walked towards him, probably tourists going for the view. His heart went out to them. Like most people they probably had no idea that the walking track went further than the lookout. Few could see the hidden realm that extended for miles into what most saw as ocean. Few had stepped into that magical world, much less be born there as Nick had. Suddenly, he felt like he was leaving half of himself behind. He shrugged off the idea and focused on the feeling of his feet hitting the pavement until the disquiet in him eased.

At the bottom of the hill, he crossed the rickety old footbridge and took the path along the side of the stream. Houses backed onto the stream, their backyards behind wooden fences like signatures of the occupants. A little pink plastic car; a toddler in that one. Probably a big Italian family in the one with the lush vege patch overflowing with eggplants and roma tomatoes. A modern renovation with big glass sliders, and a tropical fern garden; artistic people there. No shed, no tools about. No man in that house.

At the end of the track, cars sped across the bridge. The noise and fumes were always a shock, especially now, after he'd been so long on the upper reaches of the mountain basking in its intense silence. Thank goodness for the portals there. Quiet and quick.

Luckily, the right bus came almost immediately. He climbed on, shuffled in his pocket to find the right change, paid the driver and it lurched away. He sat at the back. Habit. You never wanted anyone behind you. He dragged open the window, but the breeze didn't flush out the smell of sweat and grime.

Cars and shops flashed by and people lined the streets. People and . . . damn it . . . Gimps. The little brightly coloured, bulbous-eyed demons nipped at people's heels, rode on their shoulders, backs and heads or hung off their arms, pummeling them at intervals. Occasionally, one of them disappeared, but probably not by any conscious means. Off-mountain people tormented by Gimps usually had no idea they were there, and even if they did, they didn't know how to get rid of them. Damm. Last time he was off-mountain he hadn't been able to see the little blighters. His stomach clenched for a moment. Would he be able to see Rasa demons too?

The beach at last, and just as he liked it, not too many people. He ripped off his shoes and socks, strode down to the water and splashed his way through the foam along the beach to the change rooms. Two metres from the door, he froze. Damn. Again.

Two men stood outside the brick building arguing and behind them floated two Rasa demons, as black as a moonless night, their

fluid cloak-like forms fluttering at the edges. Their long talons rested on the men's necks, feeding, and their white flaming eyes focused intently on their prey as they sucked the men's anger through their talons.

Nick's hand flashed automatically to his side, reaching for a sword that wasn't there. Damn. He knew demons roamed here, feeding on humans as they did in the realm, but he hadn't thought he would see them. Probably a side effect from being so high up the mountain. He wanted to be ignorant, blind to them like everyone else. As it was, he caught the eye of one and vaporized it quickly, the other he dealt with by jabbing his knife in as he walked past. It disappeared with a satisfying fizz and the men stopped arguing.

He changed quickly, returned to the beach, dumped his pack on the sand and plunged into the surf. The waves hit hard, thrashing him, and he loved it. Jumping one, diving under the next, letting this one dump him. It seemed fitting to have his nose ground into the sand. He came up spluttering, but a few strokes later, he was behind the breakers and swimming free, just the gentle swell rising and falling beneath him.

Arms pulling, feet kicking, body streamlined smooth through the water. All was well until the slimy black beast appeared in his mind, sneering, green eyes burning with venomous flames. Harder and faster he swam, but still the image remained. Damn. He caught a wave and body surfed back to shore. Nice one.

A bunch of young teenage girls sat on the sand peeking at him and giggling as he walked out of the surf. You get used to it. Sure, a girl would be good, but these ones were far too young for him. A beauty with glorious auburn hair glanced his way, her eyes flashing. He flinched and looked away. It felt as if she'd reached inside and tugged at his heart but not in a good way. Strange. Another thing not to think about.

He rinsed off under the fresh water shower, then sat staring into the horizon, merging his eyes with the endless blue. His mind eased,

cleared and soared far above his worries and he sat enjoying the freedom until his skin began to cool. The day was drawing to a close. Time to go. The giggling girls walked shyly past, but though he searched her face, the Auburn beauty didn't look his way. He threw on a T-Shirt and headed up to the bus stop.

Daylight faded quickly and the street lamps flickered into life as Nick got off the bus. A short walk along a leafy street later, he stood outside Bob Tingle's elegant old weather-board house. It rose two stories above a high iron fence and rambling shrubs, thankfully familiar. If he hadn't spent that time off-mountain learning about solar power with Denis, this would all be so much harder.

He pressed the bell. Its chimes resounded through the house, then footsteps, a pause. Bob would be checking his visitor through the eye hole. Nick pulled a silly face.

'Nick!' The door flew open revealing a smiling middle aged man, almost bald, just a smattering of very short grey hair above his ears. 'What a delightful surprise.'

'Hi, Bob. Good to see you again.'

'Likewise. Do come in.'

Nick followed him down the hall into the large kitchen, perfectly modern but completely fitting with the one hundred and fifty year-old house. Bob immediately put the kettle on, then turned to Nick with a quizzical expression.

'I need you to contact the American University,' Nick said. 'I want to study medicine there. They'll accept my Sheldra degree.'

'They will indeed, but may I ask what has brought about this new direction?'

'I've decided that I'll be of more use to humanity off-mountain.'

Bob pursed his lips and twisted them to one side. 'Does Walnut know?'

'He'll guess.'

'I see. And what caused this decision?'

‘I’ll say one thing, then I don’t want to talk about it anymore, okay.’

‘As you wish.’

‘Cogin nearly killed me. I’m wasting my time up there.’

Bob nodded, his brow still furrowed. ‘I suppose you want this organized yesterday.’

Nick chuckled. ‘Of course, but now will do.’ Good old Bob. He hadn’t accused him of running away, which was what he was doing, of course. And he hadn’t tried to change his mind . . . yet.

‘I’ll send an email now. They’ll just be getting off to work over there.’

‘I’ll need a plane ticket too and some sort of papers, I guess.’

Bob nodded. ‘Consider it done.’

The kettle bubbled noisily then clicked off and quietened. ‘You want something to drink?’

‘Black tea. I’ll make it. You get that email off.’

‘I was about to make dinner actually.’

Nick grinned at the challenge in Bob’s eyes

‘Shall I cook?’

Bob’s face broke into a delighted grin. ‘Please do.’ He turned towards the door. ‘Oh, and your old room’s vacant, you can stay there until we sort you out.’

Nick nodded.

He made one of Bob’s favorite noodle dishes and as they ate, diverted the conversation away from anything to do with the hidden realm onto the happenings on the Manifest Plane. If he was to live here, he needed to be up to speed.

‘I have a sword fighting class coming at seven,’ Bob said when they’d finished. ‘I’d be delighted if you took it for me.’

Nick shook his head. ‘Not tonight. I want to taste the city.’

Bob’s eyes twinkled. He didn’t miss a thing. ‘The same group comes back in two days, can I tell them they’ll have a master class then.’

Nick sighed. 'Okay. I guess I'll have to have something to do while I wait for the bureaucracy to wind over.'

Nick was a metre and a half from the front of the queue when the bouncer walked along the line, checking out the potential. He looked Nick up and down then jerked his thumb towards the door. Nick nodded and ignoring the dirty looks, pushed past the plain looking clutch of women waiting ahead of him. Clearly they had an oversupply of females this evening because he wasn't the only man jumping the queue.

Inside, lights flashed and music thumped. The funky world fusion rhythm reassured Nick that the DJ was the same guy as before. His pick, the best of dance. Just what he needed. He downed two whiskeys in quick succession then hit the dance floor, throwing himself into the beat as he had into the waves, trying to thrash the memory from his muscles, exorcise the adrenaline that still flickered inside and would keep him awake if he didn't deal with it.

For around twenty minutes, he danced full out, not caring what anyone thought, seeing nothing but an amorphous blob of humanity seething around him, jostling and grinding. The rhythm was everything, pounding through his body as if his limbs were his palms slapping his beloved drums. It worked, until he realised it'd worked, then he remembered what he'd wanted to forget.

Without conscious intention, his eyes gravitated towards them. Demons. Peppered throughout the club. Mostly relatively harmless little Gimps of various colours and demeanor, but squeezed in amongst the dancers, unseen by ordinary eyes, a few big, black, slimy Rasa demons rested their great talons on the necks of their unsuspecting prey and fed, red-eyed Emots feeding on desire and green-eyed Cogins getting off on jealousy. His hand slipped inside his leather jacket brushing the knife hidden in the inner pocket. Wait.

Not your business.

These guys weren't in danger of death, only of addiction and one knife strike could do nothing about that. He pushed off the dance floor and, carefully avoiding the Cogins, wove his way through the bodies back to the bar.

'Johnny Walker, please,' he said slipping onto a bar stool.

The bar tender nodded, flicked ice in a glass, squirted in the amber liquor and slid the glass across the bar in one smooth movement. Nick threw a note on the bar, downed the drink and scanned the room for another diversion. Plenty of talent, but mostly in groups. Could he be bothered?

'You're a great dancer,' a soft voice whispered right in his ear.

He swung round. She'd do. Short, curvy, pretty but not gorgeous. Obviously interested, and by the way she thrust herself forward, willing to romp. Could he be so cold hearted? No. It'd be fine. He'd make it clear he was just passing through. Make sure she had no unrealistic expectations.

'Thanks. I'm Nick.' He put out his hand. She smiled and shook it, her eyes sparkling and totally fixed on his. A huge come-on. Pity about the tiny blue Gimp standing on her shoulder chewing her ear.

She leaned forward. Strong sickly-sweet perfume wafted over him. 'Jane.' The Gimp sat and rested its head against her neck, beating its little legs against her clavicle and staring at Nick.

He ignored it. 'Hi. Wanna drink?'

'Lemonade, thanks.'

Good choice, clearly she'd already had a few.

'Been drowning my sorrows,' she confessed, her mouth drooping. The Gimp grinned broadly and grew slightly, his lank hair shaking around his cheeky face. 'You?'

'Celebrating my freedom.'

She laughed and the Gimp vanished. Nick smiled, pleased he'd cheered her up. They tried some polite chit-chat but it was pretty much a waste of time trying to be heard over the thumping music.

'You wanna get some fresh air?' Nick shouted. Ugh, the second oldest line in the book. She didn't care. She sprang off the bar stool, grabbed his hand, dragged him through the packed club and outside.

The cool of the night sobered him. She was drunk, running from something painful and desperate for distraction. Was he really going to take advantage of a girl in such a state? Before he had time to contemplate it, she pulled him around the corner into the alley way, pushed him against the wall and pressed herself against him.

'I don't usually do this sort of thing,' she whispered, then smacked her lips square on his mouth.

Hell, yes. The woman was hot for him. Wasn't this exactly what he wanted? Annihilation of memory.

It worked. His body took over, the sensations blasting all thoughts from his mind. Wet lips on lips, tongues entwined, hands ripping up her shirt, stroking bare skin. Her hands over his back, moaning, dipping into his jeans. Hell. She'd unzipped him already.

'Sorry to take advantage of you like this,' she whispered, pulling up her skirt and guiding his hand between her legs.

Nick's chuckle stopped abruptly. An Emot stood behind the woman, his fiery mouth twisted into a leer, his talon raised.

'Reckon, I'll drain this one dry.' His sleazy voice brought back everything.

'Don't stop,' Jane gasped.

He didn't, but he locked his gaze on the beast and smiled at the look of shock on its face when it vaporized from his gaze.

'Please,' Jane moaned.

He nibbled her neck, hoisted her up and thrust inside. She was so desperate that she drew two more Emots before they were done. Though he demolished them easily, it rather broke the mood.

'God, you're amazing,' she said afterwards as they sat slumped on the pavement with their backs against the building.

Nick smiled. 'You were great too.' What else could he say? The truth? Like, well that's not surprising, it's probably the first time

you've got horny without a demon firing up an insatiable addiction to pleasure. After all, since they feed on desire, they have an investment in thwarting satisfaction. Yeah, she'd love that.

She nestled closer and his arm automatically slipped around her. Jane kissed him again. Greedy. Sure, he could go another round, except that another demon sniffed down the alley towards them, his red eyes blazing with lust.

Sex hadn't exorcised the demons. It'd brought them to him. Even if he couldn't see them, which, damn it, he could, he'd always know they were there and so long as they existed, he'd want to kill them. PLAN A, FAILED.

'I'm just passing through,' he said.

She sighed and drew away. 'So kay. I'll be horribly embarrassed at myself in the morning anyway. Should go home for I womit.'

'Come on, I'll help you.'

Five minutes later, he put her in cab and gave her a peck on the cheek.

'Thanks,' she said. 'It was fun, just what I needed. I don't suppose there's any chance I could see you again?'

He shook his head. 'Sorry. I won't be here.'

The blue Gimp reappeared on her shoulder and climbed gleefully onto her head, baring his teeth at Nick.

'Ooh, I am going to have a killer headache,' she moaned, clutching her head.

'Look after yourself, Jane. You're a great girl, lots of guts. Any other time and things could've been different.' He could give her that much.

She smiled and the Gimp vanished.

Nick closed the car door and it drove off, leaving him staring at a hand waving through the window. He sighed and headed towards the bus stop. He wasn't in any hurry.

A line of hopefuls still waited at the door of the club. A quick stupid blast of envy rocked through him at the thought of their blissful ignorance and a green-eyed Cogen materialized in front of him.

‘Master said to look out for you, tasty Warrior,’ the beast said in an oily voice, flexing the clawed hands on the end of his long slimy arms. ‘Can’t run, can’t hide from Master. He wants more of you.’

Nick gulped. Locking gazes wouldn’t work on this one. At least the envy had gone as fast as it’d come. ‘There’s nothing for you here,’ he said.

‘Yess. Mean fellow. All gone already,’ the demon slurred, brazenly staring into Nick’s eyes, ‘but it’ll be back. Master says to follow you.’

‘Go pick on someone harmless. I could kill you, they couldn’t,’ he gestured back towards the club before slipping his hand inside his jacket. Ready. Just in case.

‘No, no, Master wants you. Little old Walnut man told usss where to find you.’ He drew himself up, matching Nick’s height.

‘He what?’ A flash of anger raced through Nick’s heart but he caught it, stripped it clean, grabbed his knife and lunged at the demon, blasting the purified energy through the blade.

The demon merely stepped out of range, grinning. The folds of his skin, hanging from him like a loose black cloak, rippled as he shook with silent laughter.

‘Coward,’ Nick growled.

The demon flew at him, talon raised, shrieking. Nick ducked and rolled out the way, then sprung to his feet knife at the ready, but the demon had vanished. He scanned the area. Nothing, only some of the crowd outside the club staring at him strangely. They would have just seen him battling with thin air. Fine. He brushed off his pants and strode away.

What the hell was Walnut thinking?

A couple of steps later, he got it. He'd sent the demon to teach him a lesson. What's the point of running from something that will follow you everywhere?

Damn.

He still wasn't going back.

Not yet.

The end.

A note from the author

If you enjoyed this story, I'd be delighted if you could take the time to write a review and tell your friends about it. Not only do I love to hear what you think, but also your reviews and recommendations on [Amazon](#) are a vital ingredient for selling books—like everyone, I need to eat; though I should probably stay off the ice-cream.

Run is a prequel for the *Diamond Peak Series*. You'll meet Nick again there in chapter six of book one, *Lethal Inheritance*, when he meets Ariel, the auburn haired beauty he notices on the beach in this story. Nick is twenty two, Ariel is seventeen, so this story is more adult than the *Diamond Peak* series which primarily follows Ariel's point of view. You'll not find this level of sex or cursing in the four novels of the *Diamond Peak Series* which are written primarily for young adults but will be enjoyed by all ages. Chapter one follows, so keep reading.

Lethal Inheritance: Chapter 1—Abduction

A strange black shape flittered past the window. It could have been someone in a hooded cloak silhouetted against the street light, except that it appeared to glide rather than walk, and no one could possibly be on the side path of Ariel's house in fancy dress.

Despite the balmy evening, a flash of cold shivered down Ariel's spine. She raced to the window, stuck her head outside and looked down the path. Whatever it was had disappeared into the darkness—if it had been there at all. Ariel suspected it was merely the result of tired eyes and an overworked brain.

She slid the window closed, turned her back on the mystery and glared at the books strewn across the dining room table. Tension squeezed her skull. Its cause, her Maths book, lay open, its jumbled symbols exposed by the stark circle of light cast by the reading lamp. She slumped into the chair and switched off the too-revealing beam. It only illuminated her never-ending work load.

The street light cast an eerie glow into the old dining room. The wooden sideboard, almost invisible in the dark, hugged the wall, and the chairs clung to the table like shipwrecked sailors to the remains of their battered ship. They floated, but she sunk. Darkness closed in around her and dragged her down with the weight of final exams only two weeks away. It wasn't fair. She deserved a life. Something, anything, other than exams.

'What are you doing in the dark?' Ariel's mother's voice cut through the gloom as light cut the darkness and exposed the room in all its tatty glory.

Ariel blinked and spun to face her mother. 'Nothing. Absolutely nothing,' she replied with satisfaction.

Her mother, Nadima, leaned through the doorway, one hand resting on the light switch. Her straight fair hair swung around her shoulders and framed a worn but pretty face. Her eyes were a little red,

but it was the first of September, she'd probably been crying, and Ariel knew better than to mention the unmentionable.

'Are you all right?' Nadima asked.

'Fine.' *If you don't include imagining things.* 'I'm over it. That's all. Sick to death of all of this.' Ariel swept her hand across the table and knocked the books to the floor with a clatter.

The corners of Nadima's mouth curled slightly but never made it into a smile. 'You're just tired. You need a break and some apple crumble.'

The thought of dessert made Ariel's smile large enough for both of them.

'Come and get it while it's hot,' Nadima called as she left the room.

Ariel heaved herself out of her chair and followed her mother down the gloomy hall into the kitchen/living room at the back of the old Federation style house. The white walls and copious light in the renovation lifted her spirits the moment she crossed the threshold, and the smell of hot apples and cinnamon drew an appreciative rumble from her stomach.

She caught sight of herself mirrored in the wall of sliding doors that opened onto the veranda and leafy garden. Her ghostly auburn-haired reflection, clad in lumpy sweater and jeans, echoed the sense she had of herself as an insubstantial form floating through an illusion called life. Jaded at seventeen, she thought dryly.

Nadima lifted a bundle of old towels from a box on the floor and deposited it on her photo-strewn desk on the other side of the room.

'Not another one,' Ariel said with a hint of a whine.

'How could I say no?' Nadima replied as she unwrapped the bundle and revealed a bright-eyed baby wombat. 'He's so cute. Aren't you Spud?'

Ariel screwed up her nose. 'Ew.' *Cute sure, but the smell . . . at least this one had hair already.* 'I refuse to do night duty.'

'Oh, darling. I wouldn't expect you to,' Nadima replied.

Famous last words, Ariel thought. As soon as her mother got too tired from getting up every two hours to feed him, Ariel would have to step in, or suffer a horribly grumpy mother. The last orphaned wombat they'd taken in had ended up in one of Nadima's photo-shoots. Ariel's favourite was a Photoshopped image of a woman in an evening gown lounging on a giant wombat as if he were a sofa.

She spooned dessert onto a plate, added some ice cream, stuffed a glorious spoonful in her mouth and watched her mother change the wombat's makeshift pouch. Ariel liked his name. Spud. It suited his potato shape. He wriggled and waved his paws, his soft belly and innocent face a stark contrast to the lethal claws, a little like the unease that raked beneath the calm exterior of Ariel's life.

Nadima gathered the re-swaddled wombat in her arms, picked up a doll-sized baby bottle, stuck it in Spud's mouth and began pacing. While Spud tugged on the teat, Ariel sat at the breakfast bar and munched on the stewed apple and its scrumptious crunchy topping. A strange feeling rustled up her spine, a sense that someone watched her. She peered warily through the glass sliders and scanned the garden.

At first, nothing. Then two red spots, like fiery eyes, penetrated the darkness and raised goose-bumps. A very large dog? More likely that stupid kid from down the street with laser pens. But the red spots disappeared too fast for Ariel to be sure she'd even seen them. She leapt up and pulled the curtains. The creepy feeling disappeared, but she'd have words with that kid at the bus stop tomorrow. He had no right skulking about in their garden.

The wombat sucked on in a steady rhythm but Nadima stopped pacing, her knuckles white where she gripped the bottle. Had she sensed something too? 'I think we should leave early,' she said.

'What?' Ariel's spoon stopped an inch from her mouth.

'The camping trip. Let's leave tomorrow morning.' Nadima plonked the now empty bottle on the bench.

Ariel lowered her spoon. 'No way, I've got training after school tomorrow. There's a race coming up, remember? I'm planning to beat Molly Gainsbrough in the eight hundred metres.'

Nadima pursed her lips, hugged the wombat tighter and patted his back. 'You'd win the fencing medal if you went back to it.'

Ariel grimaced. 'Give it up, Mum, I'd rather run than stick a blade in someone.'

Nadima sighed. 'Fine, we'll go Friday.'

'Why?'

'We'll make it a long weekend. We could both do with the extra day.'

Ariel frowned. What was going on? Her mother never let her skip school. But why complain? 'Fine. Where are we going?'

Nadima stared into space and began rocking the wombat like a baby. 'Somewhere new. It's a surprise.'

'New? What's new within a two hundred kilometre radius?'

'You'll see.' Her clipped tone signalled the end of the conversation. Ariel let it go. She figured she'd find out soon enough and, although she loved immersing herself in nature for a whole weekend, right now, even talking about walking for miles with a pack on her back was just plain exhausting.

She licked her bowl while Nadima stowed the wombat back in the cardboard box on the floor. 'Sleep well, Spud.' She turned to Ariel and opened her arms. 'Goodnight, sweetheart.'

Ariel's heart ached at the sadness in her mother's eyes. Even the comforting embrace they shared couldn't make up for the absence that plagued their lives.

Ariel's mobile rang. She broke the embrace, grabbed the phone from the coffee table and flipped it open. 'Hi, Tamara.'

'Love you,' Nadima mouthed.

Ariel waved her mother goodnight and turned towards the door.

'Hey, guess what?' Tamara sounded pretty hyped up.

'A walrus is sitting on your cat.' Ariel flicked on the hall light and wandered towards her room.

'What? Oh, shut up. Mitch's asked me to go to the formal.'

Ariel smiled. 'I told you he would.'

'Yeah, well, he might not have. What about you and Mathew and the movies?'

Ariel shrugged. 'I don't think so. He wants to see some blood-thirsty thriller. Yuk.'

'Hey, he's hot. You've got to make a few concessions.'

'He's also a surfer, Tamara, and I'm not cut out to be a surfer chick. Freckles, remember.' She walked into the saffron walled sanctuary of her bedroom and turned on the light.

'He's also a really hot runner.'

'Duh! That's how I met him.'

'Oh yeah. Hey, you could go jogging together.'

'Red-faced and sweaty is not my best look, Tamara.'

'You might have a point there. But, look, he really likes you and I thought you liked him.'

Ariel shrugged. 'Not that much.' She kicked the pile of clothes on the floor, salvaged her pyjamas, shook them out and threw them on the bed as she talked.

'You're not scared, are you? About his reputation, I mean.'

'No, I'm not scared. I just don't want to be his girlfriend.'

'Yeah, well, I suppose it's not surprising that you're a bit slow with guys. I mean, no brothers and all.'

Ariel opened her mouth but Tamara cut in. 'Whoops, Mum's yelling. I gotta go. See ya tomorrow.'

'Okay, bye.' Ariel snapped her phone shut, walked to the window and stared into the night.

Slow with guys, huh? Sure, she was cautious. With good reason. She'd seen girls fall head over heels in love and land on their faces with their brains turned to mush. Mind you, Tamara was right about the lack of males in her life. She and her mother never had a man in

their house unless he'd come to fix something. She couldn't even remember her father, and her mother never dated. Fifteen years after the event, her mother still wouldn't tell her exactly how her father had died.

Agitation simmered in her cells and fuelled a growing urge to rock whatever boat she was in, even to dive in and see what was underneath. But Ariel didn't know where to dive, what into, or how. She felt disconnected, unreal, as if she only floated on the surface of life and beneath her fathoms of dark water remained unexplored.

The last thing she remembered before falling asleep was thinking that nothing major would change in a hurry. Two hours later, she discovered she was wrong.

Ariel jolted awake to the brutal sound of splintering wood and a resounding crash at the side door.

'Ariel. Run!' Her mother's scream sliced through the fog in Ariel's brain.

Her eyes flew open. She catapulted out of bed and stumbled towards the door in confusion. A series of thuds came up the hallway, getting closer, as if someone was kicking all the doors open. Ariel grabbed her fleecy Ugg boots, opened the window and jumped out just before her bedroom door crashed open.

She flung herself under a leafy shrub and pushed back against the fence. Bright street light spilled onto the side of her red brick house, but none penetrated her hiding place in the fence's shadow. Even so, her heart pounded and every muscle in her body tensed in fear. She peered through a gap in the leaves and shivered.

Something black and vaguely human-shaped struggled out the window, cursing in a voice as spiky as ice shards. Its skin, hanging in folds like the fabric of a long hooded cloak, rippled as it turned. White flames flicked, like snake tongues, from two slits in its hideous face, and a thin-lipped mouth curled into a sneer. The claws on its long

loose arms flexed and unflexed as if warming up for a fight, and it stunk like rotten potatoes.

Ariel froze, eyes wide, struggling to comprehend the creature before her. Nothing like this existed in her world. It had to be a dream. But it felt horribly real.

A chilling voice from down the path raised the hairs on the back of Ariel's neck and the creature swung towards the sound. 'The spawn's run off. I say we take this one and come back for the other.'

The owner of the voice, another creature, came into view, eyes blazing red. Ariel gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth to muffle the sound. But the beast's attention fixed on Ariel's mother who hung limply in the red-eyed creature's arms, her hands tied behind her back. Something black and shiny gagged her.

Ariel's world began to unravel. This could not be happening, and yet, it was. She stared at the impossible creature and one word only penetrated the numbness of her mind. It rose as if from a long forgotten memory—demon.

'Stand and walk,' the red-eyed demon growled as he set her on her feet, 'or I'll stick you with this.' It raised a clawed index finger in front of Nadima's face and the claw grew into a silvery talon the length of Ariel's forearm. The fiery line of the creature's mouth curled with sadistic pleasure.

Nadima jerked into life and ran, but the white-eyed demon threw a noose over her head. It jolted her to a stop and turned her scream into a choked gurgle.

Ariel pressed her lips together, stifling the urge to cry out.

The red-eyed demon held its gleaming talon to Nadima's throat just above where her white-knuckled hands gripped the noose, her eyes wide and glassy. 'Try that again and we'll forget our meal and send you to hell instead.'

'Feed us,' the white-eyed demon hissed and placed its talon on the side of her neck.

Nadima froze. Her face reddened and tears seeped from her eyes. The tip of Red-Eye's talon caressed her throat and came to rest on the other side of her neck. A rumbling sound emerged from the demons' throats, a kind of demonic purr. Their bodies grew, their eyes flickered more brightly and their satisfied smirks bore a perverse resemblance to bliss.

Ariel's stomach churned. Fear numbed her mind and froze her in place.

The larger, red-eyed demon eventually removed its talon from Nadima's neck and jabbed her in the back. She flinched. 'Walk,' he growled. The other demon yanked on the rope and pulled her towards the road like an unwilling dog on a leash. Ariel's mother stumbled after them as if in a daze.

As soon as they'd gone, Ariel pulled on her Ugg boots, her fingers trembling, and crawled out from under the bush. What now? Police? By the time they got here, her mother would have disappeared. She had to find out where the demons were taking her and, if possible, free her. But how? She didn't even have a weapon. Or did she?

Ariel raced down the path, through the shattered door and into the kitchen where she grabbed the largest, sharpest knife before running onto the street after the demons. She saw them several houses away, heading towards the hill at the end of the street. You can do this, she told herself, then dashed after them. Past the unseeing eyes of curtained windows and the silent mouths of closed doors, she followed them, being careful to stay out of sight. Her neighbours were probably all asleep. No one to see, no one to speak of it, no one to help, even if they could.

The only sound came from a party in the Thompson's backyard. There, voices laughed and talked loudly over the pounding music that streamed from the garden. She wondered if she should go in and ask for help, but figured that, no doubt tipsy by now, they would just laugh at her, and before she got anyone to take her seriously, Nadima could have disappeared, or worse.

At the cul-de-sac at the end of the road, the demons took the dimly lit path between the houses, then the footbridge over the stream. Ariel hurried after them and crouched out of sight behind the bridge railings. The weight of impending doom settled on Ariel as the threesome left the path, and Nadima stumbled over the rough ground lit only by the silver light of the waning moon. The three stopped at the base of the hill before a dense shadow so dark that it seemed to suck all light into its blackness. All light and all hope.

Despite the warm night, Ariel's skin turned cold. But if she didn't do something, who would? She dashed to a large rock and hid behind it, her heart thumping.

Suddenly, Nadima came to life. She ducked to the side, yanked the rope out of the white-eyed demon's hands and fled. But Red-Eyes spun and tackled her, then locked his long arms around her and pulled her to her feet. She jabbed her elbows backwards and kicked hard, but the gruesome creature didn't flinch. Nadima struggled uselessly as he dragged her into what Ariel could now see was a jagged hole in the hillside.

Panic hit, hot and blinding. Ariel raced towards them, knife at the ready, but White-Eyes leapt from the shadows and grabbed her wrist with one clawed hand.

'Got ya,' he growled, eyes flaring.

End of chapter one

Lethal Inheritance Synopsis

You can't send police into a tunnel that doesn't exist after a villain they can't see, so when shadow demons kidnap Ariel's mother, she has to mount the rescue mission herself. She enters a hidden layer of reality where rocks move, reeds whisper, people fly and sadistic demons who feed on fear are hunting her.

A quirky old guide teaches her how to locate and unleash her inner power, and she falls in love with Nick, a Warrior whose power is

more than either of them can handle. Will she defeat the demons before they kill her and enslave her mother?

Ariel's journey challenges her perception, tests her awareness and takes her deep into her heart and mind to confront, and ultimately transcend, her fear and anger.

Lethal Inheritance is available now from all major ebook sellers.

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Other Books by Tahlia Newland

You Can't Shatter Me—young adult magical realism.

Synopsis— *When superhero wanna-be, Carly, stands up to a bully, he turns on her, forcing her to battle cutting words, flying hooks, a doubt dragon and a suffocating closet. Her karate-trained boyfriend, Dylan's desire to stop the harassment sets off a struggle to control his inner caveman. Meanwhile, Carly searches for inner strength and a peaceful solution. Will she find it before Dylan resorts to violence?*

This heart-warming magical realism story offers real solutions for handling bullying that will inspire and empower teens and adults alike.

What readers are saying about *You Can't Shatter Me*

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'An entertaining and uplifting read.' Linda Gillard, best selling author of *A House of Silence*.

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‘Any fan of fantasy, magical realism, or just a really gripping tale, will find this collection of stories compelling and entertaining.’
Bibliotica, book reviews.

About the Author

Tahlia Newland is an avid reader, extremely casual high school teacher and occasional mask-maker, She lives in an Australian rainforest south of Sydney, and after creating and performing in Visual Theatre shows for 20 years is now a bone-fide expatriate of the Performing Arts. She’s married with a teenage daughter and loves cats but she doesn’t have one because they eat native birds. Her aim in writing is to challenge readers to look more closely at the nature of their world, their mind and their perception.