



LIZ VAN DER LAARSE



CHAPTER ONE

Over and over. His head, his arms, his legs, out of control. River thrust through the water, kicking out with his legs, gasping for air. The next wave crashed, taking him under, tangling his arms with bull kelp and smashing him into the sand. He scrambled up, pulling through the foam as the rip sucked at his legs, dragging him back towards the cold, grey sea.

River struggled up the beach, his feet sinking into the soggy sand, his breathing shallow and ragged. He threw himself face down beyond the high-tide mark and lay without moving. Useless, useless, useless. Salt water trickled down his back from his dreads.

He squinted at the sea. It looked as it had when he first went in. A light swell rolling in from the Tasman. Enough to make you want to try for a last body surf before winter. That set of dumpers had come out of nowhere.

River looked around for his hoodie and teeshirt. Glad of their warmth, he turned towards home. His feet picked their way across the stones at the back of the beach, along the grass track through the gorse and lupins. He reached the main road and stopped. The sun glinted off a red Holden parked in his driveway. He frowned. Eh? Whose is that?

River crossed the road and walked up the path. The front door stood open. The voices came from the kitchen. His mother, Denise. And a man's voice. His father. He felt a quick stab of pain as he stepped inside, felt his legs shake. The man turned. River stared at the man who looked so like his father. Uncle Tau. His dad's brother.

Tau's face broke into a huge grin. "Whoa, River. Look at you. Not a drowned rat but a drowned Rasta." He came over and pressed his nose to River's. "Good to see you, tama. Really good to see you." He looked hard at River's face. "How you been?"

“Yeah, good,” River mumbled. He looked at the girl sitting at the kitchen table, her springy black curls and her smiling eyes.

“Kia ora, cuz. How’s it?” She grinned.

He flicked his eyebrows. The last time he saw Huia was at their koro’s unveiling. She was an annoying eight-year-old, poncing around knowing everything tikanga Māori. Making him feel even dumber than he already felt. And now here they were, both fourteen.

Denise spoke. “Tau and Huia are on their way back from Westport. They’re going to stay the night.”

“Yeah,” said Tau, “I’ve been up to check out a new engine for my fishing trawler. Like what I saw too. Bloke says if I take the boat up there he’ll drop the engine in for me. Take my old one as a trade-in.”

River nodded. He sat down at the table next to Huia. They didn’t look like cousins. He was as blond as she was dark. But they shared the same serious brown eyes.

The talk was of how Nan had come in from the farm to live with Tau and his wife, of Denise’s boutique at Punakaiki,

River and Huia's first year at college. No one spoke of River's dad, Hēmi.

“Hey River, take Huia down to the beach, eh?” Denise said.
“Get some driftwood for a fire.”

River raised his eyebrows at Huia. “Yeah, sure,” she smiled.

Looking north or looking south, the beach faded into a haze.

“Far,” said Huia, “this beach. No ends and no people. Must be no-name beach.”

“Nah. It's Fox River. Or near enough.” River frowned.
“Anyway, what about Riverton? It's not exactly the centre of the universe.”

“It's my tūrangawaewae, River. Yours too, come to think of it.” River looked away. Here we go again. “And anyway, there's Nan ...”

River glanced at her. “What about Nan?”

“She needs me around. Wants to pass on the stuff that she was taught . . . by her tūpuna. Taught me heaps. The real Māori ways.”

River looked at her without speaking, then looked away.
Yeah, yeah, rub it in. I know everything, you know nothing.

Who was there to teach him? Does she think of that? He stopped by two massive logs beached in the sand. “This is our bonfire place. Head up the beach, eh? Heaps of wood up there.”

Although the wind had a bite, the sun danced on the sand.

The grains were coarse under their feet and between their toes. Logs and branches that had washed down the Fox River after the rains lay bleaching on the grey sands. They gathered smaller pieces in their arms and dragged branches along the beach, throwing the driftwood onto a stack.

“Anyone else live around here? You got any mates?” Huia asked.

“Course.”

“So what do you fullas do?”

“I dunno. Hang at the beach. Fishing. Surfing. I go hunting with this mate of mine, Dylan.” He paused. “Do the garden for Mum.”

“A bit of a hippy your mum, eh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

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The fire was brilliant. Orange flames leapt upward against a clear black sky filled with stars. The warmth reached into their faces and legs. River pulled his hood over his beanie, his long legs stretched out towards the fire. Tau and Huia sat on the sand with their backs against a large log. Tau's guitar rested on his legs while he strummed and sang softly. Huia joined in.

The waiata seemed to fit with the evening, the four of them alone on a beach with nothing but the stars and the fire, and the crash of the breakers. River heard his mother's voice and turned, surprised that she too knew the words. It was only he who didn't. He watched the flames send the words and notes spiralling until they too became part of the night sky. Tau put down the guitar. "I'm going for a fish. See what Tangaroa's got for us. You want a rod, River? I got two."

Tau grabbed the bait bucket and handed a long rod to River. "You done much surf casting, tama?"

"Bit."

They baited up and waded into the icy shallows to cast their lines, retreating from the water to stand on the sand and wait. River's feet were numb and his rolled-up jeans clung wetly to

his calves. The wind from the south froze his back and his hands were rigid on the rod, but there was a calmness in him as he stood with his uncle, just the two of them at the edge of the sea.

“What a beaut day for the drive home,” said Tau, leaning across the top of the Holden, tapping a cigarette on the roof.

“When the Coast turns on a day like this there’s nothing like it. Look at that.” They gazed at the Paparoa Range, its deep green forest a world of its own beneath a clear blue sky. “Nice part of the country all right.”

He looked thoughtfully at River and Denise. “You know that new engine I was telling you about?” Denise nodded, pushing her blonde fringe from her eyes. “Soon I’m going to have to take a run up the coast in the trawler to get it fitted. How ’bout I take River and Huia? They can crew for me. What d’ya reckon?” Tau turned to River, raising his eyebrows.

River looked up surprised. Eh? Crew for him? Does he know I’ve never been on a fishing boat? “Ah . . . yeah.”

He stared down at his boot, scuffing the shingle. River shot a look at Huia. Her eyes smiled back. Bet she’s laughing at me.