

# FORECAST

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*for Michael*

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# PROLOGUE

CIRRUS LOOKED AT the boy's bloody hands with delight. She watched as he hovered over his kill, enjoying the sound of death in the quiet forest.

"You remind me of myself when you slay," she said.

He exhaled with pride.

"Take your trophy."

The boy leaned over the body. There was a snap, quickly absorbed into the woody forest.

"Now I want you to kill the heir."

Wind shivered through the trees. The boy salivated at the thought. It was a task usually bestowed on higher-ranked cavalry. He looked into the moonlit face of his queen with awe.

"Yes, Weightless One," he murmured.

"The heir is in Piha. Find it. Kill it."

His bloodstained hands hovered over his chest. The

mission scared him, but the survival of his people depended on his success.

“How will I know who it is?”

A flicker of contempt flashed across Cirrus’s face. She looked into his young eyes. “Don’t make me doubt my decision.”

“No, Weightless One,” he trembled.

“You will know. There will be signs. You must destroy the heir before the new year.”

He bowed low at her feet, inhaling the scent of dirt and blood.

“Yes, Weightless One.”

Mist flooded the clearing. The queen and her assassin disappeared through the fog. The forest quivered in their wake.

# 1

**H**OLLY ARMSTRONG GRIPPED her seat as the bus careered down the road into Piha. Her suitcase beat against her knees as the vehicle shuddered over potholes. Flanked by bush, the road to the tiny coastal town was in disrepair. Branches, swishing like snakes across the dirty windows, whipped the bus as it buffeted along. Holly wondered if it was a bad omen.

Aopuri National Park blurred past, an intense emerald green. Vines and shrubs, tangled at its edges, contained the forest’s secrets. Holly stared at it longingly. She wanted to dive into the dense bush and escape from everything, never to be seen again.

The bus screeched around another bend and the view opened up like curtains pulled apart, revealing her new home. Holly bit her lip at the sight. The cosy village of Piha was nestled on the coast, hemmed in by bush. The

beach was wild and expansive. Furious waves tumbled aggressively onto the glistening black sand. A huge rock, several storeys high, climbed out of the sea. Holly recognised it from pictures she'd seen online: Lion Rock. It was surrounded by a burst of fog.

They passed a tired sign that proclaimed 'Welcome to Piha'. The letters were faded and rust dripped from the nail holes. *Wikipedia* had told her there were about 600 residents in Piha.

*Six hundred and one now*, she thought, fighting the nerves that made her heart pound.

With a long, sharp squeal the bus stopped outside a convenience store, just up the road from the beach. Holly's mouth went dry as she yanked her heavy case onto the roadside. She sat on the store's verandah, hiding behind her veil of ash blonde hair. The afternoon sun blistered the dirty green porch paint and began searing her pale limbs.

Again she fought the urge to run into the bush and hide. It was an urge she'd been fighting for 26 hours. Ever since she had embarked on the long journey to Piha. She wanted to hit the Escape key and find that this whole saga was just another one of her bad dreams.

It wasn't long before he arrived, her mother's long-lost friend. Holly heard the old Land Cruiser before she saw it pull up, trailing a plume of black smoke.

"Holly?" he called through the open window. His voice was deep and rumbling, like thunder that doesn't leave you frightened.

"Piripi?" Her voice sounded weak and scared in comparison.

"Call me Piri," he grinned. "Only my bank manager calls me Piripi!"

Satisfied he had found his cargo, Piri Waru jumped out of the truck and marched over to her, his black curls blowing in the gentle sea breeze. There was a sturdy, no-nonsense air about him. Yet a softness too. His face was the shade of vanilla fudge and creases fanned from the corners of his eyes as he smiled.

"You're all grown up now! Last time I saw you, you were this high." His right hand flapped around his knees. "How old are you now?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen," he breathed. "Where'd the time go, eh? I remember taking your mum to the school ball when we were sixteen."

Holly nodded. It was one of the few things her mother had told her about growing up in Piha.

"She was the best-looking girl in all of Piha," he continued. "I don't know why she said yes. Probably cos I asked her as soon as the ball was announced and she couldn't say no!" He gave a chesty, infectious laugh.

“It was a sad day for us boys when she met your dad.” Suddenly, horror dawned on Piri’s face. “Sorry, I, ah, shouldn’t have said anything. About your dad, I mean.” Holly felt her face begin to redden. “I’m so sorry. He was a fool to walk out on you both. A bloody fool.”

He reached for the handle of her suitcase at the same time she did. His fingers brushed the side of hers and she flinched before whipping her hand away. The familiar straitjacket of panic began clamping around her.

“Hell,” said Piri. He scratched his head self-consciously. “Sorry. Let me get that.” Tentatively, he reached for the bag, eyeing Holly nervously.

She ignored him, trying to fight the rising anxiety in her chest. *This is Piri. Mum’s friend, Piri. One of the good guys.* As she’d done often over the past six months, she began silently reciting British monarchs, letting the words wash over her mind, diluting the panic: Elizabeth the Second, George the Sixth, Edward the Eighth, George the Fifth ...

Piri swung her bag into the truck, trying to mask the concern on his face. “Well, um, if you jump in, I’ll give you a quick tour, eh?”

Holly sat as close to the window as possible, taking comfort from the millions of molecules of air between her and Piri. They drove towards the water, bumping and skidding over loose gravel. Long grass and wildflowers

shot out from the ground beside the road where a foot-path should be. There was a simplicity about Piha that Holly found soothing. Nothing could go wrong here, could it?

Piri turned left down Seaview Ave, which snaked beside a stream. There were no houses along the road, just a snarl of grass. At the end of it was a large wooden building nestled on the beach. Red and yellow striped flags flapped from its roof.

“That’s Piha Surf Club. I run my fish and chip shop from there.”

Holly had heard that Piri was famous for his fish and chips. Famous in Piha, anyway. The expansive deck that looked out to sea was currently crowded with patrons enjoying a late lunch.

Piri made a U-turn and headed back up towards the general store. “To be honest, there’s not a lot else to see. Has Nancy told you much about the place?”

“Not really,” Holly admitted. Her mother was pretty tight-lipped about those years in Piha. It was as if she wanted to forget the place completely.

“Fair enough. There’s not a lot to tell.”

Piri drove up and down a few more streets, pointing out the town hall, police station and library. The library wasn’t so much a public building as the front room of someone’s house. The police station looked like

a glorified boat shed. It wouldn't have surprised Holly if there *was* actually a boat inside it. Not that it mattered. There was no crime in Piha, right? That's why she was here ...

Piri headed back down to the water and turned right into Marine Parade, which ran parallel to the beach. He pulled into the grass driveway of an old cottage. Like the rest of the houses on the street, it was a modest timber structure with a sweeping front garden.

"This is us," he said.

Panic started bucking inside Holly again. It was finally real. She would be living with this strange man, in this strange town by the sea. Surely her mother had thought about the irony of the situation before she'd organised it?

Probably. But there was no alternative. Her mother had cut all ties with Piha after she'd left. That was why it was so weird when she'd called Piri, asking him to put her daughter up for a few weeks. Holly had been hovering in the background when her mother made the call.

"Piri Waru? Is that you? It's Nancy ... Nancy Armstrong? Do you remember me?"

It had taken Piri a few minutes to remember. Nancy jogged his memory with stories that made Holly raise her eyebrows. "We used to tramp together in the bush?" Holly and her mother had never been tramping, unless

you counted tramping down the aisles at the supermarket looking for bargain bins. "The Piha touch tournament? We raised money for the surf club?" Holly didn't know the right end of a rugby ball. She couldn't think of a single time when she'd played sport with her mother. Life in Piha was obviously nothing like life in London.

Now, Piri took her bag inside the cottage. She followed gingerly, glad that it was daylight. Inside, the house was cramped but homely. The lounge was decorated with a mishmash of chairs, two sofas and a Formica dining table. At the back of the room was a small, messy kitchen.

"It's not much, but," Piri scratched his head absently. "Let me show you your room."

He led her to a hallway off the right-hand side of the lounge. Holly's room was at the end of the narrow passage. It barely contained the single bed adorned with pale grey sheets. Holly blinked at the teal-coloured walls threatening to close in on her. She focused on the view, imagining she was outside, drowning in the fierce waves, instead of drowning in her own fears.

"You all right?" Piri's voice snapped her back to the here and now. She recalled her mother's words as she stepped onto the airport bus: *Remember your manners, Holly.*

"I'm great, this is just great. Thanks Piri," she replied,

smiling weakly.

He left her to unpack. She could hear him pottering in the small kitchen – clearly giving her a wide berth. Her mother must have told him about The Incident back home.

Home. *I'll have to stop calling it that*, she thought. This was supposed to be 'home' now. But Holly knew it would never be home without her Mum. She counted the days until her mother arrived. Twenty-nine. Then she counted the hours and the minutes. How would she possibly survive until then? She imagined metal bars across the little window. This room was about to become her voluntary prison for twenty-nine days. A hot tear escaped from her eye.

Switching on her mobile phone, she looked at it expectantly. No new messages popped up. Frowning, Holly typed her mother a message.

*Hey Mum. I've arrived in Piha. Text me when you get this. Love you x.*

She toyed with the phone, waiting in vain for a reply.

For dinner, Piri cooked them pan-fried snapper, with lemon pepper potato wedges and salad. They ate in silence at the mint-green table. Holly could hear every morsel of food that crunched between Piri's molars.

Afterwards, he wouldn't let her do the dishes, so she retreated to the safety of her new room. She checked her

phone for the hundredth time to find there were still no new messages. Why hadn't her mother replied? Sighing, she climbed into bed, admiring the fluorescent pink and orange sunset out the window. At least there was a view from her cell.

Then darkness cloaked the misty beach and Holly felt her chest tighten. It happened every day at twilight. She felt like she was being buried in a pit of black sand. "I'm safe," she whispered, "I'm safe," letting the mantra circle in her head, just like the counsellor had said to do. Things would be better here, wouldn't they?

She soon discovered that sleep wasn't any better here than back in London. There were so many unfamiliar sounds, her body refused to rest. Every crack and creak sent her diving beneath the bed covers. Her imagination kept her awake with menacing images of figures cloaked in black lingering beyond her window, their footfall disguised by the sound of rushing waves.

Eventually, in the early hours of the morning, her body gave up the battle. Instantly, she was in the forest, running for her life. The forest was choked in a heavy layer of smoke. She was running through it, unable to catch a breath. It felt like she was being smothered by it. The only thought that flashed through her mind was escape.

She had to escape.

Holly woke bleary-eyed a few hours later to the sound of cicadas chirping outside her window and the gentle purr of waves around Lion Rock. She was supposed to be in paradise, so why did she feel so dreadful? It looked like moving to Piha wasn't going to be a miraculous cure.

When she went out to the kitchen, Piri was at the table drinking coffee. He gave her the option of bacon and eggs or cereal for breakfast. She opted for muesli while he tucked into his fried meal.

"I have to go into work this morning," he said. "What do you want to do?"

The question floored Holly. She had no idea. "Erm," she stammered.

"I mean, I know your mum wants you to work, but I'd rather you had a summer holiday." He sucked some scrambled eggs off his fork. "There's a couple of months before school starts. You could go for some tramps. Learn to surf. I've got a few boards in the garage. Go out on the boat." He gave her a quizzical glance. "You don't want to be stuck in the cafe."

"I don't mind," she said quickly. She wasn't ready to be alone in this place.

"Have a break, Holly. After everything you've been through." He gave her a sympathetic frown.

"I'd rather work." *It'd keep my mind from remembering*, she thought, pushing her spoon through the muesli.

Piri laughed. "Wish I could say the same for some of the kids round here."

"Well, it might be a good way to meet people," she lied. She'd always been hopeless at making friends.

"True." Piri chomped on a rasher of bacon. "Tell you what, how about we start you off at the shop. You meet some people, get to know a few kids. Then you take time off for a holiday."

Holly smiled, unclenching her white fingers from the spoon. Piri pretended not to notice. She hadn't realised how stressed she felt about being alone. "Is there a uniform for your waitresses?"

Piri wrinkled his nose. "Nah. Shorts and a T-shirt is fine."

At about ten o'clock, Holly left with Piri for work. She noticed that he didn't lock the door behind him. *This is Piha*, she told herself, *not London*.

The air outside was humid and still. A sheet of grey cloud covered the sky. They crossed the road and walked along the beach. The sand felt warm as it tickled Holly's toes and flicked the back of her calves. Tumbling blue waves sent spurts of white spray flying through the air. Seagulls squawked and dove into the choppy water, while foam slushed around the base of Lion Rock. As she walked around the huge rock, Holly could make out the animal's hind legs on the dark beach and paws

stretching out to sea.

“You heard about Lion Rock?” asked Piri, following her gaze.

“I’ve read about it online.”

“He’s our town guard dog,” Piri joked. “Keeps us safe from what’s out there,” he said, pointing to the sea.

“What do you mean? What’s out there?” asked Holly.

“Depends who you talk to. Some of the old battlers in Piha will tell you there’s plenty to be afraid of out there,” Piri shrugged. “I think we’re safe here.”

Holly smiled weakly. She hoped so.

They approached the familiar sunny deck of the surf club. The tables were empty and the door was shut. A banner hung across the entrance that read ‘Maui’s Cave’. They crossed the deck and Piri unlocked the door. He led Holly into a large room filled with wooden tables and chairs. At the far left of the room was the bar, with the kitchen behind.

It smelled like salt and lemons. *Comforting smells*, thought Holly. She was safe, or so she kept telling herself. Sparkling silver tinsel fluttered from the ceiling beams and a tall tree smothered in red and gold decorations stood proudly in a corner. With a pang, Holly remembered it was only weeks before Christmas. This would be her first Christmas away from her mother. Her breathing shallowed at the thought.

Piri talked her through the menu and how to work the till. Then he showed her the procedure for giving orders to the kitchen and bar. Holly let the information cocoon her, protecting her from her own thoughts. She memorised the till codes and menu specials, enjoying the break from her bleak imagination.

He left her to ready the floor while he started preparing food. His kitchen hand, Stratton, came in shortly after. Built like a rower, he was tall with broad shoulders. He looked maybe a year or two older than herself. His light blond hair was cropped short, framing his deep blue eyes. He gave her a quick nod before busying himself with crumbing the fish of the day.

Holly was filling salt shakers and sugar bowls when the door opened again and a round-faced, athletic girl blew in.

“Morning, Piri,” she sang, shutting the door behind her. Cascades of brunette hair bounced around her shoulders as she walked. She strode halfway through the empty room before spotting Holly. “Oh! Hi!” Her smile lit up her soft, full cheeks.

Piri came out from the kitchen with a tea towel over his shoulder. “Marnee, this is Holly. She’ll be working with you today.”

“Great! Nice to meet you, Holly.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Give Holly a hand today, eh? Show her the ropes.”

“Of course,” Marnee glowed. “Where are you from, Holly?”

“Holly’s my friend Nancy’s daughter,” Piri explained. “Your dad’ll remember Nancy. I hate to admit it, but she taught us how to surf!”

Holly raised her eyebrows. She didn’t know her mother could surf.

“A girl taught dad to surf?” replied Marnee gleefully. “I’m gonna give him hell about that!”

“Marnee’s dad is our local policeman, Holly. Hopefully you won’t have any run-ins with him,” Piri laughed.

Holly’s face went crimson, causing Piri to slap his hand to his mouth, as if trying to shove his words back into it. Scrambling, he tried to change the subject. “Actually, ahh, Holly and her mum are moving back to Piha, Marnee.”

“Oh yeah? That’s cool.”

Holly studied Marnee. Was she genuinely pleased about Holly being in town? Or was she just pretending?

“When’s your mum getting here again Holly?” asked Piri.

“Just after New Year’s,” she replied. Marnee looked surprised, so she explained. “She had to go to India for work. Her company’s installing a new factory there.”

“India, eh?” said Piri. “She must see some amazing

places. I’ve never even been to Christchurch.” He laughed to himself. “Nancy’s an engineer,” he added to Marnee. “Smart and pretty,” he winked. “Hey, you and Holly will be at school together next year.”

“That’s nice,” Marnee smiled.

Holly’s cheeks reddened. Maybe Marnee was being genuine. Perhaps she didn’t know about her. But she didn’t have time to wonder. The doors to the fish and chip shop opened at eleven o’clock and it was soon very busy. Marnee and Holly split the floor in half, with Holly serving the outside tables. She followed Marnee’s lead, breezing over to tables with menus, filling water jugs and smiling nearly too much.

“Welcome to Maui’s Cave. Here are your menus. Can I get you any drinks to start?”

In a short time she had met a host of locals – even despite her gawky attempts at conversation. Everyone was easy and friendly. She met Marnee’s dad, Community Constable Damien, a tall brown-skinned man with a thick black goatee. He ordered the fish basket before fanning out the newspaper to read during his break. She met Gwen, the homely, crinkled librarian, who was enjoying a platter of squid rings on the deck with her daughter. The tall, burly young man who ran the Piha Adventure Programme introduced himself as Lucas. He was wearing the Piha uniform of a singlet and board

shorts, with his long blond hair slicked back in a ponytail. His co-leader, Al, was sitting beside him. A similarly solid young man, his cropped auburn hair was carefully combed in a side part.

She took their order of mussel fritters and a fish basket to the kitchen. As she clipped it to the cue string, Marnee wrapped her arm round Holly's waist. "How's it going?" she asked.

Holly took a sharp breath. She wasn't used to people touching her. "It's busy," she replied feebly.

"Yeah, but you're doing great! The lunch rush is basically over, it should get a bit quieter now."

Marnee patted her affectionately on the arm before getting back to her tables. *Maybe people did things differently in Piha*, Holly thought. She tried to remember Sadie or Mel ever showing her that kind of affection back home, but nothing sprang to mind. As soon as school was out they acted like she didn't exist. Shrugging back to work, she fetched Gwen another lemon, lime and bitters, gave a couple of English tourists a bottle of red sauce and helped a mother clean up her child's spilt soda.

As she was mopping up the fizzy liquid, her body tensed. She felt someone watching her. It was as if there was a laser burning into her flesh. Collecting the pile of soggy napkins, she spun around and found a boy staring

at her. He was sitting at the table on the deck Damien had just vacated. His brow was furrowed and his strong bronze arms were folded on the table. It was dislike at first sight.

Holly slunk back inside self-consciously. He obviously knew about her. The distaste on his face was plain to see. She lingered by the kitchen, not wanting to go to his table. Why couldn't he just pretend that she didn't have a past? Piri had managed it, why not him? Her body trembled with frustration.

Piri looked up from the fryer and noticed Holly loitering. "Everything okay?"

She pressed her lips together and nodded with a heavy sigh. "Yeah, fine." She'd better get back to work. Picking up two menus, she held them like armour across her chest. Reciting those British monarchs, she inched her way over to his table.

At close range, Holly noticed his dishevelled brown hair was wet and there were rings of salt around his tense forearms. He and his friend were dressed identically in bright yellow and red uniforms. They had just been on lifeguard duty.

"Welcome to Maui's Cave," she stammered. "Here are your menus. Would you like any drinks to start?" Her voice was barely louder than a whisper.

The boy didn't look up as she spoke. He was playing

with a black string tied around his wrist. It had a single black stone knotted into it that flickered in the afternoon sun.

His companion, watching the waves, ruffled his short black hair as he spoke. “Nah, we’re good. We’ll just have a couple of Maui burgers.”

Holly gritted her teeth as she attempted to smile. “Sure.”

She skulked back to the kitchen feeling like she’d been shot in the stomach by a harpoon. He couldn’t even look at her. She clipped his order onto the end of the string before slumping against the bar. Watching him from across the room, he looked like a bronze sculpture, with chiselled cheekbones and defined muscles. In a parallel universe she would have called him good-looking. But not today, with his face contorted into a scowl.

Marnee followed Holly’s gaze. “Taine and Keven finished early today. Yikes! Taine’s looking grumpy. Must be those headaches again. Don’t mind him.”

But Holly did mind him. She couldn’t help being upset by his hostile welcome. Trying to avoid his glares, she walked the long way round to serve four Swedish backpackers and the couple of locals on the deck. She didn’t want to get too close to him. There was a bad energy welling up inside of her and she desperately wanted to go home.

The kitchen bell trilled. Reluctantly, she stomped over and picked up Taine and Keven’s orders. Taking them over to their table, she fought the impulse to dump Taine’s burger on his head. Without a word, and keeping her eyes downcast, she set their meals in front of them.

A repellent pulse seemed to ripple across the airwaves from Taine to herself. So he knew about The Incident? He didn’t *really* know what it was like, that night in the darkness. Who was he to judge? Holly shot him a dirty look before whipping away with gazelle-like speed.

Most of the other lunch patrons had disappeared onto the beach, so she started wiping down her vacant tables, releasing her anger on the varnished wood until she could see her glowering reflection. She refused to go back to Taine’s table. His water glass was empty. So what? He could fill it up himself. When he and Keven had finished their burgers, she hid in the kitchen to avoid clearing their plates.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she repeated quietly, letting the words flood her mind, thinking back to that night in London.

“What’s that Holly?” asked Piri, pouring piping hot chips into a bowl.

“Nothing,” she replied quickly. “I’ll just ...” she said, gesturing to her tables.

She felt a vice clamp around her heart as she forced

herself back to Taine's table. She dragged her feet, which suddenly felt like they were lined with lead. *Just grab their dirty dishes*, she thought, *that's all you have to do*.

Once in front of them, her tongue refused to talk. She felt like a shaken up bottle of soda, ready to explode. She took Keven's plate, looking down. Her hand reached out to grab Taine's and her disobedient eyes flicked up to his face. The corners of his mouth were pricked up, like he was suppressing a smile. Holly stacked the plates, cradling them protectively.

Then thunder boomed and rain fell like daggers onto the deck.

## 2

**H**OLLY WAS DRENCHED in seconds. Around her, diners were grabbing their plates and rushing inside, but she remained rooted to the spot, her gaze fixed on Taine. He kept his eyes trained on her until Marnee grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away.

"Quick! Get inside," she gasped. "Did you see that lightning?"

Sopping wet, Holly squelched behind Marnee into the cafe, which was now bedlam. Behind her she could hear Taine and Keven shaking off the rain, but she couldn't look at them.

She retreated to the safety of the kitchen reciting her British monarchs, trying to compose herself. What had just happened? That storm had come from nowhere.

Consumed by her thoughts, she didn't notice Stratton looking at her.

“I see you’ve been introduced to the Piha weather,” he said.

Holly looked up and smiled meekly, water dripping from the ends of her hair. “Piha weather?” she asked.

“One minute it’s sunny, the next it’s pouring. The forecasters never get it right. Here,” he tossed her a tea towel. “Dry yourself off.”

As Holly rubbed the towel over her, she heard Piri shifting tables and dragging chairs, trying to make room inside for his wet customers.

“So that’s normal then?” Holly wanted to know. “Downpours, coming out of nowhere?”

“Normal? It’s common.”

She peeked out of the kitchen just as Piri finished moving the furniture. Al was smoothing out his sodden red fringe, while beside him, Lucas squeezed the rain from his own ponytail. Taine and Keven were loitering at the till, waiting to pay.

Holly hid behind the doorframe as Piri strode over to them. “Taine!” he cried, grabbing his hand and pulling him into an embrace. They slapped each other affectionately on their backs. “You got drenched too then?” he asked, as water dripped from Taine’s shirt.

“Good old Piha,” Taine joked. “Hey, thanks for fixing my outboard.”

“No worries. How’s it running now?”

“Like a dream. I owe you.”

Piri rang up their order on the till. Holly tried to remain hidden by the kitchen, but Piri spied her as he looked up to take Taine’s money. “You two met Holly?”

“Um, yup,” Taine grumbled. He made a face as though the mere sight of Holly repulsed him. She slunk back towards the kitchen door, feeling invisible.

Oblivious, Piri looked as though a light bulb had just sparked above his head. “Hey, that favour ...” he thought aloud. “How ’bout you take Holly out? Teach her to surf!”

The look on Taine’s face mirrored Holly’s. Disbelief. Dislike. Discomfort.

“Aah –”

“Go on,” Piri insisted. “You know, Holly’s mum taught me to surf –”

“I don’t know ...” he shifted awkwardly. “I was thinking of working here to pay off the debt.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Piri, waving his hand in the air. “Lunch is on me too.” He pushed Taine’s money away. “You know, Holly’s just moved here from London.”

Taine flicked her a look. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, and I’m sure she’d love to learn to surf instead of being holed up in here all summer. What d’you reckon, Holly?”

Holly grimaced. “Erm ...”

“That’s settled then. Take her out tomorrow, eh.” Piri slapped Taine on the arm, then turned to Holly and winked. “With Taine’s help, you’ll be a pro in no time.”

Holly plastered a weak grin on her face. Was Piri blind? Could he not tell that Taine would rather jump off a cliff than hang out with her? She frowned as she watched him and Keven leave. Piri looked pleased, like he’d just answered the final question correctly on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*

The kitchen closed at three o’clock and the cafe was empty soon after. Piri whistled as he cleaned up, before insisting that Holly go home. She faltered at the thought of going back to the empty house. She was afraid of being alone – she was afraid of herself. But Piri was adamant. He pushed Marnee and Holly out of the door into the clammy afternoon.

“I’ll just get the dinner prep sorted,” he told Holly. “I won’t be home till late tonight. Will you be all right to knock something up for your tea? Make yourself at home, eh.”

“Yeah, sure,” she lied.

Walking along the soggy beach back to Piri’s house, Holly let tears melt down her cheeks. She wished she was back in London, before The Incident, when everything was normal. Her mother had sent her to Piha to get away from the danger back home. Yet she felt like she’d been

sent straight into the lion’s den.

As her feet dragged through the wet sand, she was overcome by fatigue. All of a sudden, her jetlag seemed to come crashing down on her, like a heavy wave on the beach. When she crossed the threshold into Piri’s stuffy cottage, she collapsed on her mattress, trying not to stay awake.

Hours later, shafts of moonlight fell across Holly’s bed, illuminating her insomnia. She checked the clock on her phone for the seventeenth time. She’d been awake for ages. Her mind was refusing to rest. She wriggled on the springy mattress, wishing she could relax, but her imagination was like a steam train about to derail.

Taine wouldn’t come. Or would he? Surely not. But what if he did? And what if she made a fool of herself? She couldn’t surf. What if she drowned? Or what if he tried to hurt her? Visions of herself floundering in the waves and Taine pushing her under the water, rattled her mind.

She knew she was overreacting. But the way he had looked at her – contempt littered with disgust. Surely it wasn’t possible for the surfing lesson to play out any other way?

Holly squeezed her eyes shut and started counting monarchs. Elizabeth the Second, George the Sixth,

Edward the Eighth, George the Fifth ...

Eventually she fell into a fitful slumber, filled with heavy dark clouds and shimmering mist. She couldn't see anything through the dense fog, but she could hear a voice, low and rasping. A man's voice. It was so close she could feel his breath as he whispered in her ear. His words echoed in her mind as they repeated, over and over: *I'll find you ... I'll find you ... I'll find you.*

The next morning, Holly felt stiff and woozy. Her head ached and her eyes were crusted with sleep. The bad dreams and jetlag were wreaking havoc on her body. When would the nightmares stop? It had been six months. She longed for a good night's sleep. She snuck a peek at her face in the mirror and flinched. Her white blonde hair was like a tangled cloud floating around her head.

She opened the curtains, letting the daylight stream in. Wincing, she looked at the beach with trepidation. The waves were even bigger than yesterday.

Piri left for work with a spring in his step. He winked at Holly as he walked out the door. "Taine will be here soon. You're gonna love surfing. I bet you'll be even better than your mum!"

Holly smiled feebly, watching him walk down the path. Her bones chattered with nerves, fear flooding

back into her mind. She wondered what drowning felt like. Would it be quick? Would it hurt? "Stop it!" she cried, slapping her forehead. This was beyond ridiculous. Taine wasn't going to hurt her. In fact, getting to know her might change his opinion of her.

She slumped on the couch, letting her ears tune into the sounds of Piri's home. The whirring of the refrigerator, the bossy ticking of the wall clock, the dripping kitchen tap. She wished she could hear her mother's voice right now. If only she could call. But her mother was adamant. No calls. It was far too expensive from Piha. Just wait. Text and email if you must.

Holly pulled out her mobile phone and, fingers shaking, sent her mother a quick text.

*Hey mama bear. Did you get my text? How's India? Miss you. 27 sleeps! Love baby bear x*

She re-read the message as her thumb hovered over the send button. She knew she should say she's enjoying it here, or that the beach is lovely, or that Piri's been nice, but she just couldn't bring herself to lie. She hated it here, the beach was windy and Piri was making her spend time with a guy who clearly hated her. Sighing, Holly sent the message, then tossed her phone onto the coffee table.

Was it morning or evening in England now? She wondered if people would be at school. Would anyone be

missing her? She doubted it. The other kids at school weren't so much friends, but human beings who happened to sit in the same classroom as herself. None of them had ever invited her to hang out.

Though, to be fair, she'd never invited any of them over. It wasn't that she was embarrassed of their draughty flat in Brixton, was it? Compared to home, Piri's house may as well be Buckingham Palace. But most of the kids at school probably lived in flats like Holly did. So why didn't she invite them over? Why didn't they invite her?

Because they all knew about The Incident, that's why.

They called her names. They tagged them on her locker and smeared them across her text books. They said she'd been asking for it. Her mother had made her shut down her Facebook page after the trolls had started posting on there too.

Curling up on the couch, Holly tried to forget. Outside, she could see a couple strolling hand in hand along the boardwalk. She watched a young boy and his father fly a kite on the beach. A group of tourists posed for photos in front of the rolling waves. She watched the life-guards placing their red and yellow flags in the sand. She squinted, trying to make out Taine, but he was nowhere to be seen. He was probably in the cafe giving Piri an excuse. *I've got a terrible cold ... My dog ate my surfboard ... I just don't think she's up to it.*

Her eyes rested on Lion Rock, looming over the sea. Water churned around the lion's paws, splashing its limbs as it sat sentinel in the waves, guarding the town. From what?

*From me,* Holly thought gloomily.

Haze twisted around the base of the rock. Crisp and pale like cloud, it hovered over the sand and sea. As the snow-white vapour bubbled and contorted beneath the rock, it shimmered a pale shade of green. Holly watched the mist with a sense of longing, wishing it would swallow her up. She stared at it, transfixed, until she started to make out shapes within it. From her vantage point, she thought she could see the outlines of people. Were they in the mist, or behind the mist? She moved closer to the window, blinking hard. From Piri's house, she could have sworn there were people in the fog. She could just make out a hand here, a face there ...

Her mobile buzzed. She spun away from the window and snatched it off the coffee table. There was a message from her mother.

*Hey sweets, sorry for the late reply. Glad you arrived safely. How's it going there? Any trouble? Miss you too love x*

Holly's lip wobbled. The message made her feel even more desperate to see her mother. How would she survive 27 more sleeps?

*Miss you more*, she replied.

Frustrated, she buried her phone in her pocket and went to her room. Rummaging in her suitcase, she pulled out a dog-eared paperback. *To Kill a Mockingbird* had always been her favourite. She let the musty smell of the yellowed pages comfort her. Then she fell under the book's spell, forgetting her frustration, so she didn't hear the door open and the footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Holly?"

She screeched, flinging the book at the boy in the doorway. It bounced off his chest before he caught it skilfully with one hand. He looked at her with amusement.

"Taine!" she cried in horror. "Oh, sorry." Beads of mortification coloured her cheeks.

"Shall we see if your surfing's as good as your throwing?" he chuckled.

He was wearing a pair of blue and green board shorts. A striped towel hung over his shoulder, skimming across his bronze torso. Holly tried not to look at his sculpted abdominals. "We don't have to," she said, sitting up, "I mean, you don't have to teach me."

He shrugged. "Do you want to learn to surf?"

The truth was, she'd love to learn to surf. She imagined herself flying over the turquoise water, the salt spray whooshing through her hair. Just like her mother. "Yeah,

but -"

"Good. You want to surf and I've got a debt to Piri. So, I'll teach you to surf."

Holly wrinkled her nose. "But -"

"Grab your togs. Let's go."

Togs. She thought only her mother called them that. Taine walked out of the room and she wriggled into her bathing suit, a going-away present from her mother. She slung one of Piri's towels over her shoulder and found Taine on the grass outside.

Her chest was simmering with tension. Grey cloud cloaked the sky and a restless wind swirled around them. Two surfboards lay at Taine's feet. He picked one up and handed it to Holly. She felt nervous just looking at the long foreign object.

"Here's your board. Let's get out there." He picked up the other board, tucked it under his arm and led Holly across the road to the beach. She bumped along behind him, the surfboard slapping her leg as she walked.

Taine didn't seem as repulsed by her today. Instead, he just seemed ... indifferent. Was this progress?

They skidded down the sand dunes onto the beach. Taine led Holly into the area between the red and yellow flags that were stabbed into the sand. There were a few lifeguards in the area with their binoculars trained on the surf. Taine greeted them as he walked past. Holly

hoped none of them would have to rescue her shortly.

“Okay, before we head into the water there’s a few basics to learn,” said Taine, chucking his surfboard onto the compacted black sand beneath one of the flags. Holly followed suit, plonking her board next to his. “Piha can be pretty dangerous if you don’t know what you’re doing.” His hair glinted gold as the wind whispered through it.

He talked to Holly about rips and waves and rocks. For someone who hated her guts, he was being very thorough.

*Professional, she thought. He was just being professional.*

“Now onto the fun stuff. Let’s start at the beginning.” He pointed to the board in front of Holly. “This is a surfboard.” She laughed. “Now there are three key things to know and practise. Lying on your board, paddling and standing up.”

He demonstrated the three basics, talking Holly through where her body needed to be in each position. She cringed. Standing up? Standing up didn’t look like it’d be that easy in the waves.

“Make sense?” asked Taine.

“Hmmm,” said Holly doubtfully.

“Give it a go,” he said, watching as Holly attempted to copy him. Her motions were not as fluid as his and she

wobbled on the board as she stood up. Her face flushed pink in embarrassment.

“Good,” said Taine. “You just need to keep your weight forward like this –” He placed his hands around her waist and gently pushed her hips forward. It felt like a volt of electricity passed through her. Holly held her breath. “And hold your hands a bit lower.” He took her arms in his, carefully lowering them to the correct height. He wasn’t wearing his wristband today and his arms skimmed softly across her skin.

He talked through some basic technique with Holly. Where her chin should sit when she’s paddling, where her feet should land when standing. Taine was a natural tutor. Watching him eagerly, she tried to absorb everything in his lesson.

“I think you’re ready to try this in the water,” he said.

“Oooh, I don’t know,” Holly replied. Butterflies were flitting around her stomach at lightning speed.

“You can’t surf on the sand,” Taine pointed out. He looked at the water. “Well, I’m heading out.” He picked up his board and started marching toward the water.

Holly floundered. Knowing she couldn’t stay put, she followed him timidly. She tried to steady her heartbeat. Her head was awash with the lesson, trying to remember all the little details and hoping she wouldn’t make a fool of herself.

They waded into the shallows. Holly's skin tingled as the water lapped around her ankles. Taine's board slapped the surface as he threw it ahead of him before diving into the undulating waves.

"Come on, Holly," he said, splashing her.

The cold droplets sent a shiver of goosebumps up her torso. "Ah!" she shrieked. "It's freezing!"

"No it's not," said Taine. "Not once you're in."

He waded over to Holly, eyeing her menacingly. Before she had time to react, he scooped her into his wet arms and tossed her into the sea.

She plunged heavily into the waves, but instead of an icy chill, Holly found the water energising and inviting. She gasped as she surfaced.

"Not so bad, is it?" said Taine.

Holly smiled, brushing her hair away from her face. She followed Taine's lead as he started paddling on his board away from the beach. She surprised herself by feeling confident as she ventured out. If her mum could surf, maybe she could too. Taine led her to a calm spot where the waves were just beginning.

"And now we wait," he said.

They bobbed on top of the water. Holly's body shivered with anticipation.

"Here's a good one," said Taine, spying the water behind them.

Holly felt the water tug her backwards, collecting ammunition for its assault on the shore. She watched Taine prepare himself. As the wave came closer, he paddled hard then nimbly stood up on his board, riding it effortlessly to shore.

"That was great!" yelled Holly.

The corners of Taine's mouth pricked as he paddled back out. "Next time you have to ride with me."

"Okay," said Holly, feeling surprisingly eager.

Taine and Holly lay on their surfboards waiting for the next big wave.

Feeling the familiar tug of water from behind, she pushed hard with her arms and felt the board being carried along by the gushing water. She tried to stand up, like she had done on the sand, but her body quivered and wobbled. Perching precariously on her knees, the board rocked sideways. Then, as the wave roared beneath her, she was pushed off. She tumbled through the bubbling water, tossed around like a rag doll, water shooting up her nose and throat.

Eventually, the wave hit the beach and spewed her frazzled body onto the sand. Coughing and spluttering, she wiped her stinging eyes. Her hair was plastered across her face. She brushed it aside, squinting at Taine who was standing in waist-high water with a grin on his face.

“Well, you tried,” he said.

Holly stood up. Her body trembled involuntarily. She tried not to think about all the people on the beach behind her, probably having a good laugh.

“You done?” he called.

She shook her head. “Not yet. Give me another shot.” Taine raised his eyebrows. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Holly splashed her way back into the deep water. Lying alongside Taine, she bit her lip, anxious to catch a wave. When she heard the whooshing sound of water behind her, she kicked hard until she felt her board being tugged. Then she pulled herself along the surfboard and pushed up. She felt a bubble of excitement build inside of her. But just as she slid her back leg forward, a burst of power shot from the breaker, sending her crashing into the water in a tangled heap. The ocean blurred before her eyes as she somersaulted through it. Her shoulder hit the sea floor with a heavy thud. Water spilled over her, then ejected her into the shallows.

Wheezing, she sat on the sand for a few moments.

Taine smirked. “You’ve got a …” he gestured at her crown. She pulled a length of seaweed out of her matted hair and laughed as she flung it into the sea.

“You done now?” he called.

“Not yet,” she shot back.

Taine looked surprised. He cocked his head, then

kicked hard, paddling back into the deep. Holly picked up her board and followed him. Next time she’d catch her wave.

Swimming towards the breakers, she went through his lesson again in her head. She tried to imagine herself standing tall and riding the next wave. She lay alongside him, staring at the blue green sea, willing on the next one.

When it came, it ate her up and spat her out on the black sand. And a dozen more did the same after that. Still, she kept trying, determined to ride that elusive wave. Taine looked impressed by her resolve. “You’ve got guts, Holly, I’ll give you that.”

He surfed like a professional – curling and zigzagging across the powerful waves with ease. Holly watched enviously. If only she could have an ounce of that skill. Had her mother surfed like that? It was hard to imagine Nancy carving out lines through the surf. But the way Piri talked about her, she was obviously good. Maybe she could teach Holly when she finally made it to Piha.

Her fingers were completely wrinkled when Taine suggested they head in. “The water’s getting wild. We don’t want you to get hurt now, do we?” He gave her a sly smile.

Holly reluctantly followed him back up the beach. She didn’t want to give up, which was odd for her. Usually

she accepted that she was useless at sports. But surfing was different. Her mother could surf. So Holly really wanted to surf – just like her.

“We’ll go out another time, eh?” asked Taine, as if sensing her frustration.

Holly nodded as she picked up her towel.

“To be fair, I shouldn’t have taken you out today,” he said. “Conditions were way beyond beginner level. You handled them well.”

“No, I didn’t,” Holly protested.

“You did,” he insisted. “You pulled up most of the time. Hardly anyone can do that on their first try.”

“Yeah, but –”

“Trust me. You did great. I thought you would’ve given up after your first wave.”

Holly allowed a little pride to brim in her chest. Was this the same guy who was so rude to her only yesterday? They trudged up Piri’s grass driveway.

“I’ll just hose down the boards,” said Taine, looking at Holly. He ran his eyes up and down her sand-covered body. “On second thoughts, maybe I’ll hose you down first.”

“What?”

But before she could process his statement, Taine had turned on the hose and fired it at her. She squealed as the ice-cold water hit her skin. She tried to jump out of

the way, but Taine chased her across the lawn laughing, shooting water at her. With each flick of the hose, she yelped with shock.

Splash. “Ahh!” Splash. “Oooh!” Splash. “Stop it!”

“You’ll never win,” Taine called in his smooth, deep voice. She was waving her hands in front of her in an effort to protect herself from the cold spray. Taine chuckled as she zigzagged across the lawn, trying to dodge the water.

“You can’t go inside covered in sand,” Taine said. “It’s Piri’s pet hate.”

“Is there a hot hose I can stand under then?”

“Just stay still. It won’t take a second.”

Holly whimpered in acquiescence. “Fine.” After her many wipe outs, she was covered in black sand. He walked up to her slowly, pointing the hose at the ground, grinning.

“Just – make it quick,” she moaned.

“Brace yourself,” he grinned. Standing in front of her, she could see the delicate freckles on his nose. Gently, he flicked the water over her ankles, then slowly higher and higher up her leg. His hand was only inches away from her skin. Her body felt hot on the inside, yet goosebumps lifted on her arms.

“Finished yet?” she asked.

“I think you brought most of the beach with you,”

Taine replied. They were standing so close now, she could see his chest rise and fall. "Arms up," he commanded. He took hold of Holly's hips and swivelled her around. Then, he began tenderly washing the sand from her side. "This should motivate you for next time."

"What – to not fall off my board?"

"Exactly."

They locked eyes as he swept his hand down her side. She shivered, before quickly looking away.

"Okay, nearly done. Turn around."

He adjusted the hose so that the water was a soft trickle, letting it run down her shoulders. Again, he gently rubbed his hands down her body, washing the sand away. She could feel his warm breath against her skin. His face was locked with concentration. Was he enjoying this?

Then he wound the hose valve shut. "All done."

"Thanks," she smiled. "For the lesson too. It was fun."

A cloud of awkwardness rose between them.

"I'll just clean the boards," he said, moving over to the surf boards lying on the grass. Taking the same care he'd taken with Holly, he washed them down until they were clean. When he finished, he stowed the hose and put the surfboards back in Piri's garage.

"Well, good surfing today," he said quietly.

Holly grinned. "You too."

"I'll see you round then."

*Hope so*, she said to herself.

Inside, Holly was suddenly aware that her heart was beating in double time. She forgot about the wipe outs. All she could think about was Taine. Perhaps they would be friends, her and Taine? He had tolerated her today. He'd smiled. He'd even laughed.

As the sun set, she didn't feel the usual anxiety taking hold. Sitting on the couch, she watched the beach clear. Keven and the other lifeguards packed up their equipment and flags. Beach goers shook the sand off their towels and slid into their shoes. Holly looked at the waves, determined to master them one day. Watching them tumble around Lion Rock, she was itching to get back on the water.

With still no sign of Piri, she fixed herself a salad for dinner. Then she went to bed, exhausted from the day's surfing. Well, the day's attempt to surf.

Lying in bed, she had the sensation that she was being tossed around on the waves. It felt like she was back on the water, bobbing about on the surfboard, bobbing about next to Taine. She enjoyed the unusual feeling and, before long, it rocked her to sleep.

Then she was standing in the middle of the forest, surrounded by a veil of mist. It snaked around her body and drifted into her mouth and nose. She struggled for

breath, but it wouldn't come – she was choking in the silky fog.

A young man walked through the forest towards her. His eyes were wide in recognition, his full lips upturned in a smile. Holly walked towards him, her arms outstretched. The mist slackened its hold on her breathing and slithered back down to her fingertips.

She stood in front of the man. He started speaking, his voice animated and fast, like he was talking to a long-lost friend. Holly held a finger to her lips and he fell silent. She smiled slowly. "I've found you," she whispered.

The man looked confused as she placed her arms around his neck. She felt his throbbing veins, his beating pulse, the sharp whiskers on his throat. Then her hands tightened. She watched her fingers as they squeezed the life from his lungs.

He began struggling in her grip. Desperately, he grabbed her wrists, scratching and tugging to make her let go. His fingernails dug into her arms, but she refused to release him. She watched his face redden. Globules of saliva popped from his lips. He tried to cry out, but his voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper. Holly watched his life slipping away, into her hands ...

Then she screamed.

### 3

**P**IRI BURST INTO her room. "Holly? Holly! What is it? What's going on?"

Shocked awake, Holly trembled in her bed. The sheets had wound around her body, trapping her inside them. Her legs were wet with sweat and her hair was sticking to her neck.

Piri scanned the room, looking for an intruder. Then his face crumpled as he realised what was happening. He bent over Holly, his voice low and soothing.

"Holly, you all right? It's all right." He helped her untangle herself from the sheets and fetched her a glass of water. She drank the water slowly, her heart still thumping in her chest, like a caged animal wanting to escape.

"Sorry I woke you," she murmured.

Piri shook his head. "It's all right, love. You okay

now?”

Holly nodded, handing him the glass. She hid her hands beneath the bed covers to hide the shaking. She could still feel the man’s throat, his slackening pulse and faltering breath ...

She threw up on the carpet.

Piri dashed away to get a bowl. He shoved it under her chin before mopping up the mess. Holly insisted on helping, but he forced her to stay in bed. She lay back weakly, reciting monarchs as she fought the nausea churning in her stomach. She felt embarrassed watching Piri tending to her. It shouldn’t affect her like this. It was just a dream.

After he had cleaned up, he left Holly to rest, though he kept her door open and the light on in the hall. But she couldn’t go back to sleep. Her hands were soiled. Murderer’s hands. Stained with blood.

The next day, Piri wouldn’t let Holly go into work. “I want you to stay home and relax,” he said firmly, over his steaming morning coffee.

“But –”

“Read a book. Go for a walk. Have a swim.”

“But –”

“No arguments, Holly.” He brushed toast crumbs off his shirt before disappearing out the door.

Holly flopped onto the couch with a heavy sigh. It wasn’t the first time she’d had a nightmare. There had been hundreds before. But this one was worse than the others. It was so real and ... cold-blooded.

She grabbed her phone.

*Mum, the nightmares are getting worse. What should I do?*

Her counsellor said it was normal to get nightmares. It was part of the healing process. Holly started biting her fingernails. When would she be healed? This was the first time she’d dreamed something so graphic. Usually she dreamed about her own death.

Who had morbid dreams like that? Did other people have nightmares? Probably not nightmares about murdering someone ...

She watched a flock of surfers curling over the waves around Lion Rock. It gave her a boost, thinking about her surfing lesson yesterday. What had Taine said? You did great. She hadn’t heard much praise like that in the last six months. It was always sympathy or advice. *Are you all right? Don’t worry. Try not to think about it. You’ll get through this.*

She had confronted her fears yesterday. She’d tried something new and almost achieved something. She never would have even bothered if she was still in London.

She stood up and started pacing the living room. What would the new Piha version of Holly do now? Lie on the couch moping that she'd had a nightmare? No!

She pulled her shoulders back. She needed to march into that forest, breathe in the comforting smells of the bush and put her nightmare to bed. That would cure her.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she strapped on some sandals and tied back her hair. She strode out the front door and slammed it, enjoying not having to lock up.

It was another overcast day. A few shafts of sunlight were trying to poke through the grey cloud. Light drizzle swirled through the air, moistening her face and beading in her hair.

She walked with purpose, taking long strides and swinging her arms. She wasn't sure how to get into the bush, but she followed her feet. She took Piri's road, past the neighbouring cottages and holiday homes. It followed the curvature of the beach until it came to a dead end. There was a small car park and a little grassy area with benches. Beyond it lay the dense bush. Holly read the green and yellow sign on the edge of the track with triumph: 'Welcome to Aopuri Forest'.

Then she started feeling anxious. Her legs wavered. She thought about turning back, of hiding under the blankets. Her hands formed fists at her sides and her

mouth went dry. She inched towards the bush, feeling nauseated, starting to second-guess herself. Was this the right thing to do? What would her counsellor have said?

All she wanted to do was curl up in a ball on the side of the road.

But Holly shook her head. *It was just a nightmare*, she told herself. It wasn't real. There was nothing in the bush that would hurt her. She flapped her arms at her sides, shaking out her fists and the ill feeling. She pushed herself forward, willing her legs to continue going one foot in front of the other until she reached the forest entrance.

Her first few steps across the threshold were heavy. She thought her legs might melt beneath her. But as she ventured further into the bush, she felt her anxiety beginning to fade.

The track was quite narrow, often heavily disguised by an overgrowth of branches. She had to beat a path through the trees. Fern fronds swished past her legs and leaves licked her shirt, leaving tiny crystals of dew. The bush was eerily calm. Prickles of light pierced the forest canopy overhead and insects danced in the light.

Holly moved quietly along the track, the thuds of her feet dulled by the dense earth. She scanned the forest floor, searching for the man in her dream, wondering if she would come across his body, or signs of his struggle.

But the forest looked pure and untouched. There was no blood, no body, just the bush. The further she walked, her unease was replaced by relief and she started enjoying the restfulness of the forest. No one was following her. Nothing was chasing her. She stroked the rough bark of old tree trunks and fingered the delicate yellow flowers of a blossoming plant. Birds chirped overhead. Holly craned her neck, squinting into the trees to watch a tui, iridescent turquoise with a tuft of white feathers under its beak, croon melodiously.

She savoured the sights of the bush. There were millions of shades of green, with sporadic bursts of floral colour. The air felt clean, as if each breath was purifying her from the horror of her nightmare.

She walked for some time, curving past old trees and wobbling over exposed roots. Eventually, the soft sound of running water penetrated the quiet. With a few more steps, the track dovetailed with a stream. Deep blue water gushed along, curling over smooth pebbles. Dark green moss coated the edges. Holly walked alongside it, admiring the swirling water and lush surroundings.

Following the water upstream, she came to a secluded waterfall. A few storeys high, it cascaded over a steep, rocky cliff. Ribbons of white water washed over gnarled stones and splashed into an indigo pool. It was hypnotic watching the steady flow of white froth disappear into

the deep. Then something jumped out of the water.

“Taine!” she squealed.

“Holly!” he gasped.

She took a moment to get her breath back. “You’ve got to stop surprising me like that.” She had missed seeing his towel and pile of clothes by the edge of the water.

Taine grinned, treading water in the middle of the pool. “But I like surprising you.”

Before Holly could respond, he dove back under. She tried to follow his movements, but lost sight of him. He was immersed for several moments before popping up by the edge. “Come in, it’s warmer than it looks.”

“I didn’t bring my togs.”

Taine gave her a lopsided smile and Holly flushed.

“I’ll leave you to it,” she said, turning to go.

“Wait – can you give me a hand?” Taine held up his arm by the water’s edge.

“A what?”

“Help me out. It’s pretty rocky on the side here.”

“What would you have done if I hadn’t shown up?”

“I must have known you were coming,” he winked.

Holly stepped over to the edge of the pool tentatively. He held out his hand for her. There was a long scratch down his forearm.

“See?” said Taine, admiring his scratch. “I did that on the rocks. You don’t want me to hurt myself even

more, do you?”

Holly took his hand. He gripped hers firmly, squeezing her fingers together. His palm felt soft, like he'd been swimming in silk. She started pulling, but he was so heavy he didn't even budge. She pulled harder, trying to drag him out, until she lost her footing. The next moment she was falling forward with his weight until she plummeted head first into the cold pool.

She fell hard into the stinging water, which was so black she couldn't see a thing. She quickly lost her bearings, falling deeper. Panicking, her hands chopped through the water, desperately trying to find the way up. Then a strong arm wrapped itself around her and towed her towards the light. She cut through the inky liquid, panting. Taine was holding her in a firm grip against his chest. He was laughing.

“You pulled me in!” accused Holly.

“Did I?”

She huffed. “You – you – my clothes are all wet!”

“They'll dry.”

“You're lucky I didn't have my mobile on me.”

Taine smirked. “I'm a lucky guy.”

She tried to wriggle out of his grip, but he wouldn't let her. He had her firmly latched to his chest.

“Let me go!”

He shook his head. “The water's very deep.”

She fought him a little more before giving up and he smiled. They were so close she could hear the tiny sounds as his lips moved.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

She raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Not really. It was worth it to see the look on your face.” He laughed, gently releasing her.

Holly splashed water at him as he floated away. She watched as he slid out onto the mossy bank with ease. She couldn't believe she'd fallen for his trick. Of course he could get out of the pool by himself! This was the same guy who surfed like an expert yesterday. A little rocky bank wouldn't give him any trouble.

“You can wear my shirt,” said Taine. “It's dry.”

He held out his hand to help her out of the water. She looked at it sceptically.

“Truce?” he asked. His eyes looked like glittering emeralds.

She screwed her face up as she took his hand. With barely any effort, he lifted her out of the pool. He gave her his dry towel, looking away as she removed her soggy clothes and put on his shirt.

There was something odd about Taine. One moment he was deadly serious, the next he was playing tricks and laughing. What was his deal? Holly wanted to dive into his soul and swim through his secrets.

When she was done changing, she handed him his towel along with her wet clothes. “There you go. You can wash them for me.”

Taine laughed. “Fair enough.” He roughly dried himself before slinging the towel and clothes over his shoulder.

“What were you doing here anyway?”

“Just felt like a walk,” she said curtly. “What were you doing here?”

“Nothing much.”

They walked side by side along the bush track. Holly pulled her ponytail out and squeezed the water from her hair.

“Your hair’s pretty when it’s down,” he said, taking a strand and twirling it around his finger. His hand smelled like pine needles. Holly felt a burst of heat sink below her belly button.

“You can’t sweet-talk me after pushing me into the water,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

Taine shrugged. “Technically I pulled you.”

Holly gave him a raised eyebrow. He grinned as they followed a gentle bend in the track.

“Like it in Piha so far?” he asked.

“Aside from you bullying me? It’s okay.”

“I haven’t bullied you!” Taine cried indignantly.

“You tricked me into surfing when you knew it was

too rough. Then you *pulled* me into that deep pool fully clothed!”

“Hmm, this is true.”

Holly smirked.

“Do you prefer it here to London? How does it compare?”

“It doesn’t really. The closest thing I had to a forest near home was a tiny park with three trees in it.”

“Are you serious? I couldn’t imagine my life without this bush,” said Taine, thoughtfully. “Or the beach. So you’ve never been into a forest?”

Holly shook her head. “No.” Then she thought for a moment. “I guess there was Hyde Park. But that’s a park, not a forest.”

“You haven’t lived.”

“Excuse me! I have too. I went for a picnic in Hyde Park with my mum when I was eight.”

Taine cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. “A picnic?” he asked, unimpressed. “Not even a tramp or an overnight?”

“I was so excited, I was bouncing around on the Tube, counting the stops until the park, that when we finally got to our stop, I rushed onto the platform and left our lunch on the train.” She laughed, remembering their makeshift picnic of chewing gum and crisps.

“We need to take you camping,” said Taine. “How’d

you like to spend a night in the bush?”

Holly cringed. “Any snakes or spiders?”

“Worse,” Taine replied, “evil spirits.” He pulled a face and made a noise like a werewolf.

“Stop it!” cried Holly, slapping his arm.

“When’s your mum getting here?”

“Not till after the New Year. She had to work.”

“That sucks,” he said. “What made you guys decide to move?”

Holly flushed. “You don’t know?”

“What?” asked Taine.

“I thought everybody knew,” she said quietly.

“Knew what?”

Holly took a deep breath. “It’s ... complicated.”

“Complicated like differential equations? Or Latin verbs?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. Sorry.”

They walked in silence for a few moments. A wood pigeon purred softly as it fluttered across their path.

“Well, why did you guys leave Piha in the first place?”

Holly shrugged. “Mum’s never really said.”

“No?” Taine looked surprised. “Who would ever leave? She must have been trying to get away from something. Or someone?” Taine looked at her sideways.

Why *did* her mother decide to leave? Not only Piha, but New Zealand as well. She had been abandoned.

There’d be so many unhappy memories for her here. Kind of like the unhappy memories Holly had of London.

“So,” said Taine, breaking the silence, “wanna go surfing again sometime?”

Holly shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’m good enough.”

“Trust me, you are.”

Her chest swelled.

“You just need to keep your chin up,” his fingers, smooth as a feather, glided beneath her jaw, “and your arms.” He let his hand sweep across her shoulder.

“And not fall down?” she said ruefully.

“And that.” His laugh was milky and warm. “Let’s go out again. I suppose I owe you – after the dunking.” He smiled sheepishly.

“Yes, you do,” she grinned.

They went round a corner and came face to face with Lucas and Al, who were tramping, laden with gear. They were wearing long trousers and quick-dry shirts, like they’d just stepped out of a Kathmandu catalogue.

“Hey,” said Taine, nodding at the pair. “What are you guys up to?”

“Hey,” said Lucas slowly. “We’re just checking out some locations for the next programme. It starts next week.”

“Are you coming?” asked Al, resting his pale hand against a tree. His hair looked a little dishevelled. A wispy ginger strand was falling over his forehead.

“Nah, I’m lifeguarding,” said Taine. “Another time, eh?”

“You always say that,” said Lucas shaking his head. His blond ponytail shook against his pack.

Taine laughed. “What can I say? I’m a busy man.”

Lucas scoffed as he stepped past Holly and Taine. “You’re missing out,” he tutted, as he and Al continued down the track.

Taine rolled his eyes. They came out of the forest and crossed the grass park, following the quiet road back toward Piri’s house.

“Do you always swim back there,” asked Holly, “at the waterfall?”

“Sometimes. If I happen to be passing,” said Taine.

“Wouldn’t you rather swim in the ocean?”

“I like to mix it up.”

They came to Piri’s driveway and slowed to a stop.

“I’ve gotta do a few things,” said Taine, “but I’ll come and get you some time for a surf.”

“I’d like that.”

“Catch you, Holly.” He started walking away. “Try and stay out of trouble,” he called over his shoulder.

Holly gave his back a crooked smile. She watched

him disappear up the street, his broad shoulders arching with his long strides. She wondered what the skin on his shoulders felt like. She imagined tracing his muscles with her fingers. Suddenly breathless, she ran back into the house, feeling red hot.

Trying to keep her mind off Taine, Holly sent scores of texts and emails from Piri’s computer to her mother, even though they went unanswered.

*Hey mum. Everything going okay? Miss you.*

*Hey mama bear, me again. What’s happening over there? Text me!*

*Hi mum, it’s me. Your daughter. Holly. Remember me?*

The lack of replies didn’t help. Her mind started wandering back to Taine. Holly found herself wishing she had friends in London she could message. Maybe she should go and find Marnee? They could do something together. Holly screwed up her face. She was no good at striking up friendships. And where would she find Marnee? She couldn’t exactly go knocking door to door to find her. Well, she probably could. There weren’t that many houses in Piha.

Holly shook her head. No way. That was too scary. She’d rather swallow a sword than go and ask Marnee to hang out. What if she said no?

Instead, she took to the internet and googled surfing. She wanted to learn everything she could about the

subject. If she couldn't do it on the water, at least she could be an expert in her head. It was hard to believe her mother could surf. She couldn't imagine Nancy on a surfboard. Hell, she couldn't imagine her mother in togs. It must have been quite a different childhood to the one she'd had in London.

She trawled through different surfing pages online and came across a picture of Taine surfing on the Piha Surf Forecast page. On another site she found some results from the surf club champs. There were several familiar names in the results table. Marnee had won the under-sixteen girls section. In the open mens, the bronze award had gone to Keven. Lucas had come second, while the overall title had gone to Taine.

Holly pursed her lips together. Impressive. She had some tutor. If only she wasn't so hopeless at sport. She wished she'd inherited a few clues from her mother, instead of the two left feet she must have got from whoever her father was.

Exhausting the surfing forums, her mind wandered back to Taine. What he was doing. How long would it take him to do those 'few things'? And when would he be free to take her surfing?

The cafe was quiet the next morning. Piri had reluctantly let Holly go back to work. She tried to keep busy, filling

sauce bottles and polishing glasses, scrubbing her tables harder than they'd ever been scrubbed before.

She barely noticed when Marnee came in. She kept her head down as she marched to and from the kitchen, distributing food and drinks. Of course, her blind determination meant she gave Gwen's latte to Lucas, while Al got Damien's chicken sandwich and a Japanese tourist got two diet sodas instead of one iced chocolate. Piri pounced on her when she headed back to the kitchen during the middle of the lunch service.

"Holly, are you all right? Maybe you should head home for the day. You've been working pretty bloody hard this morning."

Her cheeks went the colour of beetroot as she realised customers must have started complaining about her. "No, I'm fine. Please let me stay," she pleaded.

Piri sighed heavily.

"Order up, boss," Stratton shouted.

Piri rubbed his forehead and looked away. His kitchen hand had just plated a sizzling piece of steak that awaited his mushroom sauce. "Thanks, Stratton," he replied wearily.

"Please let me stay, I'll do better, I promise."

Piri nodded, inching his way back to the hot stove. "All right, thanks. Just ... look after yourself okay?"

Holly strode back to her tables with resolve. She threw

herself into her work, desperate not to get told off again. She needed this job to keep her mind busy. Yet as she circled the cafe with a water pitcher in hand, she realised she wasn't looking for empty glasses to fill. She was looking for someone.

She was looking for Taine.

Every brown-haired male made her do a double-take. Every bronze arm made her stop in her tracks. She realised she wanted to see him. She was hoping to see him. Why? What was it about him that she found so captivating? His looks? There was something about him, she just couldn't put her finger on it.

The lunch crowd slowly petered out, along with Holly's hopes of seeing Taine. Marnee grabbed her arm when she was clearing away plates. "You okay?"

Holly thought she might hit the next person who asked if she was all right. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, trying to make her voice sound breezy.

"Well, good." She turned to leave, her long dark ponytail whipping her neck, then stopped. "We're having a bonfire on Saturday night on the beach. Do you wanna come?"

Holly felt her chest rise a few inches. Her first invitation since arriving in Piha. "I'd love to," she grinned. She wanted to ask if Taine would be there too, but she wouldn't let her lips form the words.

"Great!" Marnee smiled, and Holly thought it seemed genuine. "Well, it'll be at dark, obviously, by Lion Rock." She slipped away to finish clearing up.

Holly scrubbed her tables with even more fervour. She counted the hours until the bonfire – until perhaps she'd see Taine?

When the cafe closed, Piri said goodbye to Holly and apologised that he'd be home late again, but he couldn't have her working the evening shift as she was too young to serve liquor. She stepped into the kitchen to drop off her apron when Stratton spun around from his workbench.

"Hey, Holly," he said. "How's it going?"

"Yeah, good," she smiled. She hadn't had much of a chance to talk to Stratton.

He asked her a few questions about how she liked Piha. "You got the hang of surfing yet?" His voice was quiet but deep.

"No way! I don't think I ever will," she replied, blushing.

"Hey, do you wanna grab dinner tomorrow night? You probably don't know many people yet. I thought we could hang out."

Two invitations in one day? This was certainly a record. She was about to say yes, when she remembered about the bonfire. "Oh, I'd love to," she started. Stratton's

face perked up. “But Marnee’s just invited me to a bonfire tomorrow night. You should come!”

“Sweet, sounds good,” he said, smiling. “I’ll see you there.” He went back to cleaning up as she slipped through the door.

She took baby steps along the beach, enjoying the smell of the salt spray and the swirl of wind in her hair. She passed Lucas, sprawled on the sand, his pale limbs lathered in sunblock. She dodged Keven, diving to catch a spiralling rugby ball. She watched the lifeguards on the beach. One of them was running down the sand towards the water with a rescue tube dangling from his wrist. Was that Taine? He dove into the sea and got swallowed by the waves. Maybe. Part of her wanted to wait and watch him come back to shore, but another part of her knew that would be bordering on stalking. Reluctantly, she kept trudging up the beach.

Instead of heading straight home to the empty house, Holly took a detour to the town library. She knew she was going to need some distraction. She walked up the melting bitumen towards the store before hanging a left into the street Piri had shown her when she first arrived in Piha.

The library was in the front room of a house like Piri’s. A bell tinkled as Holly went through the French doors into the space and she took in the comforting smell of

musty, well-read books.

Although the library was crammed with shelves, Holly realised there was not a lot of choice. The space was no bigger than Piri’s lounge. Touring the room, she fingered the book spines. There was a limited non-fiction section, heavily stocked with new age and health books. There were several large books in the New Zealand section, weighing down the shelf, while there were only three books under biographies. The fiction section was only a little more varied.

After browsing for a few minutes, Holly found some dog-eared books to try: two New Zealand history books and a couple of paperbacks. Before she decided what to do with them, a woman appeared from an internal door. Holly recognised Gwen from the cafe.

“Hello, dear,” Gwen smiled. “You found us okay then?”

Holly nodded as she took the books over to check out. “Do I need a library card?” she asked.

Gwen shook her head. “That’s all right, love. We know who you are,” she winked.

Holly wasn’t surprised to find that the system wasn’t automated. Gwen took out the tired book cards from their pockets and wrote in them, before filing them away in a wooden box. She stamped the books then handed them back to Holly.

“They’re due back in three weeks. Enjoy.”

Holly tucked the books under her arm and headed back to Piri’s, keeping an eye out for Taine all the way home.

The next day, work dragged. Holly was so excited about the bonfire that her mind lagged behind her duties.

Stratton slapped her with a tea towel when she finally came over to collect a platter for one of her tables. “How many times do I have to ring the bell, Missy? Looks like you’ve got waves on the brain.”

“Sorry,” she cringed.

She was clearing away a table of coffee mugs when a group of mourners came in. Dressed in black and with their heads downcast, they stood out in the cafe of bright, summery clothes. It was obvious they had come from a funeral. The group took a table inside, away from the overcast sky that personified their sorrow.

Holly’s body tightened. She didn’t know how to deal with death. She clenched her teeth as she took over their menus. There were five of them. Holly thought they were a family. A young woman with her parents and grandparents. Holly wondered who they were grieving. Their eyes were puffy with freshly dried tears. They didn’t order drinks to start, just water, and opened their menus in hushed silence. Holly tiptoed away to grab a carafe

and some glasses, bumping into Marnee at the bar.

“That’s the Kopu family,” she whispered. “Poor things.”

“What happened?” asked Holly.

“Their son, Rangi, died the other night in the bush.”

Holly felt a belt tightening around her heart. “Really?”

Marnee nodded. “He was only back in Piha for a few weeks on his uni holiday. It’s so sad.”

Holly felt like a tonne of bricks had landed on her shoulders. She hesitated, before heading back to the Kopu family’s table with their water. She couldn’t imagine what they must be feeling, having lost a brother, a son, a grandson. Pressing her lips together, she leaned over to put down their water glasses. Several photos were scattered over the table. They were all of the same person. A smiling boy, with small dark eyes and jet black hair.

Rangi Kopu. He looked so young. He looked so fresh and vital. He looked so ...

Familiar.

Holly’s legs wobbled. Her head spun. The water jug and glasses slipped from her hands, crashing to the ground. Splinters scattered across the wooden floor.

Rangi Kopu was the man she had murdered in her nightmare.