

**MAKE A
HARD
FIST**

TINA SHAW



One

‘Which one of you idiots sent this?’

Lizzie waved the letter like a flag. Josh, head down, had taken a step back. But Tim reached out and grabbed the crumpled sheet of paper. He looked at it in silence, then showed it to Josh and Michael.

Lizzie @, I love U.

Josh took one glance, then stormed off. Michael followed him.

Tim shoved the letter back at Lizzie. ‘You trying to be funny?’

Lizzie mocked him with a smile. To her, Josh’s friend was a moron. ‘Me? I’m always funny.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Tim, and slouched off after his mates.

Lizzie went back to the benches against the wall where Melua was sitting. Guitar music was drifting out from the hall where the Polynesian club were practising a song.

‘That went well,’ said Lizzie drily. She shoved the paper back into the messy interior of her bag, biting her lip, eyebrows knitted. Despite her brash words, her face was pale. She kept seeing the look on Josh’s face as he turned away.

‘Josh wouldn’t have sent that letter.’

With a sigh, Lizzie plumped onto the bench beside Melua. ‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Then why’d you show it to them?’ Melua asked.

‘Oh, you know me, totally tactless and cruel,’ quipped Lizzie.

‘Come on,’ protested Melua. ‘Why’d you really do it?’

Lizzie squinted up at the greasy-looking sky above the drab school buildings. ‘Cause somebody’s put it in our letter box, and it’s gotta be one of those guys. Probably being smart, you know, after ...’ She meant to say after the thing with Josh, but the words had turned sour in her mouth. Oddly enough for Lizzie, who usually said the first thing that popped into her head, she was silent.

‘It doesn’t sound like the kind of thing those guys’d do,’ Melua persisted.

‘You don’t know Tim’s warped sense of humour,’ said Lizzie.

Her friend pulled a bottle of water out of her pack. ‘Well, I don’t think it’s one of them. Josh wouldn’t. Tim’s mad at you, cause of Josh, but why would he bother leaving notes? And Michael – well, Michael’s too sweet.’

‘Yeah, we all know what you think about Michael.’

Melua squirted her with the water bottle, wetting her shorts.

Lizzie jumped up. ‘Hey!’

The bell rang shrilly. Melua ran for the arts block, Lizzie behind her. ‘Gimme that bottle, you ...’

‘Ms Quinn,’ called Mr Munro, coming up behind them, ‘Ms Avia – act your age, please.’

Lizzie grabbed Melua round the neck and they both burst out laughing as stuffy old Munro marched ahead of them into the arts block.

‘Yeah,’ growled another voice. It was Tim, brushing past. ‘Act your age, lesbo.’

Lizzie stumbled. One sandal was loose. She bent over to fix it, and to hide her burning face.

‘Hurry up,’ said Melua.

‘You go on ahead. I’ll be there soon as.’

Lizzie dug out her own drink bottle, as other kids went past into the building. Sometimes she wished a big hole would open up in the asphalt and swallow her whole. She couldn’t help it if Josh was

hurting, and Tim was mad at her. She didn't want a serious boyfriend – she thought he'd understand; she was sixteen, for goodness sake, and she just wanted to hang with her mates. She didn't want to go into a boy-girl huddle. Life was complicated enough without Josh wanting to get serious.

Lizzie pulled the balled paper out of her bag and looked at it for the hundredth time. It wasn't any handwriting she knew. The words crawled across the paper like twisted wire. In some places, the pen had gone nearly right through. The letter Q had been gone over and over, so it stood out.

But if Josh – or Tim – hadn't sent the letter, then who had?

They used to hang out in the park, she and Josh. Sometimes they went to the movies. They went to see a movie about Jimi Hendrix, and Josh raved about it all the way home on the bus. It was all right, thought Lizzie, but she just couldn't get excited about a guitar player – even a really good one like Hendrix. Sometimes they went to the mall and got a soft serve. Just hanging out, like she did with Melua and Jocelyn. Lizzie couldn't even remember how it first started. Maybe after she and Josh were teamed up for the science fair and they'd put together that project about a wind-propelled turbine. He had dreads, but apart from that was kind of nerdy – not one of the cool kids. They got on well.

Then there came that day in the reserve. They'd been walking

around aimlessly and Lizzie was thinking about how much homework she had to do when Josh stopped and kissed her. She was gobsmacked.

So he kissed her again, slipping his tongue between her lips. That was the moment the old Lizzie woke up. 'Ew, yuck, Josh! What d'you think you're doing?' It was like having your brother kiss you.

He went bright red. Then he stalked off, hands shoved in pockets.

'Engage your brain for once, Quinn,' he muttered over his shoulder.

'What?' She caught up with Josh, grabbing his arm. 'What did you say?'

His face was flushed. 'Just for once, bloody think before you open your bloody mouth.'

'I . . .'

'Forget it, all right.'

She hung back, dismayed, feeling like such an idiot, as he hurried out of the park. She should have known . . . and now he hated her.

Running. Pulse pounding in her ears. Arms pumping. Feet barely touching the track, she was going that fast. Everything around her a blur of green and grey. Tamsin was up ahead, ponytail slashing back and forth. Lizzie's gaze bored into the girl's back as if she could burn a hole in that pristine tank top.

Three metres . . . two metres . . . one metre . . . really pushing it now, giving it everything. And passing her. Come on, come on, one metre, two metres . . . distantly, she heard a whistle blow. Then she hit the ribbon.

She'd done it!

Slowing now, her face contorted in pain. Panting hard, heart going like a rocket. Slowing down. Leaning over, hands on her knees. But grinning secretly. She'd done it. She'd finally beaten that private school bitch. Two seasons they'd been battling it out on the track, and at every meet it was the same: Lizzie'd nearly catch her up, but then Tamsin would put in that extra spurt at the end and get away from her. And each time she'd overhear Tamsin going on to her running buddies about how good she was and what a breeze it was beating off all the competition. Every time second: it'd been killing her. But now she'd cracked it. And it felt so sweet.

She straightened up, still breathing hard. Girls were still coming in from the race. Tamsin, a few metres away, was lying on the track. She wasn't going on now. Lizzie went over and reached out a hand to help her up.

'Good race,' she said.

Tamsin ignored the helping hand and got up by herself. 'Yeah,' she muttered, 'you too.'

Lizzie, with another thin smile, went over to the stands to get her water bottle.

Mr Jessop, their coach, clapped her on the back. 'Well done, Lizzie. I knew you had it in you.'

'Thanks,' grinned Lizzie, sucking at the bottle.

He was looking at his stopwatch and making a note on his clipboard. '15.4 seconds – your best time ever,' he said. 'So what d'you reckon we take on the Nationals next? It'll mean extra training ...'

Lizzie felt a spurt of joy. Jessop hadn't thought she was good enough before. Wait till she told Dad. He was the one who had got her into athletics. He'd been a runner himself as a young man.

'Cool,' said Lizzie.

'Good girl,' said Jessop, moving away.

Lizzie pulled on her track pants and shoved the water bottle into her pack. Her school books were in there calling 'Homework, homework.' But she didn't want to think about that right now. She wanted to savour the race. That extra time she'd spent at the pool, hauling lengths; at the gym, slogging away on the bike and the cross-trainer, had paid off. She was a mean running machine. And the Nationals! She grinned, heading for the gates. Sweet.

'See ya, Lizzie,' called one of the girls.

The kids in the next age group were stretching and bouncing about and generally getting themselves ready for their race. Normally she'd stay and watch the other races, but she was starving and wanted to get home. There was a piece of chocolate cake in the fridge with her name on it.

She waved goodbye and turned into the street.

Two blocks, three, past the dairy – tempted to go in for a pie, but feeling round in her pocket, Lizzie only came up with one 20 cent piece and a bit of fluff. Crossing the street, a white souped up car sped up as if wanting to run her over, the guy dark behind the wheel and grinning. Safe on the other side, she flicked him the bird.

She passed two seniors she recognised from school, shouldering heavy packs. Probably been at the library. Another block. A short cut through the park, then she'd be home. Past the bus stop, where two Asian boys stood waiting, comparing phones, then she turned into the long path that led down to the reserve.

There were fences and houses on either side, and trees hung over the path. Down the end of the first part, it was like a tunnel. A sharp turn to the right, avoiding the tree roots that were pushing up through the concrete, past the gum trees that had been tagged recently, and down the last stretch of the path. On her left now was the high wire fence, barbed wire at the top, the salmon-pink mosque on the far side. She meant to go in there one day and have a look but so far hadn't got round to it. Maybe she'd see if her mum wanted to go.

And finally, out into the reserve. Grass stretched away to her left, down to the railway tracks that ran along the bottom of the park. A pair of cackling parakeets flew out of a tree.

Course, it was possible that Tracey would've eaten her cake.

Knowing Tracey, not even the big sign Lizzie had stuck on the container – Keep out! Property of Lizzie! – would be enough to stop her older sister. Actually, she was pretty safe on that score. Tracey wasn't coming over for tea until six – she had exams at uni today, and it was supposed to take all day. So with any luck, she would have polished off the chocolate cake well before Tracey showed.

Lizzie picked up her pace as her tummy rumbled. Along the concrete path that went right round the reserve, and into the patch of bush and manuka that grew around the little creek. The white manuka flowers smelt like honey sandwiches.

As she came out of the bush, Lizzie thought she heard a sound behind her. Steps, maybe. She glanced back. Nobody there. She was alone.

The reserve was nearly always quiet, that's why she liked it, though she wasn't the only one to use it as a short cut. Just the other day her mother, a worrywart, had said, 'You're not cutting through the reserve, are you, Lizzie?' Mum was always worrying about 'her girls' getting attacked by 'bad guys'. Anyway, that kind of thing wouldn't happen here, not in their neighbourhood. 'Nah, I'm going round by the road,' she told her mother.

A few kids cut through the park too, especially on the way to school. There was a chunky Asian girl she often saw sitting on a bench – once even in the rain – like she was waiting for her parents to go to work so she could go back home again instead of going to school. Her mum, Kate, when Lizzie once mentioned this

girl, said she should go and talk to her. But hey, it wasn't her problem.

Another glance behind. It felt like somebody was following her. But again, she couldn't see anyone. Just trees and the grass that sloped up towards the houses and a ginger cat sitting near a bush. It wasn't like her to be so jumpy.

Nevertheless, Lizzie shivered and broke into a light jog.

Hungry, she told herself, and promptly forgot all about it.

She was the first one to get home, so there was a bundle of mail in the letter box. Lizzie didn't bother to riffle through it – the only person who wrote to her was Gran, and she wasn't due for another letter for at least another month. If she was lucky.

It wasn't until Lizzie got inside and threw the mail on the kitchen table that she noticed the grimy envelope with no stamp. She picked it up and looked at it. The same scrawled printing in blue pen. Quickly, she ripped it open. Inside, the same carefully folded sheet of paper.

Lizzie Q, what's with U?

The next day Jocelyn and Melua walked back with Lizzie to her place so they could do homework together. Lizzie put on a pot of hot water to heat. Jocelyn flopped down at the table and dragged a ring binder out of her pack. Melua sat in the armchair in the corner and slipped off her black shoes, tucking her feet beneath her. Her

mum, home early from work, walked through the kitchen on her way to the lounge, carrying a vase of blue irises.

She paused to say hello to the girls. 'There's some panforte in the tin if you want.'

'What's panforte?' asked Jocelyn.

'It's this crunchy thing with cherries in it,' said Lizzie. 'I loathe cherries.'

'I'll try some,' said Melua.

Mum put the tin on the table, taking off the lid. 'And did anything extraordinary happen at school today?' she asked Lizzie.

In the middle of examining the packets of dry noodles in the pantry, Lizzie scrunched up her eyebrows in a parody of deep thought. 'Yes,' she said.

'What?' asked her mother.

'E Block exploded,' Lizzie declared.

Kate groaned. 'Oh, don't say that! Those poor families . . .' There had been a mining explosion down south which had killed three men; the news was full of it.

'You know the fire's still burning underground,' commented Jocelyn. 'They don't know how to put it out.'

'I can't help thinking,' said Kate, 'how the mining company must have been aware of the gas leak but hadn't got around to fixing it. It was a disaster waiting to happen.'

Lizzie ripped open two packets of noodles and sniffed the contents. 'They should just dump a whole load of sand down the hole. That'd put out the fire.' She slipped the wedges of dry noodles into the boiling water, hearing them sizzle.

'I think I'll send a card,' said Kate thoughtfully.

'Mum, you don't even know those people.'

'That doesn't matter,' she said. 'I feel really sorry for them, and want them to know that there are people thinking about them in their time of loss.' She picked up the vase of irises and drifted off into the lounge.

'That is so ghoulish,' muttered Lizzie.

'When my grandmother died,' said Melua, 'we got cards, and even money, from people we didn't know.'

'That's different,' said Jocelyn. 'It's a cultural thing.'

'I still think it's creepy. It ought to be private when somebody dies. If my mum died I wouldn't want total strangers sending me stuff.'

'I wouldn't mind if they sent me money,' said Jocelyn, idly turning pages.

Lizzie dumped the steaming noodles into a sieve. 'I want loads of money. Then I wouldn't need to work at my stupid job and I could buy all the things I wanted.'

'Frankly,' said Melua from the armchair, 'I think money is vastly overrated.'

Lizzie snorted. 'That's because you don't want anything.'

'Sure I want stuff,' she said. 'I'd like to buy my mum a nice pair of slippers.'

'My point exactly.' Lizzie plonked three steaming bowls on the table.

Jocelyn took a pair of chopsticks from the fruit bowl and examined them. 'I'm saving up for a trip to Malaysia next year. I'm going to stay with my aunty and climb Mount Kinabalu with my cousins.'

'Well,' said Lizzie, forking over her noodles, 'I'm saving up too.'

'What're you saving for, Lizzie?' asked Melua, joining them at the table.

'I'm saving for a car,' she announced.

'Cool,' said Jocelyn. 'Then you can take us on a road trip to Wellington.'

'Absolutely,' said Lizzie.

Lizzie's car was a sky-blue 1969 Volkswagen Beetle, and it lived in Uncle Harry's garage. He had got it from a friend who went overseas, though he didn't drive it very often, except to take it round the block to '*get some air*', as he put it. It had been '*her*' car ever since she'd clapped eyes on it several months ago, and immediately decided that she was going to buy it and get her licence. Fortunately, Uncle Harry was prepared to go along with this plan as well. That

was when she got the job at the library, and apart from using some of her earnings as pocket money, the rest stayed in her bank account for the car.

On Sunday, when there was no job, no training, and her film response essay was finally done, Lizzie hopped on her bike and cycled over to Harry's to visit her car. Mum teased Lizzie that she saw more of her uncle now because of the car than she had ever done. Well, that was true, though she also liked to visit Uncle Harry because he was cool.

Harry's place was situated on the edge of a tidal bay, hidden from the street behind a grove of bamboo. The driveway swooped through the thick bamboo, down to the low house that was hunched in the middle of a prickly lawn. It was probably worth a fortune now, like anything in Auckland near the water, and Lizzie hoped her uncle would leave it to her in his will.

She dropped her bike to the grass, knocked on the open door and marched right in. Through ranchsliders, the bay glittered silvery in the afternoon sun. 'Hello?' she called, prodding at a heap of laundry on the floor with her foot as if Harry might be hiding underneath it. On the breakfast bar was a big bowl of fruit, and Lizzie helped herself to an apple. The sink in the kitchen was full of dishes. It didn't look like Harry's flatmate Miranda was around either.

Crunching into the apple, Lizzie went out onto the deck. Down

below, a dinghy was hauling slowly in towards land. 'Hey!' she shouted.

The ginger-haired man in the dinghy looked back over his shoulder and waved. 'I'll be up soon,' called Harry.

Lizzie went back through the house and out to the garage. As well as the VW, there was also Harry's everyday car, a boring Holden Barina. Lizzie couldn't believe anybody would want to sell the Dubbie, but Harry was planning to exchange his Barina soon for a newer model.

There it was, gleaming in the dim light. Even the silver hubcaps, with the VW logo, had been polished. Opening the driver's door and sliding inside, Lizzie promised the car she'd keep it just as clean as Harry did. She breathed in the smell of ancient vinyl and gripped the large slim steering wheel in both hands.

With a crank, the garage door started going up, and two freckled legs appeared, followed by the rest of her uncle in shorts and baggy teeshirt.

'Giddy,' said Harry.

Lizzie hopped out and together they stood and admired the car. 'Hey, I caught three fish,' said Harry. 'You can take one home if you like.'

'Great. Mum likes fish.'

'Don't you, too?'

'It's all right,' shrugged Lizzie. 'Though I'd rather eat pizza.'

Harry laughed. 'It's hard to beat a good pizza. I've got some in the fridge if you'd like a slice.'

'Yum, yes please.'

They went inside, and Lizzie perched on one of the bar stools while Harry lifted a large pizza box out of the fridge and sniffed at its contents. Just then a tall, leggy girl in yellow tights and black Doc Martens came in and, without saying a word, helped herself to a slice of pizza, and marched out again.

'I'm afraid Miranda isn't house trained,' explained Harry, looking sadly into the box, 'but at least there's one piece left.' He brought the box over to the bench and pushed it towards Lizzie.

'Um,' Lizzie hesitated, 'don't you want it?'

Harry shook his head. 'You go ahead. You probably need it more than me.' He got out a filleting knife and started to sharpen it. The three fish were lying on the bench; the scales hadn't faded yet and were still silvery-pink. Even Lizzie recognised snapper when she saw it. Not that they got it much at home – it was too expensive.

'Hey,' said Lizzie through a mouthful of pizza. 'I only need another 425 dollars and I can buy the Dubbie.'

'Sweet,' said Harry. 'And I've found this great car on Trade Me I want to buy.'

'But what if you get it before I can save the money?' she frowned.

'No worries. I can leave it outside under a cover. Or put your one outside,' he added.

‘No way! It’ll get leaves and crap all over it.’

He laughed. ‘And we can’t have that happening.’ He got out a wooden board and placed one of the fish on it.

‘You’re not going to cut that open in front of me, are you?’ said Lizzie in disgust.

‘Would you object?’

‘I’ll be sick, more like it.’

Her uncle considered the fish. ‘Well, I’ll have to gut one for you to take home, so maybe you could just look out the window?’

Lizzie hopped off the stool and went over to the ranchsliders. They were open and she could hear the distant ping of rigging on moored yachts.

‘So what’s been happening, anyway?’ Harry asked.

Before she knew what she was doing, the words just popped out of her mouth, ‘I’ve been getting these weird letters.’

It was Miranda, leaning forward from a seat hidden in the corner of the deck, who asked, ‘What kind of weird?’

Lizzie hesitated at the open doors. Miranda was an actress, and so impossibly cool that Lizzie had never actually spoken to her before. Most un-Lizzie-like behaviour, as her dad would have said. Miranda was looking at her intently, giving Lizzie her complete attention. Somehow, this seemed to help.

‘Well,’ she said, taking a deep breath, ‘the first one said “Lizzie

Q, I love you" . . . ' Miranda was quite still, like a bird listening for a worm. Her eyes, Lizzie noticed, were as green as the inside of an avocado. Though it could've been coloured contact lenses.

'Now there's been a second one,' she added in a low voice, glancing back over her shoulder to see if Uncle Harry was listening. He seemed absorbed in fish dissection.

'And what did that one say?'

Lizzie told her.

'Did you keep it?' asked Miranda. Lizzie shook her head.

'Shame.' She leaned back in her chair, so that only her crossed legs in the yellow tights were visible. Lizzie moved out onto the deck so she could see Miranda properly.

'What d'you think?'

Miranda looked up at Lizzie, her green eyes looking even more intense than before. 'I think, sweetie, you might have a stalker.'

'How d'you mean?'

'You know what a stalker is, don't you?'

Lizzie flushed. 'Course.'

'A friend of mine,' Miranda continued, 'she had a stalker. He used to stand across the street from her house.'

'What did she do?'

'Nothing. She kind of liked it.'

'That's creepy,' said Lizzie, disgusted.

Miranda shrugged. 'He was harmless.'

'Anyway, this isn't like that.'

'No?'

'No,' said Lizzie. 'This is just some dickhead from school.'

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you ...'

'Warn you about what?' asked Harry, appearing in the doorway.

'Nothing,' muttered Lizzie.

'Um, okay.' He handed her a package wrapped in newspaper.

'Here's the fish. You guys should come over for a barbecue next weekend. I'm having some people over from work. Miranda has promised to behave.'

Miranda made a face at him. But as Lizzie followed her uncle back inside, she caught the young woman's thoughtful gaze before she turned back to the view, and she shivered. An angel just walked over my grave, Gran liked to say. Lizzie always replied that it was only a draught that made her shiver. But now she kind of knew what Gran meant.

Lizzie biked home feeling puzzled. Only movie stars and rich people got stalkers. Not a gawky-looking high school kid like her. Miranda was wrong. Maybe, if Miranda had been getting letters, then it would be a stalker. She could imagine some guy being in love with Miranda and hanging out in weird places just to catch a glimpse of her, and maybe following her every time she went out.

Lizzie shivered. Was that what her secret correspondent was doing – following her?

She veered into Meola Road and nearly crashed into an old lady who was stepping off the pavement.

‘Sorry!’ she called.

The old lady shook her fist.

Nice, sniffed Lizzie, speeding down the hill. I did apologise.

Anyway, coming back to the subject, who would want to stalk her? Some kid from school? Yeah, right. It was a prank, that was all. Some stupid idea of a joke. Like she’d heard you could put a fake page on Facebook. Gliding fast down the steep hill behind the zoo, wind in her face, Lizzie forgot all about it.