

LITTLE Fisherman

by Sarah Penwarden



It isn't that Haylee hates them. She just likes it better when they're not there: Tom and Tyler, Dayne's boys. They're not exactly her stepbrothers, but close enough. Her mum always says they're a family now.

It happened so fast, Dayne and her mum getting together. They'd met at Auntie Simone's birthday – she worked with Dayne at the panel beaters. Dayne was funny. Auntie Simone couldn't believe he was single. Later, she told Haylee he'd be great for her mum. Even Haylee could see they were a good match.

They'd started going out straight away. Dayne would come over for dinner and kiss Mum right in front of her. Then he'd stay weekends. Finally he moved in. Now he clomps round the house in his work boots, making jokes and leaving clothes that smell of car oil on the floor. Haylee might have been OK with this ... but then there were his boys.

At first, she'd thought Tom and Tyler were twins. They had brown hair, cut short at the sides and long at the back, and they were the same size even though Tom was twelve and Tyler was ten. They both had Dayne's nose, and they talked like Dayne, too – when they talked. Mostly, they just whispered to each other and kicked their football.

It isn't something Haylee can talk to her mum about. She understands most things – but not this. Besides, it wouldn't be fair. Her mum's happy, and that's good. The only person Haylee can complain to is Tara, her best friend. "I'm lucky they don't go to Riverhead Primary," Haylee had said. "Tyler would be in my class. Imagine that. Yuck!" She'd made a scream with her face, and Tara had laughed.

Haylee knows something is up when Mum's wish-washy about their holiday plans. She finally resorts to some direct questions.

"Are we going to Grandma and Grandad's after Christmas?" she asks.

"Yes, but ..." Mum takes a deep breath. "Dayne's got the bach over new year, so we're going there for a few days first. Dayne's brother Pete will be there ... and the boys of course."

"The boys!" Haylee's eyebrows pull together in a tight frown. "The boys will be at the bach?"

"Haylee!" Mum says. "They're Dayne's sons. He doesn't see them that often. And the boys are looking forward to being with their dad – and their uncle. Some quality boy time, you know."

Haylee tries to take all this in. "So, they'll be off fishing? We won't see much of them during the day?"

"That's right," Mum says.

The bach is small. Haylee and the boys share the bunk room while Dayne and Mum take the front room. But the lounge is big and sunny, and the view through the ranchslider is really something. There's a smooth beach of golden sand, where tiny waves ripple and gently break, and each end of the bay is framed by flowering pōhutukawa. It's postcard perfect. Every morning, after the boys go off in Pete's boat, Haylee sits on the deck and reads in peace.

"Don't forget to try something else, eh," Dayne advises one afternoon. He's gutting fish – eight gurnard and three big snapper – and he's pleased. No sausages tonight. Mum hovers with a plate and admires the big catch. "It's beaut out there," Dayne continues, nodding towards the sea. "You can't spend all holiday with your nose in a book."

"I can," Haylee says. She's done it before.

Mum nods, but it's not Haylee she's agreeing with. "Why not go fishing with Dayne tomorrow? Who knows, you might like it!"

Dayne scratches the back of his head. He looks shifty. "Well, it's mainly a guy thing ..." Dayne meets Mum's eye and trails off. He rubs the back of his neck. "Sure. Haylee can come if she likes. She can borrow Tyler's spare rod."



When Tyler hears this, a frown crosses his face. "She'll need to look after it."

"Of course she will," Mum says. She looks at Haylee. "So you'll go?"

Haylee's not caught anything in her life, never hunted or gone fishing. What will it be like, a whole day on the boat with Dayne and the boys?

"You don't have to go," Tyler says. "Most girls don't like fishing."

Haylee's heard this kind of stuff a lot lately. She's getting sick of it. They need to stop. "No. I'll come," she says.

Tyler and Tom shoot each other worried looks.

"That's settled then," Dayne says. "Good." He smiles. "Right, let's get this barbecue going."



They leave early. The sea is dead flat. Haylee has to hold on to her cap as they zip across the water. Spray hits her face – they’re really flying. It’s so much fun, she never thought they’d go this fast. The boys are grinning, too. Obviously this is the best part.

It takes half an hour to reach Rangitoto. Pete anchors the boat off the island, and Tyler and Tom get out their rods. “There you go, love,” Dayne says, passing Haylee the spare. “Watch out for the hook.”

He shows her how to cast, then encourages Haylee to try for herself. She has a few goes – it seems easy enough, though she has to remember to flip the bail. She finds a spot next to Pete, casts out, and settles in to wait.

Then it comes. Total peace. There’s just the ocean as far as they can see, the dusty trees of Rangitoto, the ferries crossing back and forth, the white yachts with sails like hankies. It’s still, calm, quiet. No one speaks for a long time. Finally there’s a tug on Haylee’s line. It’s just a little one at first, then bigger, until the line starts twitching.

“Hang on!” Dayne calls, leaping up. Haylee clamps her hands round the rod and holds as tight as she can. The thing on the end fights and fights.

“Reel it in slowly!” Dayne says, leaning over her shoulder.

She winds the reel just like he says, slowly, slowly, and all of a sudden, right in front of them, a silver-red fish leaps into the air. It’s big and beautiful, and Haylee lands it all on her own.

Dayne can’t stop talking when they get back to the bach. “Look at this!” he says to Haylee’s mum, opening the cooler and taking out Haylee’s fish. “A 5-kilo snapper!”

“Good on you, Dayne.”

“It wasn’t me who caught it – it was Haylee.”

Mum looks amazed. “Haylee!”

“She’s a natural,” Dayne says, grinning. “A great little fisherman.”

Haylee grins back. She lets that one pass.

“All that time reading books,” Dayne says. “Who’d have thought! She’s as good as the boys.” There’s real pride in his voice.

This time, Haylee groans. She looks over at Tyler. The corners of his mouth are turned up in an amused smile.

“Dayne,” Mum says sharply. “Of course she’s as good as them! How about I come next time, too. We could have a fishing competition.”

Dayne laughs when he sees the boys’ faces. “We might have to borrow another rod,” he says, “but you’re on.”

“Haylee can use my spare again,” Tyler offers.

“That’s sorted then,” Mum says happily.

She turns to Haylee. “Think you can catch another one, love?”

Haylee nods. “No problem. I’m a great little fisherman, remember?”



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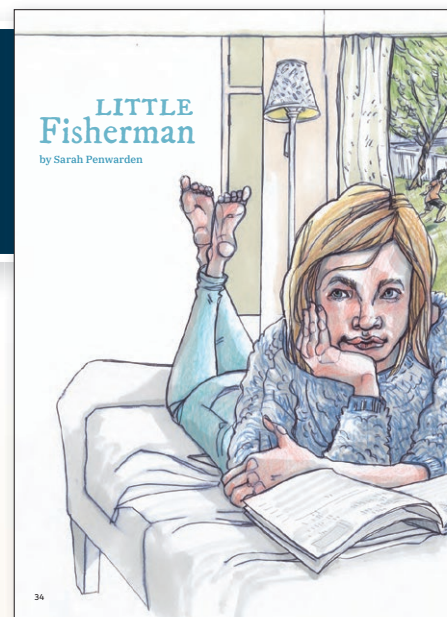
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