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# LOPINI THE LEGEND

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Feana Tu'akoi

SCHOLASTIC  
AUCKLAND SYDNEY NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO  
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**For Sione, *my* legend!**



# CHAPTER 1

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# TAHA

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“Ugh!” yelled Lopini, as soon as they’d got away from school. He booted a stone and watched it skitter across the path.

“What’s up with you?” asked Fi. As if she didn’t know.

“Only the worst day of my life — ever,” complained Lopini.

“Why?” she asked. “What happened?”

“You know why,” snapped Lopini. “You were there when they took the kapa haka leadership off me.”

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“Ohh ... that,” said Fi. She smiled and gave Lopini a nudge. “They didn’t really take it off you,” she said.

“As good as,” insisted Lopini. “I’ve been leader for two years and suddenly they hand it to someone else?”

Fi laughed as they stopped at the crossing. “Hemi wasn’t at our school two years ago,” she told him, “or he probably would’ve got it in the first place.”

“Wow,” growled Lopini. “Thanks a lot.” He hunched his shoulders and glared at her.

Fi let out a giggle, as the crossing light turned green. “Don’t be so grumpy!” she said, following him across the road. “You know what I mean.”

Lopini *did* know what she meant. Not only was Hemi Māori, but he was fluent in te reo. Perfect for kapa haka leader. Lopini could only speak English and a smattering of Tongan.

“It’s not the point,” he said stubbornly, even though he knew it was. “They shamed me, in front of everybody.”

Fi shot him a funny look. “That’s not true,” she said. “Matua Ānaru checked with you first. You said it made sense.”

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“It *does* make sense.” Lopini groaned. “That’s the problem. There’s nothing I can do to get it back.” He heaved a big sigh and strode off towards the field.

Fi ran to catch up with him. “I don’t understand,” she panted. “I thought you’d be pleased. You’re always going on about how you wish you didn’t have to do it. You *hate* being out in front.”

“That’s not the point, either,” he told her.

Fi had had enough. She glared at him and slammed her hands onto her hips. “Then what *is* the point?” she snapped. “You hate doing it and now you don’t have to. You should be happy!”

Lopini dropped his head and his ears went red. “But I *failed*,” he mumbled. “In front of *everybody*.”

Fi didn’t mean to, but she let out a snort. “This again!” she cried. “Get real, Lopini. Do you know what they call you at school? ‘Lopini the Legend’. That’s because you’re a superstar. You’re the best in class, the best at sports, the best at art, the most popular ... even the teachers love you.” She was counting things off on her fingers. “You’ve never failed at anything in your life.”

Lopini’s eyes were starting to burn. He swiped

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a hand across them and tried to laugh. It came out kind of choked. “Star’s falling now though,” he mumbled. “The whole school knows I’ve been replaced.”

Fi stared at him for a moment. Then she shook her head. “You’re my best mate, but sometimes I think you’re crazy.” She laughed at his shocked expression. “Only *you* could feel like a failure about

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this,” she said, giving him a shove. “Everyone else thought you were amazing — the way you stepped aside for Hemi and told him he deserved it. You oozed mana. Are you saying you didn’t mean it?”

Lopini rolled his eyes at her. He was starting to feel a bit better. “Of *course* I meant it,” he said. “Hemi will be awesome. He’ll be able to do all the welcomes in te reo, without having to learn them off by heart, like I did. He’ll be a great kapa haka leader.”

Fi grinned and punched him lightly on the shoulder. “There you go, then,” she said.

“Yeah,” shrugged Lopini. “I s’pose.”

They crossed the rest of the field in silence. Then they headed for the corner.

“You know,” said Fi, as they turned onto their street, “you’re lucky you got to be leader at all. I’ve never been chosen to lead anything.”

Lopini nodded. He knew it was true. He reached out to squeeze Fi’s shoulder. “How do you do it?” he asked, softly. “How come you feel okay about missing out all the time? It makes me feel shamed.”

Fi decided not to be offended. She thought for a

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moment. “Lots of practice, I guess,” she joked. “I’m good at failing.”

Lopini stared at her. “That’s it!” he cried. “I need to get better at failing.”

“You’re sounding crazy again,” warned Fi.

But Lopini shook his head. “It makes perfect sense,” he told her. “I freak out every time something goes wrong because it hardly ever happens to me. I haven’t had enough practice.”

Fi rolled her eyes as they stopped at her gate. “Crazy!” she groaned.

“It’s not crazy,” he insisted. “All I need to do is practise failing, until I’m good at it. Then it won’t be a problem anymore.”

Fi’s eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared in her hair. “The world’s biggest perfectionist wants to be a failure?” she spluttered.

“Exactly!” cried Lopini. He flicked her a high-five, then headed up the path to his place next door.

“In fact,” he called, stopping on the verandah to kick off his shoes, “I’ll be the *perfect* failure!”

He laughed as an even bigger groan came from next door.



## CHAPTER 2

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# UA

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Lopini went straight to his laptop and searched for ideas on the internet. Then he made his list:

1. Fail at least once a week.
2. Volunteer for *everything*.
3. Go hard.

He nodded. Simple, but effective. He was good at setting goals. It was probably his only superpower. Well, that and the fact that he actually followed

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through with them. Goal-setting was how he avoided being rubbish at everything. The trick was to break the goal into small enough steps. Dad had taught him that: Make it manageable, so you don't put it off.

Lopini was only aiming to fail once a week or so. Every day might be too hard, and he didn't want to find himself giving up. Although, he chuckled to himself, that in itself would be a failure.

To fail, he was going to have to stop being in control all of the time. He usually only did stuff he knew he could do well. So, once a week from now on, he was going to make himself do something he *couldn't* succeed at. Something that wouldn't work out. And, to make sure that he didn't accidentally choose easy things (brains are sneaky like that), he'd volunteer for everything that came up along the way. That way, he'd have no control over some of the things he'd have to do.

*Go hard* was at the end because he wanted to practise failing properly. He didn't want to fail by not trying. Real failure was when you went hard, but failed anyway.

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He started a new list underneath the first one, and jotted down a few things he could fail at.



Mum and Dad were preparing dinner; Mum was slicing meat and Dad was on vegies. Lopini perched on a tall stool at the kitchen bench and watched them for a while. They hardly ever got to cook together because Dad worked long hours up at the hospital, and once Mum started painting a new piece, she often didn't stop for dinner.

"What's up?" asked Dad.

Lopini gave a little shrug. He'd come in to tell them about his plan, but he didn't want them to think he was stupid. He tried to think of a way to make it sound more impressive. Then he realised. He should just say it. *This could be his first failure.*

He took a deep breath. "I want to be a failure," he blurted.

"You ... *what?*" asked Dad. He was so shocked that he dropped his knife and braced his hands on the bench. He was looking kind of pale for a Tongan.

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Lopini knew why. Dad was a hard-out perfectionist who'd aimed high and been a superstar his whole life. He'd started out in Tonga with almost no money, and had worked so hard that he was now the youngest head surgeon the hospital had ever had. He had everything he'd ever wanted — flash house and car, great family, impressive job and enough money to help the rellies back home — but he was still pushing himself. He probably couldn't imagine why someone would want to fail.

Mum was a different story. She was a super-creative artist who loved to play around with new ideas. Even her hair was creative. One day, she got sick of struggling to untangle her long curls, so she left them. Now, she had amazing orange dreadlocks. Mum didn't dye them or anything — she'd always been a redhead — but it was the coolest combination. People were always commenting on it.

Lopini couldn't imagine taking a chance like that with his hair. He grinned. Well, maybe now he could. He pulled out his list and added *Do something weird with my hair*.

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A shiver ran up his spine. He felt shaky, just thinking about it.

Mum's head was cocked to one side and a grin was starting to move across her face.

"Tell us what you mean, love," she said. She gave her husband a nudge. "Preferably *before* your dad has a heart attack."

Lopini told them all about it. Then he showed them his list.

Dad was rubbing his temples now. "So, you're going to fail *on purpose*?" He said it like he couldn't believe it. Because he couldn't.

Lopini nodded and swiped a carrot from Dad's pile. "I hate freaking out every time something goes wrong," he said. "I don't want to be tied up in knots all the time. I need to get better at failing and the only way to get better at something is to practise."

Mum was excited. She rubbed her hands together and her eyes sparkled. "It's a *wonderful* idea!" she cried. "I'm going to do it, too! I'll start a series of terrible canvasses and see where it leads me."

She had that dreamy look she always got when

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inspiration took her. Lopini could tell she was itching to get into her studio.

Dad let out a groan. “The world’s gone mad!” he muttered. He took a breath and eye-balled Lopini. “You don’t need to be a failure,” he said in a tight voice. “You just need strategies to manage your stress levels. I can teach you the ones I use. Deep breathing, mindfulness, exercise ...”

Lopini shook his head firmly. “I don’t *want* to manage my stress,” he said. “I want to get used to failing so that it doesn’t feel stressful to me anymore. At the moment, every tiny failure feels huge and I’ll do practically anything to avoid it. It stops me from trying out new stuff.” He chewed at his carrot, and swallowed before continuing. “I’ve been reading online about exposure therapy,” he said. “If I keep exposing myself to failure, it’ll get easier.”

Dad considered this. “It could work, I guess,” he said at last. “But won’t all that failing make you *feel* like a failure?”

Lopini shrugged. “It’ll be more practice,” he said.

Dad took a steadying breath and nodded. “Can I have another look at your list?” he asked. He was

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starting to look interested; he loved planning new goals. He checked them over thoughtfully. “Almost S-M-A-R-T,” he said. “Specific, Achievable, Realistic and Timed, but maybe not Measurable. How will you know when you’ve failed?”

Lopini remembered how he’d felt about the whole kapa haka thing. “Oh, I’ll know,” he said. He whacked at his stomach. “I feel it right here when stuff doesn’t go perfectly. My tummy clenches up something wicked.”

“But won’t that go away over time?” asked Mum. “I mean ... isn’t that the whole point?”

Lopini hadn’t thought of that. “I’ll just have to think of bigger things to fail at,” he said. The thought made his belly twist. “And if the feeling goes away completely, I’ll know I’ve achieved my goal — I’ll be a perfect failure!”

Mum grinned, but Dad was struggling. He didn’t want his only child to be a failure. Still, he stretched a smile across his face and tried to look supportive. “Fair enough,” he said at last. “Now, go and get started on your homework, or that’ll be the first thing you fail at.”

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Lopini laughed. “It’s only a failure if I go hard and don’t make it,” he reminded him. He slid off the stool and headed for his room. “I think my homework’s safe!”