

# BEST MATES

by Paora Tibble



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“Hāngi,” I reply. “What have you got?”

“Jam sandwiches.”

“Want some of mine?” I ask.

“Yeah!”

“Bad luck!” I laugh. “You know the rules about swapping food.”

“That’s OK,” he says. “Jam is sweeter than hāngi anyway.”

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We’re out playing rugby when Jackson tells me. “Mum’s got a job in Auckland. We’re moving next month.”

My stomach feels like it’s suddenly been filled with lead. I want to say something, but all I can manage is, “Oh stink.”

“Yeah, stink one, eh?”

I stand there thinking – Jackson is going to Auckland. It’s such a long way away. Suddenly I hear someone shout, “Pass it to Mana!” I turn round, but too late – BOOF! The ball hits me in the stomach, and I fall down winded.

The rest of my day is like that. It’s as if I’ve been knocked over. I’m still in a daze. It just drags on.

Finally, the bell rings for the end of school. Jackson asks me if I want to come over to his house, but I can’t. I’m staying with Dad and Sharon this week – not with Mum, who lives round the corner from Jackson.

When Jackson’s mum turns up, she gives me a hug. “Hey, Mana, you’ll have to come over for kai before we leave, eh?”

I guess so.

Dad picks me up not long after.

“How was your day, cuzzie?”

“Stink. Jackson’s leaving.”

“Eh? That’s no good. But you’ll be all right. You’ll find another mate.”

He doesn’t get it.

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Later on, after kai, I have a shower and get my PJs on. Dad is watching something online. He doesn't watch TV. He reckons there's too much rubbish on. Sharon joins us in the sitting room and sits next to Dad.

I read my comic, but it feels like they're both staring at me.

"Have you told him?" Sharon asks Dad.

I look up. I hate it when people talk about me as though I'm not there. Dad just shrugs.

Sharon pipes up, "Mana, your dad's got something to tell you ..."

Dad blushes and looks a bit whakamā. "Mana, you're going to have a new little brother or sister. It can be your new best mate, now that Jackson's leaving."

A baby as my best mate? Whoa! He definitely doesn't get it.

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On Friday, Mum picks me up from school.

"Mum, did you hear about Sharon?"

"Yep, I had a coffee with them the other week. Good news, isn't it?"

"It's not fair, Mum. Jackson's leaving, and Dad doesn't even care. He thinks I can replace Jackson with a baby!"

Mum gives me a big hug. "What makes you think that?"

"'Cause he said it can be my new best mate."

"Well ... you know what your dad's like. He's just being funny. By the way, Jackson's mum invited us over for tea tonight. We're taking dessert."

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We get to Jackson's, and we just hang out. We play a bit of scrag with his younger brothers and bug his big sister just for the fun of it.

Being around Jackson's whānau gets me thinking.

"Jackson, what's it like having brothers and sisters?"

"I dunno. Amy's all right, I guess. Sometimes I get sick of Brooklyn and Quade scragging. But they're my bros. Besides, they look up to me."

"Sharon's pregnant. She and Dad are gonna have a baby."

"Cool! Then you won't be all alone."

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On our way home, I get a surprise.  
We go to the bus stop and pick up Nan.

“Nan! I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Whoa, you’ve lost weight my handsome mokopuna. Your mum and dad not feeding you?”

“Nah, Nan. Me and Dad run together.”

“Bah, running – it just makes you tired. I never ran, and look how healthy I am!”

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When we get home, my bedroom is already sorted. Nan sleeps in my bed, and I sleep on a mattress on the floor. It’s good when Nan comes to stay. She listens to me – not like Dad.

“Moko.”

“Yeah, Nan.”

“I hear you’re going to be a big brother.”

“Yeah, Nan. But I don’t care. My best mate is moving away.”

“Is that where you went tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your friend’s name?”

“Jackson.”



“You know what? When I was your age, I had four brothers and five sisters. They were *my* best mates.” Nan laughed. “And sometimes, they were my worst enemies too! Your great-uncle Mana, he was the next after me. We did everything together. I even taught him how to catch eels. We had heaps of fun.”

“Is that why you wanted me to be called Mana?”

“Āe, moko.”

Nan tells me a few stories about her hard-case brother, my koro Mana, before I fall asleep.

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That night, I have this dream. There's me, Dad, and a little boy. He's called Haki. We're throwing the rugby ball around. It's the final game of the season. The score is tied at 12-all, and we need a try to win the game. Dad's playing on the other side.

It's touch footy. I hold the ball in two hands in front of my face and make the signal behind the ball so Dad can't see it. I tap off and pass the ball to Haki. He runs at Dad and dummies, and then he does this mean-as sidestep I taught him. Dad can only watch as Haki runs round him and scores a try.

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When I wake up, I'm still thinking about my dream ... and my little brother, Haki. I'm still thinking about him later when I'm eating my toast. I wonder if Dad has kept my first pair of rugby boots – the ones I grew out of. I go to look for them in the garage.



# Best Mates

by Paora Tibble

illustrations by Scott Pearson



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