



Chapter 4

Gibbons and ghosts

The terrors came fast, one upon another. The lights of the *Peggy Sue* went away into the dark of the night, leaving me alone in the ocean, alone with the certainty that they were already too far away, that

my cries for help could not possibly be heard. I thought then of the sharks cruising the black water beneath me – scenting me, already searching me out, homing in on me – and I knew there could be no hope. I would be eaten alive. Either that or I would drown slowly. Nothing could save me.

I trod water, frantically searching the impenetrable darkness about me for something, anything to swim towards. There was nothing.

Then a sudden glimpse of white in the sea. The breaking of a wave perhaps. But there were no waves. Stella! It had to be. I was so thankful, so relieved not to be all alone. I called out and swam towards her. She would keep bobbing away from me, vanishing, reappearing, then vanishing again. She had seemed so near, but it took several minutes of hard swimming before I came close enough to reach out and touch her. Only then did I realise my mistake. Stella's head was mostly black. This was white. It was my football. I grabbed it and clung on, feeling the unexpected and wonderful buoyancy of it. I held on, treading water and calling for Stella. There was no answer. I called and I called. But every time I opened my mouth now,

the seawater washed in. I had to give her up. I had to save myself if I could.

There was little point in wasting energy by trying to swim. After all, I had nowhere to swim to. Instead, I would simply float. I would cling to my football, tread water gently and wait for the *Peggy Sue* to come back. Sooner or later they had to discover I was overboard. Sooner or later they would come looking for me. I mustn't kick too much, just enough to keep my chin above the water, no more. Too much movement would attract the sharks. Morning must come soon. I had to hang on till then. I had to. The water wasn't that cold. I had my football. I had a chance.

I kept telling myself that over and over again. But the world stayed stubbornly black about me, and I could feel the water slowly chilling me to death. I tried singing to stop myself from shivering, to take my mind off the sharks. I sang every song I could remember, but after a while I'd forget the words. Always I came back to the only song I was sure I could finish: 'Ten Green Bottles'. I sang it out loud again and again. It reassured me to hear

the sound of my own voice. It made me feel less alone in the sea. And always I looked for the grey glint of dawn, but it would not come and it would not come.

Eventually I fell silent and my legs just would not kick any more. I clung to my football, my head drifting into sleep. I knew I mustn't, but I couldn't help myself. My hands kept slipping off the ball. I was fast losing the last of my strength. I would go down, down to the bottom of the sea and lie in my grave amongst the seaweed and the sailors' bones and the shipwrecks.

The strange thing was that I didn't really mind. I didn't care, not any more. I floated away into sleep, into my dreams. And in my dream I saw a boat gliding towards me, silent over the sea. The *Peggy Sue*! Dear, dear *Peggy Sue*. They had come back for me. I knew they would. Strong arms grabbed me. I was hauled upwards and out of the water. I lay there on the deck, gasping for air like a landed fish.

Someone was bending over me, shaking me, talking to me. I could not understand a word that

was being said. But it didn't matter. I felt Stella's hot breath on my face, her tongue licking my ear. She was safe. I was safe. All was well.

I was woken by a howling, like the howling of a gale through the masts. I looked about me. There were no masts above me, there were no sails. No movement under me either, no breath of wind. Stella Artois was barking, but some way off. I was not on a boat at all, but lying stretched out on sand. The howling became a screaming, a fearful crescendo of screeching that died away in its own echoes.

I sat up. I was on a beach, a broad white sweep of sand, with trees growing thick and lush behind me right down to the beach. Then I saw Stella prancing about in the shallows. I called her and she came bounding up out of the sea to greet me, her tail circling wildly. When all the leaping and licking and hugging were done, I struggled to my feet.

I was weak all over. I looked all about me. The wide blue sea was as empty as the cloudless sky above. No *Peggy Sue*. No boat. Nothing. No one. I called again and again for my mother and my

father. I called until the tears came and I could call no more, until I knew there was no point. I stood there for some time trying to work out how I had got here, how it was that I'd survived. I had such confused memories, of being picked up, of being on board the *Peggy Sue*. But I knew now I couldn't have been. I must have dreamed it, dreamed the whole thing. I must have clung to my football and kept myself afloat until I was washed up. I thought of my football then, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Stella, of course, was unconcerned about all the whys and wherefores. She kept bringing me sticks to throw, and would go galloping after them into the sea without a care in the world.

Then came the howling again from the trees, and the hackles went up on Stella's neck. She charged up the beach barking and barking, until she was sure she had silenced the last of the echoes. It was a musical, plaintive howling this time, not at all menacing. I thought I recognised it. I had heard howling like it once before on a visit to London Zoo. Gibbons, 'funky gibbons', my father

had called them. I still don't know why to this day. But I loved the sound of the word 'funky'. Perhaps that was why I remembered what they were. 'It's only gibbons,' I told Stella, 'just funky gibbons. They won't hurt us.' But I couldn't be at all sure I was right.

From where I now stood I could see that the forest grew more sparsely up the side of a great hill some way inland, and it occurred to me then that if I could reach the bare rocky outcrop at the summit, I would be able to see further out to sea. Or perhaps there'd be some house or farm further inland, or maybe a road, and I could find someone to help. But if I left the beach and they came back looking for me, what then? I decided I would have to take that chance.

I set off at a run, Stella Artois at my heels, and soon found myself in the cooling shade of the forest. I discovered a narrow track going uphill, in the right direction, I thought. So I followed it, only slowing to a walk when the hill became too steep. The forest was alive with creatures. Birds cackled and screeched high above me, and always the

howling wailed and wafted through the trees, but more distantly now.

It wasn't the sounds of the forest that bothered me, though, it was the eyes. I felt as if I was being watched by a thousand inquisitive eyes. I think Stella did, too, for she had been strangely quiet ever since we entered the forest, constantly glancing up at me for reassurance and comfort. I did my best to give it, but she could sense that I, too, was frightened.

What had seemed at first to be a short hike now felt more like a great expedition into the interior. We emerged exhausted from the trees, clambered laboriously up a rocky scree and stood at long last on the peak.

The sun was blazing down. I had not really felt the burning heat of it until then. I scanned the horizon. If there was a sail somewhere out there in the haze, I could not see it. And then it came to me that even if I were to see a sail, what could I do? I couldn't light a fire. I had no matches. I knew about cavemen rubbing sticks together, but I had never tried it. I looked all round me now. Sea. Sea.

Sea. Nothing but sea on all sides. I was on an island. I was alone.

The island looked perhaps two or three miles in length, no more. It was shaped a bit like an elongated peanut, but longer at one end than the other. There was a long swathe of brilliant white beach on both sides of the island, and at the far end another hill, the slopes steeper and more thickly wooded, but not so high as mine. With the exception of these twin peaks the entire island seemed to be covered with forest. So far as I could see there was no sign of any human life. Even then, as I stood there, that first morning, filled with apprehension at the terrifying implications of my dreadful situation, I remember thinking how wonderful it was, a green jewel of an island framed in white, the sea all about it a silken shimmering blue. Strangely, perhaps comforted somehow by the extraordinary beauty of the place, I was not at all down-hearted. On the contrary I felt strangely elated. I was alive. Stella Artois was alive. We had survived.

I sat down in the shadow of a great rock. The

gibbons set up a renewed chorus of howling and hooting in the forest, and a flock of raucous birds clattered up out of the canopy of the trees below us and flew off across the island to settle in the trees on the hillside opposite.

‘We’ll be all right,’ I told Stella. ‘Mum and Dad, they’ll come back for us. They’re bound to. They will. They will. Mum’ll get better and they’ll come back. She won’t leave us here. She’ll find us, you’ll see. All we’ve got to do is keep a look out for them – and stay alive. Water, we’ll need water. But so do those monkeys, right? We’ve just got to find it, that’s all. And there must be food too – fruit or nuts, something. Whatever it is that they eat, we’ll eat.’

It helped to speak my thoughts out loud to Stella, helped to calm the panic that came over me now in waves. More than anything, it was Stella’s companionship that helped me through those first hours on the island.

It seemed to make sense not to plunge at once into the forest looking for water – to be honest I was too frightened anyway – but rather to explore the shoreline first. I might come across a stream

or river flowing out into the sea and, with a bit of luck, on the way I might well find something I could eat as well.

I set off in good spirits, leaping down the scree like a mountain goat. Where monkeys lived, I reasoned, we could live. I kept telling myself that. I soon discovered that the track down through the trees was bereft of all edible vegetation. I did see fruit of sorts, what looked to me like fruit, anyway. There were coconuts up there too, but the trees were all impossible to climb. Some rose a hundred feet, some two hundred feet from the forest floor — I had never seen such giant trees.

At least the intertwining canopy did provide welcome relief from the heat of the day. All the same, I was becoming desperately parched now, and so was Stella. She padded alongside me all the way, her tongue hanging. She kept giving me baleful looks whenever our eyes met. There was no comfort I could give her.

We found our beach once again and set off round the island, keeping wherever possible to the edge of the forest, to the shade. Still we found no

stream. Again, I saw plenty of fruit, but always too high, and the trees were always too smooth, too sheer to climb. I found plenty of coconuts on the ground, but always cracked open and empty inside.

When the beach petered out, we had to strike off into the forest itself. Here too I found a narrow track to follow. The forest became impenetrable at this point, dark and menacing. There was no howling any more, but something infinitely more sinister: the shiver of leaves, the cracking of twigs, sudden surreptitious rustlings, and they were near me, all around me. I knew, I was quite sure now, that eyes were watching us. We were being followed.

I hurried on, swallowing my fear as best I could. I thought of the gibbons I had seen back in the zoo and tried to persuade myself how harmless they had looked. They'd leave us alone, they'd never attack us. They weren't man-eaters. But as the rustlings came ever closer, ever more threatening, I found it harder and harder to convince myself. I began to run, and I kept running until the track brought us out on to rocks, into the

blessed light of day, and there was the sea again.

This end of the island appeared to be littered with massive boulders that lay like tumbled cliffs all along the coast. We leaped from one to the other, and all the while I kept a keen eye out for the trickle of a stream coming down through the rocks from the forest above, but I found none.

I was exhausted by now. I sat down to rest, my mouth dry, my head throbbing. I was racked with desperate thoughts. I would die of thirst. I would be torn limb from limb by the monkeys.

Stella's eyes looked up into mine. 'There's got to be water,' I told her. 'There's got to be.' So, said her eyes, what are you doing sitting here feeling sorry for yourself?

I forced myself to my feet and went on. The seawater in the rockpools was so cool, so tempting. I tasted it, but it was salty and brackish. I spat it out at once. You went mad if you drank it. I knew that much.

The sun was already low in the sky by the time we reached the beach on the other side of the island – we were only about halfway round by my

reckoning. This place was so much bigger than it had seemed from high up on the hill that morning. Despite all my searching, I had found no water, nothing to eat. I could go no further, and neither could Stella. She lay stretched out beside me on the sand, panting her heart out. We would have to stay where we were for the night. I thought of going into the forest a little way to sleep on ground under the trees – I could make a nest of soft dead leaves, the jungle floor was thick with them – but I dared not venture in, not with the shadow of night falling fast over the island.

The howling had started up again far away in the forest, a last mellifluous evensong, a chanting that went on and on until darkness covered the island. Insects (that is what I presumed they were anyway) whirred and whined from the forest. There was hollow tapping, like a frantic woodpecker. There was scraping, scratching, and a grunting grating noise that sounded like frogs. The whole orchestra of the jungle was tuning up. But it wasn't the sounds that frightened me, it was those phantom eyes. I wanted to be as far as possible

from those eyes. I found a small cave at one end of the beach with a dry sandy floor. I lay down and tried to sleep, but Stella would not let me. She whined at me in the pain of her hunger and thirst, so that I slept only fitfully.

The jungle droned and cackled and croaked, and all night long the mosquitoes were at me too. They whined in my ears and drove me mad. I held my hands over my ears to shut out the sound of them. I curled myself round Stella, tried to forget where I was, to lose myself in my dreams. I remembered then that it was my birthday, and thought of my last birthday back at home with Eddie and Matt, and the barbecue we'd had in the garden, how the sausages had smelled so good. I slept at last.

The next morning I woke cold and hungry and shivering, and bitten all over. It took me some moments to remember where I was, and all that had happened to me. I was suddenly overwhelmed by one cruel reality after another: my utter aloneness, my separation from my mother and father, and the dangers all around me.

I cried aloud in my misery, until I saw that Stella was gone. I ran out of the cave. She was nowhere to be seen. I called for her. I listened for her, but only the gibbons howled in reply. Then I turned and saw her. She was up on the rocks high above my cave, half hidden from me, but even so I could see that her head was down. She was clearly intent on something. I clambered up to find out what it was.

I heard her drinking before I got there, lapping rhythmically, noisily, as she always did. She did not even look up as I approached. That was when I saw that she was drinking from a bowl, a battered tin bowl. Then I noticed something strange up on a flat shelf of rock above her.

I left Stella to her water feast and climbed up further to investigate. Another bowl of water and, beside it, palm leaves laid out on the rock and half covered by an upturned tin. I sat down and drank the water without pause for breath. Water had never tasted so wonderful to me as it did then. Still gasping, I lifted aside the tin. Fish! Thin strips of translucent white fish, dozens of them, laid out

neatly in rows on the palm leaves, and five, six, seven small red bananas. Red bananas!

I ate the fish first, savouring each precious strip. But even as I ate I was looking around me, looking for a telltale trembling of leaves at the edge of the forest, or for a trail of footprints in the sand. I could see none. Yet someone had brought this to me. Someone must be there, someone must be watching me. I wasn't sure whether to be fearful at this revelation or overjoyed.

Stella interrupted my thoughts. She was whimpering pitifully at me from the rock below, and I knew it wasn't love or comfort she was after. She caught every strip of fish I threw her, snaffled it in one gulp and waited for the next, head on one side, one ear pricked. After that it was one for me, one for her. Her beseeching eyes would not let me do otherwise.

The fish was raw, but I did not mind. I was too hungry to mind, and so was Stella. I kept the red bananas all to myself. I ate every single one of them. They weren't at all like bananas back home, but much sweeter altogether, much juicier, much

more delicious. I could have eaten a dozen more.

Once I had finished I stood up and scanned the forest. My benefactor, whoever he or she was, had to be somewhere close by. I was sure I had nothing to fear. I had to make some kind of contact. I put my hands to my mouth and called out again and again: 'Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!' My words echoed round the island. Suddenly the forest was alive again with noise, a great cacophony of singing and hooting and howling and cawing and croaking. Stella barked wildly back at it. As for me, I felt suddenly exhilarated, elated, ecstatically happy. I jumped up and down laughing and laughing, until my laughter turned to tears of joy. I was not alone on this island! Whoever was here must be friendly. Why else would they have fed us? But why wouldn't they show themselves?

They would have to come back for the bowls, I thought. I would leave a message. I found a sharp stone, knelt down and scraped out my message on the rock beside the bowls: '*Thank you. My name is Michael. I fell off a boat. Who are you?*'

After that, I determined to remain on the beach

all that day, and stay close to my cave and the rock above where the fish had been left for us. I would keep it always in sight, so that I would at least be able to see who it was that had helped me.

Stella ran on ahead of me down into the sea, barking at me, inviting me to join her. I didn't need any persuading. I plunged and cavorted and whooped and splashed, but through all my antics she just cruised steadily on. She always looked so serious when she swam, chin up and paddling purposefully.

The sea was balmy and calm, barely a ripple of wave to be seen. I didn't dare go out of my depth – I'd had quite enough of that for a lifetime. I came out clean and refreshed and invigorated, a new person. The sea was a great healer. My bites were still there, but they did not burn any more.

I decided I would explore further along the beach, right to the end if I could, just so long as I could keep my cave in view all the time. There were shells here, millions of them, golden and pink thrown up in long lines all along the beach. Before long I came across what seemed at some

distance away like a flat wedge of rock protruding only very slightly from the sand. Stella was scrabbling excitedly at the edge of it. It turned out not to be a rock at all, but a long sheet of rusted metal – clearly all that was left of the side of a ship's hull, now sunk deep in the sand. I wondered what ship it was, how long ago she had been wrecked. Had some terrible storm driven her on to the island? Had there been any survivors? Could any of them still be here? I knelt down in the sand and ran my hand along it. I noticed then a fragment of clear glass lying in the sand nearby from a bottle perhaps. It was hot to touch, too hot to handle.

It came to me in a flash. Eddie had showed me how to do it. We'd tried it in the playground at school, hiding behind the dustbins where no one could see us. A piece of paper, a bit of glass and the sun. We had made fire! I didn't have any paper, but leaves would do. I ran up the beach and gathered whatever I could find from under the trees: bits of cane, twigs, all sorts of leaves – paper-thin, tinder-dry. I made a small pile on the sand and sat down

beside it. I held my piece of glass close to the leaves and angled it to the sun. I had to keep it still, quite still, and wait for the first wisp of smoke.

If only I could get a fire lit, if only I could keep it alight, then I could sleep by it at night – it would keep the flies away, and the animals away, too. And, sooner or later, a ship had to come by. Someone would spot the smoke.

I sat and I sat. Stella came over to bother me – she wanted to play – but I pushed her away. In the end she went off and sulked, stretching out with a sigh under the shade of the palm trees. The sun was roasting hot, but still nothing happened. My arm was beginning to ache, so I arranged a frame of twigs above the leaves, laid the glass across it, then crouched by it and waited. Still nothing.

All of a sudden Stella sprang up from her sleep, a deep growl in her throat. She turned and ran down towards me, wheeling round to bark her fury at the forest. Then I saw what it was that had disturbed her.

A shadow under the trees moved and came lumbering out into the sunlight towards us. A

monkey, a giant monkey. Not a gibbon at all. It moved slowly on all fours, and was brown, ginger-brown. An orang-utan, I was sure of it. He sat down just a few feet from me and considered me. I dared not move. When he'd seen enough, he scratched his neck casually, turned and made his way on all fours slowly back into the forest. Stella went on growling long after he had gone.

So there were orang-utans here as well as gibbons. Or perhaps it was orang-utans that made the howling noise and not gibbons at all. Maybe I'd been wrong all along. I'd seen a Clint Eastwood film once with an orang-utan. That one, I remembered, had been friendly enough. I just hoped this one would be the same.

Then I saw smoke. I smelled smoke. There was a glow in amongst my pile of leaves. I crouched down at once and blew on it gently. The glow became flames. I put on a few more leaves, then a dry twig or two, then some bigger ones. I had a fire! I had a fire!

I dashed into the forest and collected all the debris, all the dried-up coconut shells, all the wood I could find. Back and forth I went until my fire

was roaring and crackling like an inferno. Sparks were flying high into the air. Smoke was rising into the trees behind me. I knew I could not rest now, that the fire would need still more wood, bigger wood, branches even. I would have to fetch and carry until I was quite certain I had enough to keep it going, and enough in reserve.

Stella, I noticed, would not come with me into the forest, but stayed waiting for me by the fire. I knew well enough why. I kept a wary eye out for the orang-utan myself, but I was too intent on my fire now to worry much about him.

My pile of wood was huge by now, but all the same I went back into the forest one last time, just in case the fire burned itself out quicker than I expected. I had to go deeper into the forest, so it took a while.

I was coming out of the trees, loaded with wood up to my chin, when I realised there was much less smoke coming from the fire than there had been before, and no flames at all. Then, through the smoke, I saw him, the orang-utan. He was crouching down and scooping sand on to my

fire. He stood up and came towards me, now out of the smoke. He was not an orang-utan at all. He was a man.

