



Chapter 6

Abunai!

In an instant I was on my feet, shouting at the top of my voice and waving frantically. I leaped up and down screaming for them to stop, to hear me, to see me. 'I'm here! Here! I'm here!' Only when my throat was raw and I could shout no longer did I stop. The tanker crept tantalisingly slowly along the horizon. It

did not turn, and by then I knew it would not turn. I knew too that no one would be looking, and that even if they were, this entire island would be little more than a distant hazy hump on the horizon. How then could they possibly see me? I could only look on, helpless and distraught, as the tanker moved inexorably further and further away from me until it began to disappear over the horizon. This took all morning long, a morning of dreadful anguish.

As I stood watching on the summit of Watch Hill, my despair was replaced by a burning anger. If I had been allowed to have my fire, there would at least have been a chance they could have spotted the smoke. True, the old man had brought me a sleeping mat and a sheet. He was looking after me, he was keeping me alive, but he was also keeping me prisoner.

As the last vestige of the tanker sank from my view, I promised myself that I would never again let such a chance go by. I felt in my pocket. I still had my precious fire glass. I determined I would do it. I would build another fire, not down on the beach where he could find it, but up here on Watch Hill,

behind the rocks and well out of his sight, even if he did have binoculars – and I now had to presume that he did. I would gather a great beacon of wood, but I would not light it. I would set it all up and wait until the moment I saw a ship. If this one had come, I reasoned, then another one would come, had to come, and when it did, I would have my fire glass ready, and a cache of paper-thin, tinder-dry leaves. I would make such a blazing inferno of a fire, a fire that would send up such a towering smoke signal that the next ship that happened along would have to see it.

So now I no longer spent my days just sitting on Watch Hill and waiting. Every hour I was up there I spent building my beacon. I would drag great branches up over the rocky scree from the forest below and pile them high, but on the seaward side of the hilltop – the perfect place for it to be seen by ships, when it was lit – but, in the meantime, not by the prying eyes of the old man who I thought of now as my captor. And he *would* be watching me – I was quite sure of that now. Through all the fetching and carrying, I kept well out of his sight. Only eyes from

the sea could possibly have known what I was doing, and there were no eyes out there to see me.

It took several days of hard labour to build my secret beacon. I had almost finished when someone did indeed discover what I was up to, but it wasn't the old man.

I was heaving a massive branch on to the pile when I felt a sudden shadow come over me. An orang-utan was looking down at me from the rock above – I could not be sure it was the same one as before. He was on all fours, his great shoulders hunched, his head lowered, eyeing me slightly sideways. I dared not move. It was a stand-off, just as it had been before down on the beach.

He sat back and looked at me with mild interest for a while. Then he looked away, scratched his face nonchalantly and sloped off, stopping once to glance back at me over his shoulder before moving on into the shadow of the trees and away. It occurred to me as I watched him go that maybe he had been sent to spy on me, that he might go back and tell the old man what he had seen me doing. It was a ridiculous thought, I know, but I do remember

thinking it.

A storm broke over the island that night, such a fearsome storm, such a thunderous crashing of lightning overhead, such a din of rain and wind that sleep was quite impossible. Great waves roared in from the ocean, pounding the beach, and shaking the ground beneath me. I spread out my sleeping mat at the very back of the cave. Stella lay down beside me and huddled close. How I welcomed that.

It was fully four days before the storm blew itself out, but even during the worst of it, I would find my fish and fruit breakfast waiting for me every morning under my tin, which he had now wedged tight in under the same shelf of rock. Stella and I kept to the shelter of our cave. All we could do was watch as the rain came lashing down outside. I looked on awestruck at the power of the vast waves rolling in from the open sea, curling, tumbling, and exploding as they broke on to the beach, as if they were trying to batter the island into pieces and then suck us all out to sea. I thought often of my mother and father and the *Peggy Sue*, and wondered where they were. I just hoped the typhoon – for that was

what I was witnessing – had passed them by.

Then, one morning, as suddenly as the storm had begun, it stopped. The sun blazed down from a clear blue sky, and the forest symphony started up where it had left off. I ventured out. The whole island steamed and dripped. I went at once up Watch Hill to see if I could see a ship, perhaps blown off course, or maybe sheltering in the lee of the island. There was nothing there. That was a disappointment, but at least I found my beacon had not collapsed. It was sodden, of course, but still intact. Everything was sodden. There could be no fire now until it had dried out.

The air was hot and heavy all that day. It was difficult to move at all, difficult to breathe. Stella could only lie and pant. The only place to cool off was the sea, so I spent most of that day lolling lazily in the water, throwing the occasional stick for Stella to keep her happy.

I was lying in the sea, just floating there and day-dreaming, when I heard the old man's voice. He was hurrying down the beach, yelling at us as he came and waving his stick wildly in the air.

'Yamero! Abunai! Dangerous. Understand? No

swim.' He did not seem to be angry with me, as he had been before, but he was clearly upset about something.

I looked around me. The sea was still heaving in but gently now, breathing out the last of the storm, the waves falling limp and exhausted on to the beach. I could see no particular danger.

'Why not?' I called back. 'What's the matter?'

He had dropped his stick on the beach and was wading out through the surf towards me.

'No swim. *Dameda! Abunai!* No swim.' Then he had me by the arm and was leading me forcibly out of the sea. His grip was vice-like. There was little point in struggling. Only when we were back on the beach did he at last release me. He stood there breathless for a few moments. 'Dangerous. Very bad. *Abunai!*' He was pointing out to sea. 'No swim. Very bad. No swim. You understand?' He looked me hard in the eye, leaving me in no doubt that this was not meant as advice, this was a command that I should obey. Then he turned and walked off into the forest, retrieving his stick as he went. Stella ran after him, but I called her back.

I felt at that moment like defying him openly. I

would charge back into the sea and frolic as noisily, as provocatively as I could. That would show him. I was bristling at the outrageous unfairness of it all. First, he would not let me light my fire. Then I was banished to one end of the island, and now I wasn't even allowed to swim. I wanted to call him every name I could think of. But I didn't. I didn't go swimming in the sea again either. I capitulated. I gave in, because I had to. I needed his food, his water. Until my secret beacon of wood dried out, until the next ship came by, I would have to do as he said. I had no choice. I did make a mansize sculpture of him lying in the sand outside my cave, and I did jump up and down on him in my fury and frustration. It made me feel a little better, but not much.

Until now, except for occasional gut-wrenching pangs of homesickness and loneliness, I had by and large managed to keep my spirits up. But not any more. My beacon stayed obstinately damp. Every day I went up Watch Hill hoping to sight a ship, and everyday the sea stretched away on all sides, empty. I felt more and more isolated, more and more wretched. In the end I decided not to go up onto Watch Hill any more, that it

just was not worth it. Instead I stayed in my cave and curled up on my sleeping mat for long hours during the day. I lay there drowning in my misery, thinking of nothing but the hopelessness of it all, how I would never get off this island, how I would die here, and my mother and father would never even know what had happened to me. No one would, except the old man, the mad man, my captor, my persecutor.

The weather stayed heavy and humid. How I longed to plunge into the ocean, but I dared not. He'd be watching me for sure. With every day that passed, in spite of the fish and fruit and water he continued to bring me, I came to hate the old man more and more. Dejected and depressed I may have been, but I was angry too, and gradually this anger fuelled in me a new determination to escape, and this determination revived my spirits. Once again I went on my daily trek up Watch Hill. I began to collect a fresh cache of dry leaves and twigs from the forest edge and squirreled them away in a deep cleft in the rock so that I would always be sure they were dry, when the time came. My beacon had dried out at last. I built it up, higher and higher. When I

had done all I could I sat and waited for the time to come, as I knew it must. Day after day, week after week, I sat up on Watch Hill, my fire glass polished in my pocket, my beacon ready and waiting.

As it turned out, when the time did come, I wasn't up on Watch Hill at all. One morning, with sleep still in my head, I emerged from my cave, and there it was. A boat! A boat with strange red-brown sails – I supposed it to be some kind of Chinese junk – and not that far out to sea either. Excitement got the better of me. I ran helter-skelter down the beach, shouting and screaming for all I was worth. But I could see at once that it was hopeless. The junk was not that far out to sea, but it was still far too far for me to be either seen or heard. I tried to calm myself, tried to think . . . The fire! Light the fire!

I ran all the way up Watch Hill without once stopping, Stella hard on my heels and barking. All around me the forest was cackling and screeching and whooping in protest at this sudden disturbance. I readied my cache of dry leaves, took my fireglass and crouched down beside the beacon to light my fire. But I was trembling so much with excitement

and exhaustion by now that I could not hold my hand still enough. So I set up a frame of twigs and laid the glass over it, just as I had before. Then I sat over it, willing the leaves to smoulder.

Every time I looked out to sea the junk was still there, moving slowly away, but still there.

It seemed an age, but there was a wisp of smoke, and shortly afterwards a glorious, wondrous glow of flame spreading along the edge of one leaf. I bent over it to blow it into life.

That was when I saw his feet. I looked up. The old man was standing over me, his eyes full of rage and hurt. He said not a word, but set about stamping out my embryo fire. He snatched up my fireglass and hurled it at the rock below where it shattered to pieces. I could only look on and weep as he kicked away my precious pile of dry leaves, as he dismantled my beacon and hurled the sticks and branches one by one down the hill. As he did so the group of orang-utans gathered to watch.

Soon nothing whatsoever now remained of my beacon. All about me now the rocky scree was littered with the scattered ruins of it. I expected him

to screech at me, but he didn't. He spoke very quietly, very deliberately. '*Damedada,*' he said.

'But why?' I cried. 'I want to go home. There's a boat, can't you see? I just want to go home, that's all. Why won't you let me? Why?'

He stood and stared at me. For a moment I thought I detected just a flicker of understanding. Then he bowed very stiffly from the waist, and said, '*Gomenasai. Gomenasai.* Sorry. Very sorry.' And with that he left me there and went off back into the forest, followed by the orang-utans.

I sat there watching the junk until it was nothing but a spot on the horizon, until I could not bear to watch any more. By this time I had already decided how I could best defy him. I was so enraged that consequences didn't matter to me now. Not any more. With Stella beside me I headed along the beach, stopped at the boundary line in the sand and then, very deliberately, I stepped over it. As I did so, I let him know precisely what I was doing.

'Are you watching, old man?' I shouted. 'Look! I've crossed over. I've crossed over your silly line. And now I'm going to swim. I don't care what you

say. I don't care if you don't feed me. You hear me, old man?' Then I turned and charged down the beach into the sea. I swam furiously, until I was completely exhausted and a long way from the shore. I trod water and thrashed the sea in my fury – making it boil and froth all around me. 'It's my sea as much as yours,' I cried. 'And I'll swim in it when I like.'

I saw him then. He appeared suddenly at the edge of the forest. He was shouting something at me, waving his stick. That was the moment I felt it, a searing, stinging pain in the back of my neck, then my back, and my arms too. A large, translucent white jellyfish was floating right beside me, its tentacles groping at me. I tried to swim away but it came after me, hunting me. I was stung again, in my foot this time. The agony was immediate and excruciating. It permeated my entire body like one continuous electric shock. I felt my muscles going rigid. I kicked for the shore, but I could not do it. My legs seemed paralysed, my arms too. I was sinking, and there was nothing I could do about it. I saw the jellyfish poised for the kill above me now. I screamed, and my mouth

filled with water. I was choking. I was going to die,
I was going to drown but I did not care. I just wanted
the pain to stop. Death I knew would stop it.

