

The Blob, the Frog, the Dog and the Girl

By Nick Creech

With apologies to my two sons, Gideon and Dan, for appropriating their memories of what Dan was once gracious enough to call a first-class childhood. Much of what follows is true, including Boris and the Bifrost, and the knives he made. The rest is not untrue.

Chapter One

"This is our jetty!" a voice said behind her. The girl looked round. She was being confronted by two boys with fishing lines and a bait pail and the biggest, blackest, drooliest dog she had ever seen. The bigger of the boys, who looked to be a bit older than her, was tubby, extremely tubby. The smaller, who looked to be a bit younger than her, was skinny and scowling. They were both dressed only in board shorts and suntan and were brown as biscuits. The dog came up to her where she was sitting with her legs dangling, gave her a good sniffing and slobbered all over her ear, which made her very wet indeed. He plonked down beside her and began to gaze intently into the water where a school of yellowtail were darting in and out of the piles.

"This is our jetty," the smaller boy repeated.

"It is not," the girl said. "It's a public jetty. It says so." She pointed at the sign which read, Carol's Wharf. Below it was a council notice that proclaimed it a public jetty and sternly prohibited everything you could think of including fishing, swimming, diving, jumping, running, bike riding, skate boarding and dogs. It would have been a lot simpler, the girl thought, if it had just said: no fun, by order, ever.

"But it is our fishing spot," the smaller boy said.

"Who says?" the girl demanded, starting to get angry herself.

"I do," the bigger boy said. "Move!"

"Or what?"

"Or he'll sit on your head and fart," the smaller boy said.

"Gross!" the girl said, scrambling to her feet. "You wouldn't dare."

"Of course he would. He does it to me all the time," the smaller boy said.

"So nick off," the bigger boy said.

"No!" the girl said. "And don't you dare touch me..."

She was too late. The bigger boy gave her a shove and a twist and the next second she was down on the rough planking of the jetty. A second after that a heavy weight was pressing her head into the boards.

"I warned you," the smaller boy said with satisfaction. His voice was distant, muffled.

"Now you're for it."

There was a thunderous noise and a terrible stink. The girl gasped for breath and retched.

"Do it again," the smaller boy said. "Make sure she never comes back."

"If she tells we'll be grounded longer," the bigger boy said.

"If she tells we're grounded longer anyway..."

There was another thunderous noise and a second wave of miasma engulfed her. The girl tried to kick and punch but she couldn't reach anything to hit. Abruptly the weight was gone. She lay there, sucking in the clean, fresh air, smelling slightly of ozone. It was delicious. At last she got to her feet, her face scratched from the planking. Already, the two boys were seated on the edge, legs dangling and baiting their hooks. The dog looked at her kindly and thumped his tail.

The smaller boy glanced over his shoulder. "And don't come back," he said.

"Is she crying?" the bigger boy said, without deigning to look.

"Who cares?" the smaller boy said.

The girl, in fact, wasn't crying. The matter of revenge was far too pressing for tears. She walked away down the long wharf, thinking hard. To her right there was a scraggly patch of mangroves struggling to grow on the rocky shore. To her left was a scraggly beach that ran along in front of a motley collection of cottages. She could just see the place her mother had rented for the summer holidays down near the sandflat. It never crossed her mind to go home and complain. No. This was a battle she was determined to fight herself. The tide was out and she could see somebody's old bailer that had washed up near one of the mangroves. She began to grin. She already knew what she would find if she lifted a rock or two. The two went together like crime and punishment.

The girl ducked under the jetty where it met the shoreline and crept along beneath it, invisible to the two fishermen out at the far end. When the water began to get too deep she climbed into one of the moored commuter boats and then up to the wharf. About 20 metres away was the flat-roofed, shelter shed for people waiting for the ferry, constructed so that it ran from one side of the jetty to the other, actually forming a tunnel. There were bench seats inside and the walls had been turned in a bit at the ends to keep the worst of the weather out. Through the tunnel and three or four metres further on were the enemy, sitting right at the end. The girl sneaked into the shed and

hid in the corner, biding her time. She didn't have long to wait. The bigger boy wound in his line, rebaited the hook and stood up to whirl it round his head and cast.

The girl darted forward, so quietly that even the dog didn't hear her, pulled back the waistband of the boy's shorts and emptied the clicking contents of the bailer down his backside.

There was a moment of frozen stillness, of shock, of stunned disbelief and then the boy began to dance and shout, clutching at his shorts in a paroxysm of panic.

The other boy and the dog stared at her, both open-mouthed.

"Crabs," she said.

There was a huge splash as a tubby body hit the water and began to struggle out of its suddenly lethal shorts.

The smaller boy threw himself on his back on the jetty and began to howl with laughter.

The girl, with great aplomb, picked the smelliest, slimiest prawn from the bait bucket and delicately popped it into his wide open mouth.

"Now we're even," she said.

The boy stared at her in horror, spat frantically and then he, too, was in the water, gargling for all he was worth.

The dog grinned at her, rolled over, stretched his huge body and asked to have his tummy tickled. The girl absently obliged, contemplating her victims thrashing about below. At last, the commotion ceased and two wet heads, hair slicked any old way, turned to glare at her. She gave the dog one last stroke, nonchalantly rose to her feet and sauntered off. A pair of shorts floated to the surface as she went.

Later that day towards evening, the girl passed the jetty again. The boys were back. Automatically she made to walk on by and then shrugged. Determinedly, she strode towards them. They heard her coming, looked to see who it was and squidged sideways to make a space for her. She hesitated a moment and then sat down between them.

"We brought a fishing line for you," the bigger one said.

"And you can use our bait," the smaller one said.

"What are your names?" the girl said, taking the proffered handline and baiting the hook. The boys noted that she did it efficiently and with none of the show of disgust that girls usually felt obliged to make.

"He's Blob," the smaller one said.

"And he's Frog," the bigger one said.

"And he's DOG," they both said. DOG thumped his tail in agreement.

"He has his own kitten," Frog said. "Who goes to sleep curled up in his tail."

The girl laughed.

"That's ridiculous," she said.

"We know," Blob said. "But it's true."

"Those are never your real names," the girl said.

"They're our island names..."

"Our Scotland Island names..."

"But who are you really?"

"He's Anthony," Frog said. "And I'm Jack. But we only use our island names when we're here."

"Aren't you here all the time?" the girl asked.

"No," Blob said. "Worse luck. What's your name?"

"Jessica. Why don't you live here all the time?"

"Dad lives here. Our mother lives in town..."

"They're divorced," Frog said.

"And we're only allowed to come here for weekends and school holidays."

"My father's dead," Jessica said.

There was a respectful silence as neither Blob nor Frog had the least idea of what they should say.

"It's all right, though," Jessica said. "I never really knew him. Why doesn't DOG have a proper name?"

"He does," Frog said. "Dad calls him Josh..."

"But we call him Desperate Omnivorous Garbage-guts," Blob said. "DOG for short."

"He's nice," Jessica said. She pulled in her line and rebaited the hook. "But there are no fish here, are there? Just tiddlers."

"Not really," Blob said.

"Sometimes," Frog said. "But we're grounded. We have to stay where Dad can see us."

"Why?"

"Because we're grounded."

"That's not very grounded. I mean why are you grounded?"

Blob and Frog glanced at each other behind Jessica's back. In the distance there came a strange whistle. The two boys started winding in their lines.

"We have to go now," Blob said.

Jessica glanced from side to side and began to wind in her line, too.

"You can borrow it if you want to go on fishing," Frog said.

Jessica hesitated.

"Thanks," she said. "But I have to go too."

The three children picked up the pail and escorted gravely by DOG made their way back down the long jetty. They turned left at the end and picked their way along the shore, over seawalls and past boatsheds and then Stefan's place right on the water's edge. Three houses further on, the boys stopped.

"That's our house," Blob said, pointing up a flight of steep steps to a small cottage perched on the bluff. A man came out onto the deck that ran right along the front.

"Dinner!" he called.

"Coming," Frog yelled. And with out more ado, the boys and their dog became to race each other up the stairs, jostling and pushing. Jessica watched them go suddenly feeling rather folorn. It must have showed.

"I expect they'll be coming down for a last swim," the man called. "They usually do before bed."

Jessica waved vaguely. She went on across the bit of beach that evidently belonged to the boys, or at least their father, climbed up onto a patch of reclaimed land, roughly grassed, and continued on round the shore to her own house, except that it wasn't a house, just a converted boatshed with a small kitchenette, bunks and some other bits of furniture. There was a shower and a toilet round the back. The sun was low in the west now and away to the south, thunderheads were looming.

Her mother was still sitting at the makeshift desk working at her laptop. After they had moved in the day before, Jessica had helped her to set up the card table by the open roller door, looking out at the water.

"Hi," Jessica said. "What's for dinner?"

"Sweetheart, I've got a deadline and it's not going well. Could you do something?"

Jessica sighed.

"Please..."

It was a situation to which Jessica was all too accustomed. She had begun learning to cook at a very early age from her grandmother. It was self-defence. Otherwise, at home there tended to be an unending diet of sandwiches and baked beans on toast. Resignedly Jessica set about making a Spanish omelette with a green salad on the side.

She was still feeling forlorn, downright lonely in fact, which was unusual for her. She was mostly alone, even at school, but rarely let it bother her she was so accustomed to it. However, just today, the two boys and their enormous dog – a dog quite big enough for Jessica to ride on – who were all so familiar to each other and so relaxed in each other's company, had made her feel that something was terribly lacking in her own life.

She and her mother took their meal outside and sat on the wooden ramp leading from the shed down to the water. The tide was in now and the sound of the ripples lapping at their feet was charming. The sun was setting and turning the clouds to towering columns of crimson and gold.

"It's so beautiful here," her mother said. "Have you had a good day?"

"It was okay," Jessica said.

"What did you do?"

"Oh...wandered about a bit."

"Did you meet anyone?"

Jessica shrugged, not wanting to share and not knowing why.

"Sweetheart...do try to make some friends. I was told that lots of children live on the island. That's part of the reason we're here. You know I have to work but I hoped you could have some fun..."

"I'm fine, Mum," Jessica said.

"Sweetheart..."

"Really."

"Good heavens," her mother said suddenly in a completely different voice. "Look at that huge animal. What is it?" She pointed.

"A dog, Mum. Just a dog."

"It's so big. It looks dangerous."

"Nah. He's fine."

"Look out. It's coming here. We'll have to go inside."

"Mu-um! It just smells our dinner."

Josh ambled up and sat down expectantly.

"Go away! Shoo!" her mother exclaimed, jumping up and flapping her hands. Josh ignored her, wagged his tail hopefully at Jessica and looked at the now empty plates.

"I know where he lives," Jessica said. "I'll take him home."

"I don't think you should go anywhere near..."

But Jessica didn't wait. She too jumped up and brushed her hand over Josh's muzzle.

"Come on DOG," she said. "Time to go home." She set off back along the shore and Josh immediately followed suit. A little bit further on, he pushed past her and led the way, glancing back from time to time to make she sure she was still following.

Blob and Frog were waiting on their beach.

"Oh good," Frog said. "He found you."

"He found our dinner," Jessica said. "Except there was none left."

"Don't feed him," Blob said seriously. "Never feed him. Dad's the only one who's allowed. DOG has pancreatitis."

"What's that?"

"He gets sick in his tummy. It comes from being a garbage-guts. He's only allowed to eat rice and stuff like that."

"Poor dog, but what sort is he?"

"He's a Newfoundland," Frog said proudly. "Dad got him when he moved here and we were small. He said no-one ever drowns with a Newfie around, and nobody has."

"What does that mean?"

"Newfies are water dogs...Paw, Josh," Frog said. Josh reluctantly sat and held out a paw.

"See?" Blob said, spreading his toes. "He's got webbed feet for swimming. In Newfoundland they pull out the fishing nets and do rescues. I chose him," he added. "When he was a puppy."

"You did not," Frog said. "That was just a story to make you feel good. Dad told me. DOG chose us. Dad says we sat down in the kennel and of all the puppies he was the one who came over to us to play. Dad says, always take the liveliest one, and we did."

"Let's go in," Blob said crossly, abruptly changing the subject. He shucked his t-shirt and shorts and was down to swimmers in seconds. At the signal, Josh was already wading out. Frog followed suit.

"Come on," he said. "Dad said we could ask you."

"But I don't have my costume."

"On the island," Frog said seriously. "Always wear your swimmers underneath."

Jessica was left all alone on the beach, again feeling bereft.

"See you tomorrow," Blob called over his shoulder. He had waded out to where his father's tin dinghy was moored. He dived and struck out, followed by Frog and DOG. Jessica suddenly smiled. She waved at the three heads disappearing in the direction of Carol's.

Josh came again to fetch her in the morning. Her mother was already ensconced at her desk and barely noticed as Jessica mumbled something and hastily disappeared. The boys were waiting for her on their beach. She saw the tinny was gone. Their father must be off somewhere.

"Hi," Blob said. "Dad says that if you're going to hang out with us, you have to do the test."

"What test?" Jessica said, taken aback. She had been cautiously looking forward to the morning and had been careful to put on her swimsuit. Talk of a test was not at all what she was expecting. Frog pointed across the narrow strait separating the island from the mainland. From the beach where they were standing to the old, concrete boat ramp on the other side was almost exactly 500 metres.

"You have to swim across to the other side and back," he said. "Then Dad knows that if you get into trouble you can probably swim ashore from anywhere in Pittwater."

Jessica looked across the water. It suddenly seemed a very long way, further than she had ever swum in her life, much further.

"How far is it?" she said nervously.

"About a kilometre there and back," Blob said. "We both did it when we turned seven. We weren't allowed off on our own till then."

"That's not true," Frog said. "We swam it one way..."

"But we've done it both ways lots of times since. Anyway, you have to do it on your own. To make sure you won't panic or anything stupid."

"But what happens if I don't make it?" Jessica said even more nervously.

"You drown," Blob said callously.

"It's all right," Frog said. "DOG will go with you and... Anthony! Get off my foot."

"Oh," Blob said. "Sorry..." And then to Jessica: "So, are you game?"

Jessica hugged her arms round herself. The bright, summer morning suddenly seemed cold and depressing. A breath of wind whiffing along the shore made her shiver. A boat, a tinny, came round the corner from the store at Church Point but instead of accelerating when it reached the end of the speed limit zone it just kept idling along, apparently in no hurry to get anywhere. At a point opposite their beach, it seemed to have engine trouble or run out of fuel or something. It came to a stop and sat there, just drifting. Jessica paid it absolutely no mind. She was far too busy worrying about swimming all the way to the other side and then back again. It seemed impossible, really frightening. Much easier just to go home. But then what? A long, dreary summer holiday all by herself, again.

Blob, Frog and DOG stood there, looking at her, waiting. At last, Blob's lip began to curl and Jessica just knew he was about to say something horrible, really horrible, but true. She stripped off her shirt and then her shorts and shuddering violently, waded in. DOG galumphed happily along beside her, splashing carelessly. The spray was awful, freezing, unbearable, altogether too much. She stopped, determined to end this ridiculous nonsense right now.

"Go on," Frog said. "We really like you, but..."

Jessica started forward again, the water creeping up her legs until it reached her suit. It felt so cold and unpleasant that she stopped again.

"Get under," Frog called, and all at once Jessica swept up her arms and dived forward. Once she was in, she found that the water was really rather nice. She began to relax a little. DOG was waiting for her so she got to her feet again and kept on wading. Just before she began to swim properly, Blob called to her:

"Pace yourself. Slow and steady."

Jessica's mother, known to her readers as Gillian Locksley, looked up from her computer and gazed sightlessly at the water. A movement over to the left finally attracted her attention. What was that? Somebody swimming. Out in the middle. Right out in the middle. No, two people. Except one was a dog, that horrible, black dog. And that other head, it was blonde... Surely not?... But it was... It was definitely Jessica... Being chased by the dog... She would drown... She would be eaten by sharks... At the very least, she would be savaged by that great black, brute. Gillian jumped to her feet, frantic but quite helpless. She had no boat. She knew no one. What on earth could she do? The water police, she would ring the water police.

Jessica was quite good at freestyle and her breast stroke wasn't bad, but taking Blob's advice to heart she had chosen a slow, but untaxing side-stroke. DOG, she noticed, might have been bred for swimming but his style, too, was definitely aimed at comfort and endurance rather than speed, and they went along at much the same pace. The first hundred metres or so were hard as she kept raising her head to see how far she had come, but then she made up her mind not to look until she got there and was able to settle into a rhythm. Time passed and Jessica fell into something of a hypnotic trance, steadily stroking on, reaching forward with one arm then the the other and timing the kick of the legs just so. She was facing away from the drifting boat as she went past and was quite unaware of it. At last, she thought she ought to be getting near but still refused to look and when, eventually, her foot kicked the bottom, it came as a bit of a shock. She stood up so the others could see that she had fairly reached the other side and taking a deep breath immediately set off on the return journey.

Gillian, pacing up and down in an agony of helplessness, saw Jessica drawing nearer and nearer to the opposite shore and began to dare to hope that she might reach safety

before that horrible animal caught her. So it was with immense relief that she watched as Jessica finally rose to her feet, and total disbelief as her daughter, instead of racing for shelter on shore, turned about and plunged back into the water. The great brute of a dog, who would have to be at least twice Jessica's weight, never even bothered to touch ground but just swam in a circle and immediately set off in hot pursuit. If Gillian had been frantic before, she was now all but hysterical.

"I told you she could do it," Frog said, as Jessica again passed the half way mark.

"Uh-oh," Blob said by way of reply and pointed. Coming round the corner of the island by Carol's was the big, blue police cruiser, Courageous.

"I hope they see her," he added.

"And Josh," Frog said. "But Dad'll warn them." And as he spoke, the drifting tinny suddenly came to life and skirting round behind the swimmers darted up to the police boat's side. There was a brief conversation and then one of the police officers waved as the cruiser powered up and swung round to head back the way it had come.

Again, Gillian was dumbfounded, absolutely stricken. The police were supposed to protect people and here they had blatantly ignored a person in distress. They were absolutely abandoning Jessica to a horrible fate. However, during the time it had taken for the police to perpetrate this monstrous dereliction of their duty – not for nothing was Gillian a freelance journalist – Jessica had reached the home stretch. Gillian looked more carefully and realised her daughter was heading towards the two boys standing on a bit of beach further along. She began to run.

The return leg had grown more difficult as she became more fatigued, but almost from the moment she had turned around, Jessica had been confident that she would make it. While her body had grown more and more leaden, nevertheless Jessica was buoyed by a feeling of real accomplishment. She had set off, convinced that she would drown despite Josh being in attendance, and now here she was, all but done. She couldn't help grinning to herself as she swam and she felt a new surge of energy.

"Uh-oh," Blob said again. He had glanced to his right and caught sight of the woman storming towards them.

"What do you think you're doing?" the woman shouted at them as she came up. "Are you trying to kill my daughter?"

Blob and Frog stared at each other.

"Answer me!" the woman shrieked. "Why are you trying to kill my daughter?"

"But we're not..." Blob said.

"Did you send her all the way over there?"

"Yes..." Blob started.

"Then you're trying to kill her."

"But Dad was watching," Frog said. "He always watches a test. And Josh. Nothing could..."

"A test?" the woman exclaimed. "How dare you test my daughter? Test her for what?"

"Oh mother!" Jessica said. She had come up the beach unnoticed with Josh beside her. Behind her a man was standing knee deep in the water, holding a tinny and watching with interest. He had long, sun-bleached hair and a beard and was dressed in a ragged t-shirt and frayed old jeans, now wet to the knee. He looked about as disreputable as it was possible to be. Josh glanced back and wagged his tail.

"And you!" Gillian said, rounding on Jessica. "I thought you had some vestiges of common sense. You come with me. You come with me right now!"

"Mother!"

"I don't know what I was thinking, coming to this...island. Come on. Not a word. Right now." Gillian swung on her heel and stalked off. Jessica looked helplessly at the boys, picked up her clothes still lying on the sand and with her head down, followed disconsolately. Her moment of triumph had been quite ruined but there was still a little glow of satisfaction warming her heart all the same. Finding the resolution to swim the channel, all by herself with no one coaching and both ways at that, was the best thing she'd ever done.

The boys watched her go, knowing exactly how she was feeling. Nobody understands better than another kid when a parent is being outrageously unreasonable.

Frog looked to where his father had hooked the tinny to the pulley system and was hauling it out beyond the tide line. There was a newspaper and a large bottle of milk beside him on the ground.

"Dad will think of something," he said.

"There is nothing to discuss," Gillian said. "You behaved foolishly beyond belief. Risking your life like that for a stupid dare..."

"But mother, you wanted me to make friends..."

"Suitable friends, and those ruffian boys are anything but suitable. Furthermore, if that hippy looking man I saw is anything to do with them then he's a disgrace too. You're to have nothing more to do with them. Nothing. Is that clear? Do you understand?"

Jessica said nothing but her mutinous frown spoke volumes.

"Do you understand?" her mother insisted.

Still Jessica said nothing.

"Do you understand?"

"Oh, I understand..." Jessica said at last.

"Don't be insolent. If you understand, you will obey. And give me your swimsuit. It's confiscated..."

"No wonder you never have any friends of your own," Jessica muttered.

"What? What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"I'll pretend I never heard that, for your sake. Give me the swimsuit..."

Hours later, Jessica was still sitting glumly on the ramp, hugging her knees. Her mother was hard at work at her card table, just behind. It was all so unfair, Jessica thought bitterly. She had done exactly as her mother had been nagging her to do and all she had to show for it was abuse, and her swim suit confiscated. What was the point of coming to stay on an island if she couldn't go swimming? What was the point of anything? And because it was an island, she couldn't even run away. Well, actually, she could. She had just proved that. She could always swim to the mainland. And then what? Go to her grandmother's? And then what? Be sent straight back? To her mother, the tyrant. Who wouldn't listen. Who never listened. Jessica felt the tears beginning to

brim. She was not one given to feeling sorry for herself, but just now there seemed more than enough good reason. It really was too, too unfair.

Both Gillian and Jessica were so wrapped up in their own thoughts that neither noticed Josh ambling along the waterfront towards them. Something was swinging from his mouth. It was a plastic bag. Jessica got quite a shock when it was dropped at her feet. She started and had to smile at the great black dog who was huffing at her, obviously extremely pleased with himself. Jessica leaned forward to pick up the offering but was too late, far too late. Her mother swooped and seized it.

"I'll take that," Gillian said and grimaced as she did so. The reason for the bag was now obvious. It was covered in drool. Gillian wiped her hands and fastidiously removed the contents. What the bag held was some sort of scroll tied with red ribbon. Suspiciously, Gillian unrolled it and then stood still for a long minute.

"Mother!" Jessica said. "What is it?... Whatever it is, it's for me..."

At last, without a word, Gillian handed it over. The scroll sprang shut as she did so and Jessica fumbled as she tried to open it again. Finally, she had it unrolled and could read.

At the top of the page was a small, aerial picture of Scotland Island, a jewel set in a magical fiord of bays and inlets surrounded by ancient, wooded hills, rising steep from the water. Underneath in large, curly type was the legend, Certificate of Competence. And underneath that in smaller type again, it read:

To whom it may concern, in that Jessica – and here there was a row of dots for her second name, which she realised no one on the island would know – has successfully completed the crossing of the channel from Scotland Island to the mainland and back, alone and unaided, but under supervision, be it known that the said Jessica is hereby granted the freedom of the said Scotland Island, the Western Shores and Pittwater as far as the Basin in perpetuity and forever, in the knowledge that should occasion arise she has demonstrated the ability to be self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-rescuing in a manner acceptable to all right-thinking parents and guardians.

By order.

Chapter Two

"It was brilliant," Jessica said happily. "But who did it?" She had the scroll with her and had carefully filled in her surname in the spaces that had been left.

"We did, with the computer," Blob said.

"We did not," Frog said.

"Well, Dad helped."

"Anyway," Jessica said. "I'm allowed to hang with you now. Where shall we go?"

"Carol's," Blob said gloomily. "We're still grounded..."

"Till tomorrow," Frog said.

"Funny grounding," Jessica said. "When I'm grounded I have to stay in the house."

"Yeah. But Dad says he can see no good reason for making himself miserable as well as us by making us stay inside..."

"And he knows it wasn't really our fault..." Frog added.

"What wasn't."

"The fight..."

"What fight?"

Blob and Frog looked at each other. The three of them and DOG were sitting on the boy's beach. Blob picked up a pebble and flung it angrily at the water.

"I hate them," he said.

"Who?"

"The Bell gang."

"They're island kids," Frog said. "They live along there near Bell Wharf. They hate us because we're weekend kids and we don't go to school on the ferry."

"Wish we did," Blob said.

"What happened?"

"They caught us on their territory and started throwing rocks...so what could we do?"

"And a window got broken," Frog said. "In a house by the jetty."

"And they told," Blob said.

"And we got the blame," Frog said.

"Even though we didn't start it..."

"And we didn't even throw the rock that broke the window."

"At least, they're grounded too," Blob said viciously, grinding a stick into the sand.

"For a week. Same as us."

"A rock fight," Jessica said. "But that's dangerous..."

Blob shrugged.

"Island kids are feral," he said. "There's one with an air-gun who'll shoot at you..."

"So we have to be feral too," Frog said. "Besides, war is good fun."

"Did you get hit?" Jessica asked with vicarious alarm, not sure what she wanted the answer to be.

"I did," Frog said. "But Blob got him back, really hard."

"But then That Paul got me..." Blob said angrily. "So what are we going to do about them?" he added after a minute. "The truce ends tomorrow."

"We need a plan," Frog said.

"We need a plan," Jessica agreed. She found that she was thrilled, and apprehensive. Rock fights, air guns, war...and here she was, suddenly part of it. She was instantly determined never to let her nervousness show. She was just as good as any boy. She'd show them she was every bit as brave as they were.

"And we have to give you a proper name," Frog said. "We can't call you Jessica. They have a Jessica. There's Oliver and Jessica and Chris..."

"And That Paul," Blob interrupted. "He's the worst. He's mean. I'm going to get him. He even hit Josh..."

"He's afraid of Josh," Frog said. "That's why."

Afraid of Josh? Jessica couldn't imagine how anyone could possibly be afraid of Josh. But then if she were strictly honest, she realised, her own mother gave every sign of fear when Josh was around.

"Good," Blob said. "I hope DOG kills him."

"J-T," Frog said.

"J-T?" Blob said. "What are you talking about?"

"Jessica too," Frog said.

"J-T," Blob said appraisingly.

"J-T," Jessica said. "I like that."

"But we still need a plan," Blob said.

"Why is it called Bell Wharf?"

"It comes from the olden days," Frog said. "When they're weren't many people on the island. If someone wanted to go to Church Point, they 'd go to the end of the wharf and ring the bell and the ferry-man would row over and fetch them."

"Supposing..." Blob started.

"What?"

"Let me think." Blob got up and went to stand by himself. Frog and J-T looked at each other but said nothing. At last he turned and examined them carefully.

"Who's the fastest runner?" he asked.

"Not you," Frog said.

"We'll have to have a race," Blob said.

"Why?" Frog demanded.

"All right," J-T said simultaneously.

"To see who's fastest," Blob said. "It'll be the most dangerous job. If they catch you they'll murder you and we won't be able to help."

Frog and J-T looked at each other again.

"What job?" Frog said and then: "I'm game whatever it is."

"You think I'm not?" J-T demanded with heat.

"And it will have to be a long race," Blob said. "The winner will have to run a long way."

"Why?" Frog and J-T asked in the same breath. But Blob would only smile mysteriously and headed along the shore.

"All right," Blob said. The three were standing at the end of Carol's looking back down the long, length of the wharf to the hill rising up behind. "The race is down the jetty, up the path, round to the left and all the way to our place, round the tree in the back yard and then all the way back."

"But I'm grounded," Frog said. "I'm not allowed up the back. I'm not allowed where Dad can't see me."

"It's not for long and he won't know. DOG and I will stay here and he'll think you're just swimming or something."

"It's a long way," Frog said. "He'll find out. He always does and then I'll be really grounded. You know what he's like if he thinks he can't trust us."

"Well if you're scared..." Blob said. "And if you don't care about a girl beating you..."

Frog and J-T turned on him together, both furious.

"One-two-three-go," Blob said hurriedly and after a moment's hesitation and a glance at each other, they took off.

After the first mad sprint, J-T allowed herself to fall back a little. She had no real idea of where they were supposed to be going and wanted Frog to show the way. Frog noticed out of the corner of his eye and must have thought that she was tiring already, or more likely he was thinking that she didn't want to win, that she was afraid of the plan whatever it was going to be. He increased his speed. They came to the end of the fast going along the wharf and Frog, about two metres in front, lead them up the steep, broken path to the narrow dirt road behind. He swung left and continued up the hill, starting to breath hard. J-T saw him sneak a glance behind. There was a visible flash of disappointment when he realised that she was still there, that she didn't seem at all bothered by the pace.

The road, more of a track which ran behind the row of waterfront cottages, flattened out and Frog again tried to increase speed. Jessica knew that he would be thinking that now was the time to burn her right off, to get rid of the rotten girl once and for all. She too increased speed and even drew up to his shoulder. They came to the unkempt backyard that belonged to Frog's father. Frog swung round the tree near the boundary and J-T, still right on his hammer, could see him set himself for the long, downhill stretch to the finish. Now, she thought. Go now. She surged, high on raw energy, and to Frog's evident shock, powered past him. With each stride, she pulled further and further ahead and let him suck on that, she thought. Serve him right for thinking she was scared.

Frog tried his hardest to stay with her, to regain the lead, but his early push betrayed him. Lungs burning and legs jelly, he eventually trailed in to the finish a good 30 metres behind.

He stood there, bent over, chest heaving and looking distinctly put out. J-T wondered what would happen. Maybe she should have let him win. Maybe she had found her new friends only to lose them at the first hint of a setback. Well, if that was the case, they just weren't worth having. She glanced at Blob and saw that he, too, was watching his brother narrowly.

At last Frog straightened up. He held out his hand to J-T and after a moment she took it.

"Good race," Frog said, still breathing hard. "You won fair and square. I didn't know girls could run like that." J-T smiled.

"Neither did I," she said. She couldn't remember ever being happier. Even after such a hard run, she felt strong, really strong, and so very happy.

"Balloons would be best," Blob said. They were arriving back at the beach for another council of war. The boy's father was reading in a chair on the deck above and Frog was concerned to look extra innocent. It didn't work.

"Jack!" came the peremptory summons and Frog with a helpless look at his brother trailed away up the steps. The sound of voices floated down, one quiet and firm, the other increasingly distressed. And when Frog came back down the steps he looked on the verge of tears.

"It's all your fault," he said to Blob, bitterly.

"What did he say?"

"That I violated parole, that I broke my word..."

"And...?"

"I'm grounded for another day."

"Is that all?" Blob said. "I thought it must be something really bad."

"It is really bad. He's really upset with me."

"How did he find out?"

"I don't know. Saw me through the window or something. He always knows..."

"I'm sorry," J-T said. "If I hadn't raced you..."

"It's his fault," Frog said, pushing Blob.

"Watch it," Blob said.

"You watch it. This plan better work. It just better work, that's all."

"So," Blob said. "Like I was saying, balloons..."

"And where do you think we're going to get balloons around here?" Frog demanded.

"I could ask my mother to buy some when she goes shopping," J-T said.

"No," Blob said. "That's no good. She'd want to know what they were for. Parents always do."

"Plastic bags," Frog said. "Freezer bags. Big ones. We could tie the necks."

"That could work," Blob said.

"But I'm not nicking any of Dad's," Frog said. "And you're not either."

"We've got some," J-T said.

"Can you get them?" Blob asked.

"Sure," J-T said. "Mother will never even notice. I have to do most of the kitchen stuff anyway."

"We need at least a dozen," Blob said.

"I should get them at lunchtime. Then Mum won't suspect anything, not that she would anyway. She's always too busy working."

"Why?" Frog asked.

"It's hard for her. To make enough money. She works freelance so that she can stay at home for me, except..."

"What?"

"Leave her alone, Frog," Blob said. "It's none of our business."

Except she never has any time for me anyway, Jessica said to herself. Because she doesn't really want to have time, because she never really wanted me in the first place.

"So," she said aloud. "What is the plan?"

Blob looked around carefully and pulled them in close. He began to whisper and their heads were touching by the time he had finished. Frog gave a shout of laughter and he J-T looked at each other, eyes shining.

"Beautiful," they said together.

"As long as they don't catch you," Blob said to Jessica. "If they do they'll make shark bait of you."

"They won't catch me," J-T said confidently. "I won't let them."

Jessica made a sandwich for her mother without even being asked, happy for that to be the price for the wad of freezer bags that somehow found their way into her pocket. Gillian accepted the offering with a belated thank-you, barely looking up from her screen. Jessica bolted her own lunch and disappeared without her mother noticing. She heaved a sigh of relief and raced along the shore. The boys were waiting for her and were delighted with her contribution.

"Great," Blob said, taking the bags. "Really good. Now for stage two." The two boys looked at her searchingly.

"Do you mind?" Frog said. "We'd do it but it's out of bounds. And I'm not going out of bounds again."

"It's cool," J-T said. Blob smoothed a patch of wet sand and started to draw a map.

"Here's Carol's," he said. "And this is the road past the back of our place..."

"Where we ran...?"

"So you turn the other way and go down here, then up and then you turn left here..."

"That's Thompson Street," Frog said.

"Like there are any street signs on the island," Blob said scornfully. "And it's just another dirt track, anyway ."

"It's still called Thompson Street," Frog insisted.

"So what?...Anyway, you keep going along here – you'll hear the chooks - until the houses end on the right. And then a bit further on you'll find a path and it's up there. You can't miss it. They're not supposed to do it but the other people don't mind. They help themselves when they need some, for their gardens. Even if anyone sees you, it doesn't matter. It's sort of community property."

J-T picked up the bucket and trowel the boys had brought down.

"We'll come with you as far as we can," Blob said.

"And we'll wait for you," Frog said.

"Here," Blob said. "You'll need this." He handed over a large bandana, ironed and neatly folded. "I...borrowed it," he added.

"What's this for?"

"Tie it round your face."

"Oh..."

DOG decided that he fancied a bit of a walk so with a backward glance at the boys standing at the inshore end of Carol's, he pushed past Jessica and led the way. He waited at the top of the path to see where they might be going and when Jessica pointed, happily trotted off. They came to Frog's Thompson Street and Jessica turned left as instructed. It was quiet there beneath the thick canopy of eucalypts and it was not long before she heard the promised chooks gossiping away to themselves behind one of the

houses on the left. She kept on, the hillside on her right growing steeper and the houses on that side quickly coming to an end. She passed the last of them and began to wonder where to look. DOG stopped at the beginning of a faint track and wagged his tail as if he knew what she was searching for. She turned up the path and almost immediately understood why Blob had given her the handkerchief. Gratefully, she tied it about her face.

Filling the bucket was horrible and the trip back only a little less unpleasant, but the boys were there, faithfully waiting where she had left them.

"Whoa," Frog said, holding his nose. "That's way worse than usual."

"Nice and fresh," Blob said. "They must have just dumped a new lot."

"So what now?" J-T asked.

"The messy part," Blob said.

"Look out," Frog said. "Some one's coming."

"Quick, under the jetty."

The three dashed under the planking and held their breath as a man and a woman passed overhead on the way to their boat.

"Hullo Josh," the woman said. The dog had stretched out in the sun and not bothered to move. "Where are your boys?" DOG thumped his tail.

"Must be here somewhere close," the man said. "He's never far away from them."

"Up to something, no doubt," the woman said. "Under the jetty...? Should we...?"

"Leave them alone, and anyway we don't have time. But what's that smell?"

"Something must have died. Come on...Tell them to behave themselves, Josh..."

The footsteps started again over their heads and receded down the jetty.

"Phew," they all said simultaneously.

"Who left DOG up there?" Blob demanded.

"You did," the other two replied in unison and laughed.

"We can't do it here," Blob said. "Too public."

"So what?" Frog said. "We have to stay in Dad's line of sight. We can't hide. We shouldn't even be under here really."

"It will have to be tonight," Blob said.

"But we're grounded," Frog said despairingly.

"I'm not," Blob said. "At least not after midnight. After midnight, I'm a free man. I'll sneak out and do it then. And they have to be put in position, anyway. "

"And I'll help," J-T said without thinking and regretting it the moment the words were out of her mouth .

The boys looked at her respectfully.

"Really?" Blob said. "That'd be great."

Jessica, who had been just about to take it back, hastily shut her mouth. She couldn't weasele out after that.

"Come on," Blob said. "J-T can stash the bucket in the mangroves for now and then we'll do a rehearsal down the jetty, make sure we've got it worked out properly."

Jessica made careful preparations. There were three main problems to be overcome. First was the fact that her mother, naturally, had taken the bottom bunk. Second, she would never be able to wake up at the right time by herself. And then, if she did manage to escape, she would need clothes and, most important, sandals. She had no intention of walking about in the dark over all that rough ground with bare feet.

Fortunately, Gillian was still struggling with the piece due at the end of the week and had no attention to spare for the bizarre evolutions that her daughter, her demure, docile, obedient daughter, was perpetrating right under her nose.

Anthony woke at the first pip from the alarm wrist watch that had been his mother's gift on his last birthday. He slipped on shirt and shorts and eased open the insect screen which led straight out to the back porch and freedom. Josh lifted his head.

"Stay!" the boy hissed and then eased the screen shut again. He heard Frog turn over and mutter something. There was a slight thump as Josh let his head fall back and then all was quiet.

Blob had a torch but didn't need it. There was a late moon and more than enough light for him to drop soundlessly down the familiar steps to the beach and then creep along the shore to J-T's boatshed. At the ramp he paused and felt carefully around the edge praying that Jessica's mother had not rumbled the plan. For a moment it seemed certain they had been discovered but then, there it was. He grasped the length of light, nylon, fishing line he had given J-T earlier and which was now dangling down the corner of

the ramp, almost invisible even in daylight. He tugged gently, knowing that the line ran across the floor, hidden by the mat, and then up past the end of the bunks to J-T's toe. He tugged again and after a moment felt an answering pressure.

Jessica sat up and slipped the looped line off her foot. The sound of breathing below was deep and regular. She slid down the bunk and on her tummy, reached over the end, feeling for a foothold. A floor board creaked and Jessica held her breath. Her mother never stirred and Jessica could see with relief that she had the sheet pulled right over her head against the mosquitoes. A moment later Jessica was outside. Blob was waiting and the two crept along the shore to where she had hidden her clothes under a bush. She hastily pulled shirt and shorts over her pyjamas and slipped on her thongs.

"Come on," Blob whispered.

It was a lovely night. A cooling breeze ruffled the water, making it glitter in the moonlight, and the children paused a moment for the pleasure of it, then set off for Carol's.

The bucket was even riper than it had been that afternoon. Blob sniffed it incautiously and gagged. J-T laughed.

"Shh," he said. "You never know who might be around. Turn your back."

"Why?" J-T whispered.

"It's too stiff. It needs to be a nice, runny sort of paste."

"You're not going to...?"

"I am. That Paul deserves it. Nobody throws rocks at Josh and gets away with it."

"I want to, too..."

J-T turned her back and there came a trickling sound which seemed to go on a long time before it stopped.

"I was saving up," Blob said. "Your go."

He turned away and J-T pulled down her pants and squatted over the bucket. She found the experience extremely satisfying.

Blob found a stick and began to stir, trying not to breath.

"Phew," J-T said. "That's awful."

"You wait till morning," Blob said. "It'll be even worse with us mixed in. Have you got the bags?... You hold, I'll pour..."

As Blob had predicted, it was a messy, filthy job but at last the bags were all filled and tied off. They rinsed off the outsides in the sea and took a long time scouring their hands and the bucket with sand. Then with the bags packed into the bucket they headed out to the end of Carol's to set up the last part of the plan.

The three met on the beach in the morning, with DOG in automatic attendance.

"Did you sneak in all right?" Frog asked Jessica enviously, rather hoping she had been caught.

"Easy," J-T said. "She never knew a thing."

"And you're really going to do this?"

"Sure," J-T said, sounding a great deal more confident than she felt.

"Really sure?" Blob asked seriously. "If they catch you it won't be pretty..."

"Sure, I'm sure," J-T said.

"If you want to quit, we won't hold it against you. We can wait for Frog to be ungrounded..."

"Stop trying to talk me out of it," J-T said crossly.

"All right," Blob said. "Fair enough."

"Frog," he ordered. "You go to Carol's and wait. I'll show J-T where to go. Come on, let's move it. You and I'll cut through the back," he added to J-T.

They climbed the steps back to the boy's house. Their father was busy in a workshop that had been set up under the main deck.

"He does sculpture and stuff," Blob said as they passed and then he raised his voice.

"He's crazy." His father looked up from his bench and grinned.

Blob led J-T up the timber walk at the side of the house. There were a couple of raised beds with shrubbery screening the back of the cottage, but beyond that it was obvious that no one had ever even thought of doing anything in the way of gardening. The rest of the yard was stoney and covered in weedy tufts. They climbed up to the road and then turned west taking Jessica into unknown territory.

The track turned quite sharply a couple times, descended into a gully and then climbed steeply. At the top of the ridge they came to a flat stretch and then a public

phone box. It was the only one on the island and sat on the corner of Richard Road and the path down to Bell Wharf. Blob stopped and pointed.

"Bell's down there," he said. J-T looked carefully. The path was narrow, only wide enough for two people, and dropped down between the houses on either side so steeply that in places there were also steps.

"So where are they?"

"If you go down on the jetty, they'll come. They think they own it..."

"Like you think you own Carol's..."

Blob smiled.

"Don't try putting crabs down That Paul's pants..." he said. "They'll come to chase you off and you have to keep just ahead of them...too far and they'll give up, but if they catch you..."

"How do I make sure they chase me?"

"This is what you say..."

Jessica mooched around the phone box for what seemed like hours to give Blob time to hurry back to Carol's. The waiting was horrible. She was nervous and keyed up and just wanted to start, but too soon and she would ruin the plan. At last, she couldn't bear to wait any longer and set off down the path, planning how she would race back up it and not entirely sure that she could do it. Oh well, too late to back out now.

She reached the wharf and promenaded ostentatiously out to the end. The jetty was quite short, not nearly as long and impressive as Carol's as here, deep water came much closer to the shoreline. She wondered how long she would have to wait. Perhaps they were off somewhere else. Perhaps they wouldn't come at all, and Jessica couldn't decide whether she would be relieved or disappointed.

The boy's father was aware that Jack had gone up to Carol's with Josh and, indeed, that his son had climbed onto the roof of the shelter shed. Nothing unusual in that, the roof being one of the boys' favourite spots, but it was strange that Anthony had gone off with that girl. It was unlike the boys to split up, even if Jack was still grounded and his elder brother wasn't.

Then, after quite an interval, he noticed Anthony also appear on the jetty, but without the girl. He too climbed up to the roof of the shed. Both boys then lay down between the ridges of the aluminium sheeting and became largely invisible, even Blob. If you didn't know they were there, they were almost impossible to spot, even from this elevated angle. Something was up, something was most definitely up. He smiled to himself and on impulse went upstairs to fetch his camera, his 500mm telephoto lens and a tripod. He set them up on the deck, focused on the end of Carol's about 150 metres away, and settled down with a book.

As it turned out, Jessica had not long to wait at all. The Bell gang had cabin fever after being grounded for a week, and indoors at that, and descended on her the moment they spotted her. As Blob had said, there were four of them. Their Jessica was, of course, obvious, a pretty enough girl, but the others were a different matter. There was a thin boy with a narrow face and dark hair who was no bigger than the others but who appeared to be rather older and who was obviously the leader. He must be Paul, she decided, but who might be Chris and who might be Oliver, she couldn't say.

They came down the jetty, four abreast, blocking the whole width and unmistakably looking for trouble. Their usual tactic was to force rival kids into the water, fully dressed, and make them swim for it.

"This is our jetty," the boy, Paul, snarled. "Piss off." He stepped forward and pushed her hard so that she fetched up against the hand-rail at the end.

"Don't you touch me," J-T said, and surprising herself mightily, pushed him back. It was so unexpected that Paul ended up on his backside. She seized her opportunity and darted through the gap in the line, which meant she was now on the shore side and her escape route clear.

"Grab her," Paul shouted from the ground. "I'm going to smash her." But his minions hesitated and J-T was able to retreat hastily until she was safely out of reach.

"Island kids are sooky bubs!" she shouted. "Island kids are sooky bubs!"

The gang stared at her, shocked. How dare she, some strange kid they had never even seen before? Paul scrambled to his feet.

"Paul has a weeny one! Paul has a weeny one!" J-T watched like a hawk as she shouted the next, absolutely unforgivable, insult. The moment Paul launched himself at

her, she was off, springing up the path with the adrenalin pulsing and giving her wings. The others jostled in pursuit and by the time they had sorted themselves out had lost quite a lot of ground. J-T glanced back and eased her pace a trifle lest they become discouraged. She needn't have worried. The pack was in full cry and was determined to hunt her to the kill. Especially Paul. Even if the others should eventually stop, Paul never would, not now, not ever. He had been made to look foolish in front of his troops and that was utterly intolerable.

J-T reached the phone box, puffing a bit but still strong and set herself for the long run, down to the gully and up again, along the twisting flat stretch behind the boys' house, finally down the hill, round the corner and out onto the jetty. Then they would see. Oh yes, then they would see.

Her second wind came and she ran easily, savouring the thrill of it. She felt the others beginning to flag a little and eased her own speed to encourage them. The gang accelerated again and she let them get quite close, toying with them, falling back to seemingly within their grasp then pulling slightly ahead again. She was so caught up in taunting them that she wasn't paying proper attention to her footing and stumbled. The others gave a breathless shout and gathered themselves to spring on her but she just managed to save herself from falling and to pull away again. It was much worse after that. The near-miss had eaten into her reserves and she had to work hard now. All five ran grimly on, gasping, throats burning, with J-T just out of reach.

At last, the road dropped down and then there was the path to Carol's. They shot round the corner struggling for balance with J-T desperate not to be caught till the end of the jetty. She had to hold out till then. She just had to, or the whole plan would be ruined. Carol's was about 90 metres from beginning to end and it was the longest 90 metres of Jessica's life. Twice she thought they must have her, but each time she just managed to find enough left to pull her clear. Then, when it was obvious that once their quarry reached the end of the wharf she would be trapped anyway the pursuing pack began to slow a little.

J-T passed through the shelter shed, slowing, hoping desperately that the boys were in position, and came to a final stop. There was nowhere left to go, unless she swam for it, which the gang knew was the last thing she would ever do. In the water, they would inevitably catch her and would be able to drown her at their leisure. They too slowed

and walked through the shed. They were all breathing hard, spent but finally triumphant. If they noticed Josh stretched out in the sun, they thought nothing of it. J-T turned at bay and they stopped.

Oh no, J-T thought. Not far enough. She backed off a couple more steps and it did the trick. The gang, once more lined across the width of the jetty to block all escape, followed her forward until they had moved out from under the protection of the shed roof and were now standing fully exposed in the open. Ducks in a shooting gallery, Jessica thought. She saw Blob and Frog rising silently to their feet behind and well above the enemy, each armed with a large, plastic bag darkly gleaming. Her heart began to rise with them. It was going to work. The plan was going to work.

"Say it again," Paul demanded. He was trying to make it sound menacing but the effect was spoiled somewhat by his puffing.

"Say what again?" Jessica asked innocently.

"Say Paul has a weeny one and island kids are sooky bubs," Blob said from above.

There was a moment of stunned immobility and then the gang swung about. The first bomb caught Paul full in the face and exploded wetly, drenching him in a foul-smelling paste. It dripped and clung, soaking his hair, covering his face. The stink was appalling, epic. And still the gang stood, totally bemused. A hail of bombs followed the first and it was only when they had all been saturated at least once that they recovered the power of movement and ran for the shed. As they burst through the other side, they were caught by a second hail of the nauseating missiles.

"And never come back," Frog shouted after them almost incoherent with jubilation.

"Quick," Blob ordered. "We have to get rid of the evidence."

The two boys slid down from the roof and with a bucket on a line began to sluice down the jetty. Jessica gathered up the burst bags and put them in the community rubbish bin and it was only when the wharf was again wetly innocent and drying fast in the sun that the three of them climbed back onto the roof of the shelter and began a celebration war-dance that made the whole shed drum and shake for what seemed like hours.

Back on the home deck, the boys' father reviewed the stream of pictures he had snapped with a motor drive and laughed and laughed and laughed

Chapter three

They exulted over the chook-bomb war for days. Every detail was endlessly parsed and examined and savoured, and they only had to look at each other to set off another bout of uncontrollable giggling. News spread quickly. The Bell gang were generally unpopular, and some of the other island kids took the trouble to come down for a swim at Carol's and to hear the full, delightful story from the heroes of the hour. J-T had never found herself a centre of attention among her peers before and enjoyed holding court immensely. So, when her mother dropped her own bombshell out of a clear, blue sky it came as an even worse shock.

"Good news, sweetheart," Gillian said at lunch. "I'm being sent off on a job so you can spend the rest of the holidays at your grandmother's instead of on this boring, old island twiddling your thumbs..."

Jessica was aghast, shocked into speechlessness, and as her mother prattled on, she couldn't stop the tears from starting. Her mother might be disillusioned with Pittwater, but Jessica already knew it was paradise. Gillian looked at her, astonished. It had never occurred to her that her daughter might actually be having fun for once in her life, even though that had been part of the original intention.

"Sweetheart, what is it? I thought you'd be dying to get back to the city...away from these horrible mosquitoes..."

The city. So far away and yet only just across there on the other side of the channel. Prison. Jail. Never allowed out except with an adult, always at the mercy of adults. Unbearable. After this brief taste of freedom, absolutely unbearable. Better to die. Jessica felt her heart would burst. She swung out of the boatshed and raced blindly along the shore.

"Jessica! Jessica! You come back...! You come back right now...!"

But she ran on until she could no longer hear her mother's insistent shouting and then on past the boys' beach. In the end she didn't stop until she was scrunched down in the mangroves beyond Carol's and quite invisible.

Frog and Blob were also eating their lunch and watching the kitten pounce on Josh's tail. It was something they never tired of.

"Wag your tail, DOG," one of them would say and Josh, stretched out on his rug by the door, would thump his great, thick-coated rudder. Kelly-kitten would instantly leap on it and savage it to death. When it was still, she would prance away triumphantly, waiting for the game to begin all-over again. Only once had she ever managed to get her teeth through all the fur and down to Josh's skin when the result had been one, very startled Newfoundland.

Their father came in off the deck.

"I think your friend might need you to go find her," he said.

"Why?" Blob said with his mouth full.

"Manners, Anthony. I think your friend might need you to find her right now."

The boys looked at each other.

"You can take your sandwiches and finish them on the way."

They walked out to the end of Carol's, still munching, expecting to find J-T up on the roof of the shed. She wasn't there, then they noticed that Josh had abandoned them. He was standing fixedly right back at the beginning of the jetty.

"Where is she DOG?" Blob said when they had walked all the way back. "Where's J-T?"

Josh wagged his tail and led them down into the trees. He found Jessica's spot within a matter of moments.

"What's up?" Blob said, regarding her gravely. She had her back to them and was hugging her knees.

"Nothing," she said, with an odd tone in her voice.

Frog went round in front of her.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I'm not," Jessica said angrily.

He sat down beside her and after a moment Blob did the same on her other side. There was a long silence.

"My mother's taking me away," Jessica said at last, the agony plain in her voice. "She has to go off on some stupid job and I have to go and stay with my grand-mother."

There was another long silence.

"You could stay with us," Frog said tentatively. There was an even longer silence while the words hung in the air about them, pregnant with hope, pregnant with inevitable adult rejection.

"I'll go and ask," Blob said at last. "Come back to the beach." He got up and marched off resolutely, the others trailing behind.

When at last Blob came back down the steps he had been gone so long that the others had given up hope.

"Well?" Frog demanded. "Why not?"

"Dad says that if J-T doesn't mind sharing our room, it's fine by him."

Jessica's heart leapt.

"Of course, I don't mind," she said. Frog gave her a friendly push.

"You'll be sorry. Blob and DOG fart all the time. But what took so long?" he asked.

"And what's that?" Blob held up a computer disc and a letter.

"Dad was making these. He says that when your mother says no we should show her the disc and then the letter, and then he'll talk to her if she wants."

"What's on the disc?" Frog asked.

"I don't know. But he says we should go with J-T to prove we're not total savages or something and he says that her mother probably won't yell at her so much for running off if we're there too..."

Jessica gave them a grateful look.

To say that Gillian was disconcerted to be confronted by a delegation consisting of her suddenly unaccountably rude not to say rebellious daughter, the two ruffian boys from down the way and a monstrous dog she particularly disliked was putting it altogether too mildly. But all the same, she bit off the tirade that had been bubbling away and simply raised a thunderous eyebrow.

"Excuse me," Blob said formally. "But my Dad says that Jessica is welcome to stay the rest of the holidays with us, if she's allowed. He says she'd be most welcome and Frog...that is Jack and I would really like her to."

"Please, Mum. Please," Jessica burst out before her mother could speak and knowing the signs.

"Absolutely not," Gillian said. "I've never even met their father. It's quite impossible. Ridiculous, in fact."

"Then Dad says would you take the time to look at this disc, please," Blob said.

"Why? What's that got to do with anything. The decision is made."

"He says it might change your mind," Blob said.

Gillian took the disc reluctantly but made no move to do anything with it.

"You have to Mum," Jessica said desperately. "You have to look at it."

"I don't have to do anything, young lady. And I'll speak to you later." Nevertheless, Gillian sat down at her desk and inserted the disc into her laptop. The children surreptitiously moved around behind her and craned to see. All of them watched in amazement as the stream of pictures flowed across the screen. It was the chook bomb battle all over again in full colour with every gloriously foul detail clear to see. The children struggled to suppress their mirth as they relived the triumph but Jessica's mother became grimmer and grimmer particularly when she began to understand the full measure of her own daughter's involvement.

When it was over, she rounded on them angrily.

"And just why does your father think that this is a recommendation for anything let alone entrusting my daughter to him?" she demanded. "You two, get out. Go...At once..."

However, Blob stood his ground and held out the envelope.

"He says you should read this...please," he added belatedly.

Gillian however scrumpled the envelope in her hand and made to drop it on the floor.

"He said you'd do that," Blob threw at her. The challenge was plain. After a long moment, Gillian smoothed the letter and tore it open. There was a single sheet of paper inside.

"Children grow strong on Pittwater," she read. "It's probably the only place left in the city where adults can safely leave them alone to get on with it. Your daughter has now discovered she has guts..."

Again they were sitting on the beach. They could hear the sound of voices above them on the deck, but not what was being said. It had gone on for a long time.

"I wonder what was in the letter," Frog remarked for something to say. "I wonder what he said?"

Jessica made no reply. She had the fingers on both hands firmly crossed and her eyes squinched shut. Her lips were moving, soundlessly forming over and over the words:

"I wish, I wish, I wish..."

"Dunno," Blob said. "But it must have been good to make her at least come and talk... Look out, they're coming."

They scrambled hastily to their feet and stood anxiously as Gillian came down the steps, followed by the boys' father.

Jessica thought she would burst with tension. At last her mother was standing in front of her.

"All right," Gillian said. "You may stay but only on condition..."

What the conditions were, Jessica never heard. Her heart was thumping so hard and the blood roaring so loud in her ears that she was quite deaf for a minute or two. Then the roaring turned to singing and a huge grin of delight spread all over her face.

She thought the boys' house was just wonderful. Across the front was a big deck with table and chairs and the workshop underneath. Behind, also stretching the full width of the house, was a glass wall, all sliding windows and doors, with the living room, dining room and kitchen alcove all combined. Behind that again and up a half flight of stairs was a wide, open landing with a desk and computer. The main bedroom opened off the landing to one side, the boys' bedroom to the other, behind was the bathroom and laundry and behind that again, the back porch which also had a second door into the boy's bedroom so that they could come and go without tramping through the whole house. All the walls and ceilings were plain white, the floors polished and the furniture simple and comfortable. To Jessica it all seemed absolutely perfect.

The boys cleared a shelf in their cupboard for the contents of her backpack, pumped up the air-bed and moved Josh's rug out onto the porch so there would be plenty of room for her. They fetched her a towel and bedding and then they all stood, admiring the result. Only one thing bothered her.

"What should I call your dad?" she asked.

"Sir," Frog said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Blob said. "Call him by his name."

"But I don't know what it is. Anyway, shouldn't I be calling him mister?"

"Well, ask him then. Come on."

But it turned out that as he was Bill to everyone else he was happy to be Bill to her as well.

"And now you can all get lost," he said cheerfully. "At least until dinner time. And J-T there are only two rules in this house. One, leave things the way you find them and two, if you actually want to eat dinner come to the table showered and in clean clothes."

Jessica was amazed.

"Are those really the only rules?" she asked when they were outside.

"Aren't those enough?" Frog grumbled.

"And we have to tell him where we're going if we leave the island," Blob said. "And when we'll be back."

"Do you leave the island?" Jessica asked.

"Sure," Frog said.

"How?"

"Dad lets us paddle the D2."

"What's that?"

"His big wind surfer. He has lots of boards for different winds. The D2 is for light winds and he doesn't use it much anymore. He only goes out now if it's blowing."

"It's the one down the bottom," Frog said.

"Oh..." Jessica, of course, had noticed the long, white board leaning against a stump at the bottom of the steps but had never stopped to think what it might be.

"Come on," Blob said. "Let's go for a paddle. We haven't been for ages."

"Me too?"

"The three of us can fit, easy."

The board was four metres long, narrow with a round bottom and a fin at the stern. As she and Frog carried it down to the water, Jessica discovered that it was surprisingly light. Blob went back upstairs and came back with three, double-ended, surf-ski paddles. He held one out to Jessica.

"You can use Dad's," he said. "We sometimes all go paddling together. He uses one of his other boards. They're up under the house. This one's too big to take up."

"With three of us we'll fly," Frog said.

"If we can stay upright," Blob said. "We've never tried three before."

He was right. Because of the narrow beam and the round bottom, the board was very unstable and time and again the three of them climbed on only to find themselves sitting up to their necks in the water a second or two later. At last, Blob thought it through.

"One at a time," he said. "And hang your legs over the side." It worked. Blob sat astride the stern, Jessica in the middle, and Frog at the bow.

"But what good's this?" Frog said.

"When we start paddling, we lift our legs up. It's easier to balance when it's going."

Frog made to dip his paddle.

"Not yet," Blob said. "We have to do it altogether, in time, and I'll do the steering..."

"Why you?" Frog demanded.

"Because I'm sitting at the back and the back is where you steer from. You're at the front, so you set the stroke."

"Can we just do it?" Jessica said, bored with the bickering.

"By the left," Blob said. "Quick paddle." They dipped their blades and the board began to move.

"Now bring your legs up," Blob said. "But carefully..." There was a mighty splash and all three found themselves again in the water. However, after two more attempts they were beginning to nail it and Frog was right. With three stroking hard together, the board fairly zipped along in a most exhilarating fashion. DOG who had been standing in the water, looking folorn, began to swim after them.

"Hey this is brilliant," Frog said. "Where shall we go?"

"Let's go to the waterfall," Blob called. "But we have to tell Dad first." He backwatered with his paddle on one side while the other two paddled only on the other and the board swung round.

"I think we're getting the hang of this," he said.

Back at the beach, Frog waited for DOG to catch up and took him up the steps.

"Can't DOG come?" Jessica asked.

"He's too slow," Blob said. "And he's not allowed over the other side. No dogs in the national park."

Frog returned and climbed back on, then setting a steady, sustainable stroke, they darted out into the channel, heading west.

Jessica was deeply happy. She found she liked paddling for its own sake but to be working in rhythm with a team was a feeling she had never before experienced. It was a powerful thing. She felt three times stronger than she ever had before.

They stroked past Church Point going like an Olympic sprint canoe and then swung north round the bottom of the island past Elvina Bay and on to Rocky Point. The nor'easter was hitting them now and it was much harder work. Whitecaps were showing thickly as the chop was quite severe, and wave after wave swept the length of the board. Jessica, however, took her cue from the boys and resolved that if they weren't worried than neither was she.

At Rocky Point they swung west again which put the wind more or less behind them and surged down the length of Lovett Bay trying to catch the waves like a surfboat. Blob watched behind them and when a likely crest was about to reach them, shouted for them to accelerate. A couple of times they managed to catch quite long rides. Ahead of them a milky haze was creeping across the sky and if they had been further out in Pittwater and not close in under the surrounding hills, they would have been able to see that thunderheads were beginning to poke over the horizon. At the end of the bay they had the choice of swinging left into a small inlet or right, into Salvation Creek. Blob steered them left and then into the shore, where they lifted the board out, well clear of the water. There was a trickling sound from a small stream but it was buried far down in the great tumbled boulders of its bed, stretching away back up the hillside. The gully sheltered a mass of rain forest plants and though Jessica didn't know it she was gazing at Lily Pily and Corkwood, different types of fig tree, Pittosporum and Cabbage Palms, Snow Wood and Coffee Bush, Rosewood and Turpentine, treeferns and Mutton Wood all tangled up with Wonga-Wonga Vine, Kangaroo Vine, Rasp Fern and Basket Grass.

"Come on," Frog said, leaping off up the rocks, which was the only road through the jungle.

"It's his favourite place," Blob said to Jessica as they trailed behind, rather less enthusiastically. "Sometimes we go right to the top but it more or less takes all day by

the time we've paddled over and walked round to the trail." They stopped talking as the climb grew steeper and more difficult and they finally caught up with Frog at the foot of the waterfall proper.

Jessica stopped, open-mouthed. She could quite see why Frog should be so fond of it. The stream, which was not much more than a trickle at this time of the year, plunged over the edge of the escarpment to a ledge about 40 metres above them and then made another sheer drop to splatter on the rocks at the base, before disappearing into a strange, circular pool of sand. This had been deposited over thousands and thousands of years and was only ever full of water when the stream was in spate. The cliff appeared to have been fashioned by some giant, using great stone building blocks and buttresses, piled on top of each other higgledy-piggledy. The canopy of the forest pressed thickly overhead turning the light green and cool, and all about was the drumming of hundreds of cicadas mixing with the sound of the plunging water. It was not only magical but awe-inspiring. Jessica had the feeling that she was standing in the church to which she was sometimes taken by her grandmother.

"Isn't this just the best place!" Frog said with proprietorial pride and no sense of asking a question. Jessica could only agree.

Frog stripped off his shirt and shorts and in his swimmers, climbed the slippery rocks at the base of the fall and went to stand directly under the water. The other two raced to join him. Jessica found the water icy and the needle spray landing on her head from so far above was almost painful. Frog opened his mouth and let the water flow in.

"Is it all right to drink?" Jessica asked, shouting over the noise.

"Of course," Blob said. "It's where the people in the houses round the bay get their water."

They all drank and then climbed down, chilled but exhilarated. Blob led them to a patch of sun, though it was not as bright as it might have been. A layer of cloud was now almost covering the sky.

"We should go," Blob said and as he spoke there was a rumble of thunder, still a ways off but threatening all the same. "Come on Frog. Come on J-T..."

The thunder was louder now and there was the ominous flicker of lightning. The boys were accustomed to the regular summer storms on Pittwater but Jessica was starting to

feel alarm. The board was where they'd left it, but as the others lifted it into water, she hesitated.

"Shouldn't we stay here?" she asked.

"Lightning's dangerous under trees," Blob said. "And we can probably get back before it arrives."

He was wrong, disastrously wrong. The storm coming up against the wind was killing the breeze and the nor'easter which by rights should have been strong against them had almost died completely, allowing them quick passage down the bay. The water, however, was still lumpy though the white caps had disappeared. The sky was now completely overcast and an angry-looking bank of purple cloud was looming threateningly over the brow of the nearest hills. Blob looked anxiously over his shoulder and thought hard about heading for shore. A blinding flare of lightning followed almost instantaneously by a rolling blast of thunder right over head, deafening, terrifying, decided him. He backwatered hard and called for the others to help turn the board, but it was too late. Over his shoulder he saw the white squall racing towards them, unbelievably fast, a solid wall, the surface in front of it boiling and frothing.

He didn't hesitate.

"Into the water," he shouted. "Now. Right now! And hang on!" But they were caught half on and half off. Lightning bolts rained down. One hit the mast of a moored yacht quite close. Another crashed into the hillside just behind a house. A third, most unusually, hit the water nearby, dissipating in a ball of flickering streaks that looked like the roots of a tree. The thunder was continuous, deafening, mind-numbing, but what dominated everything was the shriek of the wind. It pounced on them and picked them up, board and all, and flung them twisting and tumbling along the surface of the water as trees on shore, bent, doubled over, splintered and shattered. A small yacht caught broadside on at its mooring was heeled over so far that it filled up and sank. Other boats broke free and went careering away, crashing into jetties and washing up on shore. It was carnage, catastrophe.

The leading edge of the squall was so violent, so shocking, that the three children were quite powerless to resist. They had no chance. They were ripped apart and hurled headlong, blinded by the torrent of rain, hail and lashing spray, so thick that it was

impossible to breath, impossible to tell whether they were underwater or still above the surface.

Blob, the heaviest, was released first. The squall dropped him like a dead rat and he found himself swimming. Behind the front the wind was still howling but it was possible to breath, to see, to think. He saw a flash of white, low in the water, and forced himself to head towards it. He saw another head in the water, also heading for the board. It was Frog and miraculously he had somehow managed to hang on to his paddle. They arrived about the same time and clung to the board.

"Where's J-T," Blob shouted. But Frog just shook his head, unable to speak. "We have to find her."

Blob hauled himself up on his stomach, swivelled and sat up. The wind was dropping fast now. Frog passed him the paddle and Blob helped him to slide on. He lay there on his tummy, gasping.

"Come on," Blob said. He began to paddle, heading dead downwind. After a minute or two, Frog started to help.

"Over there," Blob said. He changed course and in a minute they had recovered another one of the paddles. Suddenly the rain eased and they could see quite well.

"There she is!" Frog said pointing, and with one accord they set off.

Jessica was treading water and looked to have survived intact, however, her eyes were tight shut.

"Hey," Blob said, as they slid up to her. "You can look now."

Jessica opened her eyes. She was trembling and grabbed convulsively for the board.

"Are you all right?" Blob asked.

She could only nod wordlessly

"Are you sure?" he said. "That was really, really wild..."

"Look," Frog said and pointed again.

A tinny was coming round Rocky Point. A huge black dog was standing in the bow with his front feet on the foredeck. A man was bailing hard as he drove.

"It's Dad," Blob said.

"Come to rescue us," Frog said.

"But we don't need rescuing do we?" Blob said, somewhat hesitantly.

"No," Frog said after a long moment. His voice was equally hesitant, and then firmed. "We don't."

Jessica hesitated in her turn. The squall with its casual violence, irresistible violence, had terrified her. The sensation of being hurled through a maelstrom utterly helpless, unable to breath, drowning in the wall of water, drowning in the unbearable noise, drowning in the paralysing fear, was something she would take to her grave, that would haunt her again and again. Every time she slept. Every time she was afraid. Unless...

"J-T?" Blob asked.

Unless...

"J-T?" Blob said again.

Still she hesitated. Unless... Unless she faced it. Unless she took it in her stride like the boys were apparently determined to do. Unless she got back up on the board...

"No," she said at last.

"So let's find the other paddle." Blob waved to his father and pointed back the way he'd come. The tinny stopped and after a minute or two turned round and headed home.

The trip back was marked by the trail of devastation left by the storm cell. Covers had been ripped from boats. Furled sails had come loose and flogged themselves to shreds in seconds. Here and there they could see boats up on the shore, others had crashed into each other and snagged in a tangle of broken rigging. One of the trees in the little square at Church Point had been torn out of the ground and had smashed into the parked cars. In the car park proper on the other side of the Pasadena, more trees had been stripped and splintered.

The water police were already hard at work salvaging boats. An officer spotted them and waved them over.

"Are you kids okay?" he demanded.

"Sure," Blob said.

"Did you get caught in that?"

The three all nodded.

"And you're all right?" he said, the disbelief plain in his voice.

They nodded again.

"Why aren't you wearing life jackets?"

Another officer glanced at them.

"They're all right," he said. "They're local kids. I know their father."

"They still should be wearing life jackets. He should be breached for letting them..."

"Johnno, you're new around here. You'll never get a local kid to wear a life-jacket. They're alive aren't they? Through that. What more do you want?... They breed 'em tough on Pittwater Go on, kids. On your way. We've got work to do. And say g'day to your dad..."

It started slowly, but by the time they were home the glow of pride was warming Jessica right through. It was true, what the policeman had said. They were tough. She was tough.

DOG was waiting anxiously on the beach and his relief at their return was overwhelming. Even Blob was knocked over twice, but, Jessica thought, she wouldn't have it any other way. She began to wonder what was for dinner. She was starving.

Chapter four

"Wake up, J-T, wake up..." Frog was shaking her shoulder. "Wait till you see..." He was whispering. When he saw she was awake, he held a finger to his lips and went to rouse Blob. Still in their pajamas they slipped downstairs, through the house and out onto the deck.

"There," Frog murmured with pride of discovery. There was silence.

"I don't believe it," Blob said at last.

"Shhh. Don't wake Dad."

"Why not?"

"He might not let us go over there."

"But what is it?" Jessica asked, keeping her voice down.

"It's a Viking ship," Frog said.

"But how can it be a Viking ship?" Jessica said wonderingly.

"I don't know," Blob said slowly and also speaking quietly. "But Frog's right. That's what it is. Look, it's even got a dragon figurehead."

The three gazed at the apparition across the water, swinging to anchor just past the old boat ramp, a spot where visiting yachts often moored for a while. It was indeed a Viking ship. It was about 16 metres long with the both stem and stern curving in and back on themselves like a Red Indian canoe, and topped by the dragon's head at the bow and the dragon's tail at the stern. Just forward of the centre point there was a single, stubby mast, and the children could make out a red and white striped sail furled to the long yardarm.

"I don't believe it," Blob said again.

"Come on," Frog said. "Let's get the D2...And don't wake DOG either."

The children crept back upstairs and with Jessica disappearing into the bathroom, shed their pyjamas and then shushing each other, slipped out of the house and down to the beach.

Close up, the Viking ship was even more impressive, particularly the dragon's head which they could now see had been carved from a massive piece of wood. Quietly, they made a complete circuit of the boat, sitting motionless in the early morning calm. The hull was a pale, yellowy, beige colour and quite rough with the odd rust streak down the

sides. Some way along the gunn'le and down the curve of the bow on each side and also at the stern, someone had picked out a delicate circular pattern in red and black paint, which was now very faded. The ship's name was written in a strange script on the bow, also in faded red paint. The name was repeated on the stern in English and they read that she was the Bifrost from Denmark. Later, they would learn that the strange writing was runic and that Bifrost was the name Vikings gave the rainbow bridge between the real world and the realm of the gods.

The mast was particularly thick and solid compared with neighbouring yachts, and the rigging very heavy. The shrouds were interconnected with looping ratlines making them look like giant ladders and high up, a huge, square, net hammock had been suspended between the stays and across the deck. The general air was that of a sturdy, sea-kindly vessel that had done many a long voyage but was good for many more. At the masthead there flew a red flag with a white cross, and in the rigging, a courtesy Australian flag. A slender, outrigger canoe, which disassembled into just a slim hull and an even slimmer float needing minimum stowage space when the Bifrost was at sea, trailed from the stern by its painter.

Suddenly a dog appeared on deck and made a strange, woo-woo noise at them.

"It's a husky," Blob said amazed.

"Wrong," a voice said. "She's a malamute."

And if the dog had been astonishing, the man who followed her on deck was downright astounding. The first thing they fixed on was his mostly shaved skull with pig-tails hanging down the back, which was matched by drooping moustaches so long that they too were actually plaited. The effect was fearsome. Then their eyes travelled to the great tattoo which ran from his right shoulder in a complicated pattern down to his elbow, a tattoo which was fully visible because his muscular, brown torso was naked to the waist of his red, canvas trousers which themselves ended well above his horny, bare feet. Finally their eyes came back to his face. He winked at them and smiled, which made his moustaches wiggle in way that was not so much frightening as faintly ridiculous.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Boris."

The children sat there on the board, their legs dangling in the water, and gawped. At last Blob managed to close his mouth.

"Are you a Viking?" he asked. Boris laughed.

"What you think?"

"You look like a Viking, and this looks like a Viking ship..."

"He's definitely a Viking," Frog said.

"Is that really a hammock up there?" Blob said, pointing to the square of netting. For all three of them, it was the single most fascinating thing about this whole, wonderful experience. The thought of lying up there miraculously suspended between wind and water, swaying gently, was absolutely captivating.

"Sure," Boris said. "Want to climb?"

"Can we?" Blob asked, but already he was moving the D2 into the boarding ladder hanging down the stern. Frog hooked on the painter and they all scrambled up.

Gravely, Blob offered his hand which was taken equally gravely by Boris.

"I'm Blob," he said. "And this is Frog. And this is J-T." The others shook hands.

"We live over there with our Dad," he went on, pointing to the island. "He's not J-T's Dad, though. Shes a friend, she's staying with us."

"Can we really climb up?" Frog asked.

"Sure," Boris said. "If you think you can."

The three children looked at each other and then at the mast. It all suddenly seemed much higher and much more intimidating.

Uncertainly Blob moved to the base of the shrouds attached to through-deck chain plates, just inside the guard rail. He looked back at the others who watched expressionlessly, waiting. All at once he reached out and seized the ratlines and without giving himself time to think, began to climb. The vertical stays were rigid enough but the ratlines themselves, which looped across them, were loose and swayed alarmingly.

He stopped and looked down. The others were still watching him expressionlessly. Boris had turned away and was doing something at the wheel. A wake from a passing boat rocked the Bifrost and Blob clung on grimly. He could see another wake coming not far off and made a sudden decision. He wanted to be safe when it hit, so up or down? Up! And he tumbled into the hammock just as the Bifrost began to rock again.

Frog and Jessica looked at each other and then with one accord, raced to follow, Jessica taking the starboard shrouds and Frog the port. They, too, tumbled into the hammock and then all three grinned at each other with delight. The hammock was every

bit as wonderful as they had expected. It sagged and hollowed like a soft trampoline and somehow, from this vantage point, everything seemed completely different, new, fresh, magical. Below them, Boris and Ika potted about the deck but they might have been in another world so far away did they seem and all around them Pittwater gleamed and sparkled.

"I'm never going down," Jessica said. The boys were silent, soaking up the feeling. At last Blob spoke.

"Well I am," he said. "We haven't had breakfast and I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," Frog said. "That's why you're so..."

"Shut up," Blob said. "Or I'll you know what."

"Anyway, I'm hungry too," Frog said. "Come on J-T."

The three climbed down, Jessica very reluctantly, and went to thank Boris. Ika sniffed at them and wagged her tail.

"Thank you for letting us go up there," Blob said. "It was terrific..."

"We have a dog too," Frog said. "But he's a Newfoundland..."

"Can we go up again, please?" Jessica asked.

"Sure," Boris said. "But only if I'm on board."

"What's Dad doing?" Frog demanded. The three were still sitting at table, eating toast and jam. Bill had left in his tinny to do the weekly shopping in Mona Vale but instead of heading for the breakwater rocks on the far side of the channel where he would usually anchor the boat, he was curving around and coming up alongside the Bifrost. Boris came on deck and they could see the two men talking.

"Why's he talking to Boris?" Frog asked, affronted.

"He's checking him out," Blob said wisely.

"Checking him out?" J-T said.

"To see if he'll let us go back."

"But...?"

"He always knows," Frog said, doubly cross.

"Oh," Jessica said. She found the thought rather comforting, somehow, and wondered why Frog was upset. "What's wrong?" she added, but Frog just scowled. In the first place, Boris was his discovery and he felt proprietorial, and in the second place and

much more seriously he was frightened that his father would thoroughly disapprove of Vikings in general and this one in particular, and would ban them from future visits.

"Look," Blob said. He had gone and got the binoculars that lived on top of the fridge and was watching closely. The tinny left the Bifrost and headed for shore. Boris, meanwhile, briefly vanished below decks and then reappeared. He was now wearing a short, leather waistcoat which did nothing to hide his muscles, his naked chest or his tattoo. He still had his red trousers and bare feet. A moment later he had pulled in his canoe and was paddling ashore, where Bill was waiting for him. The two men lifted the canoe well above the high tide mark and then went off to the car-park.

"He must be taking Boris shopping with him," Blob said. The three children looked at each other and began to giggle helplessly as the same thought struck them simultaneously. The picture of Boris the Viking with his ferocious Cossack haircut and whiskers, not to mention his tattoo, his vest and his trousers and his horny bare feet, loose among the Saturday crowd in the supermarket was altogether too delicious.

"Bet they don't have to queue at the checkout," Blob said when he could speak. "And it means Dad thinks he's all right... Come on. We have to wash up."

"I told Boris that if you three make a nuisance of yourselves he has my full permission to throw you overboard, preferably to drown you. Got the message?"

"Yes, Dad," Blob said.

"Don't wear out your welcome."

"Yes, Dad," Blob said again.

"And I'm looking at you, too, Jack."

"Yes, Dad," Frog said crossly.

"Look," Frog said. The three of them were mooching on the deck. DOG had gone off for a walk with Bill.

"The Bell gang," Blob said. Two canoes, each with two paddlers, had appeared out in the channel, apparently heading for the Bifrost.

"Come on," Blob said. "Quick. Head them off."

"Boris isn't there," Frog said. "He's off somewhere. His outrigger has gone."

"All the more reason..." Blob said.

The three darted into the workshop, grabbed the paddles and pelted down the stairs. A minute later they had the D2 in the water and were sprinting for the Bifrost. They arrived just as Paul had hold of the boarding ladder and was making to climb on board.

"Hey!," Blob shouted. "Get off! You're not allowed up there."

"Who says?" That Paul demanded, distinctly put out by the sudden appearance of the Carol's kids.

"Boris," Blob shouted. "You're not allowed on board if he's not there..."

"I bet they were just waiting till the coast was clear," Frog said quietly.

"Who's Boris?"

"Our friend," Frog said, this time much more loudly. "And this is his boat. We're allowed on but you're not!"

"Get off!" Blob shouted again.

"Or what?!"

"Or we'll smash you..."

"And then we'll get the water police," J-T added.

"Stool pigeons," That Paul hissed but the Bell gang looked at each other. A water fight, two vessels to one, was one thing, the water police quite another. Reluctantly, That Paul let go of the boarding ladder and the two canoes began to move off.

Blob guided the D2 in close to the Bifrost's stern in case they changed their minds.

"And stay away!" Frog shouted. "He's our Viking..."

The next morning, Frog as usual woke with the dawn and quietly slipped down to the deck. The sun had only just peeped above the horizon and was not yet strong enough to burn off the summer mist. He could see the shape of the Bifrost looming vaguely across the channel. He wondered if it would be all right to go and see Boris later, or whether that would be called wearing out their welcome, and then he stiffened. Something was moving, near the ship. Something was definitely moving.

Frog crept back inside for the binoculars and after struggling to focus them properly, gasped. He could see two canoes through the mist, one with two people paddling, towing the other, which was empty. The first belonged to the Bell gang, he was sure of it. The second was Boris's outrigger. A moment later he was shaking Blob and Jessica.

"The rotten thieves," Blob said, staring disbelieving through the binoculars a minute later. "Come on. We have to follow them and get it back..."

They kept the D2 close inshore, using the moored boats as a screen.

"It's That Paul," Blob said after a while.

"And Chris," Frog said.

"Where are they going?" Jessica asked.

"Dunno," Blob said.

They followed the two canoes past Bell wharf and were so intent on the chase that they quite failed to notice yet another canoe emerge, a canoe which gave every appearance of shadowing them. The hunters, all unsuspecting, had become the hunted.

Paul and Chris rounded the bottom of the island and then headed up Pittwater. At first, the three thought they must be going to Lovett Bay, but instead of turning west at Rocky Point, they kept right on.

"They must be going to Towler's," Blob said. "The creek. I bet they're planning to hide it up the creek."

He stopped paddling.

"We'll have to let them get further ahead," he said. "Or they'll see us." The D2 was still hidden in the fringe of boats moored around the island but had reached the point where they would now have to launch across the open channel to continue the pursuit. They sat, waiting, quite unaware that behind them, another canoe had also come to a halt.

"Why don't we just go and catch them?" Jessica asked. "Or tell someone?"

"Because if we can get the canoe back before anyone knows it's gone, think how stupid they'll feel," Blob said. "All that trouble and all for nothing."

Jessica said nothing. She could think of objections to Blob's plan but bowing to his greater experience in matters of Scotland Island inter-gang rivalry, held her peace.

At last, Blob spoke again.

"They won't see us now," he said. And indeed, from their low vantage point, it was difficult for them to make out their quarry.

"We'll angle across," he added. "And go up the other shore. Even if they see us, they won't think we're after them."

Eventually the two canoes in front disappeared around Woody Point and Blob, Frog and Jessica put on speed. They rounded the point themselves to see That Paul and Chris heading down the middle of Towler's bay towards the creek at the end. Blob steered them back inshore among the moored boats. They were feeling somewhat weary now. It had already been a long paddle.

"I know where they must be going," Frog said, after a bit. "Where the creek forks back on itself. We can hide the board in the mangroves and cut across that grassy place..."

The tide was in and the canoes they were following had no trouble crossing the sand banks at the mouth of the stream, and nor did the D2 have any trouble nosing its way into the mangroves. Blob slipped the painter over a branch and then the three crept ashore until they reached a sandy spit covered in hummocky grass. The southern branch of the creek, swung back behind the spit and there was a path that cut straight across.

"This way," Frog said, leading them off at the trot. They had to cover nearly a kilometre and were breathing hard, particularly Blob, by the time they reached the other side. They had already paddled a good three kilometres and all before breakfast. They arrived just in time to see That Paul and Chris heading back the way they'd come. Of Boris's outrigger, there was no sign.

The three stood there on the bank at a total loss. Boris's canoe had vanished, completely vanished. It seemed impossible, yet it had disappeared, absolutely, without trace.

At last Blob spoke.

"They must have sunk it," he said. The others looked at him. It was the only explanation.

"Spread out," Blob said and himself headed along the bank. Frog and Jessica went the other way. A moment later Blob was calling them over.

"Here," he said, pointing to footprints in the sand. All three peered at the water but could see nothing for the sparkle and with one accord they began to wade in. They were thigh deep when they found it. Blob stripped off his shirt, handing it to Frog, and ducked under. He was back up in a moment.

"They've weighted the outrigger down with rocks," he said. "Give me some help."

Reaching and feeling with their feet, they cleared the rocks off to one side. As she was working, Jessica saw something shining in the water and picked it up, rather soaking her clothes. It was a Swiss Army knife and without stopping to think, she stuck it in the pocket of her shorts. The buoyant float popped up as she did so and they were able to walk the canoe ashore, where they bailed the hull with their hands. Boris's single-blade paddle was still wedged under one of the braces.

"Why would they do that?" Jessica asked. She had been growing more and more astonished.

"Dunno," Blob said. "Maybe they think they can come back for it when everybody's forgotten about it. And That Paul is crazy anyway. He's a vandal. I've seen him doing things. He likes making trouble just for the sake of it."

Jessica felt a sudden chill, a premonition.

"You don't think...?"

"What?"

"You don't think he might be trying to get us into trouble?"

Blob and Frog both stopped bailing to stare at her.

"How?" Blob said after a moment.

Jessica shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Not exactly."

The boys looked at her a moment longer and then went back to bailing until they had enough of the water out to be able to turn the fragile canoe on its side without damaging it and drain the rest.

"I'll paddle this round," Blob said. "You two get the D2."

Frog and Jessica watched as he pushed it out and stepped in. With only the single paddle to steer with, it took Blob some time to get the hang of heading in a straight line, but at last he waved at them.

"See you round there," he called.

"It was here," Frog said. "I'm sure it was here." He pointed to some scuff marks in the sand. "Look, that was us..." But while their footprints might remain, there was no denying that the D2 had gone.

"Somebody's taken it," Frog said, and then: "We'll have to catch Anthony. Come on." And Jessica thought that the fact that for once Frog had used his brother's real name was a fair indication that he must be really upset.

"But who would take it?" she asked as she waded through the mangroves after Frog. The only possible answer, they both realised a moment later, was deeply worrying.

Three passengers, one paddle, and a cranky outrigger canoe to struggle with all the way home was a depressing prospect and by the time they had rounded Woody Point and could see the island in the distance, they were thoroughly fed up. Frog and Jessica tried to help by paddling with their hands but they made only slow progress. They were all so head down and gloomy that they failed to see one of the small police launches until it was almost on them.

"What do they want?" Frog demanded crossly, but Jessica's heart was already sinking. She could see two smaller figures in the cockpit and recognised them instantly: That Paul, and Chris. It was a trap, she thought. It had to be a trap.

The boat came alongside the canoe and cut its motor.

"See," they could hear Paul say. "We told you. They've stolen the canoe."

"You liar!" Blob roared, roused to instant passion. "You dirty liar!" He stood up, wielding the paddle as though to smite them. "You stole the canoe! We're bringing it back!"

"Then how did you find it?" Paul demanded triumphantly. "How did you get to it? Where's your board?"

And the trap snapped shut.

"All of you be quiet," the policeman driving the boat said. It was Johnno, the same constable who had carried on about life jackets after the storm. Jessica felt her heart sink even further, if that were possible.

"I will not be quiet," Blob shouted, even more beside himself. "We found the canoe where they hid it and we're bringing it back."

"I said shut up!" the policeman said, his voice rising. He indicated That Paul. "And as this boy points out, how could you find it without a vessel to get you there in the first place?"

"They took it!" Blob shouted with all his might. "They took it!" And overcome with indignation at the injustice of it all, he made to lash out with the paddle, promptly over-balanced and landed in the water.

He surfaced, spluttering, to find Constable Johnson staring at him coldly.

"Get back in the canoe," he ordered. "And give me the painter. I'm taking you all back. The sergeant can sort this out, with your parents."

Boris's fragile canoe could only be towed at slow speed so Blob, Frog and Jessica had plenty of time to talk on the way to the waterpolice base in McCarr's Creek.

"Oliver and their Jessica," Blob said, when he could speak without frothing at the mouth. "They must have been following us, following them." He gestured at Paul and Chris sitting smugly in the police launch, trying not to smirk. "Those two didn't have time to get rid of the D2 and get the police."

"You mean they planned the whole thing?" Frog said.

"Dunno. It was very early. They couldn't know we'd spot them and follow. Maybe that was just accident. Maybe they just planned to hide the canoe and then blame us. Or just keep it. Or something."

"And Oliver and their Jessica saw us going past?"

"They were probably on watch, just in case," Blob said slowly. "It's what I would have done. And I bet they've put the D2 back on our beach."

"So what can we say?" Jessica asked, thoroughly alarmed at the thought that they might all end up in jail.

"Dunno," Blob said, defeat in his voice. "Dad will believe us, but nobody else will."

Jessica hunched down miserably. It was all so unfair. They were the good guys and yet it seemed they would be branded thieves and liars, and very likely they would be hounded off the island as a result, even if they weren't put in prison. Who would believe them, apparently caught red-handed like this? If That Paul was seeking revenge for the chook-bomb war it was all working out perfectly, just perfectly. She shifted uncomfortably. Something was digging into her. The knife. The Swiss Army knife she had found and put in her pocket without having time to think about it. She pulled it out and showed it to the others.

"It must belong to one of them," she said, jerking her head at the police boat. "I found it where they sank the canoe."

"Wow," Blob said taking it. "It's the best one, the top one, the one with every single gadget. On the island, if you have one of those you're a star."

"They're very expensive," Frog said. "I really want one, but Dad says he can't afford it and I have to save up myself. It'll take years."

"Same for me," Blob said. "These are the best." He handed it back to Jessica.

"You should keep it, J-T," he said. "Serve them right."

"Boys really like these?" Jessica asked.

"Really, really..." Blob said. "If you don't want it...?" But looking suddenly thoughtful, Jessica put it back in her pocket.

The waterpolice waiting room had a counter across the back part and a row of seats down each of the side walls.

"Sit there." Constable Johnson pointed Blob, Frog and Jessica to one side, and That Paul and Chris to the other. They sat down facing each other, That Paul and Chris still openly smug.

"And be quiet," the policeman added. "Or there'll be trouble. I can find a cell if I have to, or a broom cupboard. I'm going inside to call your parents."

The door slammed and there was a long, long silence. Blob glared and the other two smirked, but nobody wanted to be the first to speak. At last, after what seemed like hours, Jessica, elaborately casual, again pulled the knife from her pocket. Chris stiffened and a moment later, frantically began to pat his pockets. Then he pulled everything out and turned them inside out.

Jessica set about opening and closing all the tools on the knife one by one: the two blades, big and small, the file, the saw, the fish degorger, the scissors, the pliers, the screwdrivers, Philips and slot, the can-opener, the bottle-opener, the magnifying glass... She turned it over and began on the back, but Chris could stand it no longer.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded. "It's mine..."

"I found it," Jessica said sweetly.

"It's mine!" Chris all but shouted, growing more and more agitated. He stood up.

"Give it to me," he hissed.

"Finders keepers..." Jessica said, still calm and thoroughly irritating with it.

"I lost it," Chris said, desperate now. "It's mine. Give it back!"

"Where did you lose it?"

"It must have been where we..."

"Shut up!" That Paul said savagely.

"If you can prove it's yours, then I might give it back to you," Jessica said. "But you have to prove it." She pulled out the tweezers and pretended to pluck at her eyebrows. Chris was in agony. The knife was his most precious possession, and a gift from his father, and here was this girl playing with it like some toy.

"All right!" Chris shouted. "I'll tell you..." But he got no further. That Paul flew at him and they crashed to the floor, punching and kicking.

"Shut up!" That Paul kept shouting. "Shut up or you'll spoil everything!"

"I won't," Chris shouted back. "I want my knife. I've got to have my knife..." He was in tears and almost incoherent.

At that moment, both doors into the room opened simultaneously. Constable Johnson strode through one, grasped the two boys rolling on the floor by their collars and pulled them apart. Bill and Boris walked through the other and stopped short.

"What do you think you're doing?" the policeman demanded, shaking his captives until they stopped struggling.

"She's got my knife," Chris whimpered. "My Swiss Army knife..."

"I found it," Jessica said austerely.

"She found it where we sank the canoe," Chris wailed. "It was in my pocket. It must have..."

The room fell deathly silent.

At last the policeman spoke.

"Where who sank what canoe?" he asked very quietly.

"The outrigger," Chris sniffed and then stopped. "Paul and me..." he went on at last.

"We took it. So now, make her give my knife back..."

Watched intently by everyone in the room, Jessica marched to the counter and laid down the knife. She turned round, and burst into tears.

Blob, Frog and J-T were still pretty much in shock at the narrowness of their escape from what had seemed an impossible position, a position where life would no longer be worth living.

Once it was established beyond all doubt that they were the innocent victims of a conspiracy, Bill had whisked them home. Boris, reunited with his canoe, had been returned to the Bifrost and the children had silently eaten their way through a large and comforting breakfast. They were now ensconced on the roof of the shelter shed at Carol's.

"We owe you one," Blob said at last to Jessica.

"A huge one," Frog said.

"A monster," Blob confirmed. "And I was stupid," he added.

"We all were," Jessica said, trying to be gracious.

"No," Blob said. "You weren't. You said we should tell someone...If we'd gone back and got Dad, or Boris..."

"Anyway," Jessica said. "It's all right now..."

"Thanks to you," Blob and Frog said together.

Chapter five

"But why 'Frog'?" Jessica said. The three of them were sitting at the end of Carol's, swinging their legs and waiting for the sun to dry them after a swim.

"Dad says he looked like one when he was born," Blob said helpfully. "Says he still does."

"Nah," Jessica said and paused judiciously. "More like a toad..."

Frog leaped on her and with a discreet, extra nudge from Blob, the two of them crashed back into the water. DOG jumped up and began to prance about, barking. A moment later, he too crashed down beside them with a huge splash.

"Incoming...!" Blob roared and rounded things off with one of his notorious bombs.

The four of them splashed about happily for a while, DOG inadvertently ducking each one of them in turn with his great paws, then they pulled themselves out and clambered up the steps. The world that perfect summer's day was a wonderful place and the very best spot to be, the absolute pinnacle of desire and satisfaction all rolled into one, was right there, at the end of Carol's wharf.

"And who was Carol anyway?" Jessica demanded when they were all sitting quietly again.

"Some lady," Frog said.

"She decided this part of the island needed its own jetty and went to war," Blob explained. "And in the end the council built the wharf just to get some peace."

"Before we were born," Frog said.

"And so it's always been called Carol's wharf..." Blob said. "Come on. Let's ask Dad if we can go and visit Boris."

But Bill and the tinny were both missing when they got back, though it was not hard to discover where they might have gone.

"What's he doing there?" Frog demanded, rather put out and gazing at the Bifrost.

"Dunno," Blob said. "But if he's there, it should be all right for us to go. Your turn to get the paddles."

"It is not," Frog exploded. "It's your turn, isn't it J-T?"

Jessica could only nod and Blob with his usual bad grace at having to do anything physical, stumped off.

As they came up the Bifrost, they could see Bill and Boris, standing on the deck and talking to a third man, who was wearing a proper shirt and trousers, even shoes.

"That's Julian," Blob said. "One of the vets. He looks after DOG sometimes. Ika must be sick."

They were still a little way off when Julian and Boris shook hands, then Julian followed Bill into the tinny. Both men waved as they went past, heading for Church Point.

Boris was glum.

"What's wrong with Ika," Blob asked as they came on board.

"Heartworm," he said.

"Oh no!," Frog said.

"Is okay," Boris said. "She hasn't got, but your father say probably will around here if not do something. She is quarantine and can't go ashore, so vet must come here to test. No vaccine possible if already is infected." He paused. "And all very expensive," he added mournfully. "So now must make money."

"Why is Ika in quarantine?" Blob asked.

"We come to this country not long," Boris said.

"What do you do?" Jessica asked. "To make money..."

"I make knives," Boris said.

"Really?" Blob said, his eyes very wide.

"Like this," Boris said taking something from a sheath at his belt and holding it out.

"Whoa," Blob said, taking the knife reverently. It was about 20cm long with a strange curving shape unlike anything the children had ever seen before. A little more than half the length was blade of brightly polished stainless steel, razor sharp and with a sweeping radius to the edge. The rest was handle made from some dark wood with a semi-precious stone inlaid on each side. It was a beautiful thing and Blob instantly fell in love with it. He held it out for the others to admire.

"Is Viking knife," Boris said. "For skinning. Is called seax. I have job to make three."

"Can I help?" Blob asked, lusting deep in his heart. "Please." If he couldn't have one himself, and Blob was instantly certain that it must be worth much more than a mere Swiss Army knife, than perhaps he could learn to make one, and some day...

"Sure," Boris said.

"When can we start?" Blob demanded.

"Now," Boris said.

"Can we go up to the hammock, please?" Jessica asked looking at Frog. Neither of them had the least interest in knife-making.

"Sure," Boris said.

When Boris designed and built the Bifrost with the help of friends, he had based it on a particular Viking trading ship, a knarr, the wreck of which was discovered in Denmark. During his voyage around the world following in the wake of the great Viking seafarers who sailed as far as America long before Columbus, his plan was to pay his way by making and selling replicas of Viking knives and leather work. He had it down to a fine art.

Blob helped him set up a small generator to power his tools and then watched avidly as Boris began to cut the blanks from a billet of 3mm thick stainless steel, using a hacksaw and grinder. It was a laborious process but Blob was fascinated and as time went by, Boris began to let him help. Bill would have been amazed. He regularly tried to interest the boys in tools and how to use them but was always greeted with groans of "do we have to?".

The first Blob knew of the hours that had passed was Frog coming up behind him and demanding they go home for lunch.

Blob couldn't wait to go back to the Bifrost and disappeared with his mouth still full. Frog and J-T looked at each other and shrugged.

"Wonder what happened to Chris and That Paul?" Frog said inconsequentially.

"Dunno," Jessica said. She had been wondering the same thing, particularly as the unmasking of the plot had been mostly her doing. "How can we find out?" she added.

"Let's go round to Tennis," Frog said.

"Why?"

"That's where you go to find out what's happening."

He went and fetched a basketball that was mostly pumped up and then the two set off for Tennis Wharf, which was right round the other side of the island, DOG happily leading the way.

Passing the telephone box and the path down to Bell, J-T couldn't help grinning and was caught thoroughly unprepared when a man appeared round the corner of one of the houses and stood glowering at them, hands on his hips. Jessica found that without knowing why she was suddenly very frightened.

"Uh-oh," Frog said quietly, then whistled urgently. DOG glanced back, broke into a gallop and a moment later had positioned himself firmly between the children and the grown-up. He pressed them over to the side of the road away from the man and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Somehow he seemed to expand so that he was twice his normal size, which was already huge, and all at once, Jessica felt safe again. No one would ever dare to touch them now.

"Just keep walking," Frog whispered, and it was only when DOG had shepherded them round the next corner and they were out of sight, that he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Who was that?" Jessica asked shakily. She gave DOG's great head a hug, not caring in the least that she ended up with slobber all over her t-shirt.

"That Paul's father," Frog said. "And he's the meanest man on the island. Everyone says so."

"But why's he mad at us?" Jessica asked. "We didn't do anything."

"Probably blames us anyway," Frog said wisely.

"Do we have to come back this way?" There was a definite note of anxiety in Jessica's voice.

"Nah," Frog said. "We'll go round the other side."

Tennis was the social centre of the island. There was a grassy park that apart from anything else was good for football and bike riding. On one side there was the community hall and on the other, the volunteer fire shed. When the tide was out in the little bay, it was the best place on the whole island for mud fights. Half a dozen kids were shooting hoops at the little court tacked on to the end of the hall.

Frog and J-T went across to watch, Frog idly bouncing their ball on the concrete of the floor. It made an unhealthy, squelching sound.

One of the other kids, a boy a bit older than Blob, sneered. "That's no good," he said. "Why don't you guys ever pump up your ball? Come on, you can play with us..."

Jessica enjoyed the game but she enjoyed the conversation even more. It turned out that Chris and That Paul had been grounded for another week, but more importantly that they also had to attend juvenile court. The police, it appeared, had finally lost patience with them, particularly That Paul, and had decided to teach them a serious lesson. It explained why That Paul's father had regarded them so threateningly. Apparently he didn't mind That Paul getting into trouble but when that caused him trouble too, then it was a different matter.

Jessica also found that the story of how the pair had been brought undone had spread like wildfire and that as a result, she was very much a hero. She wasn't much good at the basketball, but that didn't matter at all.

The other main topic of conversation was the island triathlon to be run on Sunday and open to all comers, solo or in teams of two. The other kids were busy pairing off and Frog and J-T began to look at each other with mounting speculation.

"Let's," Frog said at last.

"What about Blob?" Jessica said. "Won't he want to be in the team?"

Frog snorted and then laughed.

"You've got to be joking," he said.

They talked about it all the way home. There would be three legs: a swim, a paddle and a run round the island. They knew Jessica was the better runner and that Frog was definitely the better paddler as he had had far more practice. That left the swim. They discussed whether they should have another race to see who was best in the water but it seemed more sensible for Jessica to do the swim as well as then she would have a chance to rest between legs, while it was probably asking a bit much for Frog to do the swim and then go straight into the paddle.

"I wonder who else will be entering," Jessica said.

She and Frog looked at each other speculatively. Both had the same thought at once.

"Do you think...?" Frog said.

"I don't know," Jessica said.

"That Paul and Chris should still be grounded," Frog said.

"What about the others?"

"Their Jessica and Oliver might," Frog said thoughtfully. "But do we care?"

"We do if they beat us," Jessica said. "We care heaps."

"Then we better do some practice," Frog said.

"Will you use the D2?"

"Let's go and talk to Dad."

Bill considered the problem with proper seriousness and they decided in the end that the best thing to do would be to hold a speed trial. As well as the D2, Bill had two other slalom sailboards, one for medium winds and a smaller one for heavy winds, both much shorter than the D2. It was a question of which would be fastest for Frog when he was paddling by himself.

Bill and DOG helped them to carry the boards and the paddles down to the beach. He lent Jessica his watch which had a second-hand and suggested she go to the end of Carol's to time Frog over the distance on each of the three boards, before leaving them to it.

"I'll wave when you're to start," she said and set off at the run with DOG galumphing beside her.

Frog decided to begin with the smallest board and work up. An hour later and much to their surprise it was clear that the D2 was much the fastest. When they discussed this with Bill over dinner, he explained that it was because the D2 had a longer waterline which meant it had a higher potential speed.

Frog was quite cross. "Why didn't you just tell me, instead of making me do all that paddling?" he demanded.

"You have to pay to learn," Bill said. "And now you'll have no doubt which board is best for you. Besides, you said you wanted to practise and it was fun wasn't it?"

"Yes it was," Jessica said. But Frog stayed grumpy until desert.

Blob was starting to get interested.

"Who else is in the race?" he asked. Frog and Jessica reeled off the names they could remember.

"What about you know who?" he said.

"We think maybe their Jessica and Oliver," Frog said.

"Well," Blob said. "You'll have to make sure you beat them at least."

"We'll try," Jessica said doubtfully. "But Frog says they're both older than us."

"What's that got to do with it?" Blob said. "What you need is a coach."

"And who's going to be that?" Frog demanded.

"Me, of course," Blob said.

"Oh thanks very much," Frog said, with visions of an endless deluge of orders falling upon them.

"And you need a plan," Blob said.

"What sort of plan?" Jessica asked.

"We do not!" Frog said, speaking at the same time. "At least not your plan."

"But..." Jessica began.

"Go back to your knives," Frog said.

"But a plan would be good," Jessica said. "And Blob does good plans."

"It's our race," Frog said.

"Have it your own way," Blob said good-naturedly and changed the subject. "Guess what Boris uses for the handles on his knives?"

"No idea," Frog said, still rather put out.

"It's oak that was buried in a peat bog in Denmark," Blob said. "It's about 5000 years old, he says. And the jewels he uses are coral and lapis lazuli."

"What's lapis lazuli?" Jessica asked.

"It's a sort of rock," Blob said. "Boris says most of it comes from Afghanistan."

"What plan?" Frog said.

"Dunno. An ambush maybe? Dog and I could lie in wait..."

"Oh no," Jessica said. "If we win, it has to be fair and square. I'm not going to cheat."

"Me neither," Frog said.

"Just an idea," Blob said. "But what if they cheat? It's just the sort of thing they would do."

"That Paul might," Frog said. "But he's still grounded isn't he? I don't think the others would."

"Of course they would if they could," Blob said. "And anyway if the race is on Sunday That Paul will be free by then."

Jessica and Frog looked at each other.

"But won't he want to enter?" Jessica asked.

"He won't dare to show his face at Tennis for a long time," Blob said.

"But there'll be lots of other people in the race," Jessica said. "Adults..."

"Spread out all round the island," Blob said. "If That Paul gets a chance, you bet he'll try something. He really hates us, you especially J-T, after what you did to them. I know him, he'll be desperate for revenge."

Jessica shivered. Suddenly the idea of entering the event seemed rather less attractive.

"And don't forget," Blob added. "The race goes right past his place." Jessica shivered again, remembering the encounter with Paul's father.

"What can we do?" she said. "Maybe we should just forget the idea."

"No way!" Frog said. "If we pull out now, everyone will know why."

"But nobody knows we're even planning to enter," Jessica said.

"I know," Frog said. "And you know. And the kids at Tennis..."

"Frog's right," Blob said. "We can't let them frighten us out of the race. It's our island."

"All right," Jessica said, a little bit ashamed. "But what can we do?"

"Well for starters," Blob said. "DOG and I will have to stand guard. Then least if they try anything when you go past, you can have some help. Now about your training..."

"Training!" Frog almost shrieked.

"As your coach..."

"Coach! Who said?"

"Well we're not going to let Oliver and their Jessica beat you, are we?" Blob demanded. "So you need to train. We've got three days..."

As Frog had feared, Blob's idea of coaching was to stand around and shout orders and whenever he allowed them a rest period he would disappear over to the Bifrost to help Boris. However, it couldn't be denied that Jessica's freestyle and Frog's paddling had improved substantially by the time Sunday came around. Meanwhile, Boris had started to make the sheaths for the knives and had given one to Blob to do all by himself. Blob,

of course, was thrilled and avidly absorbed everything Boris could tell him about leather work. Most of all he was fascinated by the complicated, plaited stitch Boris showed him. By the time the lacing had been worked backwards and forwards, over and under, the edges of the sheath had been completely covered and looked splendid, the light brown of the lacing setting off the dark green of the leather. The knives, themselves, were also nearing completion, needing only the jewels to be set into the hilts and a final polish.

Sunday dawned another perfect summer's day. The race was due to start at eight o'clock to avoid the worst of the heat and Blob would only allow Frog and J-T to have a light breakfast, though he had insisted that they fuel up on pasta the night before. When he began to butter his the fourth slice of toast, Frog nearly exploded.

"What?" Blob demanded. "I'm not going for a long swim and I need my strength." Jessica laughed. She was excited and raring to go.

"Come on," she said. "We don't want to have to hurry to get to the start. We'll need all our energy for the race."

They had planned that she and Frog would paddle the D2 round to Tennis at a leisurely pace, while Blob and DOG walked with Jessica's running gear and a towel. J-T really enjoyed the freshness of the morning as they slipped through the moorings. Even Frog forgot his simmering outrage.

It was about half tide as they pulled into the little bay at the wharf and dragged the D2 up onto the mud. There was already a motley array of boards and canoes lined up to greet them and a crowd of people milling around on shore. A queue had formed in front of a table.

"That must be where we have to register," Frog said. They moved across to stand at the end of the line.

"Can you see them?" Jessica whispered.

"Over there," Frog whispered back, pointing to a group under a tree. "They must have already entered." Jessica looked and recognised the other Jessica and Oliver from their previous encounters. They were both lean and lanky and looked at least a year older. They also looked thoroughly athletic.

"What about That Paul and Christopher?" Jessica said.

"No sign," Frog murmured. "But like Blob said, they wouldn't dare."

"That' s bad," Jessica said. "It probably means they are planning something."

"Don' t worry. Blob and DOG will look after you." And as he spoke, Jessica spotted the two coming over the grass towards them. The queue moved on and in a minute or two they were giving their names to the woman at the table.

"The course is over there," she said, pointing to a map on an easel that was being studied by another group of people. The three moved across and craned to see the board. The swim leg was to begin with a dive from the jetty, then out around a moored boat, along parallel to the shore, around another moored boat and then back into the bay and the boards. The total length was some 400 metres and Jessica rather quailed at the thought. The paddle leg was even worse going all the way up to the channel marker at Long Nose Point and back again, a distance of very nearly four and a half kilometres. Finally there was the run right round the island, which was another three kilometres or so.

Frog and J-T looked at each other with exactly the same thought.

"Are we really going to do this?" Jessica asked.

"Of course you are," Blob said comfortably.

"It' s all right for you..." Frog began with heat.

"You can do it," Blob said. "And think how good you'll feel at the end."

"If we ever make it," Jessica said in a low voice.

"You' ll make it," Blob said. "And don't let the others see you're worried. Come on we need a bit of psychology here." He sauntered off and led the others past the group under the tree.

"Disappointing the course is so short," Blob said casually. "It's really only a sprint." Oliver's head jerked round and he glared at them.

"See?" Blob whispered triumphantly when they were out of earshot. "They' re just as worried as you are. Now J-T," he went on. "You really ought to do a warmup. Get used to the water. There' s not long before the start now..."

Jessica and Frog grimaced at each other and Frog stuck his tongue out at his brother. Jessica could only agree.

One of the volunteer marshals blew a whistle and led the 20 or so swimmers out to the end of the wharf. They lined up along the edge and J-T made sure she was as far away

as possible from the other Jessica. J-T stared down at the clear green water with Blob's final words ringing in her ears: "Do it for the Carol's kids," he had said. "Show them we're the best."

"On your marks," the starter said. As he blew his whistle the field hit the water with a mighty splash and the spectators roared. The half-dozen adults quickly pulled ahead, leaving the kids to fight it out behind. J-T tried to spot the other Jessica but she was invisible in the welter of threshing. Spray was flying everywhere. All J-T could do was to settle into her stroke and hope that she could make the distance. She had never swum nearly that far freestyle before and she knew that if she switched to side-stroke she would be left far behind.

With the adults now far in front, the leaders of the kids' pack came to the first turning mark. Four of the bigger boys had broken clear. Next came the other Jessica. Already J-T was trailing about 20 metres behind in the last group. Frog and Blob looked at each other.

"I hope your paddling is a bit better," Blob said gloomily.

"She's doing her best," Frog said defensively, but he was thinking exactly the same thing.

However, as the field thinned out, J-T found the going a bit easier and while she wasn't managing to gain anything back, at least she wasn't falling further behind. She held on all the way down the long swim to the second mark, and it was only when they turned for home, that the other Jessica began to increase her lead. The adults, who all seemed to be taking it very seriously, had already powered into the bay and were now well on their way to Long Nose Point. As the first of the kids swam past the jetty and on towards the shore, the crowd of spectators began to roar encouragement. Frog was already seated on the D2, grasping the paddle so hard that his hands hurt. Blob looked down the line.

"Hey" he said. "We've got a chance here."

"What do you mean?" Frog's gaze was fixed on the swimmers thrashing towards them. Blob pointed.

"Oliver's only got that ratty old canoe of theirs. The D2 should be much faster, especially all the way to Long Nose and back. Look out, here they come."

The first of the junior swimmers found his feet and began to surge towards his partner. They slapped hands and then the paddler was off. One by one the others came out of the water and made the changeover. The other Jessica tipped Oliver and he sprinted away. He had a lead of a good 50 metres by the time J-T staggered up and released Frog. It looked insurmountable. J-T sank to her knees, panting and miserable.

"I'm sorry," she said when she could speak. "She was way too fast for me."

"Don't worry," Blob said. "You did good, really good. Look..." and he pointed. Already Frog was gaining on Oliver, whose ancient canoe would not track in a straight line. It wobbled and wobbled all over the place and the faster Oliver tried to paddle, the worse it was. Frog, on the other hand, stroking along smoothly and powerfully.

"If Frog can keep it up," Blob said. "He should be well in front by the time he gets back. Come on, you need to dry off and get into your shoes."

"What about you?" Jessica asked.

"DOG and I are off," he said. "We'll scout, and if there's a trap we'll warn you. Remember, it's a long way round the island, so don't burn yourself out too soon." And with a whistle to DOG he was away, jogging up the park surprisingly quickly.

Blob was right, Frog thought. The D2 was much faster than Oliver's canoe. Mindful that there was a long way to go, Frog set a steady, even pace. Even so, he seemed to be hauling Oliver in as though he were on a piece of string. He saw Oliver glance over his shoulder anxiously, and then again. Suddenly suspicious, Frog changed course to pass Oliver in a wide arc. Again Oliver glanced back, and he too altered course. Frog swung back the other way, and again Oliver matched him.

"You rotten cheat," Frog said to himself, sure that Oliver was planning to attack him rather than let him overtake. "Well, we'll just see about that..."

Steadily, surely, the D2 overhauled the canoe. By now Oliver was watching over his shoulder almost constantly, and it was plain that he was determined not to let it get past. Oliver was quite a lot bigger than Frog and if it came to fight there was not much doubt about who would win. If Oliver, for example, captured Frog's paddle then it would be all over. Frog would have no chance trying to paddle the D2 with just his hands, like a surfboard. Frog looked about carefully, hoping for help or at least a witness, but by now

they were quite isolated in the middle of Pittwater. He was on his own and it was up to him.

He slowed his pace, both to rest a little and to have something in reserve. Still he came closer and closer until the bow of the D2 was almost touching the canoe. He saw Oliver look back one final time and then dig hard with his right paddle. Simultaneously, Frog heaved with his left and then accelerated for all he was worth. The canoe swung hard to port and the board hard to starboard, and in a flash, it was past. Oliver tried to correct but the canoe wobbled when it should have wobbled and he was left staring at Frog's receding back.

Frog was well in front round the mark at Long Nose, and although Oliver tried a second attack as they passed each other going in opposite directions, Frog was easily able to keep clear. Even better, the flush of victory lasted him all the way back to Tennis.

J-T was ecstatic to see him so far in front and enjoyed the look on the other Jessica's face even more. Oliver was barely in sight and unless J-T broke a leg it seemed impossible for the other Jessica to win. She and Frog high-fived, and as she set off on the run J-T had forgotten all about the possibility of an ambush. It was only when Blob stepped out on the track near Bell that she remembered. She slowed slightly and Blob and DOG began to jog beside her.

"How far in front are you?" Blob asked.

"I don't know," Jessica said. "A long way I think. Frog did really well."

"I told you it would be all right," Blob said, puffing already.

"What about the others?"

"I couldn't see anything," Blob said. "But that doesn't mean they're not waiting. DOG and I will run with you as long as we can. At least until you're well past Bell."

Jessica quickened the pace again, and Blob stopped talking as he concentrated on trying to keep up. They swept around the last corner and then past the phone box and the track that lead down to the wharf. They were just beginning to think they were clear of the danger area when Jessica felt a sharp, biting sting to her arm. At the same time DOG yelped as he too was pinged. Ahead, two boys suddenly jumped into the middle of the track raising their left arms straight in front of them.

"Watch out," Blob shouted. "They've got shanghais. Quick, up here." They darted up a path leading to someone's front door and crouched behind a bush. It was clear that the two boys, armed as they were with catapults firing casuarina nuts, had no intention of letting them past, at least until the other Jessica had caught up.

"What we do now?" Jessica said forlornly. It had all been going so well and now this. Blob searched desperately about, frantically looking for inspiration. At last his eye fixed on the two dustbins standing near the front door.

"The lids," he said. "We can use them as shields."

Jessica looked at him doubtfully.

"Well have you got any better ideas?" he demanded. Jessica shook her head, still looking extremely worried.

"We have to try," Blob said. "We have to charge them... for the honour of Carol's. Come on! Before the other Jessica catches up." He raced over to the bins and wrenched off the lids, thrusting one at J-T. "Come on!" he said again, and led the way back down the path without giving her any time to think. J-T followed reluctantly.

Christopher and That Paul were still standing in the middle of the track. They had their catapults locked and loaded.

"Ready?" Blob said. J-T nodded and bit her lip.

"Then charge!" Blob roared, and yelling at the top of his voice, raced straight at the enemy. Shots pinged on his shield but before they had time to reload he was on them. He crashed straight into That Paul who was bowled over and then Blob turned to pursue Chris.

"Drop the shield," he yelled at J-T. "And keep going." J-T glanced back to see Chris disappearing rapidly down between a couple of houses and Blob turning back to give That Paul another thumping. He, too, jumped rapidly to his feet and fled. Back at the last corner before Bell, a girl came into view, running hard. It was the other Jessica. J-T dropped the dustbin lid as though it were redhot and began to run for her life, hoping desperately that it wasn't too late.

Once before, the two girls had raced along the same bit of road, but then the other Jessica had been running with a pack. Now she was free to set her own pace, and older and with longer legs she could not but be faster than J-T. By the time they had gone past Carol's, up the hill and then dropped down the rough gulley officially known as Elsie

Street, there was not much more than 20 metres between them. Setting herself for the long, final stretch all the way around Florence Terrace, J-T summoned every last reserve she had, but little by little, inch by inch, the other Jessica wore her down. As they swung round the last corner before Tennis, she was so close behind that J-T could sense her breathing.

Again, J-T reached deep into herself, and now the other Jessica, too, was also almost spent. The crowd was roaring them on but the two girls were beyond hearing, the blood pounding in their ears. The finish line was now in sight and J-T was daring to think that she might just last the distance when suddenly she felt something strike her heel. Her legs crossed and she went sprawling in the gravel, badly scraping her hands and knees. The other Jessica swept on and triumphantly crossed the line, her arms raised.

Frog watched in horror. A moment before he had been jumping up and down in excitement, yelling at the top of his voice, now, he stood there frozen, quite powerless to move. J-T finally slid to a stop at the bottom of the rough, sloping path. She lay there in crumpled heap. There was an involuntary cry from somewhere in the crowd. Someone sighed. Then Frog was running towards her.

He saw her body tremble and her head lifted. There were tears streaking the dust that coated her face, but her mouth was still firm. She winced and began to struggle to her feet. Blood was dripping dully from under the dirt and gravel ground into her knees and one of her hands was badly scored. She saw Frog coming.

"Don't help me," she said. "I've got to finish by myself. Don't help me."

Frog dropped his hands and stepped back, watching dejectedly as Jessica struggled to get to her feet. and then biting her lip and limping heavily, made for the finish line. There was a scattering of applause from the people still standing about as she finally crossed. A woman came up and gave her a hug.

"I'm Lisa," she said. "Come over to the fire shed. We can use their first aid kit to clean you up a bit. Your friend can come too..."

DOG lay full length on their beach, his head flattened between his paws, watching mournfully. The three were inconsolable. They sat in a row on the sand, staring listlessly at the water. Frog's heroic paddle, Blob's heroic charge at the enemy armed

and dangerous, and Jessica's heroic swim and even more heroic run had all gone for nothing.

"It's not fair, it's just not fair," Frog said at last. He was almost in tears. "I'll kill her," he added after another long silence.

"You can't," Jessica said. "Maybe it was just an accident."

"Accident my bum," Blob said. Jessica smiled despite herself, just a little bit.

"Even if she did mean to do it, we can't prove it," she said. "It happens in running races all the time. And my mum says, you can't win 'em all."

"Why not?" Frog demanded morosely.

"I don't know," Jessica said. "You just can't."

DOG glanced up and wagged his tail. Bill was coming down the stairs. He stood a long moment, surveying the group, and then spoke:

"Life never is fair," he said. "And every so often it comes along and smacks you in the face with a shovel, for no reason, just because it feels like it. The question then, the only question, is do you get up again or do you not?"

Chapter six

The knives were finally finished, and even Frog and Jessica had to admit that they were spectacularly fine. They lay on a hatch-cover on the Bifrost, winking in the sun, the blades flawlessly polished and the whorled grain of the hilts darkly gleaming, beautifully set off by the red of the coral and the blue of the lapis lazuli, inlaid into the wood. The sheaths lay arranged around them, two of which had been made by Boris and the other by Blob. Only a thoroughly uncharitable critic would have noticed the difference and Blob was beside himself with pride.

"But who are they for?" Frog asked, wishfully. "Who's going to buy them?"

"Ah," Boris said. "Is already sold."

"But who to?" Blob chimed in. He too was bursting with curiosity and if there was one thing in the world that he wanted with all his heart it was the knife that fitted the sheath he had made himself, and the sheath of course.

"Secret," Boris said. "Buyer want ano... anonymity."

"Anowhaty?" Jessica said. She too was lusting after one of the knives, not because she wanted a knife particularly but just because it was a beautiful thing.

"Wants to be secret. Doesn't want childrens pestering."

"As if we would," Jessica muttered.

"I would!" Blob said. Reluctantly he turned away to console himself with a session in the hammock.

The summer seemed to be growing hotter and hotter. Perfect day followed perfect day, each one warmer than the last and even the water began to feel more like a hot bath than a cool treat. A change was needed. After lunch, they all piled into the tinny, minus DOG, and Bill drove them the length of Pittwater. At Palm Beach, armed with flippers and towels, they anchored the dinghy and waded ashore. A short walk of 200 metres or so would take them across the isthmus to the surf beach, facing the wide Pacific Ocean.

"Hope it's pumping," Blob said.

"Hope it's cold," J-T said.

"The radio said it was good," Frog replied. The three hurried on. They were already far ahead of Bill and beginning to hear the sound of the waves crashing on the sand.

They crested the last small rise to behold the magnificent length of the beach which stretched for over two kilometres from the headland marking the southern end until it reached the towering buttress of Barrenjoey to the north.

"Come on," Blob said, and pointed to the southern end of the beach. "We have to go right down there. We're only allowed to swim between the flags."

"And we have to wait for Dad," Frog said.

The surf that day was beautiful, curling in with long, crisp, even combers.

"Whoa!" Blob shouted over the noise of the waves. "Look at that one!"

Jessica was as excited as the two boys, but also apprehensive. She had never been in the surf before.

"Make sure you stay close to me," Bill said. Jessica was grateful and listened carefully as he explained how to dive under an oncoming wave and to grab onto the sand on the bottom if necessary, to avoid being tumbled backwards. The water felt like cool velvet and after her first tentative attempts she enjoyed the challenge of working her way through the shore break until she was swimming in deep water.

"Want to catch a wave?" Bill yelled at her. She had been watching enviously as Blob and Frog used their flippers in frantic attempts to accelerate fast enough to body surf. She nodded eagerly.

"Arms straight in front of you," Bill said in her ear. "Keep your head down and keep kicking."

He was still able to stand some of the time and waiting for the right moment gave her a hard push. Jessica felt the wave pick her up and suddenly she was racing towards the shore. It was the most exhilarating feeling she had ever experienced. She herself had magically become part of the ocean, part of the surging power. It was glorious, just glorious. It lasted only a few seconds but it was something she would never forget.

"My first wave..." she thought, as she worked her way back out through the shore break.

Blob and Frog had given up trying to catch waves on their own – they still couldn't swim quite fast enough – and Bill was now helping them, too.

"Farthest into the beach gets an ice cream," he said, but before they could begin the competition a siren began to wail in the distance.

"The shark alarm!" he shouted. "Quick! And get right out of the water." He pushed Jessica and Frog onto the next wave, Blob onto the one after, and finally surfed in himself.

It was agreed that as the contest had been cut short, everyone should have an ice cream. Blob was leading the way up to the kiosk, and as they passed the lifeguard's elevated chair, he called to them.

"Hey kids, did you see the shark?" The three of them spun round, and then went closer.

"What shark?" Blob asked.

"You were out there with your dad, weren't you?" They all looked at each other and finally nodded.

"Well the shark was swimming round only about a metre away from you. A big bronze whaler. Must have been at least 4 metres long."

Jessica felt herself going wobbly at the knees. A shark! Just a metre away! A huge shark! And none of them had known a thing. They stood, shocked into silence for quite a long time. At last Frog spoke:

"It's all right," he said to Jessica. "As long as Blob's around, no shark would ever touch us. We're much too skinny." He was already running as he spoke.

"That's not funny!" Blob roared, and took off after him. Jessica and the lifeguard dissolved into laughter.

"I've been thinking," Blob said. "We really oughtn't let the Bell gang get away with what they did." The others looked at him questioningly.

"Even if their Jessica didn't trip you, J-T," he went on. "Oliver still tried to knock Frog off the board, and then we were ambushed. And if you don't care about them hitting you with shanghais, I care about them hitting DOG. Nobody hits DOG and gets away with it."

"So, what?" Frog demanded.

"Bet you don't know this..." Blob said. "Bet you don't know why Thompson Street is called Thompson Street..."

"So what?" Frog said again..

"Thompson Street..."

"You mean where the chooks are?" Jessica interrupted.

"Thompson Street was named after Andrew Thompson," Blob said. "He was the first person to live on the island. He started off as a convict, but ended up rich...."

"So what?" Frog said yet again.

"Is that all you can say?" Blob replied. "So there's supposed to be buried treasure on the island..."

"Really?" Jessica said.

"I don't know," Blob said. "But that's what they say."

"So what?" Frog said a final time.

"If you don't stop saying that, I'll you know what," Blob said. "So, I was thinking that if we made a treasure map and let them find it, we could have some fun."

"How?" Jessica said.

"If the map said that treasure was buried up at the top of the island, then they'd start digging, wouldn't they?"

"The top of the island?" Jessica asked.

"It's supposed to be a park," Frog said. "But it's just bush. It's nice though, sort of wild...nobody much goes there."

"And they'd go on digging for days, wouldn't they?" Blob said. "Days and days."

Jessica and Frog looked at each other, their faces lighting up.

"And wouldn't that just serve them right?" Frog said.

"Also," Blob went on. "*We* might think about ambushing *them* when the time is right. Heaps of casuarina nuts up there... Ammunition," he added for Jessica's benefit. "Little pine-cone things. It's what they hit you with. They really hurt, but they're not very dangerous, unless you get one in the eye. It's what we usually fight wars with..."

"But not with shanghais," Frog said. "That is dangerous."

The more they pictured the plot, the more they talked about the details, the more they fell in love with it. The thought of That Paul, Christopher, their Jessica and Oliver struck with gold fever, slaving away in the heat, greedily trying to dig down through the stony earth, day after day, was just too delicious. Add in the idea of a surprise attack, vengeance for the ambush, and the whole thing became very beautiful.

There was just one problem: how to make a convincing map.

"I'll go and talk to Dad," Blob said.

He was back in minutes, so quickly that Frog's face fell.

"Were not allowed to, are we?"

"He thinks it's funny," Blob said. "And he says it's quite easy. I didn't tell him about the ambush though, so don't say anything."

"So how do we do it?" Jessica asked.

"We just have to draw what we want," Blob said. "The rougher the better, he says. He says my writing looks like a semi-literate convict's anyway. And then we just have to photocopy it so it looks like we've taken it from the original document. You know, an ancient map that's too valuable to risk in the open. Dad said he doesn't care how we get it to the Bell gang and he doesn't want to know."

"How will we get it to them?" Jessica asked.

"Ah, I've got an idea for that," Blob said. "Come on, let's get started..."

It was Jessica's first time at the top of the island and she thoroughly approved. The bush, officially known as Elisabeth Park, for the most part was open heathland, dotted about with eucalypts, angophoras and casuarinas. Blob led the way deep into the most secluded area. He stopped and made a careful survey.

"Over there," he said. "Just what we want." He pointed to a rocky outcrop, moved across and then walked all around it.

"Here," he said, standing on a patch of bare ground a little way off. "This is where it's buried." He pulled a compass from his pocket and took a bearing. Then he paced off the distance to the outcrop. "Thirteen paces south south-east," he said, and Jessica wrote it down in the notebook she was carrying.

"Now," he said. "We have to trace a route back to the summit of the island as the starting point and write directions. Make sure we don't leave any tracks..."

When Blob had finished drawing and annotating the map with his spiky capital letters on a plain sheet of paper, it looked reasonably convincing. By the time he had folded and crumpled and torn it almost in half along one of the crease lines, and then run it through the copy function on Bill's printer it appeared to be absolutely genuine, genuine

enough to fool the Bell gang anyway. As a final touch, Blob inserted the copy into a clear plastic envelope that he nicked from his father's desk.

"Now for the best part," he said. "We're going fishing, fishing for humans. And first we need to spread some burley."

"What's burley?" Jessica asked.

"Chopped up bait and stuff. You spread it around to attract the fish."

"Oh boy, we're really in luck," Blob said. The usual suspects were hanging round the basketball hoop, and they included Oliver and their Jessica.

"Let me do the talking," Blob whispered as they moved to join them. Blob motioned and they sat down at one side of the little court to watch. Oliver and their Jessica stared at them for a moment and then drifted further away. Blob was happy to note, however, that they were still well within earshot.

"Hey you guys, have you pumped up your ball yet?" The speaker was Mike, the older boy who had invited Frog and J-T to join in before. He came across, ruffled DOG's ears and sat down.

"That was bad luck in the triathlon," he said to J-T, generously. Frog noticed the other Jessica stiffen, and that she couldn't help looking guilty.

"Oh well," J-T said. "You can't win 'em all."

"Still..." Mike said. "So what's happening?"

"Nothing much," Blob said, and then: "Dad thinks he might have found a treasure map."

"No way!" Mike said. "What sort of treasure map?"

"It looks like it might be the top of the island," Blob said.

"You mean, for the treasure that's supposed to be buried here?" Blob shrugged.

"Dunno," he said. "It might be."

"Where did he find it?"

"It was in an old chest somebody gave him, stuck up under the lid. He's taken it into the library to see what they think."

"Really?" Mike said, his eyes widening. "You really think it's real?"

"Might be. We made a copy. We thought we might go up and check it out sometime..."

"Can I have a look?" Mike asked, a touch slyly. Blob grinned.

"Better bring a pick and a shovel..." he said. "Sure you can have a look. It's pinned on the board in Dad's workshop. Come round, if you want..."

And neither Blob, nor Frog, nor J-T were the least bit surprised to see Oliver and their Jessica disappearing up the hill shortly afterwards.

When they got home themselves, Bill was out sailing his board. Solemnly they trooped down to the work deck, which was open to anyone, having no walls or door, and equally solemnly they inspected the noticeboard where their father was accustomed to pin his working sketches. The map in its plastic envelope had disappeared.

The three looked at each other and try as they might they couldn't hold it in. Their giggles started slowly at first but built to a storm, and went on so long they all thought they would be sick.

The hardest thing any of them had ever done was to wait for dusk the next day. Blob insisted that they had to allow time for the hook to set before they tried to discover whether they had actually caught their fish. In case they should meet the others coming down, they walked all the way round to the northern side of the island before heading up to the top. Cautiously they picked their way down from the summit but when they reached the outcrop, they broke into an instant war dance. Blob's patch of bare earth was now a hole in the ground with a large pile of stony soil sitting beside it.

"They must have been working at it all day," Frog said gleefully.

"And I hope they've all got blisters," Blob said, inspecting the hole. "Wonder how long they'll go on before they give up?"

"Another day, at least," Jessica said.

"Do you think?" Blob asked.

"If you thought you were hunting treasure, wouldn't you?"

"All right," Blob said. "So we'll raid them tomorrow afternoon. Let's stock up on ammunition now."

The three children, rather to DOG's puzzlement, took large plastic bags from their pockets and began to gather casuarina nuts.

"Isn't three against four rather dangerous?" Jessica asked. She was beginning to have second thoughts about the wisdom of deliberately attacking the Bell gang.

"It used to be two against four," Blob said with studied unconcern.

"And we'll have surprise," Frog said.

"Aren't you afraid?" Jessica said.

"Of course we are..." Frog said.

"But what's that got to do with it?" Blob chimed in.

"Oh..." Jessica said rather weakly. Well, she thought, if they can do it, so can I.

"Besides," Blob said. "Don't you want to see their faces?" And Jessica had to admit that was something she really didn't want to miss.

Again they went round to the other side of the island, before making for the summit. At the top, Blob put DOG on his lead, and they cautiously began to creep towards the outcrop. Soon they began to hear voices. It seemed that an argument was in progress. The voices got angrier and angrier and they could begin to make out who was saying what. Christopher, their Jessica and Oliver all wanted to give up, to quit, but That Paul was apparently determined to carry on.

"I'm sick of this!" they heard Oliver shout. "You want to keep on digging, do it yourself."

"You shut up!" That Paul shouted back. "It's here, I tell you. And we'll go on digging till we find it."

Blob turned to look at his troops, each armed as he was with a bag full of knobbly nuts. They all pulled out a handful.

"Ready?" he whispered. They nodded and with one accord stepped into the open.

It took a moment for the Bell gang, all talking at once, to register their presence and then there was a comical double-take.

"Well aren't you a bunch of idiots?" Blob said casually. He watched delightedly as their jaws dropped.

"What do you mean?" That Paul said, after a long moment, a horrible suspicion already forming in his mind.

"That we made the map, of course," Blob said triumphantly.

"All that digging..." Frog crowed, watching the Bell gang visibly deflate.

"And it's so hot..." J-T added, with a mock sympathy that she enjoyed enormously.

"You must be so tired, and so thirsty..."

"You absolute idiots!" Blob exulted.

"Greedy idiots!" Frog added.

"Downright thieves!" Jessica piled on for good measure.

"That'll teach you," Blob said, picking up on her line. "That'll teach you to come into my father's workshop and steal stuff."

"And that'll teach you to cheat in the triathlon," Frog said. "And I mean you," he added staring straight at their Jessica. "You tripped J-T, and you know it, because you wouldn't have been able to beat her otherwise."

The Carol's kids stood there contemplating their victims. It was so sweet, oh so sweet. One thing remained.

"Now!" Blob shouted at last. And he, J-T and Frog let fly with a hail of nuts, catching the others at their lowest, wreaking doom and havoc and putting them to instant rout.

The Bell gang only stopped when they were far down the slope and well out of range, leaving the Carol's kids in possession of both the high ground and the pickaxe and shovel the gang had been using. There was an agitated conference and at last Oliver stepped forward.

"I have to get the tools," he said. "They're my father's..."

"If you want them, come and get them," Blob invited, tossing a nut up and down.

There was another long conference and eventually, That Paul stepped forward.

"Single combat," he called. "You and me... but you're afraid..."

Jessica immediately had a bad feeling.

"Don't," she said. "It's a trap. It's some sort of trap. It has to be."

"Coward!" came from down the hill. "You're a coward. I knew you wouldn't have the guts for single combat."

Blob shifted angrily and began to march forward, but Jessica grabbed him by the arm and hung on.

"It's a trap," she said again. "I know it's a trap."

"I don't care," Blob snapped. "Nobody calls me a coward." He shook Jessica free, and stepped forward.

"Tomorrow afternoon," he called. "At low tide. The usual place."

"And I bet you chicken out," Paul sneered.

"Oh, I'll be there," Blob shouted. "Don't you worry about that!" And suddenly invested with a lofty dignity, he led the way to the path down the hill.

"But what does it all mean?" J-T asked. She had let Blob get some way ahead so she could interrogate Frog. "Where's the usual place? And why at low tide?"

"Island duels are always fought at Tennis, in the mud," Frog said.

"Oh, so they're not serious, then? It's just a mud fight."

"It's very serious," Frog said. "Mud can really hurt and the idea is to throw so much into the other guy's face that it gets into his eyes. When he can't stand it any more and has to go and wash them out, he loses. And if you lose a duel like that, there's only one reason. It's because you're a sissy and then you get laughed at for months by everyone. On the island, losing a duel is the worst thing that can happen to you. Everyone comes to watch. Everyone knows."

Jessica thought about it all for some time. It seemed a bit silly really but then, she supposed, it was probably a better way of settling things than fighting with she didn't know what. Fists? Sticks? At least it seemed that no one could get hurt very much.

"Has Blob ever fought a duel before?" Jessica asked.

"Once," Frog said reluctantly.

"And did he win?"

"He was a lot younger then," Frog mumbled defensively. "It's why That Paul thinks it's safe to challenge him now. It's why he called him a coward."

"Have you ever fought a duel?"

"No," Frog said. "And I don't want to. Losing is terrible."

Jessica was beginning to understand. Maybe it was only your pride that could get really damaged, but maybe that was worst of all.

As the evening wore on and then throughout the day that followed, Blob grew more and more remote, a warrior withdrawing into himself, gathering his strength for the fight of his life. Frog and Jessica hovered about him with anxious solicitude, and even

did his share of the washing-up, but he seemed to have been translated to some higher plane where the mundane things of the world could no longer penetrate.

His father watched him with a knowing eye, but said nothing. Bill should stop it, Jessica thought at one point, but then realised it was the one thing he could never do, not and have Blob keep his self-respect.

At lunchtime, Blob pushed his sandwich around the plate and then quietly slipped it to Frog. Jessica started to get really worried. Blob off his food was something she had never yet witnessed and it was truly alarming. Most of all, they were hyper-conscious of the tide dropping inexorably, measuring out the minutes to Blob's meeting with fate.

At last it was time to go.

The park at Tennis was crowded with what seemed like every kid on the island. Word had spread magically and no one wanted to miss it. The little bay tucked in behind the wharf glistened darkly in the sun. Blob strode manfully down to the sea wall, ignoring the pointing and the murmurs, shed his shirt, his shorts and sandals, and climbed down onto the mud. At the same moment, That Paul also slipped over the wall. He too had stripped down to his swimmers. He and Blob were about the same height, but where Blob was tubby That Paul was thin and wiry and looked much tougher. J-T sucked in her breath. She knew That Paul was also a couple of years older and much more experienced.

The two combatants moved out into the middle of the mud flat and began to circle each other well beyond throwing range. With one accord the spectators gravitated down to the sea wall.

"Get on with it!" someone shouted impatiently, but still the two boys just circled each other. Then as though at some signal, they both stooped, grabbed handfuls of mud, and moved in.

Jessica shivered. True, it was only a mud fight, but there was something primal in the way the two boys were facing off against each other, each determined to reduce the other to abject humiliation. The first exchange of volleys brought a sigh from the spectators, then as the mud began to fly thick and fast the crowd started to bay.

Soon the combatants were streaked and splattered, though as yet neither had gained any sort of advantage. Then all at once, Blob scored two direct hits one after another on Paul's face, and he began to give ground. Again Blob scored and Paul began to shake his head from side to side as though trying to clear his eyes.

"Come on Blob!" Frog shouted. "You've got him! You've got him! Kill him! Kill him..." But to Jessica, something seemed wrong. Paul was still backing away, faster now, but he was also going crab-wise and seemed to be heading to some predetermined spot. She grabbed Frog by the arm.

"Something's wrong," she shouted in Frog's ear over the noise. "He's up to something."

Again Blob landed a handful of mud full in Paul's face, and another. The crowd roared. But instead of trying to fight back, Paul was crouching and feeling about. A moment later he straightened and threw. Blob gave a cry and doubled over, his hands to his face. Again Paul threw, and again Blob cried out, turning away and trying to protect himself.

"Rocks!" Frog screamed. "He's throwing rocks." He jumped over the sea wall and began to run towards his brother. But Blob had taken matters into his own hands.

Despite the blood pouring down his face from the jagged cut over his eye, he had charged forward, grappled with Paul, brought him down and using his superior weight was forcing the boy's face deep into the mud. Others were now also running towards them, and Mike arrived at the same time as Frog.

"Let him up Blob," Mike shouted. "Let him up or you'll drown him. You've won! You've won!" He pulled at Blob's shoulder and he and Frog between them managed to separate the warriors. Except Paul was no longer a warrior. He was broken, scrubbing at his face and sobbing incoherently.

"He hid those rocks before the fight" Jessica said. "He knew they were there..." several of the others who had gathered around nodded agreement. Mike stared at Paul with contempt.

"You're a worm," he sneered. "A coward and a cheat. You're finished. On the island you're finished." He turned his back and began to walk away. Paul's sobs slowly ceased and he looked towards his friends, but they too were walking away.

Frog and Jessica took Blob down to the water to clean off the mud. Jessica soaked his shirt and then wrung it out to sponge at the cut over his eye. The skin had split quite badly and was still pouring blood, as scalp wounds do.

"Come on," she said. "We have to take you home."

Bill greeted the return of the wounded warrior with calm efficiency. Blob holding an absorbent pad to the cut was whisked off to hospital, to return a couple of hours later sporting three stitches, a waterproof dressing, and his first scar of honourable battle.

"Just one question," Bill said at dinner. "Who won?" The shining look that Frog and Jessica directed to Blob was all the answer he needed.

Chapter seven

Bushfires ringed the city. The sun shone redly through a sky clouded with smoke haze and drifting fly-ash flecked the water. Adults gathered in little groups to discuss the situation, which grew steadily worse. Houses in vulnerable areas around Sydney were burning and even some suburbs seemingly far from the bush were suffering. The long, dry summer and a hot north-westerly wind, which seemed to have been blowing from the interior of the continent for weeks, had created tinderbox conditions which meant that the slightest spark unleashed an instant fury of flame. Worst of all, several fires had started in the national park and were heading straight for Pittwater.

The kids on the island, however, by and large, were far more concerned with the fact that next week the holidays would be over and whether they wanted to not, liked it or not, were ready to or not, they would all have to go back to school. A pall of gloom hung about them almost as thick as the smoke from the fires.

As the morning wore on, Bill summoned Blob and then disappeared in the tinny.

"Dad says he's gone to help a friend in Lovett Bay get ready," Blob told the others. "He says we're to stay around the house and to pack a bag each. He says we have to be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Why?" Frog demanded crossly.

"Because of the fires, stupid," Blob said. "I wonder if Boris is all right."

Both Frog and Jessica shrugged.

"I think I just better nip over and see," Blob said.

"But your father said you have to stay around the house," Jessica protested.

"It is staying round the house," Blob said. "He's only just over there..." He pointed across the water to where the Bifrost loomed through the smoke.

"I am coming too," Frog said.

"Well, I'm not," Jessica said determinedly. "I'm staying right here."

"All right," Blob said. "But you'd better put DOG on his lead to make sure he doesn't wander off.." And without more ado the two boys disappeared down the front steps.

Jessica went back through the house. DOG was lying on the back porch, panting in the heat. They were bubbles of saliva around his mouth. It didn't look like he had any intention of moving anywhere any time soon, but Jessica clipped his long lead to his

collar just in case. He didn't stir which was most unlike him. Usually he had at least a thump of the tail for her but now he didn't even seem to know she was there. She began to wonder if he was ill. The phone rang and Jessica went back inside. She wondered whether she should pick it up but decided to let it ring, then she heard her mother's voice speaking to the answering machine.

"Jessica! Jessica! I must talk to you. You can't stay there. It's too dangerous. I'm coming to get you right now." Abruptly the voice fell silent. Jessica was alarmed. Her mother had sounded half hysterical, and the last thing she wanted was for Gillian to come charging up, causing trouble. Crises, she knew from bitter experience, were not her mother's strong point. She debated with herself whether to try to stop her, but realised it was already too late.

She went back out and sat down next to DOG, putting a hand on his forehead. He made a listless effort to lick her knee and failed. She began to get really worried.

At last she heard the boys bursting back into the house and called to them.

"Boris has an axe on deck," Frog said importantly as he came through the back door. "Ready to cut the anchor warp if the fire gets too close."

"DOG's sick," Jessica interrupted. "Really sick."

Blob followed Frog onto the porch and took one look.

"That's tick poisoning," he said. "We've seen it before. We must have missed one." One of the boy's jobs when they were on the island was to search DOG morning and night for paralysis ticks, bloodsucking insects whose poison could easily kill an animal if they were not removed in time. DOG's coat had been clipped for the summer, as usual, but even so it was easy to miss one of the horrible little creatures.

"What does tick poisoning do?" Jessica asked anxiously. "What should we do?"

"First we have to find the tick," Blob said. he had knelt down by Josh and was already running his hands carefully all over the huge dog. "Then we have to get him to the vet," he added. "He has to have serum or the poison will paralyse his lungs and he'll die."

Frog had been looking more and more stricken.

"It's my fault," he said. He too was kneeling and was searching in between DOG's toes. "I was in a hurry this morning, and I didn't do it properly." He was starting to cry. Blob looked at him and thumped him on the arm, kindly.

"It takes much longer than a couple of hours for this to happen," he said. "We must have missed the tick yesterday or even the day before. And kept on missing it. It happens. Even Dad misses them. Here... right inside his ear." He pulled and then held up a dirty, grey-green bulb about the size of a fingernail. At one end there was a tiny head and legs. He squashed it on a rock and Jessica was amazed at the quantity of blood that spurting out.

"And here," Frog said, holding up another. He and Blob looked at each other in shock.

"This is really bad," Blob said. "Two ticks is really bad. So much poison..."

"What are we going to do?" Jessica demanded, her voice rising. "We can't let him die."

"Of course not," Blob said. "We have to find Dad..."

Even in that short time, the situation outside had deteriorated markedly. The fire, travelling frighteningly fast, driven by a roaring wind generated by its own heat, was bearing down on Pittwater. Smoke was now so thick that the sun was just a red gleam and the Bifrost across the way was almost lost to view. They decided that Jessica would stay with DOG and that the boys would take the D2 round to Lovett Bay in search of their father.

"And don't let DOG have anything to drink," Blob shouted as they raced down the stairs to the beach. "If it gets into his lungs he'll get pneumonia. And put Kelly in the cat box, just in case."

"All right," Jessica called, and watched as the boys set the long board in the water and headed off. The wind, blowing straight down the channel, was strong now, whipping up whitecaps, and they found it hard going, but the urgency of DOG's condition lent them strength. Then with a sudden howl they were hit by the full force of the blast generated by the fire storm erupting out of McCarr's Creek. It seemed as though someone had opened a furnace door on hell. The heat was frightening and they were being blown back faster than they could paddle.

"Into the water, quick" Blob ordered, and with one accord the two boys rolled over the side and clung grimly to the board. The squall seemed to last for hours, but in reality it took only minutes for the worst of it to pass. The roar of the wind was now replaced by the roar of the flames. They climbed back on the board and grimly set off again.

Jessica got the cat box down from on top of the cupboard in the laundry and went in search of the kitten. She was curled up on Blob's bed and seemed totally unconcerned. She didn't even protest about being put in the cage. She took Kelly out to the porch and after gently wiping the foam from DOG's muzzle she settled down to wait. She had no idea how long it might take the boys to find their father and having to sit there and watch poor, old DOG fighting for breath, unable to do anything to help him, was just horrible. The air grew thicker and thicker, smokier and smokier, and to Jessica it began to seem as though she were lost in a timeless fog.

The boys fought their way round the corner of the island, past Elvina Bay and on to Rocky Point. Lovett Bay, when they got there, was crowded with boats full of people just sitting and watching in awe as bright flame roared along the northern shore, devouring trees and houses, shooting high and sending a rain of sparks and embers pouring down on the bush not yet alight. From time to time, a tree well in advance of the fire-front would explode into a fountain of fire and the flames behind would race to catch up with this new advance into enemy territory. For that's what the fire was, a ravening army on the march, destroying everything in its path.

To Blob and Frog, the glare of the flames stabbing through the murk made it look as though the very air was on fire and they couldn't imagine how anyone could possibly survive this inferno, especially anyone on land. Blob spotted one of the small police launches trying to marshal the crowd of boats and with part of his mind realised that the bay must have been evacuated and that everyone who lived there had been ordered to take to the safety of the water.

"Come on," he shouted to Frog. As they pulled alongside, they saw one of the policemen on board was Johnno and their hearts sank. But Johnno, since the affair of Boris's canoe, had revised his opinion of the boys and was less disposed to be unreasonable.

"Have you seen my father?" Blob shouted. "We have to find him. It's an emergency."

Johnno stared at them. The sight of the two boys paddling a board in all this chaos was so astonishing that for a moment he was lost for words. He opened his mouth to

deliver a tirade, and then stopped short. If the boys said it was an emergency, he was now prepared to believe them.

"Over there," he shouted, and pointed. "I saw him a while ago. He was helping to take stuff out of one of the houses."

Blob waved a thank you, and they set off for the northern shore picking their way through the motley armada of boats. People stared at them and some shouted, but they kept grimly on.

"There," Blob said in Frog's ear. "That's our boat, over there."

"And that's Dad," Frog shouted back. Through the swirling smoke and ash, they could see him standing on a jetty, holding the boat's painter. As they watched, a man came out of the house above with the bundle over his shoulder. It was Stefan, their neighbour, helping to salvage possessions. The fire was very close now.

"Hurry Stefan!" they heard their father shout. Sparks and embers were beginning to fall on both men, as Stefan raced down the length of the wharf. They both tumbled into the dinghy and a moment later were drawing away.

"Here!" Blob shouted. "Over here!" And the dinghy turned towards them...

It took a minute or to explain, but very quickly Bill understood the situation. Stefan and his bundle were transferred to another boat, the D2 was pulled on board the tinny, and they were on their way home.

The first Jessica knew of her mother's arrival, were staccato footsteps in the laundry behind her. She turned just as her mother burst out onto the porch and they stared at each other in stunned surprise.

"Where are the others?" Gillian demanded, when she could speak.

"Out," Jessica said reluctantly.

"Out where?" Gillian asked, her voice rising rapidly. "They've gone out? They've gone out and abandoned you? At a time like this. They've abandoned you to the fires..."

"Mother! They haven't abandoned me. They're coming back as soon as they can..."

"They've left you alone? So they have abandoned you. I can see that for myself, thank you very much. Come on. Get your things. We're leaving. Right now."

"I can't leave..."

"Right now!" Gillian shouted. "The water taxi's at the jetty, and he can't wait more than a minute or two. Get your things."

"Mother, I can't leave..."

"I knew it was a mistake to let you stay here. Do as you're told, young lady."

"I can't leave. I won't leave. And you can't make me."

"Jessica, you are 10-years-old. We are in the middle of a bush fire. If you stay here you'll die. You will do exactly as you're told. And you'll do it right now." Gillian bent down to seize her daughter by the arm, but Jessica was too quick for her. She scrambled to her feet, ducked and jumped backwards.

"Please listen," she said. "Just listen..." But Gillian began to move determinedly towards her. Jessica saw the softball bat that the boys used for pickup games on the tide-flat leaning in a corner. She swooped and seized it, holding it threateningly in front of her. Her mother stopped, in shock.

"Why will you never listen?" Jessica shouted. "You never listen. You never, ever listen."

Gillian stepped back, then turned and marched through the house. Jessica was left holding the bat and feeling both stupid and deeply alarmed. She couldn't imagine what her mother would do now. Gillian returned and stood regarding her.

"The taxi's gone already," she said and then: "So I'm listening."

Jessica took a deep breath and put the bat back in the corner.

"DOG is sick..." she said and she gestured to where Josh lay unmoving and breathing stertorously. "He has tick poisoning. He's being paralysed... Listen to his breathing... If we don't get him to a vet soon, he'll die... and I can't leave him."

Gillian went and sat on the back step, put her head in her hands and sat gazing at the smoke roiling past.

"You have to leave him, darling," she said at last. "You have no choice. If you stay here you'll die."

"No one will die, mother. If the fire jumps to the island, we can just go and get in the water. We'll be safe there, though I don't know how we'll get DOG down to the beach..."

"Where are the others?" Gillian asked, her voice returning to normal.

"Bill is helping with the bushfires," Jessica said, still wary. "And the boys have gone to find him."

Gillian turned to look at her daughter and opened an arm. Hesitantly, Jessica went to sit beside her.

"How long will they be?" Gillian asked.

"I don't know," Jessica said miserably. "I just have to wait..."

"Then we'll wait together," her mother said.

Neither of the boys remembered much about the journey home, but neither of them would ever forget the scenes they had witnessed in Lovett Bay, scenes of a world gone mad with people's homes vanishing in the furnace, homes of people they knew, friends. It had all happened so fast and without the open water for the locals to retreat to, it might have been a much greater disaster than it already was. And there was still every chance the fire might jump to the island. People were talking about radio reports that it had already spotted right over Pittwater to Newport on the other shore.

The tinny nosed into their beach. Frog jumped out and made the painter fast, while Blob and Bill lifted the board out and carried it back to its place. Then they all raced up the stairs and round the back. Gillian was still sitting on the back step but Jessica was crouched over DOG.

"How is he?" Bill asked, taking in the scene at a glance.

"Really bad," Jessica said, tears in her voice. "I'm frightened." Bill knelt down and felt DOG's nose.

"Hey, old Josh," he said. "Not feeling so good?" Weakly, DOG tried to move his tail and failed.

"All right," Bill went on. "Straight to the vet. He needs serum as quickly as possible. We have to go right now. What about you?" he added, turning to Gillian. Jessica looked at her mother beseechingly.

"I want to take Jessica home," Gillian said. "She needs to be somewhere safe."

"But Mum..." Jessica began.

"Please don't argue."

"But I love him. I have to go. I just have to."

Gillian regarded her daughter for a long moment, sighed and then nodded.

It was the last day.

The bush-fire had spared the island and DOG was home again, still shaky but improving rapidly. With Jessica carrying Kelly and her mother helping the others, they had lifted DOG down to the beach using his rug as a stretcher, crossed the channel and then hoisted him into Bill's hatch-back. They had all gone to the vets and when DOG had been treated and they had been reassured that he would recover, Gillian had turned to Jessica.

"I won't ask, because I know what the answer will be," she had said with a wistful smile. "See you on Monday. We have to get you ready for school..."

The next two days without DOG to fall over at every turn had seemed most peculiar, the house empty and rather forlorn, but then it was a strange time generally. In the aftermath of the fires, which had finally died with a wind change, everyone was subdued, quietly exchanging experiences and giving thanks that no one had been killed, at least not here on Pittwater.

When they had been able to bring DOG home at last, the hardest thing had been to keep him quiet. Julian, the vet, had warned them sternly that too much exertion would re-activate the poison. And of course, sensing as dogs do, that change was coming, DOG wanted nothing so much as to race around with them.

That morning, the last morning, Frog, the early bird, had roused them out of bed to go swimming...

It was another glorious day, with just a hint of crispness to indicate that autumn might not be far away. They swam all the way up to Carol's and then climbed on the roof of the shelter shed to warm up in the rising sun.

"Well," Blob said. "That was about the best holiday ever." Frog and Jessica could only agree but after that they were quiet. There was nothing to say. Tomorrow they would be off in their different worlds.

After breakfast, they packed their gear and stacked it on the deck ready to go.

"All right," Bill said. "Let's do it then."

"That's not fair," Frog said belligerently. "We've still got half an hour."

"Ah," Bill said. "But I thought you might want to say goodbye to Boris on the way."

The three looked at each other, somewhat ashamed, and carried their bags down to the tinny without another word, though they all took time to give DOG a last hug.

Boris and Ika seemed to be waiting for them. They climbed on board and Blob, their spokesman, made a small speech:

"We've come to say goodbye. We have to go back to school tomorrow. And we want to thank you for letting us have such a good time on the Bifrost. And I want to thank you for letting me help with the knives."

"Is pleasure," Boris said. "But talking of knives, don't forget to take. Not to leave behind after all trouble to make."

The three children stared at each other, wild excitement flaring in their faces. Behind them Bill grinned and suddenly suspicious, Blob swung round in time to catch him. Boris shrugged apologetically and Bill nodded.

"Father is paying for vet for Ika," he said. "So I make knives... Come..." And he led the way for'ard to where the knives were again arranged on the hatch cover.

"This one," he said, handing one to Frog. "For you. "

"And this lady seax, so for you," he said to Jessica. And indeed, this particular knife did somehow seem more feminine, having a rather more slender blade.

"And this, but of course, for you," he said to Blob, handing him the biggest of the knives together with the sheath he had made himself.

The three of them were absolutely speechless and stood there, admiring Boris's craftsmanship and flashing the blades in the sun.

At last Blob spoke:

"This is the best thing I've ever had!" he said.

The end

For Josh,

Near this Spot
are deposited the Remains of one
who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the virtues of Man without his Vices.

This praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery
if inscribed over human Ashes,
is but a just tribute to the Memory of
BOATSWAIN, a DOG.

With thanks to Lord Byron, who was also privileged to have a Newfoundland for a
friend.

