

Batman and Robyn

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Illustrations by Jerry Hoare



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Chapter I

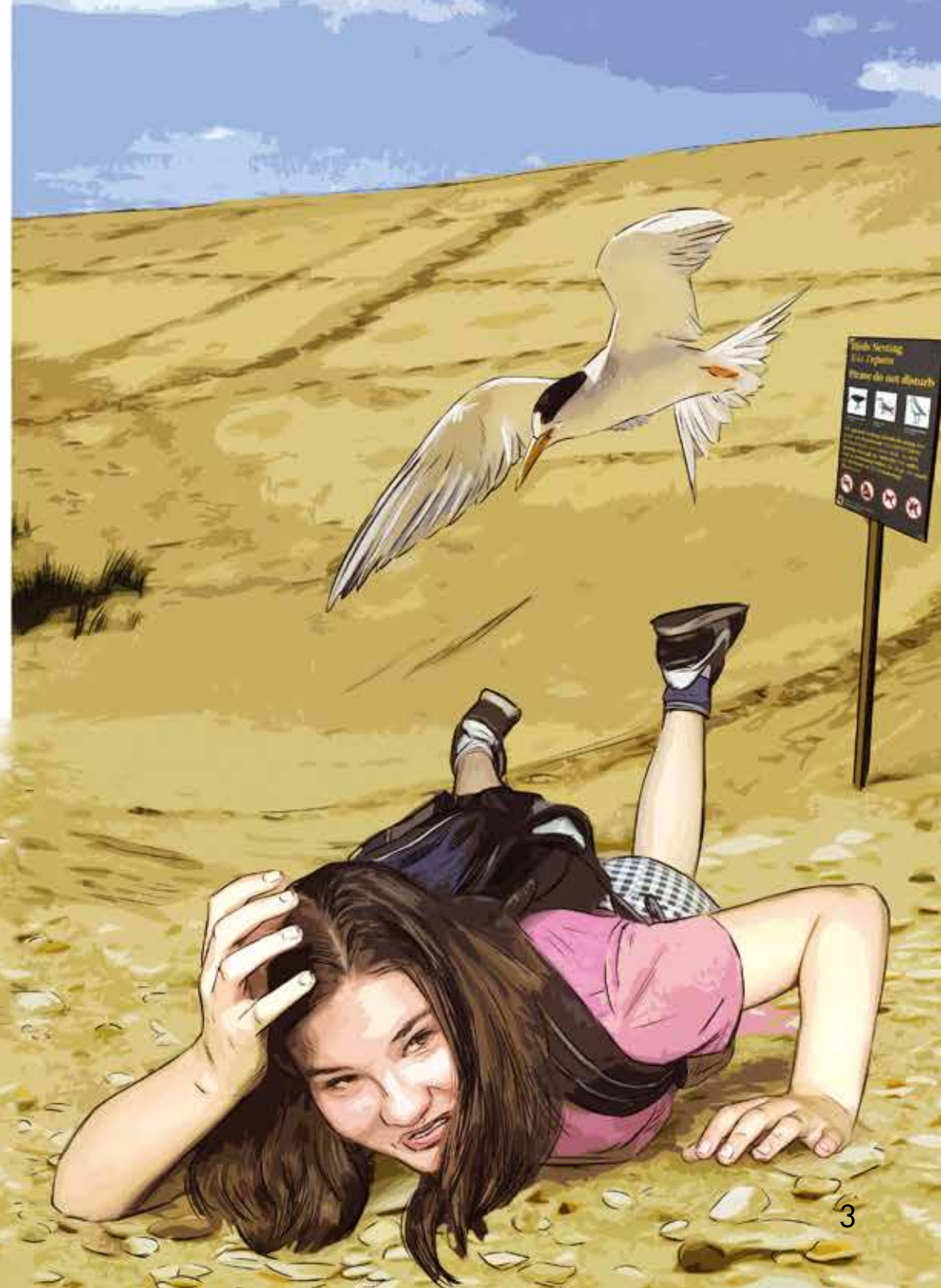
“Help me!” Aroha screamed and fell onto the sand. Her attacker swooped again, lower this time. She could hear the beating of wings.

Aroha waited for another attack. But it didn’t come. She raised her head and felt something warm and wet running down the back of her neck.

“I’m bleeding!” she screamed.

“Don’t worry, Aroha,” said a kind voice. “It’s not blood. It’s bird poop, very rare bird poop at that!”

Aroha wiped the back of her neck. The voice was right. It was her nana’s friend, Mrs Milligan.

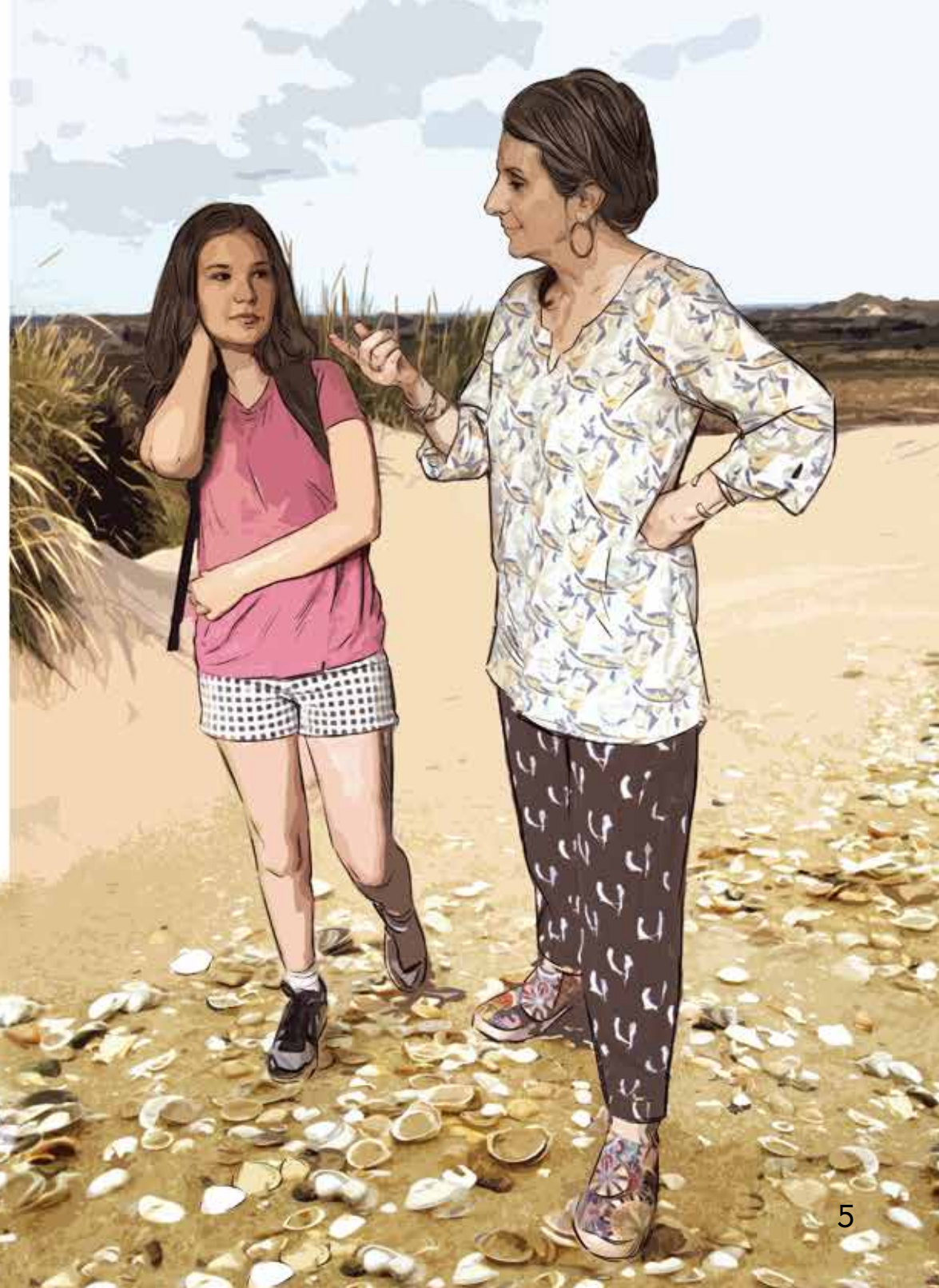


Mrs Milligan had been watching from a small wooden hide in a nearby dune. As soon as she saw Aroha enter the nesting area, she sprang into action. One of the fairy terns, whose nesting area was nearby, also took action. He swooped low over Aroha's head in an effort to scare her away.

Mrs Milligan's main concern was for the safety of the two precious eggs that lay in the sand and shells a few metres from where Aroha had fallen.

After making sure the eggs were intact, Mrs Milligan helped Aroha to her feet and guided her to the hide.

"Thank goodness you missed them," she said. "You're not the first person to get pooped on by a fairy tern. They'll do anything to protect their eggs. I'll give you water to get that mess off your neck."



Chapter 2

Aroha had been at the campsite in Mangawhai Heads for two days. She had kayaked to the wildlife refuge across the estuary. Aroha rushed up the first dune. She didn't stop to read the signs and when she got to the top, the view amazed her. There was a vast wilderness of sand dunes, shells, tussock, wetland and the Pacific Ocean.

Aroha bounded down the dune. She didn't notice the fence. She didn't know that it marked the nesting area of one of the most endangered birds in the world. Mrs Milligan explained how close Aroha had been to hurting the birds and the eggs.

Aroha hadn't heard of fairy terns before. There were only 40 New Zealand fairy terns in the world. She had come close to two of the 17 eggs laid by fairy terns this breeding season.

Mrs Milligan was a volunteer who helped DOC* rangers protect the small birds and their eggs during the breeding season.

*Department of Conservation



“We can recognise each one by the coloured bands on their legs,” said Mrs Milligan. “We have names for most of them. The one who attacked you is “Batman”. He swoops to protect the eggs. The female is Robyn because she’s Batman’s mate. The Māori name for these birds is tara-iti.”

She went on. “They don’t nest in flocks. They spread out in pairs at five different places around the coast. Their nests aren’t really nests at all. Apart from pooing on anyone who gets close, camouflaging the eggs is their only defence.”

Aroha looked closely at a bowl of eggs that looked like the ones in the nesting area.

“They’re not real,” said Mrs Milligan. “They’re fake. We replace the real ones if the parents go away. If they come back and brood on the fake eggs, we bring the real eggs back. We keep the real eggs safe and alive at Auckland Zoo.”

Aroha thanked Mrs Milligan and promised to come back.

“Good,” said Mrs Milligan. “Next time wear a wide brimmed hat!”



Chapter 3

Aroha visited the dunes every day and her interest in the fairy terns grew. When Mrs Milligan wasn't there, Aroha talked to Maxine, a DOC ranger. Maxine's main job was protecting the fairy terns.

From the hide, Aroha watched Batman and Robyn. They left the nest one at a time to feed on the tiny fish that darted in the shallows of the estuary.



Aroha planned to take Dad to see the birds on her birthday.

Heavy rain had started over night and a gale was blowing. The binoculars Aroha got for her birthday would have to wait for another day.

Aroha knew that storms were a big threat to the fairy terns. The nesting areas could be flooded, or buried in sand. Breeding pairs might be forced to leave their nests.

As Dad decorated a cake with a picture of a fairy tern, Aroha put on her rain jacket.

“I have to go and see Mrs Milligan,” she said. “Batman and Robyn are a really good breeding pair. They make a good team.”

“So it’s true that one good tern deserves another!” laughed Dad.

“Yes,” Aroha groaned.



Chapter 4

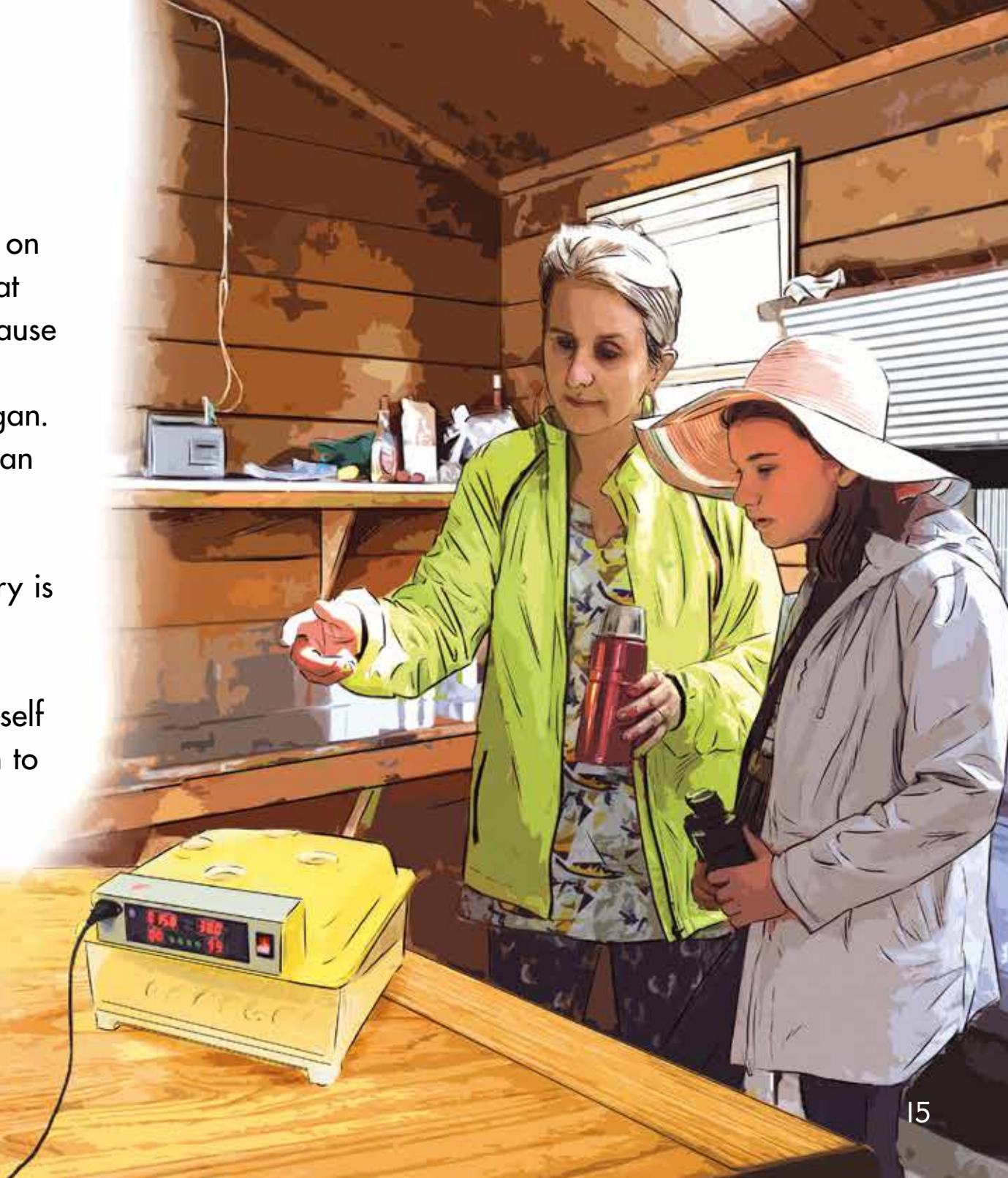
Mrs Milligan looked worried.

“I’ve just had a call from Maxine,” she said. “She’s just seen Batman and Robyn sheltering on the Kaipara Harbour, 50 kilometres away. That means their eggs have been abandoned. Because a slip has closed the road, Maxine can’t get back. I’ve got to get the eggs,” said Mrs Milligan. She grabbed a flask for the eggs and turned an incubator on.

“I’ll come with you,” said Aroha.

“Sorry, dear,” said Mrs Milligan. “The estuary is pretty choppy and it’s going to get worse.”

She pointed at the incubator and said, “You stay here and make sure that doesn’t switch itself off. It will keep the eggs warm until I get them to Auckland Zoo.”



Aroha watched as Mrs Milligan paddled into the gale. Then she saw her moving up the beach towards the dunes. But she stopped. With her birthday binoculars, Aroha could see Mrs Milligan lying on the beach. She wasn't moving. Aroha grabbed her phone and rang her dad.

Dad was good in emergencies. Within five minutes, a police officer, a paramedic and a surf lifesaver were racing across the estuary in an inflatable boat. They ferried Mrs Milligan back across the estuary to a waiting ambulance.

Aroha's dad managed to get some information from the driver of the rescue boat.

"She tripped on a root and broke her leg," he said. "She was more concerned about some precious eggs. She said they have to be recovered and only she knows where they are."

"They are fairy tern eggs," cried Aroha. "I know exactly where they are."

"OK," said the lifesaver. "Let's go."



Chapter 5

Aroha scampered up the dune into the howling wind. Her dad followed her, carrying Mrs Milligan's flask from the rescue boat.

When Aroha got to the top of the dune, the easterly gale almost knocked her off her feet. The sand in the wind stung her face.

"Be careful, Aroha!" Dad shouted.

They made it to the hide where Aroha grabbed two fake eggs in case Batman and Robyn returned to the nest. She ran to the place where she knew the real eggs would be. Her heart sank when she couldn't see them. But getting down on her hands and knees, she found them among the sand and shells.

"Dad! Dad! Bring the flask, I've found them!" she shouted.



Chapter 6

Aroha rang Mrs Milligan in the hospital.

“Kia ora, it’s Aroha, Mrs Milligan! How’s your leg?”

“I’m not worried about my leg, Aroha,” said Mrs Milligan. “It’s covered up in a nice white cast. It’s the eggs I’m worried about.”

“Don’t worry,” said Aroha. “They’re safe and warm in the incubator.”

Mrs Milligan sounded thrilled and puzzled at the same time. “But how?” she asked.

“Can’t talk much,” said Aroha. “We’re going into a tunnel.”

“But the eggs need to get to Auckland Zoo, Aroha,” said Mrs Milligan.

“Don’t worry,” said Aroha. “I’ve got the incubator. It’s plugged into the dashboard of Dad’s ute and we’re already half way...”



Chapter 7

Five weeks later, Aroha got home from school and was surprised to find a letter addressed to her.

“It’s from Mangawhai,” said Dad. “I hope it’s not a bill for those fake eggs.”

Aroha opened the envelope excitedly. It was from Mrs Milligan. Inside there was a letter and a card. Aroha opened the card first. On the front were the words, “Happy Belated Birthday, Aroha!” There was a photo of Batman and Robyn standing on the sand beside two fluffy chicks. Above the photo, in Mrs Milligan’s handwriting, were the words “Many Happy Wee Terns!”

Aroha rushed to show the card to her Dad.

“Look at this!” she said. “You know I like my binoculars, Dad, but this is the best birthday present I’ve ever had.”



Shore Bird Facts and Tips

Help protect precious fairy terns by sharing these fairy tern facts and tips with your friends, family, classmates and teachers.

- Fairy terns nest during spring and summer, the busiest time for visitors. The birds are easily stressed, so people, dogs and vehicles can frighten them and cause them to abandon their eggs or chicks. Without the protection of both parents, the eggs and chicks are unable to survive.
- The chicks and eggs of fairy terns and other shore birds such as the New Zealand dotterel (tūturiwhatu) and Chatham Island oystercatcher (tōrea), are well camouflaged. This gives protection from flying predators but not from people who might step on an egg or chick by mistake.
- When at the beach, keep shore birds, eggs and chicks safe:
 - Stay well away from any nesting birds.
 - Watch where you walk; avoid shelly patches and walk on bare sand.
 - Stay out of any fenced areas and obey all signs.
 - Keep dogs out of wildlife refuges.
 - Check the local rules. If dogs are allowed, they still must be kept under control. Don't let your dog chase birds or wander into dune areas.
- In the unfortunate event that you find an injured shorebird, call the DOC Hotline (0800 362 468) for advice on arranging treatment for the injured bird.

Visit kids.spcaeducation.org.nz to learn more about caring for wildlife