

CHAPTER 11

Guardian Angel

They slept in. It was the girls who stirred first.

“*Up by five*, didn’t Tom say?”—asked Liz from her sleeping bag of her half awake companion.

“Yes. What’s the time?”

“According to your watch which is hanging from this hook, it’s a quarter to eight.”

“*First up wakes the others*, Tom said.”

“I’m exhausted,” said Liz. “And I’m sure I heard voices during the night. Unless I dreamt it.” They stirred at last, got out of the tents and roused the boys.

“Come on you men. It’s almost 8 o’clock and we’ve missed the tide by miles.”

“It can’t be eight,” said Tom sleepily.

“Well, it is.” The boys groaned and after a minute or two Tom emerged groggily into the daylight.

“Hello Liz. Hello Cate. Good Morning.”

“And good morning to you my merry somnambulist,” said Cate. “Were you walking in your sleep? You look like you’re *still* asleep.”

“And I feel like it. But wait till you hear why.”

“Why. What have you been up to?” Tom was reminded as he listened to his sister’s sharp question, not for the first time, of the tone of their mother’s voice. Mark emerged from the tent just then stretching and yawning.

“You can tell them, Mark.”

“Oh. Can’t I have a cup of tea first?”

“No. We’ve only just got up and the fire’s dead,” said Liz.

“I’ll get a stove going while you tell them.”

“Oh. It took me an age to get to sleep after the excitement.”

“What excitement?” asked Liz and Cate together. Then Mark told them what had happened.

“What luck,” said Liz when he had finished and she and Cate had finished cross-examining him. “So now we’ve got six clues.”

“And the prospect of more if we can read their Morse tonight,” said Cate.

“Come on. We had better get a move on,” said Mark. “Where’s Bill?”

“Still sleeping soundly,” said Cate. “We’ve forgotten him in the excitement. I’ll rouse him.”

It was not until after 9.30 that they got away from the island. To their surprise the river was still flowing slowly north. But the wind was light and, with the trees on the river banks masking it, did not offer much assistance. What there was of it was ‘on the nose’ as it came from the east and the direction of the river was the same. They had to tack the boats back and forth across the narrow stream. The incoming tide still carried them along but its force was less and less the further they progressed. They dropped their mainsails and manned the oars again. Bill was rowing *Emerald* and Liz *Sapphire* as they negotiated a slow bend to the left.

“Courage, me hearties,” said Cate looking up from the map. “The Brasswater is just around this bend.”

“What’s the Brasswater?” asked Liz who had been trying to keep up with Bill’s energetic strokes.

“A small lake according to this.”

“A mere,” said Tom, “surrounded by swamp.” The river narrowed somewhat as, slowly, they approached the entrance.

“Gin palace ahead!” called Mark who was steering *Sapphire*. Another of the high sided cruisers was steaming across the middle of the Brasswater pushing a large bow wave.

“Bet he’s going faster than he should,” said Tom. “Pull to the southern shore all crews!” he called. The cruiser slowed as its skipper saw the two boats at the entrance to the mere and he acknowledged them as the boat glided past them to port. But its waves were still big enough to cause the two boats to rock wildly.

The Brasswater was a large sheet of water some half a mile long and about four hundred yards across at its widest part. It was ringed with tall reeds.

"It feels a bit creepy," said Liz as they pulled slowly into it.

"How do you mean?" asked Cate.

"Well you can't work out where the lake ends and the shore begins."

"Have you noticed something?" asked Mark of no one in particular.

"Yes," said Tom. "The river is starting to flow back towards Port Stephens."

"Tide has turned."

"Shall we anchor?" asked Bill.

"No," said Tom. "Just row faster." So Bill and Liz renewed their efforts and pulled the boats on into the middle of the mere.

"This section could turn into hard work, Tom," said Mark. They had been conscious for some little time of the sound of an engine approaching from downstream.

"Hello. Guess who's coming up the river behind us?" called Liz as she pulled at the oars. Bill said: "It's the mystery sailor." The others turned to look behind them.

"I thought he passed us yesterday evening. We must have passed him."

"Either that or he dropped back downstream again later."

"Well," said Cate. "We're about to find out who he is."

That it was the intention of the mystery sailor to speak to them became clear as he approached. The funny looking boat came straight towards them. They could see the sailor himself standing at the helm his bushy hat topping a face which held a faint smile. The tall bow loomed over the two sailing boats. He throttled back the engine of his outboard motor as he came up to them and, turning to port, he ranged alongside them.

"Would you like a tow?" he called.

"Tom. It's Father Hannan!" cried Cate.

"Fancy seeing you lot in the middle of the Myall River. How are you Tom, Cate and Bill. And good to see you too, Mark and Liz."

"How did you know it was us?" asked Bill.

“Secret information, Bill,” he said with a grin.

“So you were right, Tom,” said Liz. “It *was* a guardian angel.” She recalled the weatherbeaten face and the perpetual half smile of this man from the year before, also the faint Irish brogue.

“Liz. I’m beginning to understand how you got that leave pass to come with us,” said Cate responding to the twinkle in the eyes of the priest.

“Now,” he said. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

The man in the boat stood revealed as a somewhat eccentric priest whom the five had met the previous year on their holiday in the rainforest clad ranges on the border between New South Wales and Queensland. They had known him then as a bushwalker of prodigious abilities who had assisted in finding two young men who had escaped from a crashed plane the five had stumbled upon.

“All this time you were a sailor too and we never knew about it,” said Mark.

“A man must keep some things up his sleeve,” said the priest. “And a fine lot of trouble you have all put me to, I might add. That night I spent hanging off the end of Snapper Island was most uncomfortable. I was shoved around by the tide from dusk till dawn. You could have had the decency to pick an island with more camping facilities.”

“I knew it,” said Bill. “I knew your boat must be somewhere around the island.”

“I should have realised when you came out of Karuah after us,” said Tom “that you were following us.”

“And don’t forget the Latin, Tom.”

“That’s right. *Ave atque vale*. The Latin should have put us on to him.” The priest threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“My congratulations. Your Morse must be good. I was hoping to confuse you completely and I forgot you had a Latin scholar with you.” Liz blushed.

“And an expert in Morse,” said Tom indicating Mark who blushed in his turn and quickly changed the subject.

“Er, have any of you noticed that we are almost back at the entrance to the mere?” They looked around. The three boats had been drifting backwards across the Brasswater.

“Give me a line each of you and we’ll pull up the Brasswater, drop anchor and continue this fascinating conversation.” The two crews hurriedly got out their towing lines. “One short on the port quarter,” said Fr Hannan. “That’ll be you Mark and Liz. And *Emerald* on the starboard quarter on a longer line.” The two boats were organised accordingly, sails were stowed and the priest engaged the gear on his outboard motor which had been idling away while they talked. The party motored sedately up the Brasswater to a little inlet at the northern end.

“And look at the name!” said Cate to the others. They looked at the title engraved on the transom of the boat which was towing them—*Great Saint Joseph*.

“That would have been a give away,” said Tom.

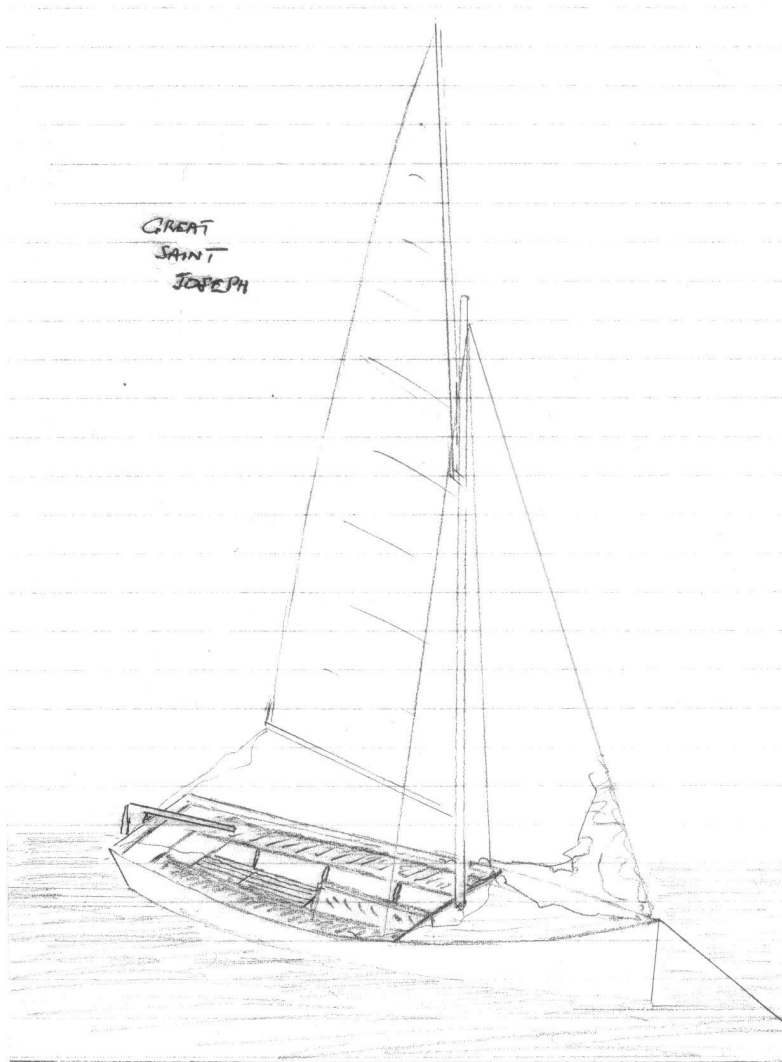
“There Tom. Didn’t I tell you, praying to St Joseph to get Liz to come would work?” said Cate. Tom grinned in reply.

“No wonder he had the stern inwards when we saw him moored below the Hawks Nest Bridge,” said Mark. “I thought it curious at the time that he had the bow out and the transom towards the shore.”

Father Hannan towed them slowly into the little cove where he brought up and dropped anchor.

“Come on. Raft up. One boat on each side and I’ll get the kettle on.” The crews hastened to tie their respective boats one on each side of *Great Saint Joseph*. The prospect of a cup of tea was inviting. They made bowlines in one end of their mooring lines and dropped them over a king post near the bow of the priest’s boat to secure the bows of their boats and then did the same to tie the sterns to small bollards on each side of the transom of the bigger boat using their buoyancy vests as fenders—‘to protect Father’s paintwork’, as Bill said.

“Come on then,” he said to them. “You’ll find she’s pretty stable.” They climbed up out of the two dinghies and onto the side decks of the bigger boat. The kettle was singing on a primus stove in the forward section of this curious boat. At Cate’s suggestion they had each brought a cup from their stores. Fr Hannan’s boat had bench seats along each side with room enough for them all to sit. He was cutting up two tea buns on a board beside the stove.



“Bought them yesterday in Tea Gardens—tea buns from Tea Gardens; it seemed appropriate. Also, I thought I might have company before too long.” He flashed that faint smile and twinkle in the eyes they remembered from the previous year. “Pass up the teapot young Bill. It’s by your feet.” Bill handed it to him and he dropped a generous handful of tea from a container into it and poured in boiling water from the kettle.

“What sort of boat is this, Father?” asked Mark.

“It’s a type designed in Queensland. Very simple to build. Flat bottom, flat sides and,” he added with a grin at Mark, “sails like a witch.”

“And you can sleep on board,” said Tom looking around.

“All the comforts of home. I put up an awning to keep the rain off and a mozzie net to keep the flies, mosquitoes and sand flies away. Now Cate, where are those cups?” She collected them from the others and placed them on a thin flat table that ran half way down the cockpit. He handed around a tin plate with large slices of tea bun and poured out tea for them all.

“Centre case?” asked Mark looking appreciatively at the structure beneath the table and then up at the priest.

“Yes. Swinging centreboard all encased except for those ropes which you use to pull the board up or down.” He indicated two ropes which poked out somewhat incongruously from holes in the top of the table.

“With a table on top. That *is* clever,” said Liz.

“Not much use when the boat’s heeled over heading to windward. But very handy at anchor when you have to feed crowds of visitors.” He handed around the cups. “Here’s the milk and the sugar. Cate, pass them around.” The five sat around the cockpit eating their tea bun and drinking cups of tea.

“This is just heaven,” said Liz. “A tea shop on the water.”

“And we don’t have to pay,” said Cate.

“Now what have you got to report? Have you enjoyed your cruise?”

“We’ve had a marvellous time, Father,” said Cate. “*And* we’ve had some adventures.”

“And some mystery,” added Liz.

“Already? You’ve only been out two days.”

“There’s a competition,” said Bill rushing in. “And the Navy, Army and Air Force are all competing and we’re trying to beat them all.”

“Well, hardly,” said Tom.

“You tell him, Tom,” said Liz. So, for the next five minutes Tom unfolded, with appropriate interruptions from the others, the finding of the various markers. When he got to the discovery of the key to the mystery he got Liz to tell how she found it. They produced the piece of paper and showed Fr Hannan. Then Mark related his seeing the Morse signal from Yacaaba Head.

“I’ve been wondering about those tough looking characters rushing up and down the river in canoes.”

“How many have you seen, Father?”

“There was one canoe at Hawks Nest. One yesterday afternoon after that storm and one early last night.”

“We missed the one last night. But we saw the other two.”

“So,” Cate summarised the position. “We’ve got six clues…”

“Two Ns, two esses, an H and a 5,” Bill interrupted.

“... and we are twelve short. But when we look across at Broughton Island tonight from the seashore we hope to get a whole lot more.”

“And, in the meantime,” said Liz we want to get the ones from Chinaman’s Knob, from that shack up the Myall River and the one at Bulahdelah Point.”

“They’re on the way.”

“Well, not really,” said Tom. “The one on Chinaman’s Knob *is* but the others are miles out of our way.”

“Where’s Chinaman’s Knob?” asked Father Hannan as he rummaged in a locker and produced a map.

“Not far up the river. It’s on the north side of the Little Brasswater. See there.” Tom pointed it out as Father produced the map.

“And where are the others?”

“Here, on Bulahdelah Point.”

“And up the river about three miles. It’s an old shack.”

“I know that shack,” said the priest. “Very ramshackle. Well the Little Brasswater’s only about a mile away. Come on, you lot. You’ve got me interested.” He stood up. “Bill, empty that tea pot over the side. Cate and Liz collect the cups. We’ll rinse them out

later. Put them in that tub for the moment. Mark and Tom. Swing the boats back onto the stern and we'll get the motor going."

They sprang to the various jobs appointed them. Tom went forward and untied the lines from the king post. Mark undid the stern lines. The two then swung the boats aft on lines of different lengths again so they would not foul each other as they trailed behind the bigger boat.

"Things always start to happen when Father's involved," said Liz to Cate confidently as they stowed the cups and empty teapot in a bucket under the foredeck, "don't they?" Her speech was interrupted by a roar as the priest started the outboard motor.

"Bill. Get on the foredeck and haul in the anchor," he shouted over the noise of the engine. "Make sure you rinse it well. I don't want mud all over my decks."

"Aye, aye, Sir—Father, I mean," he replied.

"He never says that to me," said Tom.

In no time at all the cavalcade emerged from the Brasswater and started motoring up river against the tide. Another cruiser passed them going downstream, and the skipper invited his wife to observe the funny looking surf boat motoring upstream laden with children and towing two smaller sailing boats. He was not displeased to see them bouncing in his wake as he passed. He liked to make his presence felt on the river.

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"I hadn't realised how noisy these engines were," said Cate in Liz's ear. They were sitting as far from the engine as it was possible.

"And how smelly," added Liz. "I'd prefer to be rowing even if we were hardly moving." The boys seemed oblivious to the discomfort as they watched the shore go past.

"We're turning to the east," said Mark.

"Hello. Look's like another opening in the river ahead. Must be the Little Brasswater." Tom was studying the map and showed it to Father Hannan. The river widened. There was a small island near the

southern shore with a marker post to which they could see an old rowing boat tethered.

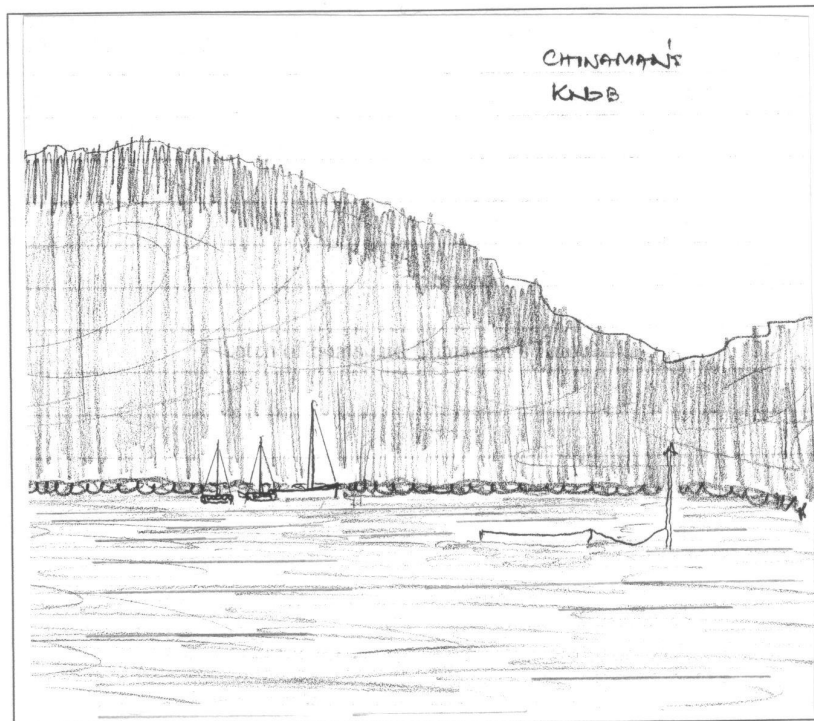
“And that looks like the Knob on the northern shore.” The trees which covered both shores rose suddenly in a small hill.

“With a bit of luck there will be a clear path to the marker,” said Tom.

“Yes. Two or all three of the parties must have visited it by now, mustn't they?” Father Hannan throttled the engine back and the boats cruised slowly along the northern shore of the mere.

“The scrub is certainly thick.”

“There is no obvious spot where the others have been.” The shore looked forbidding.



“Alright. Who’s going ashore?” asked the priest. The three boys volunteered. Liz and Cate said they were happy to stay on the boat. Father Hannan nosed his boat into the shore and the boys clambered over the side onto the bank. He kept the engine idling.

“Its pretty boggy,” said Mark as they pushed away from the shore. The ground climbed quickly and they pulled themselves up through the scrub and trees.

“Here’s some broken scrub,” said Tom indicating. “They’ve been here before us.” The three set off up through the scrub.

“It’s another S,” called Bill as they returned to the boat about ten minutes later.

“Oh, no,” said Cate.

“Afraid so,” said Mark. The boys climbed back on board *Great Saint Joseph*, picking bits of the bush off their clothing. Father Hannan put the engine in gear and the boat ambled away from the shore.

“How many esses is that?”

“Three at least.”

“There can’t be a place with three of them in the name.”

“Okay Bill,” said Father Hannan. “Get ready to drop the anchor again.” Bill went to the foredeck. “Let go when the boat stops moving; not before.” He steered the boat in a half circle and cut the engine. A few moments later they heard the splash as the anchor went over the bow.

“Now that shack up the Myall River is not easy to get to in a sailing boat. There are trees on both sides of the river and the wind is very unpredictable. What you need is a canoe.”

“Dad’s brought his on the Landrover,” said Mark. “But he’s miles away.”

“What’s the time?” the priest asked, speaking half to himself. “Close to eleven. Let’s see if we can call up a canoe.” The others looked at each other wonderingly as he walked forward and rummaged under the foredeck. He returned shortly afterwards with a small portable radio.

“A transceiver,” said Mark. “Dad’s got one—Ah! Now I see it all! They have known our every move. We’ve been spied on!” He

thumped the deck with his hand and looked expressively at the others. Fr Hannan turned a set of wheels with numbers on it and waited.

“I make no admissions,” he said in his faint Irish brogue speaking into mid air. There was a sound as of Morse code. He pressed a button on the radio and looked at it expectantly. Presently there was an answering signal in Morse which was repeated. He put the radio microphone up to his mouth and spoke: “VK2TTC, VK2TTC. This is VK2AEJ portable calling. VK2AEJ calling VK2TTC.” There was no response. “It all depends on whether your father has his monitor on,” said the priest to Mark. A minute or so later he spoke into the microphone again.

“VK2TTC. This is VK2AEJ calling. VK2TTC do you read me?” There was a crackling sound then the sound of a voice they knew came over the radio. “VK2AEJ portable. This is VK2TTC portable. You’re coming through loud and clear, Jack. Anything up? Over.”

“All is well here, James. I have to report however, that my cover has been blown. I am hanging on an anchor on the Little Brasswater surrounded by five not very clean children, very sticky and full of tea. They all look healthy enough and, so far as I can tell no one is drowned. Over.”

“We are happy to hear you’ve made contact. Sorry about your cover and I am instructed by their mother to ask you to tell Mark and Liz to wash their faces and hands immediately. Anything out of the ordinary happening? We didn’t expect to hear from you again. Over.”

“Your message to Mark and Liz has been conveyed,” said Fr Hannan twinkling at them. “All is well here. Both boats are in order and will arrive at their appointed destination this afternoon. But there *is* something out of the ordinary. We require a canoe. There are special circumstances which make it imperative. I am not at liberty to reveal the reasons on air but you can take it from me they are compelling and will meet with your certain approval. Can you chug over to Tamboy with it? Over.”

“Just a moment. I am consulting with my chief of staff...”

“Dad is talking to Mummy,” said Liz to the others.

“We will only have one canoe,” said Mark to the others. “Who will go?”

“Don’t forget we have to get the boats to Mungo. And we can’t really ask Father to tow us.”

“That would be an ignominious end. No we *must* sail in.”

“Well. I could sail *Emerald* with Bill,” said Cate.

“No. I want to go to the shack to get the clue.”

“There won’t be room in the canoe.”

“If Tom went in the canoe I could sail *Sapphire* and Liz could crew for you, Cate, on *Emerald*,” said Mark.

“Then Tom and I could go together!” said Bill with a grin.

“Don’t count your chickens yet,” said Tom.

The voice of Mr Parfitt over the radio broke in on their discussions.

“All is organised here, Jack. Pat and I will motor over with Mary Rose and the canoe. The ‘One Lunger’ does about 4 knots. Distance is close to 2 miles so it will take us about half an hour. Say another fifteen minutes to get ready. We might as well have some lunch when we get there so there may be another slight delay while we get in provisions. I suppose those kids have eaten all their supplies so a supply of sandwiches will need to be made. Expect us at about twelve thirty. Over.”

“Good, James. I can tell by the looks on their faces that the sandwiches will be most welcome. We will have another cup of tea waiting for your arrival.”

“Now. Where precisely will you be?”

“Just a minute while I look at the map.”

“*The chart, Father, the chart,*” said Cate. He poured over the map with Tom and Mark.

“We’ll be on the eastern shore just north of Tamboy and past the entrance to the river. There’s a beach there and plenty of room to pull in.”

“Roger. We’ll see you there a bit after 1230 hours. Keep your radio on in case some change occurs. Mary and Eleanor will be driving into Hawks Nest to do some shopping while we are away.”

“Will do. I will switch to low power.”

“Okay, Jack. This is VK2TTC going clear.”

“Cheers, James. VK2AEJ signing out.”