

CHAPTER 18

Confession

“Hullo. The place is deserted. Where is everybody?” said Tom. The five had arrived back at Mungo Brush. It was a quarter to eight.

“There’s Dad down at the water,” said Mark. They trooped down to the waterside where Mr Parfitt was working on the bow of his canoe taping the gash below the waterline.

“Hello, Daddy,” said Liz.

“Hello, my darling,” he said looking up. “Where have you all been? We couldn’t find you when we got up. We thought you would have slept until midday after yesterday’s adventures.”

“We have just been finishing off our adventure, Dad,” said Mark. “It’s all over now—except for one aspect,” he said looking at the others.

“Your mother’s gone into Hawk’s Nest for some more provisions. She was not impressed to find you missing when she got up.”

“Oh dear,” said Cate.

“Hullo Mr Parfitt,” said Cate. “Where have Daddy and Mummy gone?”

“They are with Fr Hannan in the big tent, Cate. They went off about twenty minutes ago. Father is saying Mass. He will be just about finished I should say.”

“Oh. I wish we had known about Mass,” said Tom. “We mightn’t have got up before dawn.”

“And we mightn’t be feeling so guilty either,” added Cate looking at him ruefully.

“There’s Mary Rose,” said Liz turning and they saw her running towards them from the camp.

“And there’s Mummy,” said Cate. She stooped to pick up her little sister as she ran up.

“Been a Mass,” she told Cate confidentially.

“*Have* you?” asked Cate with a big smile. “By yourself?”

“No,” she replied. “With Father Anning.”

“And anybody else?”

“Mummy and Daddy too.” Sometimes Mary Rose despaired of getting her elder sister to understand the simplest things.

“We went off very early walking, Pumpkin, and we have only just got back.”

“Here’s Mummy now,” said Bill.

“So where did you all get to in the early morn?” asked their mother as she came up looking far from pleased. “Tom, Cate and Bill, you’ve been away pleasing yourselves for days. I was hoping to get you to Mass this morning. We looked for you everywhere but couldn’t find you. Father wanted to say Mass before breakfast.”

“We’re really sorry, Mum,” said Tom. “We got carried away with our competition with the military forces and went off to find the prize before dawn.”

“And we’ve got it too,” said Bill triumphantly. “Look!” He produced the golden key from the little bag for their inspection. Mr Parfitt took it in his hand and applied a critical eye.

“Good Lord,” he said. “It’s gold, all right. Where did you find it?”

“You had better tell, Tom,” said Cate.

“Here are Dad and Father Jack. We’d better wait until they are here too, or we’ll have to tell it all twice.”

“Hullo Daddy, Hullo Father. We’ve found the golden key. Here it is.”

“So that’s the reason we couldn’t find you when we got up,” said Mr Ryan as they came up to them.

“Yes. We’re sorry we missed Mass.”

“We’re sorry for a couple of reasons.”

“We’re sorry we have deprived all those soldiers and sailors of their reward.”

“And the airmen too!”

“It only came home to us when we met some of them as we were returning from the hunt.”

“Yes. Up until then it had all been a game. But now we feel wretched, knowing they will all be searching in vain.”

“Now. Don’t fret. I will be saying Mass again tomorrow morning,” said Father Hannan. “How did you manage to work it all out? I thought you were four or five clues short. You had better tell us all about it.”

“Come up and we’ll have breakfast while you are doing so,” said Mrs Ryan resignedly. “Or have you already had breakfast?”

“Breakfast!” said Bill. “Yes, please and no, we haven’t. Cate forgot to pack it,” he said looking at her feelingly. They returned to the fireplace where a large cast iron kettle was singing on the hob.

“Sit down all and I’ll make a huge tot of scrambled eggs,” said Mr Parfitt and he dug out a large frying pan which he placed on the fire. “Lizzie, come and cut up some of this bread and make some toast. Where are the eggs, Mary?”

Mrs Ryan got a carton of eggs out of the cool safe and handed them over. Then she and Liz made tea and toast while Cate held Mary Rose on her lap and Tom, with appropriate interruptions from the others, told the adults the tale of the clues, of their calculated guesses and of their frustration at not being able to locate the treasure. He left it to Bill to tell the story of the discovery.

“Oh. Well done Bill,” said Father Hannan when he explained how he had guessed that the missing letter put the location of the key twenty two and a half degrees further to the south. They had all begun to smile again with the telling of the story and weren’t feeling so bad about depriving the soldiers of their treasure.

“But you have wrecked the Combined Forces competition,” Father Hannan continued. “So your respective fathers and I had better give some thought to what can be done about it.”

“And fairly quickly too,” said Mr Ryan. “Or there will be hell to pay. You should give back that key too, it’s not yours.”

“Larceny by Finding, punishable under the *Crimes Act*—Section 117,” said Mr Parfitt as he dished scrambled eggs liberally onto the plates Liz had set on the camping table before him.

“Good Lord,” said Tom aghast.

“What’s the penalty?” asked Mark.

“Five years gaol! And having regard to the value of that key I should think the prosecution would be looking for the maximum term.” The smiles had disappeared from their faces and been replaced by looks of grave concern.

“Tom!” said Cate. “It wasn’t a priest we needed but a lawyer!”

“Well, you’ve got one,” said Mr Ryan. “Think you’ll be able to get them off, James?”

“I don’t know. It depends on whether they take to my scrambled eggs or not!” Liz started to laugh.

“You will get us off, won’t you Daddy? I mean Mother will be furious if they put us in gaol. She has been under immense strain as it is with me being away in the wilds.” She couldn’t stop herself laughing.

“The girl’s hysterical. Not enough sleep. Too much excitement. I’ll have to see what can be done. But first—time to eat. Father. Say *Grace* for heaven’s sake. I don’t know about these kids but I’m starving!”

Father Hannan did as he was asked and they all tucked into huge plates of scrambled eggs and toast and everyone had a second cup of tea.

“There’s not only the criminality of the thing,” said Mr Ryan resuming after they had begun to lay down their knives and forks. “It won’t do to have the Army, Navy and Air Force off side.”

“That’s right. Who knows, you may need their help in some future adventure,” said Father Hannan with that twinkle in his eye they knew so well.

Shortly afterwards, the three men left the five to wash up for Mrs Ryan and headed for the rotunda which stood nearby for a conference. Twenty minutes later they drove off in Mr Parfitt’s Landrover for the punt across the Narrows to Legge’s Camp.

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“Oh, David. Got a minute? I need some assistance...” Sitting in his chambers in Phillip Street, Sydney, David Templeton QC answered the telephone call put through to him by his secretary.

“James. What are you ringing me for? We don’t have any case on at the moment.”

“I’m ringing you in your capacity as Officer in the Naval Reserve. I need your mediation in a matter involving the Defence Forces. I don’t know if you’re aware but there’s a competition among the Forces this week on the Myalls.”

“Yes. Keenly contested, I’m told.”

“I am ringing from Bombah Point now. My two kids are part of party of five that have beaten the Forces and pinched the prize.”

“Good Lord!”

“Yes. I imagine the powers that be will not be amused.”

“James, I should think they’ll be most unhappy. What do you want me to do?”

“Well. I was thinking...”

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“Beaten by a bunch of kids. Rear Admiral, this must never get out. The forces will be a laughing stock.”

“They felt pretty bad about it. They reckoned they cheated because they used a boat with an outboard motor for a mile of the course.”

“For heaven’s sake! How on earth did they uncover the clues on the offshore stations?”

“Knew Morse apparently and tapped into the Navy messages from the islands to the shore.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Very resourceful.”

“Whose idea was it for the Navy to use Morse anyway?”

“There was a time when all the forces used it. We have retained it longer than you or the Army. Not that it did us much good. I gather the Army beat us both to the target.”

“Wasn’t it forbidden by the rules?”

“Radio was barred. There was no prohibition on signalling. The organisers assumed, I suppose, that none of the competitors would know Morse sufficiently well to use it.”

“Where did these children get the maps?”

“The father of three of them is a surveyor and bushwalker. He had them all, apparently.”

“But how the devil did they get a list of the stations?”

“One of the soldiers dropped his list on Rooke Island. They picked it up.”

“And the kids could read the maps, I take it, and find grid references?”

“Yes.”

“How old are they? We might make an exception and offer them all commissions.”