

CHAPTER 3

The Beginnings of an Idea

A week later Tom got a further Morse note from Mark which caused him to call a quick conference with Cate.

“Look at Mark’s latest letter. I’ve decoded it.” It read—

Looking at maps. Why couldnt we sail up river from
nelson bay camping. M.

“That’s just what we were discussing at tea the other night,” said Cate looking at Tom with her eyes alight.

“Do you think Mum and Dad would let us?”

“Dad will if Mum will,” said Cate.

“We’d have to get *Emerald* set up properly for cruising. We would have to be dropped off at Tea Gardens or Hawks Nest near the bridge.”

“How many days would it take to sail up?”

“We would have to row if there was no wind. Shouldn’t be more than a day and a half.”

“So we’d have to carry food for two days.”

“Camping gear, tent, sleeping bags, cooking gear.”

“Wet weather gear, jumpers, soap and towels, toothbrushes and all the rest,” said Cate.

“We’ll have to talk to Daddy when he gets home.”

“You do it. He’ll listen better to your arguments. He’ll think I’m using feminine wiles if I try.”

“Mark is keen to go but what about Liz?”

“Yes. Liz will have a few problems.” They looked at each other. Mrs Parfitt was very particular about what Liz could and couldn’t do. She did not regard it as at all suitable conduct for young ladies to go off into the wilds. It was not refining and it was also damaging to the complexion; bound to produce sunburnt skin and early wrinkles in her daughter. The only sport she approved of was tennis and even then,

Liz was required to wear a large sunhat, which, as she said made the game pointless as it often prevented her hitting the ball.

“If only Mrs Parfitt hadn’t been a former Miss Australia she wouldn’t have these strange ideas about girls.”

“Well. We must hope for the best.”

“Dad,” said Tom coming into the Den that evening. His father, a pipe in his mouth, was at work on a survey plan.

“Yes, son.”

“What would you say to us sailing the two dinghies up the Myall River to the Broadwater from Port Stephens?”

His father turned away from the drawing board on his swivel chair, took a pull on his pipe and looked at Tom steadily. “What exactly have you got in mind?”

“Well, Mark and I have been corresponding in Morse, as you know. We can both manage our boats and we thought it would add some fun to the holiday if we could cruise up the Myall River and meet you on the Broadwater.”

Mr Ryan’s eyes glazed slightly as his imagination turned to the river on which he had spent so much time in his youth. He put down his pipe, got up from the chair and went over to a filing cabinet. “Let’s have a look at the map.” He pulled out the top drawer which had a series of hangers marked alphabetically. “Best thing I ever did, indexing these maps,” he said half to himself. He flipped through the folders, selected a topographical map and returned to the desk where he spread it out.

“Mm,” he said after another puff on his pipe. “A few maps in fact. This area is awkwardly placed from the point of view of the mapping authority. I think we might settle for the local tourist map.” He went back to the filing cabinet, took out a map entitled “*Port Stephens and Myall Lakes*” and spread it out on the desk. Tom bent over it with him.

“It’s not as if we haven’t been up the river before,” said Tom, pressing his case.

“No. That’s true. But last time you weren’t the skipper and the boat was much larger,” his father replied. He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said: “If we were to drop the boats in at Soldier’s Point it would be a great deal out of our way. We would have to drive into Nelson Bay and then return to the highway.” Tom looked at his father. He could sense that he was beginning to embrace the idea. He suppressed the thought he had had that they might start on the northern side of Port Stephens in the river itself. The prospect of leaving from Soldier’s Point was far more adventurous. They would have to negotiate the Schooner Channel, the entrance to the river, and that would be great fun.

Mr Ryan looked over the various approaches to the large harbour shown on the maps. “It would make more sense if we dropped you at Karuah.”

“Karuah?” said Tom as he followed his father’s finger as it drew across the map to the western end of Port Stephens. This was even more exciting!

“Bit of territory to cover before you got to the Schooner Channel”, said his father. A grin lit up Tom’s face at the thought of this addition to the adventure he and Mark had mooted. His father looked at him.

“Think you and Mark could cope?” he asked.

“Well what’s the verdict?” asked Cate when Tom rejoined the other two in their study. She could sense Tom’s suppressed excitement.

“Dad’s going to discuss it with Mum,” he responded. “If she doesn’t raise any objections he will discuss it with Mr Parfitt. He doesn’t know how he will take it. We’re not to assume that we will be allowed to go at this stage.”

“However?”

“What do you mean, ‘however?’”

“There’s something you haven’t told us.”

“Yes. Dad has suggested we start from Karuah rather than Soldier’s Point.”

“Where’s Karuah?” asked Bill.

“Here. I’ll show you. I’ve brought the tourist map.” They spread it out over the dining room table and all three leant over it. Bill brought up a chair which he knelt on to give him extra height.

“See, there is Karuah,” said Tom. “The highway passes right through it on the way to Bulahdelah. It’s the obvious place for the boats to be put in the water.”

“There is a lot of open water to cross before we get to the Myall River. We will sail right across Port Stephens,” said Cate looking at Tom with a grin.

“That will mean another six miles to add to the length of the trip.”

“Ten kilometres,” said Bill. “Good old Dad.”

“I knew Daddy would be in it,” said Cate grinning. “And I’m pretty sure Mum will too. It’s not Mr Parfitt but Mrs Parfitt that will be the problem. You know what she’s like. She will have a fit when she hears Liz is proposing to go cruising in a sailing dinghy overnight.”

“If we go, we’ll have to report in at Tea Gardens,” said Tom. “Dad said that if the weather forecast was reasonable he didn’t see how we could get into strife sailing across Port Stephens.”

“Where will we camp?” asked Bill.

“There seem to be plenty of places around the foreshores.”

“Also islands,” said Cate.

“Yes. Let’s camp on an island,” said Bill.

“We could camp on a different island every night, there are so many of them.”

“Where we camp on the first night, will depend on the tide and the time we get to Karuah,” said Tom. “We’ll have to check on tide movements.”

“Snapper Island looks like a good spot for the first camp,” said Bill pointing. “It’s only about five kilometres from Karuah.”

“That’s *if* we get to go,” said Tom.

“I’m sure Mr Parfitt will say yes,” said Cate. “At least to Mark going. But it will be no fun without Liz. I must write to her. We’ll have to work out some way of persuading Mrs Parfitt to let her go. I know. Let’s pray to St Joseph. It always works!”

“Let’s go and have a look at *Emerald* to see whether anything would need to be modified,” said Tom.

The three of them went down to the large garage which housed the family car and turned on the lights. A green sailing dinghy sat on a boat trailer at the far side. Mr Ryan had built the boat for the children the previous year at about the same time as Mr Parfitt had had *Sapphire*, a similar design, built by a professional boat builder for Mark and Liz.

“Good old *Em*,” said Cate as they lifted the dust cover off the boat. “She’s such a pretty thing.” She gave the hull an affectionate pat.

“It will be good to have the two boats sailing together again,” said Tom. He looked carefully around the cockpit, running his hand through his hair as he did so.

“All the gear will have to be sealed in plastic drums,” he said. “If we were to capsize, the drums would float free so we will need to screw in tie-down points for them. Then we will need strong netting around the drums to hold them in place.”

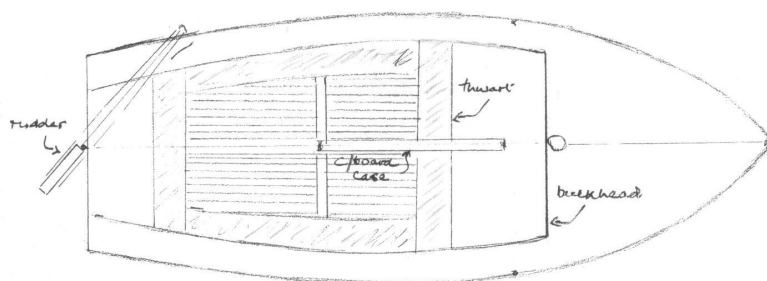
“We’ll have to carry water too, won’t we?” asked Cate.

“Too right. We’ll have to carry everything.”

“How will we fit in the tent?” Bill asked.

“Well, we needn’t carry the poles. There will probably be plenty of wooden sticks around that will serve as poles.”

“Come on, let’s be optimists,” said Cate. “Let’s start making a list.”



EMERALD - Plan view