

CHAPTER 7

Across Port Stephens

“Come on Bill,” Liz called along the shore.

“What’s that boy up to?” asked Cate as she raised her head from the task of helping Tom with last minute stowing of gear into the containers.

“Coming!” they heard a voice call and Bill appeared coming along the rocks from the point. A minute or two later he came up.

“I went to see if that boat we saw yesterday was somewhere in sight.”

“Never mind about him,” said Cate. “We want to catch this tide. Help us get the gear into the boats.”

The change in the wind had got them up early. They had enjoyed a breakfast of porridge, toast and tea and then set to packing up their gear, dismantling the tents and stowing them in the watertight containers preparatory to departing.

“Here, Tom, will you give us a hand?” Mark called from *Sapphire* where he and Liz had finished rigging.

“Come on Bill, we’ll help Mark roll *Sapphire* in,” Tom said and they walked over to where the dark blue boat was waiting to be put in the water.

“Will you put the roller under her while I lift?” Mark asked.

“There,” said Tom as he pushed the rubber roller up under the keel at the stern and as far towards the bow as possible. “I’ll put the other one just here under the stern.

“You take the bow, Liz, and make sure she doesn’t get away,” said Mark. Cate joined her as Tom and Mark took hold of opposite sides of the boat. The boat had been leaning on its starboard bilge and they stood it up so only the keel was in contact with the sand. With Bill tugging at the transom they began to drag it stern first down the beach over the two rollers. The boat was sluggish at first but it accelerated once the weight transferred to the rollers and the five had to resist the

inclination of the boat to run away from them. It slowed as the rollers moved up the boat and came to a stop as the stern bit into the sand. Tom took the first roller which had now emerged from in front of the bow and placed it under the stern and they resumed their pulling to the water's edge. The tide was only a couple of hours past the high water mark and they did not have far to pull the boat. Once *Sapphire* was in the water, they repeated the exercise with *Emerald*.

"I'll give the rollers a rinse in the sea," said Liz. After dunking the two sausage shapes in the water she brought them back placing one in the stern of each boat where she and Cate secured them so that each end was under a side deck. Mark and Tom meanwhile were engaged in loosening the ties which held the jibs and mainsails on the two boats.

"Here Bill," said Mark, "hang on to the end of this halliard."

"Why do they call them halliards?" asked Bill taking the line.

"Because of what they do," said Tom from the other boat. "They haul up the yards—'halyards'. We've done away with yards because we don't have square sails any more. But we still keep the name. All nautical names for gear make sense."

"Oh? What about sheets?" responded Bill.

"Stop arguing with your elders and betters," said Cate as she took hold of the end of the halliard on *Emerald*.

"Haul away while I make sure the sail track doesn't jam," said Tom and Cate pulled down on the rope and the sail began to climb the mast. Its luff, or front edge, was attached to the mast track by little sliding fittings. These, as Tom remarked, had a habit of jamming when the sail was being hauled up the mast and one had to make sure they ran cleanly.

"Right to the top," Tom said, and Cate put all her weight down on the line as the sail climbed the last few inches. Tom took the line from her and, keeping the tension, tied it off to a cleat on the mast.

"Now, Bill," said Mark. "You pull on the halliard while I make sure the slides don't jam." Mark stationed himself next to the mast as Bill pulled down on the halliard. The sail was soon raised and tied off. Now that the boats were in the water the girls stowed the drums and boxes on their respective boats and Tom and Mark helped secure them.

“All ready?” asked Mark.
“Have we left anything?” asked Cate looking up the beach.
“Let’s have a final emu,” said Tom.
“A final what?” asked Liz.
“*Emu*—Latin for a good last look around in case anything’s been left behind,” said Cate with a grin.

In the lightest of airs the two boats sailed slowly out from the little bay and along the shore to the north towards the stake that marked the corner of the oyster lease. Mark and Liz in *Sapphire* were ahead of the others and they heard him give a sudden shout.

“The board hit the bottom. Watch out Tom!” Cate, on *Emerald*, hastily drew their centreboard up a foot or so. After passing the stake they sailed alongside the other boat.

“It must have been a rock jutting up from the bottom,” said Mark. “We didn’t hit too hard, so I don’t think there has been any damage.” The two boats headed slowly out into Port Stephens. The westerly breeze had died to a zephyr and the two boats made slow progress until they were caught by the ebbing tide.

“Now we’re away,” said Liz looking back.

“Fame Cove, here we come,” said Cate who was steering *Emerald*. The sea stretched towards the eastern horizon, calm and unmarked save for the slightest ruffling from the wind in patches.

“I think we should use a bit of auxiliary power,” said Tom. “We should be getting on a bit faster than this.”

“Man the oars?” asked Cate.

“Yes.” She and Bill removed the oars from under the side decks and fitted them into the rowlocks while Liz did the same on *Sapphire*.

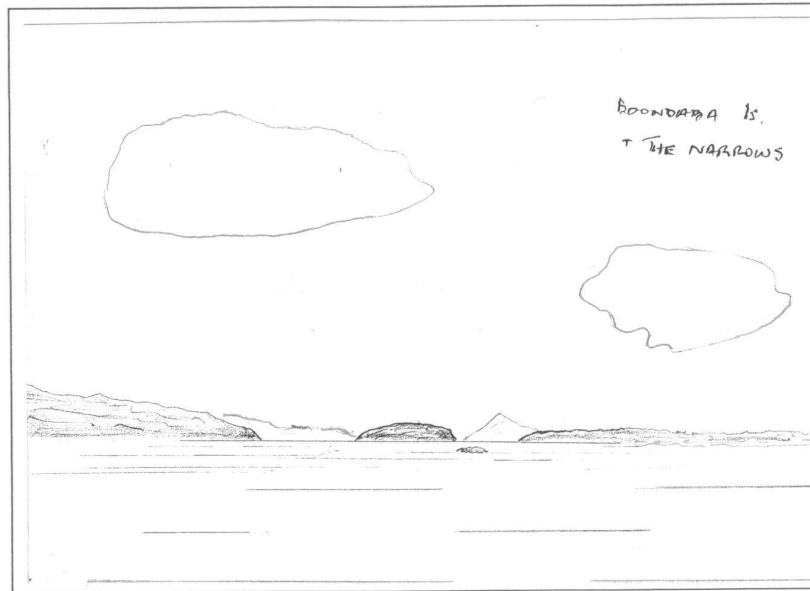
“We won’t need to break any records,” said Mark. “Just keep the momentum up.” The sails slatted back and forth as the boats moved steadily forward under the efforts of Liz and Cate.

“Look at that,” said Liz indicating towards the island which was now several hundred yards behind them. “We’re being carried down the island.” The others looked back. The tide flow was carrying the two boats to the south.

“It won’t last long,” said Tom, “the flow from the south of the island will catch us shortly and we’ll be drawn towards the east.”

“You can see the passage between the narrows more clearly now,” said Mark. They all looked towards their destination.

“There’s no mist like there was last night.”



“That’ll be the result of the westerly that came in overnight.”

“Hullo, here comes some breeze,” said Mark.

“Northerly,” said Tom. “Ship all oars.” The boats heeled slightly as the sails filled with the light air now coming from the north. The oars on the two boats were stowed and the crews resumed sailing positions.

“What’s that big island in the middle again?”

“Boondaba Island.”

“Where is Fame Cove then?”

“To the north of the narrows,” said Cate. Tom was looking thoughtfully at the map. “Cate, I’m beginning to think we won’t have time for Fame Cove,” said Tom.

“Why not?”

“It’s after eight o’clock. The tide will turn a bit after eleven. We must be in the Schooner Channel when the tide turns or we’ll be in all sorts of strife. Mark,” he turned to the other boat. “What do you think?” He repeated what he had just said to Cate.

“Can I have a look at the map?”

“You mean the *chart*,” said Cate. Mark steered *Sapphire* over to *Emerald* and took the map which Tom handed across to him.

“Here, Liz. Take the helm while I look.” He bent over the map. “What speed do you reckon we are making, Tom?”

“Tide under us is maybe one knot. The wind is probably giving us another one. Say two to two and a half knots.” Mark looked back at the island which was slowly receding from them. He looked again at the map. “What worries me,” he said, “is that it will take us a while to get into Fame Cove and then probably much longer for us to get back out of it because there will be little wind in there. Sorry Cate,” he said looking up. “I think we will have to give it a miss.”

“Well we had better alter course then,” said Cate hiding her disappointment. “It’s a pity. It’s such a lovely little cove.” They adjusted their heading and aimed the boats for Boondaba Island in the middle of the narrows.

“Well. Did you see our mysterious boatman when you went looking this morning, Bill?” Mark called across from *Sapphire*.

“No. And I’ve been keeping a lookout for him ever since.” The others looked back at Snapper Island, now more than half a mile behind them and then around the horizon. There was no other boat abroad.

“The island looks dark and mysterious from this side doesn’t it?” said Cate.

“And what was that parachute for?”

“And the letter N?”

“Hello. I can see another small island ahead of us,” said Liz about twenty five minutes later.

“There are a few of them,” said Mark looking up from the map which was still on board *Sapphire*. “Shag Island, One Tree Island and Bushy Island.”

“Which is which?” asked Cate.

“The northernmost one is Shag. One Tree is in between and Bushy is the southern one.”

“So One Tree is the one with about ten trees on it, then?” asked Bill.

“Yes. A few more have grown up in the 150 years or so since the first settlers got here.”

“Have we got time to call in on one of them?”

“We seem to be going faster now, Tom,” said Mark.

“It’s ten to nine. How far do we have to go before we get to the entrance to the Channel?”

“About five miles,” said Mark after checking the map. “Speed over the bottom is now about what?”

“Three knots?”

“We could probably stop for twenty minutes or so.”

“Let’s go to Boondaba, then,” said Cate.

“All right. Boondaba it is.”

They passed well to the south of Shag Island, a low rocky spit devoid of any vegetation, about fifteen minutes later. It was barely above water level. There was a maritime marker consisting of two cones one above the other, and a number of posts. There were a number of sea birds perched on the posts.

“I can see the shags,” said Bill.

“Cormorants, Bill,” said Tom.

“Would it be covered at spring tides?” asked Liz.

“I wouldn’t like to be camped on it,” said Mark. “There’s no shelter and the surface looks hard and unwelcome. The one we are approaching is One Tree Island.” This island was bigger and well vegetated and, as Bill had so pungently observed, many more trees on it than when it was first named.

“We could camp on that if we had to,” said Bill. They passed to the south of it.

“We had better get into the shadow of Boondaba, Mark, in case we are carried past,” said Tom. He had taken the tiller from Cate and bore up towards the northern end of the island. Mark did the same.

Whee ooooooooooh, chip chip chip chip chip chip chip chip. They looked up as a high pitched whistle came from a bird of prey floating above them, its primary feathers projecting like fingers from its outstretched wings. The first part of the call went down the scale; the second went up.

“Whistling Kite,” called Tom. The bird turned its head from side to side. It was clearly interested in their presence. It called again. They watched it circle then drop suddenly towards the water flattening out just above the surface. At a point about thirty yards further on it dropped its feet onto the surface and picked something from the water, mounting quickly into the air with powerful beats of its wings.

“It’s a fish,” called Bill as the object wriggled energetically in the bird’s grasp. The kite headed quickly for Boondaba Island, the fish wriggling in its grasp. They saw it fly away towards the island, the fish still putting up a fight. After half a minute the bird perched in a tree on the shore of the island.

“Late breakfast?” said Liz.

“Or morning tea.”

“Which reminds me,” said Bill. “Isn’t it time we had something to eat?”

“Bill. I saw you eat a huge plate of porridge,” said Liz.

“That was hours ago.”

“It’s a bit like Snapper,” said Cate as they got closer to Boondaba Island. “Similar sort of vegetation.”

“There are cabbage trees. I never saw any eucalypts on Snapper. But there are plenty here.”

“I can’t wait to stretch my legs,” said Liz.

“And I should be able to explore it all in fifteen minutes,” said Bill.

“Don’t you want something to eat?”

“After I’ve eaten.”

The two boats sailed in the light northerly to the north western tip. The tide pull was not so great as to prevent them pulling up to the rocky shore.

“There’s no beach. We’ll drop our anchor and tie off at the stern,” said Tom.

“And we’ll raft up alongside you,” said Mark. Bill had extracted the small anchor from the forward hold. He lowered it over the side as Tom directed him and as the anchor bit on the rocky bottom they lowered the sails. Mark made *Sapphire* fast alongside *Emerald* with life jackets in between as buffers to protect the paintwork on the two boats. Cate in the meantime had waded ashore with a line from the stern of *Emerald* which she took to the base of a scrubby tree growing near the water’s edge.

“The run of the tide’s not as bad as I thought it would be,” said Tom.

“We’re almost at slack water, aren’t we.”

“What’s that?” asked Bill.

“When the tide is on the change, the movement comes to a halt for a while.”

“Here Cate, take these supplies,” Liz called and Cate waded to the boats and took from her the morning tea. Bill had not waited for the food to arrive before wading ashore and setting off into the bush towards the top.

“You and Tom follow him,” said Liz to Mark as they waded ashore. “Cate and I will open the biscuits and get the drinks ready.”

“And we can keep an eye on the boats, too,” Cate added.

“Come on, then, Tom. Let’s see what’s to be seen.”

Tom and Mark followed the rapidly disappearing Bill up the only hill on the island. The going was fairly scrubby. There passed some curious palm-like plants that grew straight out of the ground with no apparent stem. There was a rough track which led them to the top after about five minutes scrambling. There they found Bill beneath a tree bending over something on the ground. Suspended above him was another of those parachute like markers.

“Here’s another!” Bill shouted as he saw them approaching.

“What is it?” said Mark.

“An S, or a figure 5. I can’t make it out.”
“Let’s have a look.” A figure was engraved on a patch of cement which had been laid between three large stones.
“It’s a five,” said Mark.
“Are you sure?”
“Yep. It’s a five all aright,” said Tom inspecting it carefully. “Look at the flat top to the letter. An S would be more rounded.”
“This cement hasn’t been here all that long,” said Mark. “It’s hardly dry.”
“An N and a 5,” said Bill.
“Well, there’s something going on,” said Mark. “But why put it on a patch of cement? The last one was painted on a flat rock.”
“No flat rocks,” said Tom looking around.
“No. I think you’re right. They’re all rough shaped here, aren’t they?”
“They seem to pick prominent spots to put these things.”
“Yes. Whoever ‘they’ are,” said Mark.
“And whatever the things are for,” added Bill.
“The views are great, aren’t they. Look, you can see Snapper. It’s miles away now, isn’t it?” They looked west across the water assessing the passage they had made in the last two hours or so.
“And look at what lies ahead.” They turned to look east at the impressive sight of Yacaaba Head standing some six hundred and fifty feet above the sea.
“You’d think that lump beside it was part of the mainland but it’s an island.”
“Cabbage Tree Island.”
“And there’s another island to the south of Yacaaba.”
“Boondelbah Island.”
“Come on. Let’s get back and have that morning tea,” said Tom.
“The girls will be worrying about us.”

They returned to the boats and told the girls of their discovery.
“An N and a 5. Well, we’ll need a bit more than that before we can make any sense of these clues,” said Cate as she handed around biscuits and apples. Liz filled their mugs with raspberry cordial flavoured water.

“It was set in cement,” said Mark. “And not very long ago either so there’s some project on foot.”

“And there was the marker hanging from the tree. It’s got to be a sort of paperchase. The marker is designed to be seen and the clues discovered by whoever are involved.”

“Well. We’ve got two.”

“Come on. Let’s get sailing. We don’t want to be caught on the wrong side of this tide.”

“When does it start to flood?”

“10.15 by my calculations. And provided I’ve made the correct adjustment for the distance from the sea.”

“Its 9.45 now. Let’s go.”

They hoisted sails, pulled up the anchor and set off east through the channel now in a northerly wind which had strengthened to five to seven knots. The two boats made good progress away from the island.

“The tide hasn’t turned yet,” said Cate. “Look. The shore is still going past us.”

“Yes. Still, I think I’d like to be closer in just in case it does,” replied Tom.

“No. Let’s stay out in the middle,” replied Mark. “We can head inshore as soon as we see we are slowing.” They continued out of the channel and east up the middle of the harbour which broadened now. To their right Nelson Bay settlement perched on the southern shore. On their left the occasional weekender showed itself on the shore. A few boats were at anchor there or drawn up on the shore. The open sea lay ahead of them some miles away between Yacaaba Head on the north and Tomaree Head on the south. Their course, once they had passed Orungall Point, was to head north up the Schooner Channel out of which flowed the Myall River. The increase in wind strength had put up a short chop and the sea sparkled in the sun. The bows of the two boats slapped happily against the small swells as they forged ahead.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” shouted Liz with a big grin looking across at Cate. “Would you?”

“Heaven, isn’t it?” she responded.

The two sailing dinghies, one dark blue, the other a rich green, made a picture as they sailed in company across the blue waters of the harbour. Fishermen on an incoming trawler gazed appreciatively at them. Had the harbour been a little more kindly to commerce, it might have been a major port on the Australian east coast. It might indeed, have been the site of the national capital had demands for a more central location not prevented this. As it was, the shallows which dotted the entrance and other areas of Port Stephens had preserved it for the delight of pleasure sailers, of fishermen and oystermen and had made it, and the Myall River which flowed into it, a little haven of adventure.

Twenty minutes later Mark called from *Sapphire*—"We've just about weathered Orungall Point Tom. Shall we tack?"

"Wait another minute or so. It'll be 'a work' all the way up the Channel, won't it?" They tacked shortly after and headed north east up the Channel.

"Why is it called the Schooner Channel, Tom," asked Cate.

"They used to run big ships up this section years ago as far as they could. They'd unload them and take on cargo just before the entrance to the River. Dad says there are reefs near the head of the Channel made up of the ballast dumped from the ships which came in for the timber which they'd bring down the Myall."

"I hope the reefs are marked," said Bill.

"Let's split tacks and try sailing one each side," called Mark. "We'll see which side is favoured."

"Okay," replied Tom. "We'll tack onto port." *Emerald* was to windward of *Sapphire* so Tom called the command: 'Ready about' to his crew and put his helm down and, leaving *Sapphire* on starboard tack, tacked *Emerald* onto port tack. The two boats sailed away from each other, each skipper sampling the wind on his side of the course.

"There's another boat following us up the Channel," Bill said. Tom and Cate looked behind and saw a small sloop following them up the Channel.

"Good," said Cate. "It will make it interesting to see if we can beat him as well as Mark and Liz to the entrance to the River."

"Bill. You've been quiet," said Tom.

"I've been thinking," said Bill.

"I told you that boy was deep," said Cate to Tom with a grin.

"Well. Let us in on the secret," said Tom.

"About those markers," said Bill. "Just what they can mean. An N and a 5. They've got to be there for some reason."

"Oh. I thought you were thinking about our mystery sailor," said Cate.

"Oh, I've been thinking about him, too," responded Bill. "I had a good look for him from the top of Boondaba. That's why I went up there. But he seems to have disappeared."

"We'll tack shortly," said Tom looking north west to where Mark was approaching the western side of the Channel.

"There goes Mark, now," said Cate as she watched *Sapphire* change tacks.

"Ready about," called Tom and they tacked the boat back onto starboard tack. "Blast, I think Mark's doing better than we are."

"We've got right of way," said Cate.

"Yes, but it's not going to do us any good if he's sufficiently far ahead of us for him to clear us when we cross."

"We're well ahead of that sloop anyway," said Bill. Tom looked back. "He's closer winded than we are," said Tom. "See the angle he is sailing at is higher than ours. And he will be faster because he is longer. Still we'll hold him out while we can." The three concentrated on getting the optimum performance out of *Emerald* as they worked to windward. Cate tightened the sheet on the jib. The wind had freshened somewhat and the little boat was tramping along.

"Mark's still ahead," said Cate as the two dinghies approached each other on opposite tacks.

"Yes. I think he'll clear us, unless there's a wind shift which favours us."

"The sloop isn't doing as well as we are," said Bill. The two dinghies closed each other. *Sapphire* was ahead.

"How about we call him?" said Cate to Tom as the boats closed to hailing distance.

"You can if you like. I think he'll just grin and ignore us."

"STARBOARD!" called Cate.

“CLEAR AHEAD!” called Liz in reply with a flashing grin, and *Sapphire* crossed two boat lengths in front of *Emerald* with no fear of a collision.

“We’ll get you on the next tack,” said Cate to Liz provocatively as they passed. The two boats proceeded away from each other to the opposite sides of the now rapidly narrowing Channel. Soon it was necessary for both boats to tack again to avoid the shore on each side. They crossed again soon after but *Sapphire* was still ahead and, being now on starboard tack, had right of way. They tacked again and soon the two were sailing in company as the Channel narrowed into the mouth of the Myall River. A green marker post showed where the edge of the river channel began and they had both to keep to the left of it, that is, to keep it on their starboard sides, to avoid going aground.

“Well. We’ve kept that centreboarder behind us anyway,” Mark called across to Tom with a smile as they came together. They looked back. The small sloop was closer, about 100 yards behind them, but the wind conditions were flukey now with the land close to and the dinghies were favoured over the bigger boat as they could adjust more quickly to small wind changes. The three boats ghosted up river. It was a situation Tom always enjoyed. You could steal a lead over a competitor by close attention to the wind conditions and this he proceeded to do, moving *Emerald* ahead of *Sapphire* as he worked the tiller at the slightest change in wind direction. The wind was generally from the north east but hardly above three or four knots in strength. The course of the river changed changed now so that they were heading south east and it was no longer necessary to tack. Soon the wind swung around to the beam and the boats were able to reach up the river with sheets eased.