

CHAPTER 9

Up the River

“Liz. Have you checked the camp site to see that nothing is left behind?” Cate called along the beach.

“Yes. All clear,” she called back.

“Bill. Is all your fishing gear stowed?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you have washed it all thoroughly. We don’t want the ship smelling of dead fish.”

“Yes. All washed and cleaned.”

The two boats were at the water’s edge with sails up, bows facing into a brisk south easterly breeze. Cate was supervising the stowing of gear containers on both boats and Tom and Mark were making final adjustments to the boats’ rigging.

“We should make good progress now that the wind has freshened,” said Mark. Liz rejoined them after doing the last check of the campsite.

“All aboard!” Mark called. The crews climbed into the two boats. Tom and Mark then walked them out into the stream a little way.

“Balance up,” said Tom and Bill moved his weight to the opposite side of the boat as Tom pushed off from the shore and scrambled aboard. Liz did the same as Mark pushed off in *Sapphire*.

“And *awaaaey* we go,” said Cate as the two boats sailed away from the shore. They had to work to windward a little. The lie of the river favoured the starboard tack, so they took short boards across the river. They were sailing against the last of the ebb but the boats hardly noticed it as they sped along.

“I see houses,” said Bill pointing to the southern bank. “Civilisation.”

“There’s a road over there and some boat trailers parked.”

“The owners must be out fishing.”

“There should be a boat ramp there somewhere.”

“There it is about fifty yards ahead.”

“And *there* is our mystery boat!” said Liz pointing excitedly. “Just beyond the ramp.” The strange looking vessel hung with an anchor line dropping into the water from the bow and the stern tied off to a small fig tree on the shore. Its sails were furled and there was an awning drawn over the boom. Tom and Mark tacked their boats over towards it.

“Doesn’t look as if anyone is at home,” said Cate as they approached.

“What’s that strange contraption up the mast,” Tom called to Mark. A plastic tube about six feet long was strung between masthead and the stern. They were getting too near the shore now and went about again onto starboard tack.

“I don’t know but he has hauled it up on a halliard,” Mark answered gazing at the masthead. They all studied the curious looking boat as they sailed past it.

“It’s a dory type,” said Mark. “Look. Flat bottom and flat sides.”

“It’s not really a surf boat,” said Tom. “But with that high bow and tremendous sheer it looks like one, doesn’t it?”

“I can smell smoke,” said Cate suddenly. “Someone’s smoking a pipe somewhere.”

“Our mystery sailor remains a mystery still,” said Liz as they passed the moored boat.

“Look, a pelican,” said Bill pointing to a large bird with an enormous bill paddling through the shallows further along the southern shore.

“There’s another further along.”

“And look. One on a pole!”

“Looking down his nose at us.”

“Hullo. What’s that bird on the next pole down, Tom?” They looked at what Mark was indicating. A bird of prey was perched there.

“What a crazy hair-do.”

“An osprey,” said Tom excitedly. “I haven’t seen one before.”

“Doesn’t it fish too?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t just get its feet wet. It dives down into the water to get its prey.”

“How does it get back into the air.”

“Sheer wing power. It just flies out of the water.” They looked at the strange bird, which was also inspecting them closely, with increased respect.

The river began to turn back to the north now and as they followed its direction the two boats were able to ease their sheets. They found themselves following a small yacht which was motoring upstream.

“There’s the bridge,” Mark called. The river bent to the left where a concrete span—the Hawk’s Nest bridge—curved gracefully across the river supported on a number of concrete pylons. There were cars passing over it, to and fro. They eased the sheets further as they followed the bend in the river and were soon running before the wind. They followed the yacht as it motored toward the gap between the two centre pylons.

“I’d be worried about my mast if I was them,” said Mark.

“It looks like it might hit,” said Bill. They could see the crew checking that the top of the mast was going to clear the bottom of the concrete span.

“It’s almost low water,” said Tom. “I guess that’s why they are trying now. They must have checked the relative heights.” They watched with great interest now as the yacht slowed its approach. Mark steered *Sapphire* wide of *Emerald* to give him a better perspective of the yacht’s approach.

“They’ll clear it,” he called to the others.” And so it proved. The top of the mast was six feet or so below the bridge and the yacht owners increased the boat’s speed once they realised they would get through without impact. The two dinghies followed it through.

“There doesn’t seem to be much tide at all now,” said Cate looking at the pylons as they sailed through.

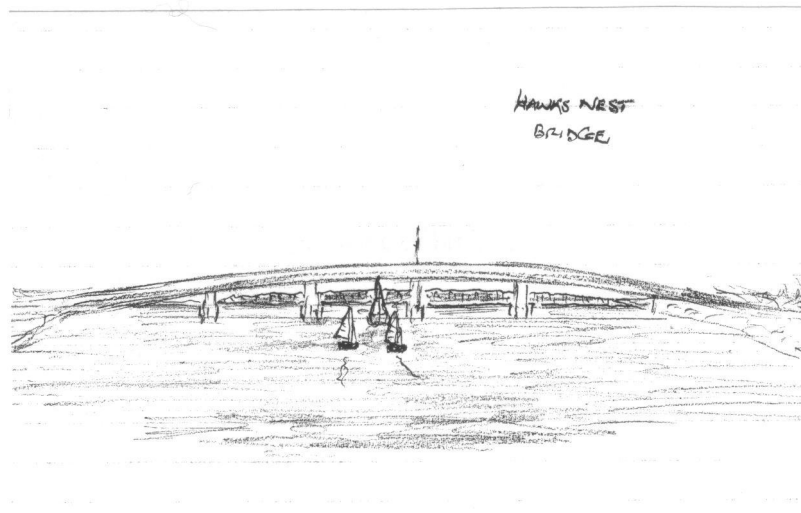
“Yes. It’s just about slack water.”

“There’s the Tea Gardens wharf,” said Tom about ten minutes later. He pointed to the shore off their port side. A road ran along the edge of the river. There were some shops there.

“We have to make a phone call, don’t we,” said Liz.

“Drop the sails and tie off to the wharf?” Mark asked. “What do you think Tom?”

“Looks like the best option. Stand by to gybe.”
“And we can get a milkshake,” said Bill.
“Now *there's* a good idea,” said Liz approvingly.



The two boats gybed their booms across so that they were now over the starboard beam as they came abreast of the wharf which was about thirty yards away.

“Coming on the wind,” said Tom. Simultaneously he put the helm down and moved his weight onto the side of the boat to counter the increased tipping moment caused by the boat turning across the line of the wind. *Emerald* rounded to port and headed towards the wharf. Mark did the same and *Sapphire* fell into line behind.

“Bill, get a couple of lines out of the front locker,” said Cate.

“Ease the main a little, Cate,” said Tom. “We’re going a bit fast.” She let the mainsheet run through her hands until the sail started to shake slightly.

“We’ll round up just short of the wharf,” said Tom. “Don’t miss it, Bill!” To a novice it looked as though Tom was going to ram *Emerald* into the wharf but at the last second he pushed the helm down and the boat rounded up with the sails shaking just before it.

With the power from the sails gone it slowed and as it touched the wharf Bill who had fed one of the lines through the bow fitting on the foredeck grabbed a post and the boat came to a halt.

“*Bee-ootifully* done, Bill,” said Cate. “Now nip ashore and tie us off while I hold on.” Bill scrambled out of the boat and tied the line he had secured to the bow off to a bollard on the wharf. They could hear the sound of *Sapphire* moving through the water just behind them. Mark called, “I’ll go around again Tom until you’re settled. Ready about, Liz. Lee-Oh!” The blue boat tacked a couple of yards from *Emerald*, there was the sound of sails flapping before Liz secured the jib on the new tack and they sailed away from the wharf.

“I’ll use my life jacket as a fender,” said Cate slipping out of her buoyancy vest.

“We’ll need two,” said Tom. “Let’s have your life jacket, Bill,” he called to him. “Tie them off, Cate, or they may fall between the boat and the wharf and go floating away.” He uncled the halliard and lowered the mainsail into the boat.

“Where’s *Sapphire*?” he asked Cate.

“Just coming back now,” Bill answered from the wharf.

They watched as Mark stood in the boat, ducked as the boom gybed across and then headed the boat back to the wharf. Liz brought the jib across and secured it on the new tack. In no time at all *Sapphire* was heading back towards them at the wharf.

“He does it well, doesn’t he,” said Tom admiringly.

“And he does it standing up!” said Cate.

“Pull us along a bit, Bill, to give him some room when he comes in.” Bill undid the line he had tied to the mooring post on the wharf and pulled the boat up the wharf a yard or two.

“I’ll catch them when they come in,” said Cate moving down the wharf.

Mark’s approach to the wharf left less margin for error than Tom’s as he would collide with the stern of *Emerald* if *Sapphire* ran on too fast. He was equal to the task and the boat ceased its forward motion as Cate grabbed it by the stays.

When the two boats were secure against the wharf with sails tied off and the buoyancy vests set as fenders between boats and wharf, the five gathered on the grass nearby.

“Now,” said Cate, “we’ve got to ring Bombah Point and leave a message.”

“Someone will have to stay with the boats,” said Tom, “in case something goes wrong.”

“I’ll stay,” said Mark.

“There is a public phone there, just up the road,” said Liz pointing.

“And we can get the milkshakes at one of these shops,” said Bill. They left Mark by the side of the wharf and crossed the road to the line of shops opposite.

“Look. There are some sailors,” said Cate.

“Naval officers, actually,” said Tom. Three men in naval uniform were sitting at a table outside one of the shoreside teashops, drinking tea while they talked earnestly among themselves.

“Who’s got the phone number,” asked Liz.

“Tom’s got it,” said Cate. Tom stopped and opened the flexible transparent plastic case where he kept the maps.

“It’s Mrs Tucker that we ask for,” he said holding up a piece of paper with notes written on it in his mother’s neat hand.

“And we are to tell her that we’ve arrived safely and what our projected time of arrival will be,” said Cate.

“The tide will not start to flood until about 12.30. How far will we get today. Let’s look at the map.” They went and sat on a seat nearby and looked at the map of the river.

“It’s the best part of ten miles to Tamboy.”

“And another three or four to the north shore of the Broadwater.”

“We had better plan on camping somewhere on the river tonight and hope to arrive at the Broadwater camp about lunch time tomorrow.”

“Yes. That’s about right isn’t it?”

“Okay,” said Cate. “Let’s phone.” She went to a phone box nearby.

“Where’s Bill?” asked Liz. She and Tom looked around. Bill was coming towards them from the teashop with a knowing grin on his face.

“Where have you been?” asked Tom.

“Spying,” said Bill, his eyes glistening.

“What do you mean?”

“I bought myself some lollies and accidentally-on-purpose listened in to some of the conversation of the Naval officers.”

“That’s a bit rude. Bill”

“I couldn’t really avoid hearing it.”

“Well. Come on. Don’t keep us in suspense,” said Cate.

“You were right. There’s a competition that started this morning against the Army and the Air Force. Their team in two canoes started from Hawk’s Nest at 6 o’clock. One of them seemed a bit excited. He was telling the others that their team had ‘a secret weapon’. I heard him say—‘None of the others can use it.’”

“It sounds like it was part of the Navy team then, that Mark spotted this morning.”

“I wonder what ‘the secret weapon’ is?”

“Well, we must keep our eyes open for some of the other competitors.”

“Enough of this. Let’s go and ring Mrs Tucker.”

The five sat on the edge of the wharf sipping their milkshakes ten minutes later watching the tide as it began its surge upstream.

“What a beautiful day,” said Liz.

“Blue sky,” said Cate.

“And blue river,” said Bill. The water sparkled in the sunshine. Gulls flew overhead and the light breeze fanned them.

“We won’t want to waste this tide,” said Tom with decision. “Come on. Let’s get going.”

“Hand me your empty containers,” said Liz, “and I’ll put them in the bin.” The boys slipped down into the boats and quickly hoisted mainsails and untied the jibs. Cate and Liz retrieved the buoyancy vests which had served as fenders.

“I’ll let go first,” said Mark to Tom, “so you don’t fall down on top of me. Bill!” he called, “take the bow line and push my bow off when I call.” Bill sat on the edge of the wharf holding *Sapphire*’s bow line his foot against the boat’s bow.

“No need to give much of a shove,” said Mark. “Let the tide do the work. Are we all ready?” he asked Liz.

“Aye, aye, Sir,” she grinned.

“Right-oh Bill, push her away,” and Bill suited the action to the command. The boat pirouetted about her stern as the tide caught the bow. Mark pulled the mainsheet on so that the mainsail started to draw and the boat sailed cleanly away from the wharf.

“Come on, you two,” said Tom. “Let’s get after them.”

Sapphire was a hundred yards away by the time *Emerald* pulled away from the wharf. Mark looked back over his shoulder and put the helm down which caused *Emerald* to round up with her sails flapping so the others could catch up. They soon drew alongside and the two boats then set off side by side up river for the Broadwater.

“Mark, Tom. We’ve forgotten something,” said Liz.

“What?” asked Mark with concern.

“Lunch!”

“Oh. Well we’ll have it on the move.”

“Ships’ cooks!” called Tom. “Prepare to feed the crews.” The river was narrow here and the banks were covered in low lying scrub and stunted trees. With the new flood carrying them the boats made good progress. Cate, Bill and Liz made up cheese rolls and handed them around. Tom and Mark found that they were hungrier than they had thought.

The river channel led north through a group of islands covered in low scrub. It then swept in a great arc to the east after which it indulged in a number of twists and turns.

“The river starts to dodge and weave here,” said Cate as she consulted the map. The scrub was dotted with occasional pine trees.

“Radiata pine,” said Tom.

“I didn’t think it was an Australian tree,” said Liz.

“No. They’re American. They call them Monterey Pines, I think.” After a mile or so the occasional pines became a plantation. They passed a small landing stage on the western shore. The bank was higher here and through a stand of exotic trees they could see a house.

The novelty of travelling up the river began to pall after an hour or so. The wind was fitful with the interference from the land. Bend after bend revealed the same type of vegetation. However, they still

made good progress with the tide assisting them. But its force was lessening all the time.

“That’s it,” said Mark about half an hour later. “The wind has died.”

“We are going backwards.”

“The tide is starting to ebb.”

“How far are we from Rooke Island?”

“About a mile by my reckoning.”

“Time to man the oars.” The oars were dragged from their places under the side decks and put in the rowlocks.

“I’ll row,” said Liz.

“And I,” said Cate on *Emerald* and they set to work. The sails on the two boats hung limply now, only moving in the surge caused when the two girls pulled at the oars. The sky had become overcast and the girls were soon raising a sweat. After twenty minutes Tom and Mark took over.

“It’s getting dark,” said Bill who was at the helm of *Emerald*.

“There’s a storm on the way.”

“How far now, Tom?” asked Mark.

“Half a mile or so.” They pulled on for ten minutes or so. There was a distant rumbling.

“It’s too quiet.”

“Yes. Nothing’s moving.”

“Those clouds are looking increasingly threatening.” The sky was growing darker by the minute.

“Was that a drop of rain?”

“Yes. There’s another.” The trees nearby gave a sigh as the first puff of wind troubled their branches. The two boats had drawn some way apart.

“It looks like we’re in for it,” said Cate.

“Let’s get the mainsail down,” said Tom to Cate. “The last thing we want is to be capsizing close to our destination. Bill, take the tiller and keep us heading towards the island.” He shipped the oars and went forward to help Cate lower the mainsail.

“You ease the halliard,” said Tom releasing it from its cleat. “I’ll gather the sail.”

The first gust of wind hit them from the east. The sail flapped wildly as it came down the mast. The boom dropped into the water but Tom quickly grabbed it and hauled it back into the boat.

“Have you got the sail?” called Cate from the mast.

“Yes. Keep it coming.” The sail came down quickly and Tom wrapped his arms around it and pulled it into the boat. Cate tied off the end of the halliard and then helped him control the sail. Once they had got it in the boat they ran a line around its folds so that it did not billow out. The breeze had freshened and with the jib still flying the boat moved quickly so Bill was able to steer towards the island. There was a rumble of thunder. Big drops of rain began to dot the surface of the river and in no time at all it was falling in torrents.

“Look at *Sapphire!*” Bill called to the other two. They left their task of tying down the mainsail for a moment and turned to see the other boat planing away in the fresh wind. Mark had elected to keep the mainsail up and *Sapphire* was throwing a fine rush of spray. The river ahead divided around a mass of land. Immediately after this Bill saw something else.

“Look!” he said pointing to the southern end of the island. Soldiers in a canoe.” From the far side of the island a canoe emerged heading downstream and paddled at full speed by two men. They were wearing army greens.

Cate was more interested in *Sapphire*. “She’s almost at the island.” They saw Mark put the helm down as his boat came into the lee of the island and he stepped forward to help Liz lower the violently shaking mainsail. Bill looked back downstream. The soldiers had by now almost disappeared in the driving rain and the chop blown up by the wind.

“Cate, just wrap part of the mainsheet around the mainsail so it can’t blow out,” said Tom and he went aft and took the tiller. “Bill!”—he found himself shouting so loud had the noise of the wind and the falling rain become—“get out a mooring line and go forward and tie an end to the bow fitting.”

Bill found himself repeating the task he had had to perform at Tea Gardens but in far more exciting conditions. He scrambled forward,

lay over the foredeck and tied the end of the line to the bow fitting with a bowline. *Every child in this family must be able to tie a bowline blindfolded* his father was wont to say. The rain was so heavy now he found himself doing just that.

“Stand by to tie off to some part of the island,” said Tom looking grim. They were now only fifty yards from *Sapphire* and heading into the lee of the island where she was comparatively protected from effects of the wind. The jib was providing them with plenty of drive but Tom knew he would only get one chance to secure the boat. If the wind changed direction so as to blow away from the island, the lack of a mainsail would prevent the boat from landing. He headed in.

“Liz has got hold of the branch of a bush,” Cate shouted.

Liz was sitting on the foredeck of *Sapphire* near the bow. Their mainsail was in disarray in the cockpit of the boat and Mark was at the mast lowering the jib which was wrapping itself around Liz’s head. Tom brought *Emerald* up close, but not too close, to *Sapphire*—just in case we need room to manoeuvre, he said to himself.

Bill used his own initiative and clambered onto the foredeck with the end of the line. Tom nosed the boat into the bank and Bill grabbed a solid looking branch and swung himself up onto the bank of the island with the line and tied it off to a nearby tree, ensuring that *Emerald* had room to swing. He then pushed his way through the scrub until he was opposite Liz.

“Good on you Bill,” she said, “here’s our line.” She passed it to him as he leant down from the bank. Bill then performed the same task for *Sapphire*.

The rain poured down. Rolls of thunder split the air every minute or so. Back on the boats the others secured the sails so that no wind could disturb them. Tom stood in the stern with the fisherman’s anchor and swung it out as far as he could so that it would offer a firm mooring point for the stern. It bit the bottom and he tied it off to the purchase for the mainsheet, wrapping a bit of cloth around the line where it passed over the transom—“In case the wind goes around to the west!” he called to Mark. Mark, meanwhile, had secured *Sapphire* in similar fashion.

“Any old port in a storm,” said Mark after the party had dragged itself through the scrub onto the shore a few minutes later.

“A bit wild and woolly, wasn’t it?” said Tom with an answering grin as he wiped the rain from his face.

“We didn’t know what was going to happen to you when we saw you plane away,” said Cate.

“I thought that would be the quickest way to get to the island,” said Mark.

“I’m glad Bill was able to tie us off or I would still be hanging on to that branch for dear life,” said Liz.

“Where *is* Bill,” asked Cate looking around. “Bill! Where are you?”

“I’m here,” came an answering call, “exploring.” The rain was less noisy now and the wind had abated somewhat. The island didn’t look particularly inviting, especially in the miserable condition. But this was their camping spot for the night. They would have to make the best of it.