

CHAPTER 13

Lights across the Sea

“Hello Mother. We’re back,” said Liz from the thwart of *Emerald*.

“So I see. And you’re as brown as a berry. *And* you’ve got freckles, Elisabeth.”

“Only little ones,” said Cate grinning at Liz.

“Hello, Catherine.”

“Hello, Mrs Parfitt. Hello, Mary Rose.”

“And you both seem to be covered in white powder.”

“Oh, that’s salt from the spray.”

“Well. Come ashore and have a shower under the canvas bag and wash it off, for heaven’s sake.”

“Hello, Cate. Hello, Liz.”

“Hello, Mummy.”

“Hello, Mrs Ryan.”

“Lo, Cate. ‘Lo, Liz.” Mary Rose was holding Mrs Parfitt’s hand. Mrs Ryan took the line Cate threw her. Mr Ryan and Mr Parfitt were standing talking in the background but came down to the water’s edge as the boat grounded. The girls waded ashore. Mrs Ryan put her arm around Cate affectionately.

“You don’t seem to have come to any harm, despite our forebodings,” she smiled at the two girls.

“We had a race with Mark and Father and we won.”

“And you’ve sent Tom and Bill off on a wild goose chase up the river?”

“Oh, they won’t be long behind us,” said Cate looking across at Liz. This hardly squared with what they had discussed in the middle of the Broadwater but it didn’t seem the time to be worrying her mother. There was a loud rattling sound and they looked up to see *Sapphire* nearing the shore, the sails shaking in the fitful breeze as Mark eased the sheets. He stepped over the side as the boat reached the shallows and brought the boat to a halt.

“Hello, Mother. Hello, Mrs Ryan. Here we are safe and sound.”

“Mark. You’ve got salt all over you too.”

“Can’t be helped if you’re belting to windward in a chop. What a great race, Cate!”

“What were you doing plowing through the shallows out there?” she responded.

“I was trying a short cut that didn’t come off. I was lucky to nail Father Hannan in the end.”

“Where is he?”

“Just dropping anchor, now. Look!” *Great Saint Joseph* had come to a halt at the end of its anchor line not far from the shore and the sails were snaking down into the boat as the priest let the halliards run. He joined them on the shore shortly afterwards towing a stern line from the boat which he tied to a convenient bollard.

“Well come on. Tie up those things and come and have a shower and some afternoon tea. We’ve got you something special from the cake shop in Hawk’s Nest. Come on Mary Rose. We’ll go and set the table.” Mrs Parfitt headed back to the camp hand in hand with her young assistant.

“Oh, Cate, this is heaven. Perhaps Mother is right after all.” Liz and Cate were stretched out luxuriously on air mattresses in a tent their fathers had thoughtfully erected for them.

“Good old Daddy, and your Dad too, putting these tents up for us. The last thing I wanted to do was to pitch tents after today’s efforts.”

“After the week’s adventures.”

“And they’re not over yet.”

They had, at the insistence of Mrs Parfitt, had a good cold shower to wash off the salt and some of the smells and grime of three days, changed into clean clothes and had then sat back in folding chairs, with towels around their heads to dry their hair, while their parents, who had missed them more than they were prepared to admit, had fed them tea and french pastries, while Cate and Liz, with interpellations from Mark, had narrated the details of their adventures. Father Hannan sat smoking his pipe in the background with a quizzical smile on his face.

“But why did Tom and Bill need the canoe?” asked Mrs Parfitt with Mary Rose on her knee.

“To get a vital clue.”

“But why did they put it in so inaccessible a place?”

“Ah. Only the diabolical minds that thought up the Armed Forces competition could answer that.”

“Well. I think it’s most unfair.”

“It just adds to the challenge, Mother,” said Mark. Yes. They had had a delightful half hour. Mark and the two fathers had gone to hose down the two boats and to stow the sails while, chiefly at Mrs Parfitt’s insistence, the two girls had retired for a small rest in their tent. Father Hannan was meanwhile making *Great Saint Joseph* livable again cleaning up, as he said, after a number of savages he had entertained on board.

It was warm in the tent under the late afternoon sun and both girls felt drowsy.

“Where do you suppose Tom and Bill are?”

“Having the time of their lives, I’ll bet.”

“Rather them than me. I’m exhausted.”

“Thank heaven the wind has eased. They shouldn’t have too much trouble getting back now.”

“What an adventure it’s been. We’ve had such fun, haven’t we?”

“Mmm.”

“We must remember to be in place on those sandhills when the Morse comes across from Broughton.”

“Mmm.”

“Who knows what else we’ll learn if we get a few more clues?”

There was no reply.

“Liz?” Well, Cate thought as her eyes glazed over, just a short snooze would be a good thing. What clues would they get? She could see the light winking in the distance over the sea from the island. Winking and winking...

It was an hour later that Mary Rose woke them at her mother’s insistence.

“Cate! Liz! Tum for dinner.” She had to repeat the message three times before Liz replied.

“Is that you Mary Rose?”

“Yes. Tum for dinner. Liz. Tum for dinner.” Liz gave Cate a prod. Cate groaned.

“Dinner time, Cate. Wake up.”

“I’ll have it later.”

“No. It’s half past five.”

“What?”

“It’s half past five.”

“It can’t be.”

“Well it is.” Cate opened her eyes and gazed around.

“Oh. I feel stiff and sore,” she said stretching. “Half past five? Are Tom and Bill back yet?”

“I don’t know. I can’t hear them.”

“Liz! Cate! Tum for dinner,” said Mary Rose again. It seemed as though she would never get her message understood.

“Coming, Mary Rose. Go and tell Mummy we’re coming.” At last she had an answer and she trotted back with the happy news to the fireplace where Mrs Ryan was preparing the evening meal.

Five minutes later the two girls arrived at the fireplace. The sun was setting.

“Hello Mummy. Are Tom and Bill back yet?”

“No. Your father is worried. He and Father and Mr Parfitt are setting off in the boat to find them.” Alongside the launching ramp they could see Mark untying the mooring rope of the One Lunger while Mr Ryan was pulling in the anchor at the stern. Fr Hannan was standing in the bow with a pair of field glasses around his neck. As they watched, Mr Parfitt pulled the starting rope and the engine burst into life. They walked down to the water as Mark lent on the bow to push the boat away from the shore. Mr Parfitt engaged reverse and the One Lunger backed away ponderously from the shore.

“What’s happening, Mark?” asked Liz.

“Hullo girls. They haven’t appeared. Father Hannan has been checking the other side of the Broadwater through the field glasses but has seen nothing. They are going over to find them.”

“We shouldn’t be too long,” Mr Ryan called from the boat. “They can’t have got themselves into too much strife. See you when we get back.”

“Don’t worry, girls,” called Father Hannan. “Go and talk with your mothers.”

“I’m worried now,” said Liz. “We should have taken one of the boats up the river.”

“No. The boats would have been useless,” said Mark. “You remember how slow they were on the way up river from Port Stephens.” The One Linger swept around in a great circle and the three men waved to them as it gathered way and headed out.

“They’ll be okay,” said Cate. “Tom always thinks ahead.”

“But what could have gone wrong?”

“We’ll find out shortly, no doubt.”

The three spent the next half an hour in the fading light calming Mrs Parfitt’s fears as they ate their dinner. Even Mrs Ryan had to join in doing so, although privately she was feeling some misgivings herself. Mary Rose could sense the worry of the others too, and she was subdued. She sat on Liz’s knee eating her dinner but had little to say.

“I look back on that meal with regret,” Liz told Cate later. “We had had three days eating camping fare and there we were hoeing into steak and vegetables but we couldn’t really enjoy it.” They helped wash the dishes after they had eaten and then asked permission to walk over to the ocean for half an hour.

“Mark will be with us. We’re hoping to get a few more clues in the Morse from Broughton Island,” Cate confided to her mother.

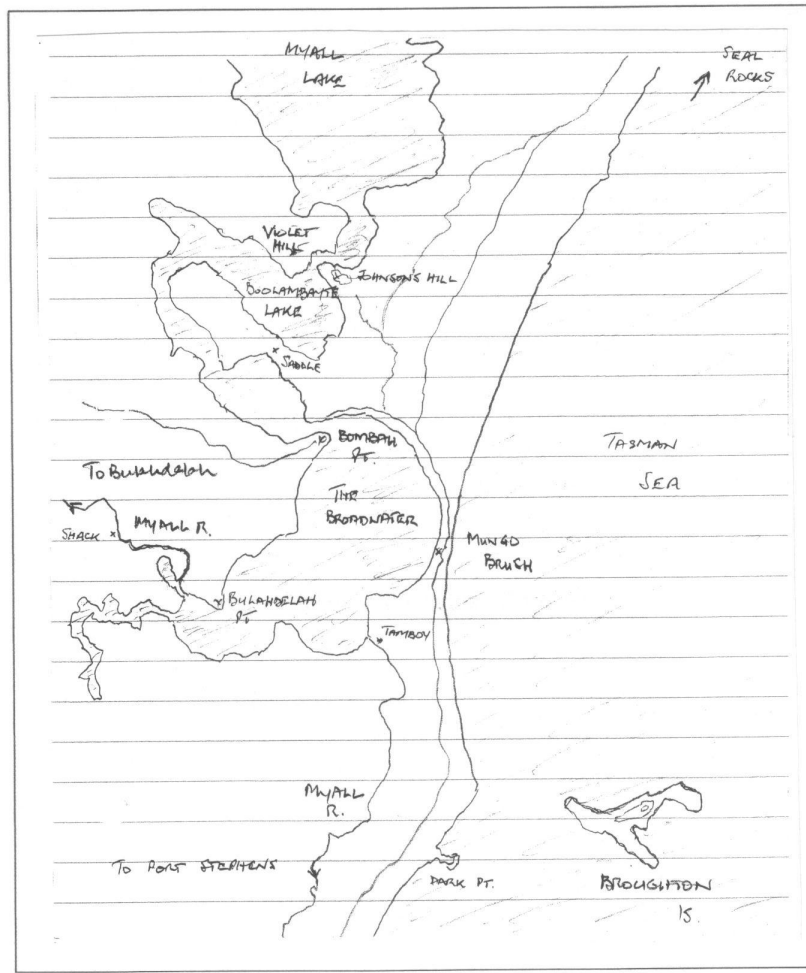
“Well. We didn’t realise what would be the outcome of Mark’s letter to Tom all those months ago, did we?”

“I’m so glad he gave us the inspiration. We should be back in half an hour or so.”

Mark, Cate and Liz moved up the path from Mungo Brush through the sandhills to the ocean. In the last of the twilight they could just pick out the route.

“Watch out for these steps. It would be easy to trip.” There were steps let into the sandy soil from place to place. Boards held with steel pegs had been placed to hold the sand in place.

“There’s still some light to see by.”



“The stars are coming out pretty clearly. It’s going to be a good night for viewing.”

“I just hope that they will be flashing their message in our direction. The only problem is that we don’t know where along the coast their mates will be. They could be down south near Dark Point.”

“It stands to reason that they will be up this end of the lakes.”

“They may be well north of us.”

“Well—north east. The road runs close to the coast there and it’s not far in from Myall Lake.”

“Maybe the soldiers are here at Mungo, and not far away.”

“Yes. We’d better keep our voices down.” They dropped their voices in anticipation that they might be overheard.

“Anyway, they would be sailors. I don’t think the average soldier would know Morse.

The booming of the surf had been a constant background noise and they had hardly been conscious of it. But now as they breasted the last sandhill they could see the sea below them and the white of the line of breakers along the shore.

“Where’s Broughton?”

“There. To the south. Look. You can see a dark shape.” Mark had the field glasses to his eyes.



“And there’s the beacon. It’s flashing from the highest point on the island—two, three flashes and then the gap. We’ll time them.”

“One, two, three.”

“A second apart.”

“Then the occult.” They counted under their breath.

“Six seconds.”

“No. Seven.”

“Let’s count them again.”

“One, two three and one, and two and three and four and five and six and seven and another flash. A seven second occult.”

“And look to the north. You can see the light from a lighthouse flashing.” They looked around to the north east.

“That must be Seal Rocks.”

“What’s the time?”

“Twenty past six.”

“We had better get ourselves a good viewing spot and settle down.”

“Out of this wind too. It’s a bit chilly.” The wind was from the south.

“Hullo. Here we go.” Mark’s voice was excited. “Look. A light is flashing from the island. To the right of the beacon. Stand by with your pen.” Below him and in a dip where their torch would not be seen the two girls sat. Liz held the torch with her hand around the lens to shade it. Cate held her pencil and her small note pad.

“Ready?”

“Ready!” Mark repeated the letters slowly as they were flashed across the water.

“N, M, X, A, R—he’s not particularly fast. Not as good as Father Hannan—N, M, Y, K.”

“Got it,” Cate whispered but what does it mean?”

“NMX is their call sign I guess, and NMY the call sign of their mates. AR means they are calling. K means over.”

“Are there any more?”

“Not at the moment. They must be watching for a reply. Quick. Put out the torch you two, get up and look up and down the coast. See if you can see any torch flashing from the shore. I’ll keep an eye on the island.” Liz and Cate quickly jumped up from their hole and climbed to the top of the sand dune.

“You look up the coast, Liz. I’ll look down.”
 “Can you see anything?”
 “No. Nothing. What about you?”
 “Nothing here. Just miles and miles of surf.”
 “Hullo. Here comes some more Morse.” The girls returned quickly to their bunker in the sand.
 “N, M, X—it’s the same message. Their mates haven’t responded yet. Hop up again girls and keep a look out.” The two returned to their former stations and gazed along the darkening coast.
 “I wonder what’s happened to Tom and Bill.”
 “Yes. They should have been back an hour ago.”
 “Anything showing yet?”
 “No. Nothing at my end.”
 “Nor mine. What’s the time, Cate?”
 “Just a minute and I’ll check. Where’s the torch?”
 “Here.” Liz handed it to her. Cate dropped below the skyline and consulted her watch by the hooded light of the torch.
 “Six thirty seven.”
 “They *are* late. The island is still flashing the same message.”
 “What will we do if they don’t turn up?”
 “That’s right. We won’t know of any new clues.”
 “We could pretend that we are NMY.”
 “As a last resort may be. I’m loath to do it just yet. We’ll wait.”
 They sat quietly. Four minutes later Mark spoke.
 “Yes. Here is something new. They’ve made contact—C, A—take this down: C, A, B, T, R, E. That’ll be Cabbage Tree Island I’ll bet. O.”
 “O or zero?”
 “O.”
 “O. That’s our first new clue.”
 “A vowel at last.”
 “Here is some more—S, T, E, P, K.”
 “That’ll be Stephen’s Peak.”
 “M.”
 “Hooray! Another clue.”
 “Not so loud. They might be nearby.”
 “Any more?”

“B, O, O, N, D, E, L,” Mark recited slowly. “That’ll be Boondelbah Island—3.”
 “Three?”
 “Three.”
 “B, R, O, U, G, H, T.”
 “Broughton Island.”
 “J. Then K.”
 “What’s that mean?”
 “You remember. K means over.”
 “No more flashing. They must be listening to their mates.”
 “So we have four more clues—O, M, 3 and J.”
 “How many’s that we’ve got now?”
 “Well assuming Tom and Bill get the one on the Myall River we will have thirteen all together.”
 “Out of how many?”
 “Out of eighteen.”
 “If only we could get the rest.”
 “It will take us another day at least.”
 “And the defence forces must be close to having them all by now.”
 “Well. Let’s look at the ones we’ve got when we get back. We may be able to work out most of it.”
 “Come on. Let’s head back. Don’t use the torch.” They began to pick their way slowly back down the sandy path.
 “Be careful. We don’t want to cut a leg open by tripping on these boards.”
 “Sssh!”
 “What’s up?”
 “Listen. Voices.”
 “Yes. I heard them too.” They were whispering now.
 “Where?”
 “To the left. They must be on another path.” There was a flash of a torch not thirty yards away and the three sank to the ground instinctively. The sound of the voices of two men came to them speaking in undertones. The men were walking and taking a path which would intersect theirs a few yards ahead. They heard one of them say “...but what was that message on the lake about? *Canoe holed*. I thought ours were the only crews with Morse. If the others

have got Morse too we have lost our advantage.” Another voice said—
—“We’ll just have to move faster. We’ve got most of them anyway.
Let’s get back...” The men had passed by. They were walking
quickly and could hear no more of their conversation.

Mark said: “Wait a few minutes. Give them time to get away.”

“Thank heaven we didn’t use the torch.”

“But what are they talking about.”

“Tom and Bill of course. They must have flashed a message across
the lake.”

“*Canoe holed.* I don’t like the sound of that.”

“But it explains why they hadn’t arrived home.”

“Let’s hope they found them with the One Lunger.”

“It also explains why the soldiers were late for the rendezvous.”

“Sailors.”

“Let’s get back as quickly as we can and find out what’s happened.”

“I can’t understand why they didn’t hear us. Cate was pretty excited
when we got the first clue.”

“Because we were downwind from them. Also the surf covered our
noise to some extent.”

“It’s a good thing they weren’t further north than we were.”

“Come on. Let’s go. Be careful now.” They headed down the path
feeling their way in the dim light. After five minutes or so the path
dropped down to the road and they could increase their pace back to
the camping area.

“Listen. The One Lunger!” They could hear the familiar chugging
of the work boat.

“Let’s hope they’ve got Tom and Bill.”