

CHAPTER 14

Tom's story—with a little help from Bill

They could hear the regular throb of the One Lunger as it approached the shore. Someone had fixed a torch so that it shone ahead from the boat—a substitute for a forward steaming light, as Father Hannan later described it. When the boat emerged from the darkness it was a curious sight. Along the port side was the canoe tied roughly. This gave it a 'raised deck' sort of appearance. As it nosed into the shore they could see Tom and Bill standing in the bows. Both looked tired and subdued.

Mark took the line Mr Ryan threw him and tied it off to the trunk of a she oak which overhung the water. The party stepped ashore except for Mr Parfitt who had dropped an anchor over the stern and now pulled the boat back on it a little so she would not take the ground.

"Hello, Mum," said Tom. "Sorry we're late. We got into a bit of strife. A pity really, after such a great three days." He put his arm around his mother as he stepped ashore.

"You are all wet. You are *both* all wet," she said running her hand through Bill's hair.

"Well, we were doing a bit of underwater paddling," said Bill with grin.

"We had to extract them from the water," said Mr Ryan.

"Are both of you all right?" asked Mrs Parfitt.

"Hello, Mrs Parfitt. Yes. Thank you. Just a bit wet."

"And starving hungry," added Bill.

"Look, Liz," said Cate indicating. "The canoe has got a hole in one end." There was a gash in the canvas.

"It was an underwater obstruction that did it," said Tom.

"Come on, you two," said Mrs Ryan. "Your dinner has been ready for almost an hour. You can tell us all about it as you eat. Thank you for rescuing them, James and Father."

"But how did you find them in the dark?" asked Mrs Parfitt.

“Morse,” said Father Hannan. We should thank heaven for all childish enthusiasms.” They walked together up to the campfire.

“Wait until they’ve got some nourishment in them,” said Mr Ryan. “Then Tom can tell you all about it.” The two mothers handed around the plates with the somewhat dried steak and vegetables to the men. Mr Parfitt handed round drinks to each of them. Father said *Grace* and they commenced to eat.

“Right. Start from the beginning, young Tom,” said his father, “omitting no detail, no matter how slight.” It was quite dark now, but in its flickering light, the fire showed the concern on the faces of the adults.

“When we left you at Bulahdelah Point, Father, we had to avoid those shallows. The water was choppy but the waves were following us and all went well. We found the entrance to the river after we turned the point. There is another small lake just inside those narrows but you turn right immediately after going in and there is a little sandy beach there. We pulled in and adjusted our positions. We were happy to be out of that wind, I can tell you. And in the river you would never know there was much wind. Father Hannan was right. The trees are so close to the banks and the river is so narrow you just couldn’t sail. Anyway, I put Bill in the back and I sat in the front. That way the canoe went better. We started up river. We had about two miles to go. The river is not very inviting. The main impression you get is of darkness. The water is dark. The scrub is dark. The trees overhang and cut down the light getting in. So it’s not very pleasant.

“We plugged away steadily. A couple of gin palaces went past dragging half the river after them and that was pretty exciting. The canoe is a beauty though and we never looked like shipping any water.”

“Didn’t it almost sink on you though?” asked Mrs Parfitt.

“Ah, that was later, but it wasn’t the design that was at fault, Mrs Parfitt, but the fabric. I’ll come to that. No. It’s a great canoe. No wonder you are fond of it, Mr Parfitt,” he added turning to him with a grin. “We saw another canoe with two soldiers in it racing down the

river and spoke to them. They slowed down to talk to us. They looked pretty exhausted.”

“We’re all pretty exhausted. I’m glad they are, too,” said Cate.

“We just passed the time of day with them. I think they were happy to have someone to talk to.”

“I asked them if they had come far,” said Bill.

“Yes. Cheeky devil that he is.”

“And what did they say,” asked Liz.

“The bloke in the back said it seemed like fifty miles!”

“Then I asked them whether they were camping. At that the chap in front was a bit vague. Said they might camp on Lake Boolambayte tonight. It depended how they were going. They had had a hard couple of days. So we left them and continued upstream.”

“You didn’t ask them about the shack?”

“No. It occurred to me but I thought it a bit risky. They might have been suspicious if we had. I’m rather pleased they didn’t ask us where *we* were going. Answering that question could have been awkward. Anyway we left them soon after and kept on. After about twenty minutes we found the shack. It’s very ramshackle, as Father Hannan said. It wasn’t easy getting ashore because the bank is so high there but we managed it. The shack is on a flat beside the river and about sixty yards from the water’s edge. There was no indicator as to where the clue was to be found other than that it was somewhere in or around the building.”

“We searched high and low,” said Bill. “Checked every ramshackle room. Looked all over the front and sides but couldn’t see anything. Then Tom had the bright idea to look at the back. And there it was painted three metres high.”

“Ten feet,” said Tom.

“And what was it? Don’t keep us in suspense,” said Cate.

“An O,” said Bill.

“Or a zero,” said Tom. “There is no way of knowing.”

“So what have we got now?” asked Liz. “Where’s our list, Cate?”

“Here. This is what we’ve got so far...”

“Cate. That can wait until later. Just keep going, Tom.” Tom continued his story. “So we got back to the canoe pretty excited at having secured the clue. But it was then that our troubles started. It

was my fault. I was so keen to get back that I forgot the canvas fabric.”

“We scraped past a wooden post half submerged near the bank and put the hole in the bow near the waterline,” said Bill.

“It was probably the remains of an old wharf that used to serve the shack. Anyway pretty soon there was water in the boat and we had to pull ashore again and work out some way of plugging it. And that was easier said than done. The banks are so darned high.”

“What did you use?”

“Bill’s hankie. But it wasn’t all that successful. The water still kept coming in. We stopped again and I put Bill in the front to raise the bow a bit to reduce the pressure on the hole. The trouble was that the hole was so close to the bow that we couldn’t reach inside to plug it. We had to try and do so from the outside which tended to make the hole bigger.”

“And made it look like it was wearing a moustache—on one side,” said Bill.

“We got back in the water and headed off again. There was less water coming in but the level kept rising.”

“If only we had taken a sponge to bail. My hat was pretty useless.”

“All the time I was worried about the wind on the Broadwater. The prospect of heading out onto a lake three and a half miles wide into wind and waves with a leaking canoe didn’t bear thinking about. And the day was coming to an end. It was getting late.”

“And the river seemed to get darker and more gruesome the later it got.”

“Yes. But we paddled on. We had to stop to bail out twice more and it was after six o’clock when we reached the little beach near the entrance to the river. We bailed the boat out again and I added my hankie to Bill’s to plug the tear more effectively. Then we headed out through the narrows into the Broadwater.”

“But we stayed near the shore.”

“The course down to Bulahdelah Point is all south east so we were somewhat protected from the easterly. The sun was almost gone by then and the wind started to take off. The fact that we were so late was in our favour because the waves got smaller and smaller as the wind died. And surprisingly the leak seemed to have eased. The last

plugging job seemed to be working. We came ashore for the last time at Bulahdelah and emptied the boat out completely. Then we headed out onto the paddock.”

“The paddock?”

“Well. The Broadwater.”

“It’s like a big paddock.”

“The sun had gone down by then.”

“We knew Dad or the others would come looking for us so we were pretty optimistic.”

“Then the leak got worse.”

“About half a mile offshore we started to take water again. I was in two minds. Should we turn back or keep going.”

“I was bailing like billy-oh.”

“I kept paddling. Bill kept collecting as much water as he could in his hat and putting it back over the side. The situation wasn’t desperate but it was tending that way.”

“Then I heard an engine faintly and Tom started signalling with the torch.”

“It was a great relief when we saw Father Jack reply. So then it was simply a matter of hanging on till the One Lunger arrived.”

“But the level was rising all the time. We were both bailing.”

“It was another fifteen minutes before they reached us. I was worried that the canoe would sink in the meantime and the torch would be useless so we wouldn’t have been able to show them just where we were. Thankfully it didn’t sink.”

“But we were half full of water, though.”

“Phew!” Liz expressed the thoughts of them all in the silence that followed. “It makes the rest of our adventures look pretty tame, doesn’t it?”

“Well. Thank heaven it’s all over now. You can get back to regular meals and enjoy what’s left of your holiday.”

“But Mother, it’s been splendid. We wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

“Well, now,” said Mrs Ryan. “You can tell Mrs Parfitt and me all about your adventures. We’ve only had it second hand from your fathers. And we want to hear it from you.”

“Omitting no detail.”

“Cate and Liz can tell it,” said Mark. “We’ll just help when they miss something out.” So the two girls related again for their mothers the fun of their three day trip from Karuah. Tom and Mark were content to sit and listen. The men sat in the background, Mr Ryan and Father Hannan smoking their pipes, Mr Parfitt offering coffee or tea for those who wanted it.

“What I would like is a good’s night’s sleep,” said Tom, as the tale reached its end.

“And you’re not the only one,” said his father, indicating Bill, who was dozing on the ground. “Tent is up. Sleeping gear is all arranged inside. You two had better get yourselves to bed. In fact you had all better hit the hay.”

“Come on, Cate,” said Liz. “We can tell Tom and Bill what we got from Broughton Island before they go to sleep.”

“Bill! Wake up and go to the tent,” said his mother. Bill roused himself, got up off the ground and stumbled after the others. When they reached the tents he went straight in and fell face down on his mattress.

“So, what did you read from Broughton?” Tom asked.

“Four more,” said Cate with a grin. She and Liz proceeded to tell of the clues they had received.

“An O, an M, a J and a 3. How many have we got now?”

“I make it twelve.”

“No. It’s thirteen.”

“When you were signalling the One Lunger, was part of your message ‘Canoe holed’?” Mark asked?

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Well on the way back here we overheard the Navy men talking about a message they had read over the Broadwater earlier. That was the message.”

“So they know we can signal in Morse?”

“Yes. But they think that it is one of the others, the Air Force or the Army.”

“Well. I’ve had it,” said Tom. “If I don’t get to sleep I’ll drop. We’ll just have to resume the search in the morning.” He ducked his head and entered the tent after Bill.

“Half a tick, Tom,” said Mark as he followed him into the tent.

“Liz,” said Cate indicating with her head. “Come and have a talk.” The two girls left them and headed across the grass to their own tent.