

CHAPTER ONE

The Morrow household was in a state of organised turmoil as Scott and the rest of the family rushed to put the finishing touches to their best clothes.

Scott was busy spraying starch on his Scout shirt and ironing it into shape. This was a day he had long looked forward to over the past twelve months. It was a day he knew would be tinged with sadness and also full of happiness when he gathered with the other members of his Venturer unit at Government House.

“Come on Scott or we’ll be late!” Scott’s mother Kelly called.

“I’m almost finished! Just a few more strokes,” Scott replied as he put the finishing touches to his crisply-ironed shirt. “You know I like to have sharp creases in my sleeves.”

“Yes, I know, just like Mike’s shirts. That man will haunt us for some time,” Kelly answered.

Scott, his parents and older brother David, made their way into the family car and drove to the city. Today Scott would be presented with two awards - one for bravery and the other his Queen’s Scout Certificate by the State Governor. The Queen’s Scout Certificate was the culmination of passing proficiency badges within the teenage section of Scouting called Venturers and was the highest possible award.

The bravery award was something special. It was the highest civilian award that could be handed out by the Government. Scott was nervous and excited.

“Remember, keep a straight back and when the media start talking to you about the bravery award, look the reporters in the eye when answering - not into the camera,” Scott’s father, Allan cautioned.

“I will. I’ll just be glad when today is over so I can go back to living a normal life,” Scott said. “I’m tired of the glare of TV cameras. What I did is what anyone else in my circumstances would do.”

“Not really. It took guts to take on those clowns and help bring them to justice,” David stated as he wound his window down.

The journey to the city took around thirty minutes. The Morrows were indeed lucky today as they were allotted special parking behind Government House. When the Morrows approached the front gate of Government House a media throng was ready to meet them.

“That’s him! Roll the cameras! Quickly!” came a yell from a number of news crews waiting to capture Scott and the other award recipients on film.

“Wave to them slowly Scott,” Allan told his son.

“Okay.”

Allan drove to his designated spot after being guided by State police who were assisting with parking in the grounds.

“I hope he’s here. I really do,” Scott said to his mum.

“He’ll turn up, you watch. Do you really think he would miss your special day?” Kelly said.

“I hope not. It will be good to see him again.”

The family alighted from the car and was ushered into the rear entrance of Government House to meet the Governor.

“This place is like a palace. Have a look at the giant chandelier - it must have a million lights in it - never mind the crystal!” Scott was suddenly struck by the grandeur of the main drawing room.

He was introduced to the Governor, a retired Major General who welcomed him with a beaming smile.

“Hello Scott, I have heard so much about you. Welcome to my humble abode,” announced General Brian McGrath.

“Humble? This place is fit for a king or queen,” Scott replied.

“Well, after all, the house was built with royalty in mind, as this is where they stay if ever the Royal family comes to Sydney.”

“Gee, I haven’t seen so many stained-glass windows and paintings in a house before.”

The Governor smiled and said, “If you like, you can come back another time and I’ll arrange a personal tour of the house and show you what it is really like.”

“That would be cool. Mum, Dad, can I come back and have a look over this palace please?” Scott asked.

“Of course, you can. Major General McGrath has invited you, and it would be an honour to see this entire colonial masterpiece,” Scott’s dad, Allan replied.

Scott mingled with the other guests for around twenty minutes while the grounds of Government House filled to capacity with family members, guests and members of the public. It was a cloudless day with hardly any wind. It was a great day for photos.

The Governor looked out the window and back at his watch and turned to Scott. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” the teenager replied.

“Don’t be nervous. You have done your country a great honour and in doing so, helped save the lives of your friends. Be proud of yourself. You deserve it,” the general said as he withdrew from the window.

The award recipients moved out of Government House and formed up with the Scout pipe and drum band and marched around the rear gardens to the front gates. The official guests took their seats and the band struck up. The march to the front of Government House with the other Venturers and special award recipients was around 500 metres long.

In Scott’s mind it took an eternity. The moment the band master twirled his baton and the band sounded, the crowd started rising to its feet. News crews were at the front of the band filming and then walking beside the marchers. A number of times cameramen walked beside Scott as he proudly marched towards the lawns in front of Government House.

Scott scanned the crowds but he couldn’t see Mike, his Venturer leader or any of his fellow Venturers. An air of disappointment started coming over him as he saw the official podium come into view ahead of him. Just then, a pea whistle started sounding and a large banner reading, *Well Done Scott* was hoisted above the crowd.

A chant started rising from somewhere near the banner as the crowd began joining in, “Well done Scott! Well done Scott! Well done Scott!”

The media went berserk and they turned their attention onto the crowd to capture the mood and then back to Scott. Suddenly, a lone Scout lemon-squeezer hat could be seen near the banner and as the crowd started to part to allow the media in, Scott saw his Venturers all turned out in their best uniforms and all singing in unison, “Well done Scott!”

The teenager began to lose it emotionally, until he saw Mike Hunter, his Venturer leader under the lemon-squeezer hat give him a thumbs up. Mike then joined his Venturers in the chorus and the crowd kept the chant going, almost drowning out the band. The bandmaster lifted his baton and the marchers came to a halt.

The band turned left and the marchers went to the right to form a hollow square on the lawns. Scott looked up at Government House and saw the Governor peering down through the curtains at him. When their eyes met, the General closed his fist and also put his thumb up to Scott before allowing the curtains to close again.

The Governor's aide-de-camp came striding out of Government House to the podium. The band stopped playing and Major General McGrath walked out to resounding applause from the now well worked-up crowd. He stood at the podium and the aide-de-camp called the recipients to attention. The band then played the national anthem while the Governor and the recipients saluted. At the end, the Governor called on the recipients to stand easy and for the crowd to sit.

"Distinguished guests, award recipients, ladies and gentlemen. It is not often so much emotion sweeps through these portals, but today is different." Major General McGrath continued. "Today we honour a number of Venturers who have worked hard and tirelessly to obtain the necessary proficiency badges to enable them to receive their Queen's Scout Award - Scouting's highest youth award.

"We also have a number of very special people who have placed self-sacrifice above all the rest and helped their fellow people ..."

The banner from Scott's unit was hoisted high and the Venturers started singing out again, "Well done Scott! Well done Scott!"

The crowd started picking up the chant again and the media suddenly started running back to Scott's Venturers. The Governor paused as he acknowledged the crowd and the chant reached a new crescendo. He waited a few moments and then continued.

"One of our special awardees seems to have captured the hearts of you all, as I know he captured the hearts of our nation recently.

"This is the day we pay special homage to"

Scott started to shed a tear as he was overcome with emotion. It had been almost a year since his Venturer unit had gone on their fateful camp. It was the Christmas holidays when the Venturers had ten days together at Myall Lakes near Newcastle on the eastern seaboard of New South Wales.

Scott remembered the trip very well. It was his first ten-day camp away from home, and his first extended camp with Mike and the unit. He had travelled with Mike in his utility along with Steve, his unit chairman. The unit had been preparing for the holiday camp for months and had done a couple of practice weekend camps too.

Myall Lakes is shaped like a figure of eight, and at its southern boundary it edges onto a narrow sand peninsula that separates it from the ocean. It was an ideal place to camp as the boys could use their surf skis and canoes on the lake or go for a swim in the surf. Situated there was a small camping ground and Mike had pre-booked it twelve months in advance. It was to be the unit's home away from home and palace for the next ten days.

"I can't wait to get the tents up and start canoeing out there," Steve said. "This will be ten days of bliss without Mum and Dad around."

"Yeah, I can't wait either," Scott agreed. "Just think ten glorious days of sleeping in and no alarm clocks going off to get you up ready for school."

"Don't rush into it too fast. Remember you will all be taking turns in organising meals and that means some of you will have to get up well before the others," Mike said.

"Good old Mike," Scott thought. "Trust him to put an organised damper on the activity."

However, he was right. Teams of boys had been organised over the last few weeks so everyone knew their roster for preparing meals, cleaning the dishes and tidying up the campsite. The last thing Mike wanted was a slack unit which would invariably, lead to problems. Mike was a Captain in the Army Reserve and was accustomed to organising personnel. He was a role model the boys and their parents respected. He was gregarious and could mix with both youth and adults on their respective levels as required. The 25 year-old newspaper journalist was worldly and had seen and been involved in things you generally only read about.

Often on camps the boys would ask Mike about his latest stories and how they really unfolded - not just what was reported. It was a great educative process for the boys as they

came to realise the difference between what could be legally reported and what actually happened in real life.

Mike told of the murders, deliberately-lit fires and demonstrations he covered for his paper. However, he wasn't one to boast about his knowledge of inside facts. It was the boys who would ask him for more details. Sometimes, Mike would hold back - other times he would let fly if he thought the police or other authorities had deliberately interfered so they wouldn't be reported as being incompetent.

Eight other Venturers had joined Steve and Scott for the camp and had been dropped off by a couple of parents at the bush land camp on the edge of the lakes. One drove a mini bus and the other a sedan so he could take the driver home. The camp itself was nothing spectacular; it was just a clearing near the lakes. Dotted along the foreshore of the lakes were huge pine trees which were great for afternoon shade. Scott was put in charge of erecting the food tent and organising it.

"Grab the barrels and put them over here," he said to Brett and Peter. "I think we should put the water barrel near the front and the other two near the back."

"What about the table and crate?" Peter asked. "The crate will have the fruit in it and needs to be more easily accessible."

"You're right, as usual. We should put the barrels on the sides of the tent and table nearer to the front with the fruit crate on it," Scott replied.

The food containers were large, plastic barrels which had screw-down lids with lists of their contents stuck to the front by tape. One was set aside for fresh water as there were no water pipes nearby.

"What about a tent fly to go over the tent to keep it cooler?" Brett asked.

"As usual, you're right," Scott replied.

"The fly is in the back of Mike's ute, I'll get it."

Within a short time, the gangly youth had returned with the fly and the three boys quickly erected it over the tent to help provide more shade. While Scott, Peter and Brett worked on the food tent, the others were busy setting up the accommodation tent, mess fly and a latrine area.

“We’re only missing one thing now,” Mike said to his assembled Venturer unit.

“What’s that?” Brett asked.

“The brew point,” Mike answered.

“The what?” The chorus went up from the unit.

“Somewhere to get a cup of tea or coffee as required rather than making a fire every time,” Mike said.

“Okay, we have one small table left over, maybe we could set up the small stove and a billy on that so we can have a tea or coffee whenever we come out of the water,” Scott suggested.

“Okay, let’s do it,” Mike said.

Within a short time the brew point was erected and the first coffee was poured for Mike.

“Mmm, that’s nice. The first brew of the day - I didn’t have much time for one this morning,” Mike said.

“How’s the camp?” Steve asked. “More to the point, what do you all think? Is it easily accessible? Is your gear stowed away and the equipment within reach?”

“Yes and I think it’s time we organised lunch,” Scott said.

“Good idea. Guys, I think you’ve done a great job. Well done. Now we have to keep this tidy as the days tick over,” Mike cautioned.

The camp was the main event for the year. It was bliss. No parents - just the Venturers and Mike and ten days of adventure on the lakes or in the surf. The camp had taken a couple of hours to pitch and it was time for lunch and the first of a seemingly endless bout of swimming, canoeing and surf skiing. The Venturers revelled with the excitement of doing their own thing. Mike, on the other hand, sat back on a deck chair in the shade of a pine tree. He had a cup of coffee in one hand and a notebook and pen in the other. Scott handed over the surf ski to David, picked up his towel and walked over to Mike.

“What’s up? Why aren’t you joining in?” he asked.

“I just want to ensure we’ve thought of everything. You know ... did we bring enough food, spares, first aid – all that sort of thing.”

Scott was drying his back when Mike looked up at him and told him to put his sneakers on.

“You know the rules – no sneakers, no swim in the lake,” Mike cautioned. “You don’t know what people have thrown into the water and if you cut your feet, they may get infected.”

“Sorry. I was just so hot after putting up the tents and overhead flys, I forgot.”

Scott beamed Mike a smile and Mike smiled back and shook his head. Scott had a large smile that would melt anyone’s problems away. Mike always said Scott should join the diplomatic service and help win over hard-nosed adversaries. Scott was different to the other Venturers. He had a smaller frame, near-perfect smooth skin, blonde hair and green eyes that were always enquiring. Scott hadn’t gone into Venturers the normal way after progressing from the Scout Troop. He had never been a Scout.

Scott’s father Allan, was a police officer in the highway patrol and he had initially frowned upon Scott for wanting to join those ‘goofy’ Venturers. Allan was a macho man, looking to always prove his manhood. His new wife Kelly worked on Allan to help change his attitude. When Scott caught up with some of the caving and abseiling adventures of a couple of his classmates he was spellbound. He got Mike’s address and went and saw him unannounced.

Mike had been living in the rear section of a house and was reading a book when he heard the back gate open. He looked up and saw a small, gangly youth open the gate and push his bicycle in and then close the gate behind him. The youth took off his helmet and a shock of blonde hair came into view. The boy was either a young-looking fifteen-year-old or an older thirteen-year-old. Mike followed the boy’s progress across the backyard and onto his verandah. The boy knocked on the door and Mike got up to greet him.

“Hello, I’m Scott Morrow, a friend of David and Brett. Are you Mike Hunter?” Scott blurted out.

“Yes, and welcome. Come on in.”

Mike was instantly taken by the boy’s confidence and his aura of geniality. Mike closed the fly screen door and looked at the youth before him. Scott beamed a large smile and suddenly Mike felt totally disarmed.

“David has told me of some of the things you do in Venturers, and I was wondering if I could join please?” Scott asked.

“I hope David wasn’t too imaginative in what he told you,” Mike said. “Take a seat and I’ll go over Venturers with you. Would like a cup of tea or coffee?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay, then let’s get straight into it,” Mike said.

This first meeting with Scott was etched into Mike’s memory banks forever. In one sense there was nothing extraordinary about a boy wanting to join his Venturer Unit; it was just that they normally turned up on Friday nights at the hall with their mates and parents. Instead, here was a slightly-built lad with a smile as big as his head and green eyes fired with determination wanting to join in the fun and games and also start on the path to becoming a Queen’s Scout.

Mike knew Scott had been well briefed by David by the way he related his knowledge of Venturers and the things he knew they did. Mike told him about the general activities the unit did and also the various badges he would have to gain to obtain his Queen’s Scout Award.

“The nights at the hall and our weekend away will be fun. However, some of the activities you have to undertake to further yourself and test your training could be a little arduous at times,” Mike told him.

“What do you mean?” Scott asked.

“Take your expeditions for instance. You have to do two lots of them. The first can be over two days but the second must be over three to four days in unfamiliar country. However, it can be done on foot, bikes, canoes or even a plane.”

“A plane?”

“Yep, if you get your pilot’s license and organised with your instructor to fly over a challenging route I’m sure it would be approved,” Mike said.

Scott was spellbound as Mike described some of the badges and the challenges they brought with them. Time slipped by and Mike checked his watch. “Wow! Sorry for the long burst on Venturers. I got caught up. Now you have some sort of idea, talk to your mum and dad. If they want to ring me then here’s my card, otherwise, just come to the hall on any Friday night with them, fill out the registration forms and start straight away. You’ll fit right in. If David and Brett are your friends, you won’t have a problem.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate your help and I look forward to getting involved,” Scott said as he stood up.

The audience was over and it was time to go home and tell his mother. She would then help Scott persuade his father to allow him to join. Mike walked Scott to the back gate and watched him ride his bike away.

The boy had been nervous meeting him but seemed to settle down pretty quickly. He was also very keen to start and seemed to have endless questions about some of the activities. In particular abseiling and caving where Mike took the Venturers to a fifteen metre rock face that overlooked the nearby Georges River. The boys never went caving until they could abseil down the cliff face proficiently. Mike didn't want problems with anyone underground when he took them to the caves at Bungonia or Wee Jasper, south of Sydney. He wanted the boys competent enough where he could rely on them to help get him out of problems if he encountered them.

The days and nights on the rock face were spent in teaching mode with various groups being taught by the other Venturers and checked by Mike. Of course abseiling was more than fun – it was an adrenalin rush. A few Venturers that had excelled in their work were taught going over the cliff face first, in what Mike called Forward Geneva. It was a technique similar to one the Army did, only this time there were no weapons slung over shoulders. Mike also taught rescue techniques to the boys and invariably would get them to rescue each other every so often to keep their knowledge current. Caving, on the other hand, was a hoot to the Venturers. They would be dressed in overalls, boots, helmets and gloves most of the weekend.

Abseiling down the pitch-black rock walls and watching the belayer's helmet light grow from less than a pin head in size to full size, was exhilarating. Scrambling over the rocky outcrops, clambering down tight passageways and inching their way up narrow chimneys, or vertical pathways, were an adrenalin rush to many of the boys. Steve had told the story of an overweight Venturer that had gone down one set of caves called the Dragon Teeth. He said the boy was aged around sixteen, but was around fifteen kilos overweight. The unit had abseiled into the cave and over a series of overhanging rocks to reach the cave floor. Slowly they made their way up and over a series of rocky paths in the shape of dragons' teeth.

However, one climb area led the party to a low-slung area with a small ceiling and the overweight Venturer became stuck. The boy's chest was rock hard against the cave ceiling and his breathing started to rapidly increase as he became scared. Mike spoke quietly to a few of the Venturers and they gathered around the stuck boy. Mike calmly spoke to the Venturer and gently stroked his face to ease his apprehension. When the boy relaxed and there was a gap between his chest and the ceiling Mike yelled out and the other three boys pulled their mate clear. The boy broke down and cried with relief, and Mike comforted him until the youth could calm himself. The Venturers then continued on their way through the tricky cave until they found the final shaft leading out.

Scott thought all his wishes had come true when his dad said he could join Venturers. Allan wanted to meet with this Mike and check him out. Scott pondered that for a second. His dad wanted to see what sort of man Mike was. This would be interesting. The highway patrolman meets the Army Reserve Captain and journalist. Friday couldn't come fast enough. However, the meeting proved to be a non-event. Allan had worn his uniform deliberately to try and intimidate Mike. The tables quickly turned when Mike shook hands with him and welcomed him to the hall.

Mike made a point to ask whether Allan knew Superintendent Ralph Sorenson, the State Head of the Highway Patrol.

"Yes," the policeman answered. Mike replied he would be having lunch with him next week in relation to a story he was working on and would pass on his compliments. Allan smiled, filled out Scott's registration forms and left. Scott looked inquisitively at Mike but he just smiled, gave him the thumbs up and laughed. That was it – Scott was in. He had only to be invested and he would be a fully-fledged Venturer.