

CHAPTER ONE

Slowly William inched his way backwards on the rock shelf. The bluewater rope ran tightly through his abseil rack. The teenager slid the rope protector in place to stop the rope abrading on the edge of the rock face. He shifted his legs shoulder width apart and leant backwards.

His right hand held the rope under his bottom and his left hand was forward of the metal abseiling rack around the rope. William took up the slack in the rope and stepped down to the first level. He moved his feet together and over balanced sending him into a mini free fall.

“Got you!” Scott yelled from the bottom of the cliff as he tightened his grip on William's abseil rope and leant backwards. Scott 'married' the end of the rope with the main part of the abseil rope and tightened his grip. He was belaying William when he saw his mate slip. His quick action averted a possible major problem by tightening the abseil rope. The youth's action locked the rope in William's abseil gear and prevented him from moving down the rope.

“Hey William, open your legs shoulder width apart again and lean back,” Scott said. “I'll lower you back on the cliff.” Scott then eased back on the rope to allow more slack and for William to take control.

“Thanks Scott. I misjudged my footing.”

Scott watched William intently and allowed him free play with the rope. William sat on his haunches, corrected his position and then kicked out from the cliff. The movement sent the teenager out and down in a controlled abseil. The sound of 'clunk, clunk' of heavy boots hitting the ground echoed at the base of the cliff as William landed. Scott dropped his part of the rope to allow William more slack to feed it through his abseil equipment.

“Of course, you know I was only testing you up there,” William said with a cheesy grin.

“Of course - I'm the official Unit tester when I belay.”

William divested himself of the rope from his equipment and walked over to Scott. He picked up the rope and curled it around his waist and married the ends. It was an automatic gesture as each of the boys in the Venturer Unit took turns in belaying after abseiling.

“Who's next?” Scott asked.

“Peter's up next followed by Mark and Ian,” William said as he craned his neck upwards to see if Peter had started to hook onto the rope.

“I'll head on up,” Scott said. “I'll also ask Mike if he's willing to let us do some face first or Forward Geneva today.”

“Good on you Scott. We haven't done any of that for some time. Cheers.”

Scott made his way across the nicely mowed sports ground and climbed the hilly embankment. The abseil area was on top of a former rock quarry, long abandoned. The quarry itself had been flattened out and public tennis courts and a car park had been built. The local Council knew Venturer Units and other groups used the quarry for adventurous activity but did nothing to hamper them. A series of homes backed onto the top of the quarry.

Scott turned the corner and saw Mike, his Venturer Leader, talking with one of the Venturers and explaining to him how to adjust his harness. Mike was an Army Reserve Captain who loved being involved with youth when he was not in the army.

“Good one Scott,” Mike said without looking up.

“That was a good save with William.”

Scott was slightly taken back. Does this man miss anything in relation to what the Venturers did, he thought?

“No problems. Will just lost his footing for a moment. Well, actually, he was just testing me, he said,” Scott said with a smirk on his face.

“Sure, he was ... now I bet he wants to do Forward Geneva? Would I be right?”

“Actually, I was going to ask if we could do some Forward Geneva,” Scott said.

“Once Ian has gone down we'll start the face first jumps. I want to ensure everyone has had at least one jump backwards before we do any forwards work.”

“Okay. I'll let the others know,” Scott said as he continued walking towards the other Venturers.

Scott joined in with the other boys as they discussed abseil options and the thrill of running face first down the cliff.

“It wrenches your gut but is sheer exhilaration,” Ian said.

“Yeah but if you don't keep running you pay for it next day with a sore stomach,” Peter chimed in.

Mike had finished adjusting the new Venturer's abseil harness and walked over to the rest of the boys. He was proud of the way they listened to instruction and heeded advice. Mike had arranged a month ago, for his Venturer Unit to visit some Army Reserve Commandos and for them to instruct the boys on the finer points of rappelling - or abseiling. This included Forward Geneva. The Commandos used their rappelling to generally get to their enemy

quicker down a cliff. However, the soldiers also carried weapons, wore webbing and had loads of special equipment. Mostly, the boys would be lucky to even carry backpacks on an abseil.

“Once we have all done Forward Geneva it will be time to concentrate on our rescues again,” Mike said. “We’ve got the canyoning trip coming up over the long weekend in a few months time and I want to ensure you are all up to speed.”

Ian shifted in his stance.

“If most of us know how to rescue, what’s the issue?” Ian asked as he lifted his right hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

Mike looked at him but re-directed the question. “Who can help Ian here?”

“If anyone has a problem on the rope in the canyon it will be a major rescue effort to get people out,” Peter said.

“What if you were second last and hit your head on the way down? You really would want the last person to know how to rescue you, wouldn’t you?”

Ian looked at Peter and quickly realised the error of what he had said.

“Maybe it’s time to tell you about the teenage boy who died at Julia Falls,” Mike said. “Tell Will to join us, Peter.”

The boys waited for Will to climb the small hill and work his way around the top of the cliff to join them.

“Grab a seat and have a listen and you’ll understand why I’ve pushed for a lot of extra training for you in abseiling with the Commandos and here.” The boys knew when Mike talked like this he was out to try and protect them. “Two Venturer-age boys went to a large set of waterfalls called Julia Falls for some abseiling,” Mike said.

“The falls are in the Blue Mountains area west of Sydney and surrounded by pretty rugged terrain. The boys had to abseil down three faces before the river opened out into a wide flat rocky area. It ended abruptly at Julia Falls which had a drop of about the equivalent of a 25-storey building.

“One of the boys threw the rope over the falls after securing one end.

“Both looked over the edge and thought they saw the rope reaching the bottom. Instead it was knotted about 12 metres down under a small ledge. One of the boys went over the edge and started abseiling but got caught up in the rope knot. He didn’t know how to tie off, disentangle himself and continue. Also, he didn’t know how to prussic or climb back up the cliff to safety on the rope.”

Not a word was being muttered by the boys as they sat quite attentively to Mike. He continued.

“When the boy became stuck it sent the other one into a panic as he couldn’t pull his mate up the cliff and over the edge for safety – it was just too hard.”

Ian couldn’t hang on any longer.

“Why couldn’t the boy on top use some karabiners like a pulley and haul his mate up over the edge?”

“When you go unconscious or die, the weight on the rope is extreme. There was just no way physically, the boy on top could pull his mate up ... he needed winches and pulleys and a lot of engineering type experience to bring it all together.

“The boys neither had the experience nor the equipment to effect any major rescue of each other. So, the stuck boy just sat there tangled next to the waterfall with water spray constantly blowing onto him from the chilly winds that occasionally whip through the valley. The second boy went back for help but this took several hours to climb out where he could raise the alarm. Then it took several hours for rescuers to reach the stuck boy. The second boy was dead when rescuers arrived,” Mike said.

“What did he die of?” Scott asked.

“He died of hyperthermia where the constant spray of the water and wind chill from the valley cooled his body to the point where it killed him,” Mike said as his voice had a noticeable change in it.

“Couldn’t the boy on top use his mobile phone to call for help?”

“No. This accident happened before mobiles were really in fashion. Even still, with today’s technology, we still have problems getting emergency services to help us when we have misadventure. It’s not that they won’t help, it’s just a lack of proper co-ordination on our part as a youth organisation and being able to share information to properly identify who is to be rescued, exactly what maps were the people using, their escape routes and so on.

“My aim is to ensure you can enjoy the challenges of the activity you choose to do and that if anything happens to you, you are self-reliant enough to get out of most problems or can get your mate out.”

There was a noticeable few seconds quiet as Mike's words sunk in to each boy. Scott particularly listened intently. He was always hearing of people being rescued and their lack of preparedness by his father. Scott's father Allan was a Police Officer and would hear about the various rescues from other Police Officers and then tell his wife Kelly when he got home.

“We'll be going near Julia Falls for our canyoning weekend away so we need to be prepared,” Mike said.

Peter looked at the other Venturers and took the initiative. ‘Okay, we've heard our story for the day. It is a true one and it shows why we must train hard - so we can play hard, as our Commando friends kept reminding us,’ Peter said. “Who's next?” he continued as he stood up.

A huge grin came over Ian. “Actually, Mr Chairman, you are,” Ian said.

The rest of the boys laughed as they stood up, ready to resume their abseiling. The preparation for the canyoning trip also included some days of basic rock climbing for the Venturers. Their expertise in rope handling, rope calls and descent were now noticeable.

Instead of a verbal remonstration from each other if there was a problem, a mere look from any affected Venturer to his mate sufficed. On one Thursday meeting night the Unit went indoor rock climbing to hone their skills. Mike motioned to Peter as the pair watched most of the boys in the Unit try the various climbing routes on the man-made walls.

“There is now calm among the boys and an expectation to perform at a high level,” Mike said.

“Yeah – they've come a long way in a short time. But then again, not every Venturer Unit can call on the Commandos for extra tuition.”

Mike looked Peter straight in the eye. “A lot of the Commandos were former Venturers, which is why they were also keen to help out in their spare time,” Mike said. “Who knows, maybe someone from our Unit may want to take the challenge of going for a green beret and becoming a Commando themselves one day.”

Peter smiled. “You weren't intentionally recruiting for the Army Reserve were you?’ he asked.

“No. I was just introducing a new dimension in service to the community and thoughts about possible career lines for the boys. It would be wrong for me to push them into the army ... but not to expose them to it!”

Peter recounted the excitement and thrill the Venturers had felt when they visited the Commandos at their Army base south of Sydney. He said the boys were particularly thrilled not only to abseil the special abseil wall but also try out the Blackhawk helicopter simulator and crawl over the mock helicopter shell set up in a special warehouse type building.

“Abseiling is great but I bet you can’t replace the thrill of the Blackhawk?” Peter asked Mike.

“No. The Army air taxi has an adrenalin push all of its own. Hopefully you’ll never have to fly in one for real.”