

NIGHT SWIM

A THUNDERSTORM HAD BEEN BUILDING up all day. The clouds were low and heavy, the wind had started blowing, but still no rain fell. It didn't matter to the Venturers as they had organised a night snorkeling session a month ago. If necessary, they would change the calendar of events to suit the weather but not tonight. It really didn't matter as they were going to get wet anyway.

Mike Hunter parked his car in the car park overlooking the Clovelly rock pool in Sydney's east. He had four Venturers with him and they all alighted from the car to view the ocean at play. Cameron Wagstaff was one of Mike's former Venturers and was now in Rovers, the next age group up in scouting. He had volunteered to help Mike on adventurous activities and drove four other Venturers to the site. Yesterday the ocean was calm. Tonight it was on the boil. Waves rolled and crashed over the protective rock wall at the ocean end of the pool.

'I've never seen it like this before, Mike,' Cameron said.

'This is supposed to be one of the city's safest rock pools for snorkelling and diving. However, looking at the outer rock wall there is a strong current surge over the wall.'

'Cameron, now you appreciate why I need you here to act as our safety and rescue person.

'I'll get the boys to stay in the shallower end of the pool if you do the roving patrol on the perimeter.'

'No probs Mike.'

Mike and Cameron walked to the edge of the car park that overlooked the pool and showed the Venturers the boundaries for the night's swim.

'Our trouble is, if we go past the halfway point set of stairs the pool gets quite deep,' Mike said to the group.

'There are some great fish there, but the danger will be the current surge over the wall. Cameron is a good strong swimmer, but even he would have massive problems getting to you and bringing you back to shore if you get sucked over.'

'How will we know when we're at the halfway point?' Ian, one of the Venturers asked.

'Fair question. You'll see a set of stairs half way along the pool.

'Also, Cameron will be wearing his dive suit, face mask and snorkel so he can jump in and assist any of you if you need it. Cameron will have two glow sticks, a red one and blue one attached to his snorkel. Don't go past him.'

Mike had never taken this group of Venturers for a night swim before, especially in an ocean pool. He was prepared. Each boy was given a plastic luminous coloured glow stick which they had to bend to break the chemical phial inside, shake, and then attach to their snorkels. There would be three groups of swimmers and each group would have a different coloured glow stick. Orange for Mike's group, green for Peter's and blue for Mark's.

'So what sort of fish can we expect to find here,' Peter, the Unit chairman asked.

'You should see a variety of sea life from groper to nudibranchs, forbeses, catfish and our deadly blue ringed octopus,' Mike said.

'What's the problem with the octopus?' Ian asked.

‘This style of octopus looks very pretty with its multiple blue rings, but if it bites you, the chances are you will die within a very short time.’

‘Okay! Don’t play with the octopussies.’

‘Also, don’t forget. If you see a small shark, it will probably be a Port Jackson. They’re harmless, so don’t panic,’ Cameron said.

‘On the wall under the surf club that overlooks the pool, you’ll find a large metal poster with photos of the marine life and a description.

‘It’s worth a look on the way in and out of the pool. Remember, like you, Mike and I aren’t fish experts.’

Scott looked at both Mike and Cameron.

‘But you are both divers, aren’t you?’

‘What’s your point?’

‘Well you both should know a lot about fish, shouldn’t you?’

‘Scott, we know how to safely scuba dive and what to do in emergencies. We have an idea of some fish, but not all. Places like this surf club recognise that sort of lack of knowledge of most people – divers included. That’s why they erected the metal sign below.’

Mike was becoming impatient. He could see the huge bulbous clouds being blown onshore and felt the air pressure change approaching. The Venturer Leader reckoned he had around one and half hours before the car park would be awash with heavy rain.

‘Okay fellows. Let’s change, gear up and have a look at the sign,’ Mike said.

‘We’re running out of time before the storm hits.’

‘You’re not worried about getting wet?’ Ian asked.

‘Yes and no.

‘Yes, I am afraid of getting wet when we are out of the water and want to get changed before going home.

‘No, I’m not afraid of getting wet and going for a swim in the rain. However, I don’t like damp smelly cars or the chance of swimming in the pool during any lightning activity.’

The boys all agreed and quickly changed into their ‘spring’ suits; dive suits with short sleeves and legs. The boys were split into their various groups and given their respective glow sticks to activate and place on their snorkels. Within five minutes the group was ready to snorkel.

It was almost a scene from a movie watching the group walk from the car park down the various steps and ramps to the pool. The multi-coloured dive suits and bright glow sticks gave a surreal effect to the night sky. The boys stopped for a brief moment to view the photos of the various marine life that has been found in the rock pool. They then made their way down to the shallow end of the pool to put their fins and snorkels on and enter the water. Each snorkeler had some form of waterproof torch.

Mike split the boys into their various groups and they all started swimming slowly around the pool searching the rocky, sandy bottom for signs of any marine life.

Occasionally some of the boys would stop and dive under for closer views of the various fish. Cameron had also suited up and walked around the pool’s edge to the half way point.

He wanted no issues tonight. A look from the half way point to the rock wall showed he and Mike were right. Large waves bombarded the wall and created a tidal surge in one corner. Any swimmer caught in the surge could be lost over the wall and sucked out to sea. Cameron hopefully would not swim tonight. If he did, it meant he was trying to save one of the Venturers or stopping them from being sucked out to sea.

‘Have a go at that!’ Scott said to Brett.

‘There’s a couple of sharks down there and they seem to be mating.’

‘Where?’

‘Near the large rock overhang. Check it out.’

The boys went back under the surface and played their torches around the base of the rock. Sure enough, Scott was right. There were four small sharks playing games or mating with each other. The Venturers seemed more excited than the sharks themselves. They returned to the surface for more air and were spotlighted by Cameron and his torch. Cameron put his two hands to the top of his head. It was the diver’s signal for ‘Okay’ from someone on the surface. The boys had been briefed that if asked by any of their group tonight with this signal they had to answer immediately.

Scott stopped and returned the ‘Okay’ signal to Cameron. The teenager then showed four fingers before putting the palms of both his hands together and opening and closing the fingers. Cameron laughed. He knew Scott was telling him there were four Port Jackson sharks under the water.

The Rover then checked Mike and the third group. All returned the ‘Okay’ sign and kept snorkeling.

Cameron was one of Mike’s former Venturers and had completed his top award under his leader’s tutelage and also had many adventures. It was fun seeing a new group of teenage boys having some of the same fun. Ordinarily, Cameron and the rest of his Rover Crew would only have a few outings a year with the Venturers and Mike. Scott changed all that.

Scott had been in the Unit for two years and created international headlines with two major incidents. The first involved being taken prisoner with the rest of his Unit by a group of Russian Mafia as the Russians were trying to retrieve packages of heroin to flood Sydney streets. The heroin had been dropped off by a Russian mother ship to an abandoned submarine hulk the boys had gone to explore. When the Venturers and the land based Russians met at the submarine, the mafia decided to take the boys prisoner rather than shoot them all. That was the beginning of their problems. The Russians took Mike and the boys to a nearby abandoned convict jail turned into a lighthouse and locked them up.

Scott escaped from his cell and turned the lighthouse into a weapon against the Russian Mafia who were caught in a combined operation by police and the Defence Force.

Cameron kept scouring the water and checking on the boys and Mike. All was safe.

The second time Scott made international headlines was only a few months ago when he went canyoning with this same group of Venturers up on the Alexander Plateau in the Blue Mountains. One of the Venturers was attacked by two Peregrine falcons when he was abseiling on an open rock ledge and ended up jumping back first into a tree to escape the birds of prey. The Venturer, Brett, was impaled. Scott abseiled into the tree, separated Brett from the branch impaling him and held him in the tree until rescue help arrived. If that wasn’t enough, as he was climbing out of one of the canyons, a Rover fell through the canyon roof

and Scott stopped him mid-fall and saved his life. The Rover had fallen heavily on Scott and tore the teenager's right interior ligaments of his leg.

Scott limped as far as he could out of the canyons before being piggy backed the last leg of the journey. He was recognised for his double bravery act by the country's Governor General and became Australia's first National Youth of the Year. He had already been honored with his State's highest civilian award for bravery for his work in rescuing Mike and his fellow Venturers from the Russian Mafia.

Before the double rescue, Scott was instrumental in setting up the National Rover Emergency Rescue Service modelled on a similar scheme in Canada. The Rovers, all aged between 17 and 26, that helped rescue Scott and Brett, were part of Scott's scheme he set up.

Cameron was an active member in his Regional Rover activities and had been quietly instructed by the national body of Rovers to assist Mike on adventurous activities where Scott would be involved.

The Rovers had placed an invisible ring of support around the teenager while he was in Venturers. This was unheard of and was not to be made public.

Slowly, each of the Venturer groups started approaching the half way point in the Clovelly rock pool. Cameron was on edge, not worried so much, just highly alert. He shone his dive torch on each of the groups and pointed them back to the shallow end. Each complied, but each also pushed the boundary of how far they could go. Cameron smiled when he realised what the boys were doing. After all, he had done the same thing when he was a Venturer with Mike.

The wind had picked up and the first spits of rain started falling. The really dark clouds were almost directly overhead. Cameron flashed Mike and pointed to his watch and then the sky. Mike responded by checking his watch and the giving the 'Okay' sign.

It happened quite quickly. An extraordinarily tall wave crashed over the rocky barrier to the pool sending a giant pressure surge towards the boys. No sooner had Cameron given the Okay sign then a wave hit with the force of a small plane crashing into the water.

Brett was the first to see the pressure surge heading towards the Venturers and started yelling out and flashing his torch towards each of the groups. Mike looked up in horror as he saw the giant wall of water heading towards him and the boys. Cameron froze as there was nothing he could do except watch the effect on the boys and then dive in and pull back any boys that began to be sucked back out to sea.

One by one, each of the groups heard Brett and dived under the surface. Mike was the last to make the dive. Cameron was rooted to the edge of the pool. The pressure surge sent a giant wave throughout the pool. The boys and Mike started surfacing again as the surge hit the shoreline and started making its way back to the pool entrance. Again the Venturers dived quickly under the surface and made their way to the pool floor. The surge passed overhead and the Venturers started bobbing around the surface again to get air.

Cameron signalled the group to ensure all were safe. He doubled check the count of 'Okay' signs and then signalled for the group to exit the pool. The boys swam and bobbed their way to Cameron and slowly made their way out of the pool and gathered in front of the giant metal poster of marine life.

'That was close!' Brett said as he started making his way out of the pool.

'You did well with your signaling and going back under,' Cameron said. 'You actually helped the others avert what could have been a major problem for them. Well done.'

The other Venturers gathered around Brett on the pool promenade.

‘Well done Brett. That was a good signaling effort out there with the pressure surge,’ Mike said.

‘Yeah. Well done Brett,’ Scott said as he broke out into a laugh.

‘It’s a pleasure hearing another end to Mike’s phrase of “Well done”.

The Venturers joined in laughing as they saw Mike look uncomfortable. It was great to know someone else received plaudits, not just Scott. The boys moved along the promenade to the large metallic fish poster.

‘I hope the Rovers and Venturers participating in the Centenary Sailing Regatta in a few weeks don’t have these sorts of issues,’ Cameron said. ‘If they do, I hope they keep as level headed as you lot.’

Mark looked perplexed. He looked briefly at Mike and then to Cameron. ‘What’s the Centenary Sailing Regatta?’

‘This is where hundreds of Rovers and Venturers will gather in Botany Bay and sail every sort of craft they can in some controlled races,’ Cameron said with a smile. ‘We decided to get the Crews and Units to all go sailing where the activity was close to Sydney.’

‘Yeah, but where does the centenary part come in?’

‘Oh yeah. To celebrate 100 years since the start of Scouting in Australia, a number of Rover Crews decided to hold a major activity in a prime location. We wanted to not only fly our Rover flag but also to help recruit from Venturer ranks and the general public.

‘There will be masses of scouting people there so it should be a big event.’

Mike saw the faces of his Ventures and chimed in. ‘Our boats haven’t been registered in awhile so we’ll have to see if we go or not. Don’t get tied around the axles yet.’

Scott read his leader’s face and decided to break an awkward moment. ‘That’s it. That’s the one we saw,’ the blonde haired youth said as he pointed to the photo of a groper on the wall underneath the surf club. ‘The damn thing kept following us around.’

‘You missed Mike actually feeding the groper,’ Mark said.

‘I didn’t think the fish was that friendly?’

‘Ah yes, but Mike fed it some sea urchin.’

‘Alright, I’m hooked. I never saw Mike or anyone else take fish food to the pool with you.’

Mike and Cameron started laughing.

‘Scott, when you do your scuba diving course you’ll see why Cameron and I carry knives on our legs,’ Mike said.

‘It’s not to kill big scary marine life, but help out with gentle things like feeding our big groper.’

‘What did you feed it?’ Scott asked.

‘I opened some sea urchin. These are little spiky marine life that attach themselves to rock surfaces.

‘Inside, their bright yellow flesh becomes an instant attractant to other fish. It’s sort of like a delicacy and fish like the groper will feed out of your hands.’

‘Wow. Okay, okay, I’ll talk to mum and dad about the dive course and see if I can do it.’

‘Me too,’ said Mark.

‘Hang on, don’t forget me,’ Brett said as he sidled up to Scott and Mark.

‘We should have enough people for the course by now.’

Cameron looked at Mike and smiled. He was just as keen as these Venturers when he was their age. Snorkeling was fine but nothing beat the freedom of scuba diving.

‘I’ll check with the dive shop this weekend and see what discount rates they can give us,’ Mike said.

‘It’s time we did another course and started exploring some wrecks and forts.’

‘We really need to have this discussion,’ Scott said. ‘I’m pretty keen.’

‘Scott, I’ll get some facts and figures on the next dive course and get back to you soon. In the mean time, we all need to get back to the cars and get changed as it’s about to storm.’

The group hurriedly made their way back to the car park just as the heavens opened and it started raining. Mike sidled up to Scott and thanked him for talking about the groper when he did. Scott just smiled and kept walking.

Brett was the first out of his wetsuit. He started wiping himself down and bent forward to wipe his feet. The scars on his back where he had been impaled on a tree during his infamous canyoning trip with the Unit had healed nicely. Scott couldn’t help but look at the scars. After all, he was instrumental in Brett being alive today to show the surgical leftover. The rest of the boys quickly stripped off their wetsuits and got changed before piling into the two cars for the return journey to their scout hall and parent pick-ups.

Scott’s mind raced as he thought of the adventures and new challenges scuba diving could open for him. Being able to stay under the surface for some time and explore the ocean floor, feed fish and see the larger sea animals up close and personal were exciting ideas. He also toyed with images in his mind of himself as a marine biologist after he left school and university. First, he needed the scuba course under his belt so he could taste what one possible future would be for himself. He stopped in mid-thought and started thinking whether his Unit should be participating in the Centenary Sailing Regatta or leave it to the Rovers. He decided to leave it to the Rovers. This was their gig.