

1 IT HAD BEEN a strange spring right from the beginning. Two cyclones came howling down in September and four people were killed. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. Some people said it wasn't a normal cyclone. They said the cyclones were unnatural.

Then there were those lightning storms. The thunder roared like a hundred jet engines. Old timers said there had never been such lightning storms.

But the most frightening event—at least for teenager Mark Scott—came one early October night. As Mark lay in bed, he suddenly heard a terrible whining sound. It sounded like a scream. It was so loud it made his ears ache.

Mark leaped out of bed and ran to the window. It was two in the morning. Yet Mr Vellier's paddock next door looked as though it were standing in full sunlight. Something was glowing in the paddock—something incredibly bright.

'Mum! Dad!' Mark shouted as he ran down the hall. 'Wake up, quick! Something really strange is happening in Mr Vellier's paddock!'

As Mark ran through the house, the thought of all those cyclones and lightning storms came to his mind. Maybe the old-timers were right. Maybe there was something unnatural about the weather.

Mark, along with his younger sister, Grace, and his parents, ran to the Velliers' farm. It was about three hundred metres away. By the time they got there, most of the paddock had already burnt. Mr

As they left the library, Mark glanced at Edward and smiled again. 'Well, you're all set, Ed.'

Edward was breathing hard. He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other and Mark could see perspiration running down his face. He seemed to want to tell Mark something. Finally he made a sound. Mark smiled, thinking that was Ed's way of saying thank you.

Mark grinned widely. 'Glad to help. See you in class, Ed.'

After the last bell of the day, Mark and Grace and a dozen other students who lived west of the school waited for the bus. A girl said to Mark, 'I saw you walking with that new guy. Man, he scares me. He just watches everybody. And he's really big. He reminds me of King Kong.'

'He's nice. Just a little shy,' Mark said.

'Gives me the creeps just the same,' the girl replied with a shiver.

Mark tightened his lips angrily. He guessed that his dad gave people the creeps, too. That was why nobody would employ him after he had the nervous breakdown. It hurt Mark to see his dad go out for job interviews and come home empty handed. It seemed that with every passing day, his father's shoulders slumped a little more. His father had once been a handsome man. Now he seemed almost as old as old Mr Vellier.

Mark and Grace sat together on the bus ride home. Mark slumped down in the seat and mumbled, 'Sometimes I hate Marnard. I'd like to go to a place like Sydney. Nobody knows anybody in Sydney. You can sort of get lost in the crowd.'

Grace nodded. 'Yeah. Small towns can be a pain all right. Everybody knows everybody else's business.'

Hugh Vellier was sitting behind Mark and Grace. He leaned forward. 'Hey, Mark, my grandfather is really upset.'

Mark turned around. 'Yeah? Why?' Hugh was one month older than Mark. They had grown up together and were pretty good friends.

'The paddock. It's really weird. Looks like nothing is going to grow there again,' Hugh said.

'Well, it was burnt in the fire,' Grace said.

3 MRS SCOTT AND Grace jumped away from the angry snake. Mark saw then that it was only a carpet snake, not a tiger. 'Wow, he's big!' Grace exclaimed.

The snake made the place seem more depressing. Only a few years ago, the farm had been alive with the shouts of the Marvin kids. Now a snake lived in the foundation stones.

They walked on to the barn and stopped. It was broken down and looked like a beached ship. There were holes in the walls and only a few scaly shreds of paint hung on the boards.

'Maybe we shouldn't have come,' Mark said.

His mother turned to him. 'Well, we did. And we're going to finish what we came to do,' she declared.

'Hello! Anybody home?' Mark shouted. There was no answer. He rapped on the big double doors. Slowly one of the doors opened a crack. A young man stood inside. He was taller than Edward and had the same blue eyes.

'Hi,' Mark said, 'we're the Scotts. I go to school with Edward. We just wanted to welcome you to Marnard.'

Mark's mother held out the cake. 'This is for you and your family.'

The man stared at the cake as if he had never seen anything like it before. His clothes were as ill-fitting as the ones Edward had worn. Suddenly Mark realised that the old clothes were some that the Marvins had left behind.

It was signed Edward and Jules Thomas.

Mark smiled and Edward smiled back. Then Edward shyly returned to his seat.

Just before the bell rang, Jeannie Bryant came into class. She quickly took the seat next to Mark's. She gave him a warm smile and immediately said, 'Mark, I've got a personal question for you. Who are you going with to the dance? Is it somebody I know?'

Mark shrugged. 'I didn't plan on going. I'm not going with anybody and I don't dance very well.'

'Oh, that would be a shame,' Jeannie said, putting on a sad face. 'But maybe that means you could help me out. See, nobody remembers me, Mark, and I'm afraid I won't get anybody to go with me. And I just love dancing.' She smoothed back her hair and arched her neck. She knew how to use her looks, that was for sure.

Mark realised what she was asking. Nervously he said, 'Uh—I'd really like to go with you, Jeannie.'

'Would you, Mark?' she exclaimed in delight.

Mark felt as though everybody in the room was looking at him. 'Yeah, I would,' he said.

'That's terrific,' Jeannie said. 'Oh, we'll really have a great time! I can hardly wait!'

Mark didn't hear much of the chemistry lecture after that. Jeannie Bryant was such a pretty girl. When she attended school here before, she had been the most popular girl in the class. Mark couldn't understand how she could ever be hard up for a date. None of the other guys could have forgotten her.

After chemistry, Hugh Vellier fell in step beside Mark. 'I just heard a rumour about you, Mark.'

'Yeah? What's that?'

'You and Jeannie Bryant are going to the dance together,' Hugh said.

Mark nodded. 'I guess so.'

'Man, how did you work that out? I called her the first night she got into Marnard and she gave me the cold shoulder. Some of the other guys asked her, too. She turned everybody down.'

'Please, Jeannie,' Mark whispered. 'I'd like to remember something nice about you. Don't ruin it all.'

Jeannie tried to say something but she choked on her words. She suddenly turned and dashed around the corner.

Mark slowly went on to his music class. Mr Santelli usually taught music. He had a beautiful tenor voice and he had sung in Italy with La Scala. But today Mr Marston, the principal, appeared in the classroom.

'I'm sorry to say Mr Santelli is off with the virus,' he explained. 'You people will have to practise for the spring festival on your own. Who's the student director?'

'Hugh Vellier, but he's off sick, too,' a boy said.

Mark looked around the room. More than half the students were gone.

'Well, then, go to the study hall and do your homework,' Mr Marston said wearily.

Mr Marston didn't look so good himself, but maybe most of it was worry. Half his teachers were gone. Others were becoming ill.

As students packed up their books, one girl commented, 'I never remember a sickness like this coming in the spring.'

'I hope I don't get it,' a boy added. 'My sister's got it and she's really sick. She's never been so sick.'

Classes that afternoon were strange. Most of them were not usual classes but study periods.

Rumours flew around the school. Somebody said that the disease control centre in Sydney was trying to find out what was causing the virus. Somebody else said that Marnard was the only place in the state where the virus had cropped up.

After school, Mark walked over to the Velliers' farm to see how Hugh was. Old Mr Vellier met him at the screen door. 'Stay away from the house, boy,' the old man ordered. 'We're all terribly sick!'

'I'm sorry, Mr Vellier. Is Hugh any better?'

'He's worse, if anything. I tell you, boy, this whole thing isn't natural. We've never been this sick.'