

1 MARK SCOTT AND his friend Hugh Vellier watched the dusty black MG sports car crawl down the main street. The car rolled to a stop in front of the *Marnard Courier* office. Out stepped a young woman in flame-red slacks, red top and black sandals. She carried a designer briefcase.

Mark's eyes widened. You didn't often see strangers in Marnard, let alone strangers this beautiful.

'Man,' Hugh gasped 'she looks like a fashion model or something.'

The boys watched as the woman disappeared inside the *Courier* office. They sipped on their ice-cold drinks in Mark's ute, eager for the woman to reappear.

School had been over for just a few weeks and already the two were bored. It had been an incredible spring—so incredible that everything else paled by comparison.

Early in the spring, violent cyclones had set people on edge. Then one night in October, a mysterious fire started in the Velliers' paddock. Most of the paddock had burnt, leaving only a large depression in the earth.

Not long after that, a teenager named Edward Thomas showed up at school. He and his brother, Jules, were big, powerful guys. At first they'd seemed to be deaf and mute. And their strange behaviour caused some people in town to believe the brothers were aliens from outer space.

‘Maybe there’s been trouble in some neighbouring town,’ Mark suggested. ‘Maybe they heard about what happened in Marnard. And now they think the Thomas boys have come their way.’

‘Who is she then?’ Hugh wondered. ‘A private investigator? She’s gorgeous, whoever she is.’

They bounced down the rutted road Mr Scott had taken the night he’d saved the Thomas boys from the squad. When they arrived at the run-down cabin, Mr Scott parked nearby.

As the group walked to the small building, Mark’s father said, ‘Well, here it is, Ms Raines. It was just a lean-to to begin with. And the wild storms we’ve had certainly haven’t helped matters.’

Ms Raines walked around the cabin, stooping and examining the ground. ‘Hmmm, what’s this?’ she asked.

Mark stooped beside her. ‘What?’ he asked.

‘This looks like slime,’ she said. ‘Black slime...gobs of it...’ She sniffed the matter. ‘Ugh...what a stink!’ Her eyes glistened with excitement.

Mr Scott came over. ‘You looking for footprints? The rains washed them out long ago,’ he said.

‘Foul smelling black slime,’ Ms Raines said. She wrote something in a notebook she’d slipped out of her purse.

Ms Raines straightened up and looked at the white pine and cedar trees. ‘Lots of broken branches.’

‘Yeah, we had some bad cyclones this year,’ Mark said.

‘What makes the grass look crushed like this?’ Ms Raines asked. She shoved her toe into the trampled grass.

‘Any number of things,’ Mr Scott said, his eye narrowing. He was getting impatient. He had a verandah to paint before dark. Mark knew his dad couldn’t finish it tomorrow as he’d be busy in the helicopter. Sergeant Poulsen wanted him to scout the countryside for some missing cars. There’d been a rash of car thefts lately.

‘Now then,’ Ms Raines said, ‘I’ve heard that both boys had unusually large hands.’

‘Yeah. Big, apelike hands,’ Hugh agreed. ‘When I felt those hands around my throat, I thought I was going to die.’

3 HUGH GLARED AT his friend. ‘Well, I happen to know there was a headless sheep found in a ravine at that time,’ he said defensively. ‘Who’s to say they didn’t do it?’

‘A pack of feral dogs did it, stupid!’ Mark yelled furiously.

‘Well, don’t make a federal case out of it,’ snapped Hugh. ‘Besides, what harm can someone like Kyla Raines do to the Thomas boys anyway?’

Mark didn’t have an answer to that. He’d give just about anything to know who that nosy woman was. And why all the interest in the gory, sensational details?

A few days later, Kyla Raines appeared at the Marnard Mall, carrying her notebook. She interviewed every teenager who’d ever walked past Edward Thomas in the corridors of Marnard High. Mark hovered nearby. He was determined to get a line on just what she was trying to do.

Ms Raines struck gold when Bill Bryant and his friend Larry Dunne came along. They were more than happy to talk to the beautiful stranger.

‘Yeah, me and Larry can tell you plenty about Ed Thomas,’ Bill said. ‘I got the scars to show from meeting up with him. Now, I’m a pretty strong guy when it comes to dealing with ordinary people. But this guy was something else.’

Larry quickly chimed in. ‘He came at us like a madman. I’m telling you, he tried to kill us. That Ed Thomas isn’t human. He’s an animal!’

‘Jody, there aren’t any hairy Yetis or anything out there in the bush,’ Mark insisted. ‘You probably saw a big dog. That lady wrote that fake story just to make money. She wants to paint this town as a bunch of dumb idiots.’

Jody didn’t seem convinced. Neither did her parents.

‘Tell you what,’ Mark suggested. ‘I’ll go and check by the windbreak to make sure there’s nothing out there.’

Mr Kendall looked worried. ‘You sure you’ll be safe? You can take the dogs with you.’

‘That’s okay,’ Mark said. He turned and quickly tramped through the paddock. In less than five minutes he’d reached the windbreak and the river beyond it. As he strode along, he noticed the broken branches and matted grass. Mark was sure they’d been caused by the fierce spring storms—not some monster.

Mark gazed around the empty, lonely land. He couldn’t see anything strange. In fact, the scene was rather peaceful. Evening was near and an owl hooted in the distance.

Then, just as Mark turned to go back to the Kendall farm, an unearthly shriek broke the silence.

Mark’s face turned grim. ‘Hey,’ he shouted, ‘whatever joker is out there yelling, knock it off! You’re just scaring people and you could get yourself shot!’

Mark was answered by another shriek. ‘Bryant? Dunne?’ he called. ‘What do you guys think you’ll accomplish? I know it’s a boring summer. But there’s got to be something better to do than polish your Tarzan imitation.’

Mark hoped the taunt would get a rise out of the trickster. But nothing further broke the silence.

Mark waited another five minutes and then headed back.

The Kendalls were waiting when he returned. In reply to their anxious questions, he said, ‘Some kids in the woods were shrieking like that ridiculous story said the creatures do. I think I know who the guys are. They’re awesomely stupid.’

Mr Kendall put his arm around his daughter’s trembling shoulders. ‘Well, I don’t much care what it is that’s out there upsetting

7 MARK WAS JUST outside Springville when he spotted the old cabin where his father had hidden the Thomas boys a few months before. The cabin door was open and Mark saw someone moving around inside.

At once, Mark slammed on the brakes and jumped out, running towards the cabin. ‘Ed?’ he shouted. Suddenly the shadowy figure darted from the cabin and raced into the bush. Mark gave chase. ‘Ed! It’s me, your friend, Mark Scott!’ he yelled.

Mark wasn’t even sure the person he was chasing was Ed Thomas. But if it was, he had to talk to him. It seemed now as though only Ed and his brother had the answers that would clear up their cloudy past.

Sounds of breaking twigs and cracked branches rang in the air as both boys plunged through the bush. Ahead, Mark heard the soft thunder of the narrow creek that headed towards the river. The heavy spring rains had turned the peaceful creek into a raging torrent.

‘Ed!’ Mark shouted, seeing a flash of blue-black hair. ‘Stop! It’s me, Mark, your friend!’

Edward reached the creek and leaped to a large white rock in the middle that formed a kind of island. Then, in another leap, he disappeared.

Mark didn’t hesitate. He tried to imitate Edwards’ strategy—leaping to the rock, then jumping to the other side. But Mark missed the island rock and instead plunged into the wild waters.