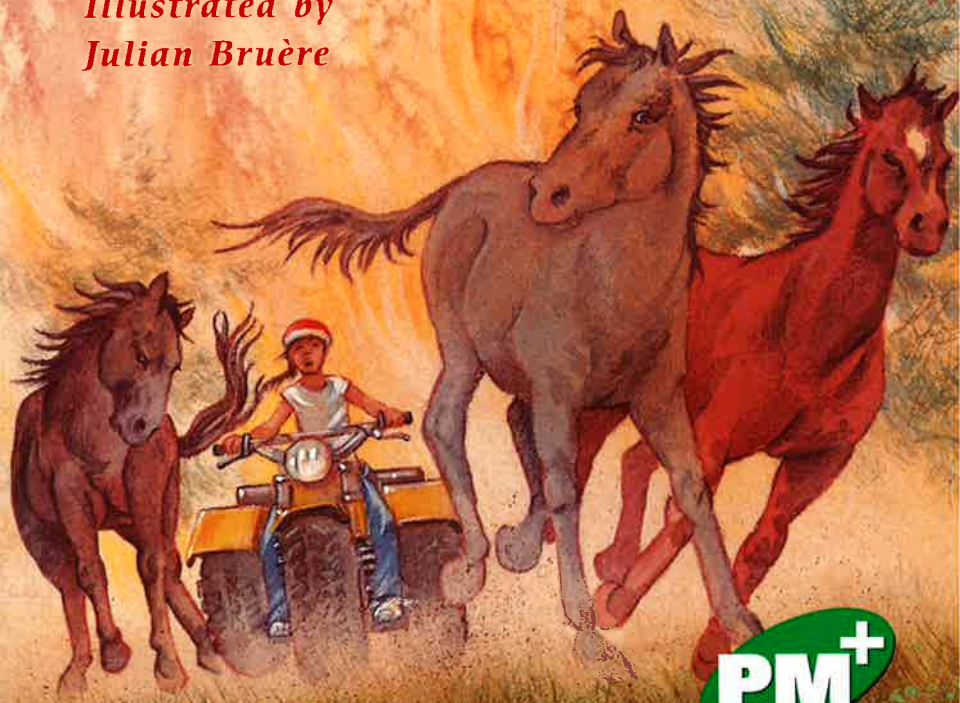
Fire on the Farm

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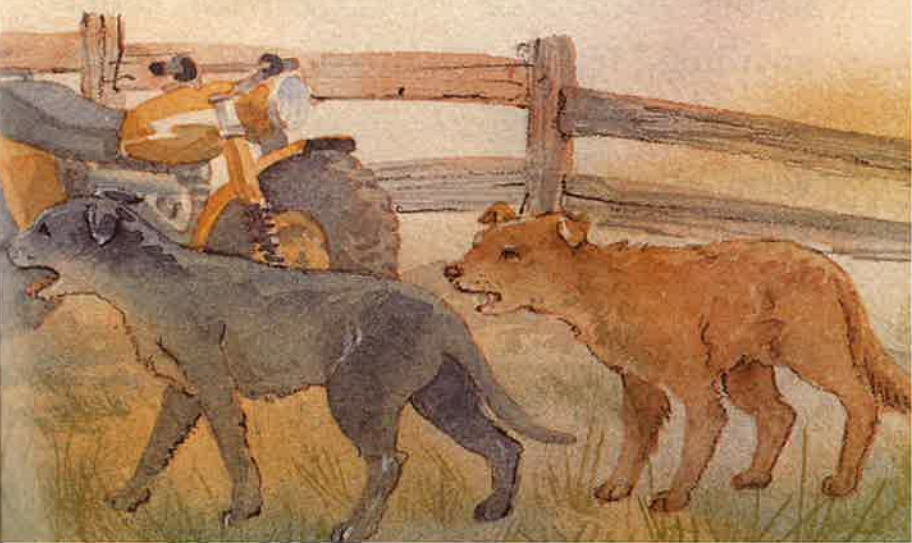


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Chapter 1

Fire in the Distance



"Remember you can reach us on Dad's mobile number if you're worried about anything," called Mum, as Dad turned the car towards the farm gate. The fierce wind whipped up the dust behind the car and the two children shielded their eyes. "We'll be at the bank for an hour or so. And you're going to make the salad for dinner. Don't forget, will you."

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Shannon knew that Mum was talking to her, not Toby. She did forget things quite often. Sometimes Dad got cross with her. At other times, he gave her a hug and told her she was a dreamer and that he supposed that the world needed dreamers.

Now, while she was in charge, even if it was only for two hours, she mustn't forget anything.



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"Give me a turn on the phone," said Toby, reaching for their mum's mobile phone.

Shannon thrust the phone behind her back. "Dad told me to keep it with me all afternoon. You know he doesn't like to leave us alone, even for an urgent meeting with the bank manager."

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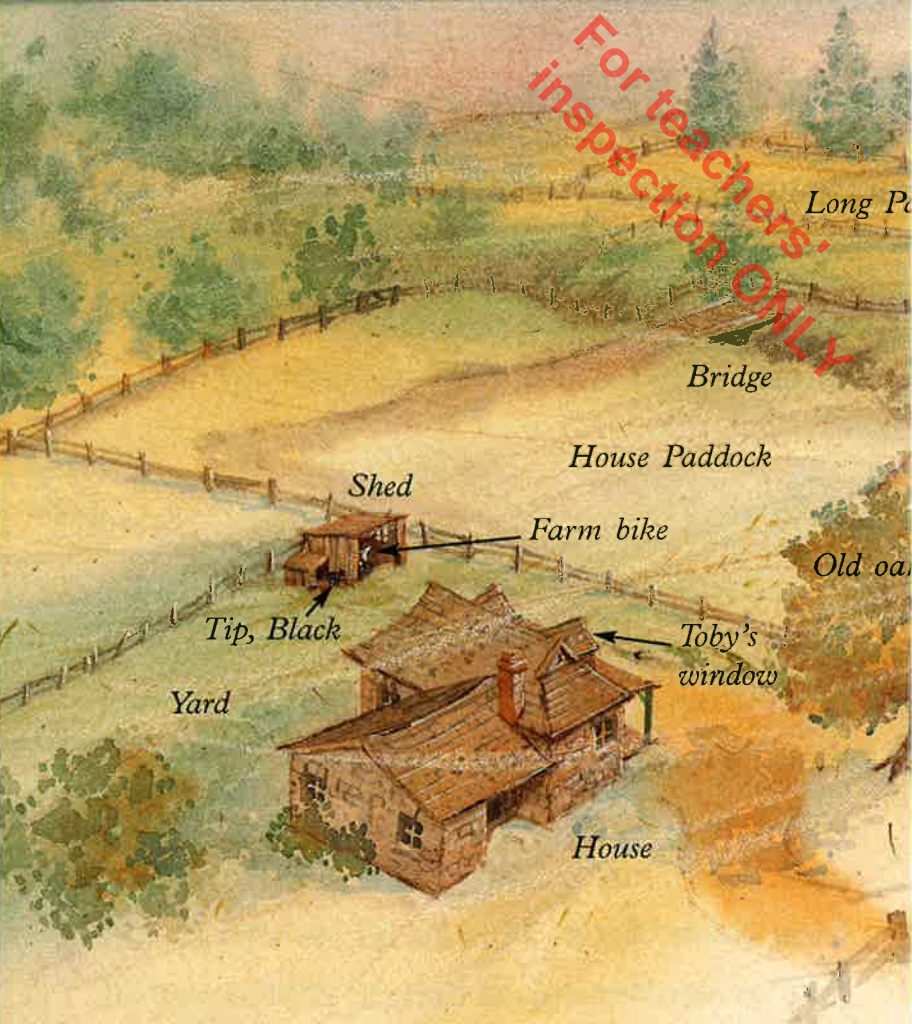
"Bossyboots," moaned her brother. "I just want to ring Peter Campbell about footy."

"Well, go and call him on the house phone," said Shannon.

Toby made a face at her and walked off.

Shannon sat on the swing that hung from the old oak tree. Tip and Black, the farm dogs, watched her. The wind was making them restless. It seemed as if the wind, wild overhead, might blow the tree over. But Dad had said the oak tree roots went down deep. This could be why it still had green leaves, although the leaves of the birches in the other corner of the yard were dropping already. It was the driest summer for years.

"I can't bear to see the trees die," Mum had said. "I *hate* this drought."



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Shannon looked past the frizzled garden with its rock-hard soil to the farmland beyond. She thought the sun-gold grass had a kind of beauty. But, beautiful or not, the dry stalks were useless for grazing sheep.