

WENDY ORR

# Spook's Shack



*pictures by* Kerry Millard

# Spook's Shack





WENDY ORR was born in Canada and grew up with various pets, in various places across North America and France. In Australia Wendy has lived on a dairy farm and a sheep farm. Recently she moved to a bush block where she found an old shack with furniture, tea-cups, dressing gowns and hot-water bottles...as if the people living there had just disappeared. She wondered if a ghost might still be there. But while Wendy was writing *Spook's Shack* she heard a science report that said mobile phones were killing ghosts. Ghost sightings in Britain have shrunk to nothing since mobile phones have become common. Wendy is the author of several award-winning books for young children and teenagers.

KERRY MILLARD was born in Canada and grew up surrounded by all sorts of animals. Later she moved to Australia and became a vet. One day Kerry took her crazy dog to dog school, drew some cartoons for their newsletter, and accidentally began a new career as an award-winning cartoonist and illustrator, and author.

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*pictures by* KERRY MILLARD

  
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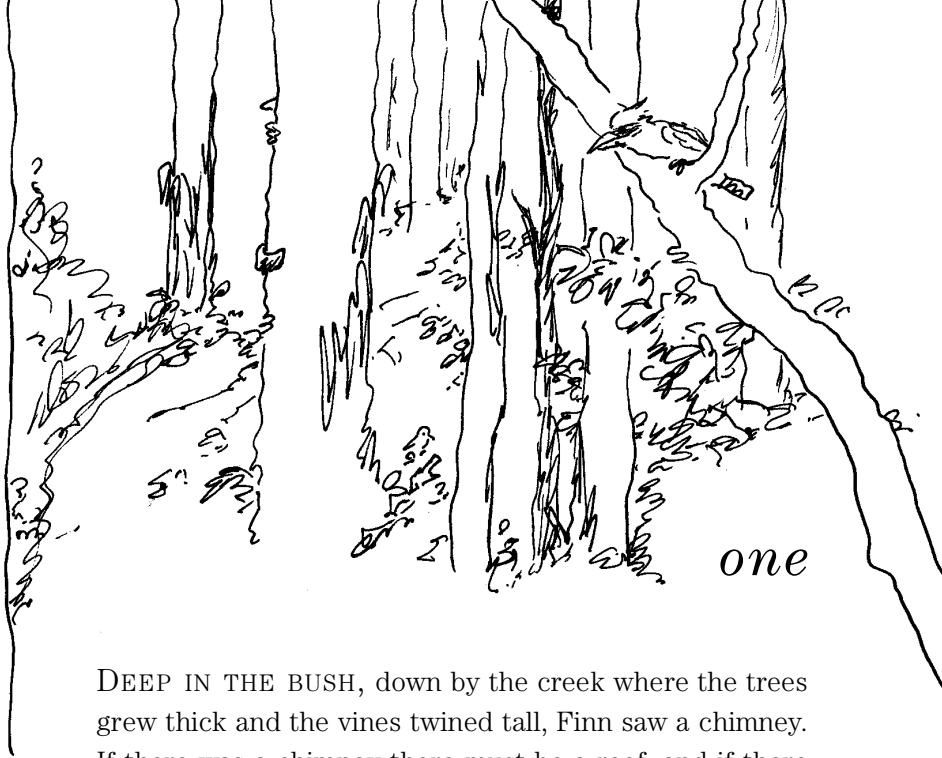
for adults

*The House at Evelyn's Pond*

For Tom







DEEP IN THE BUSH, down by the creek where the trees grew thick and the vines twined tall, Finn saw a chimney. If there was a chimney there must be a roof, and if there was a roof there must be a house.

But there was no road and no driveway, and all this great wild bushland belonged to Aunt Agatha.

‘No one else has lived here for a hundred years,’ she’d said. ‘Stay off the farms and away from Boris Banks’ mansion – but while you’re in the bush you’ll bother no one and no one will bother you.’

So Finn went exploring, because there was nothing else to do and no one to do it with.

If he’d had a dog it would have gone with him and barked if there were danger. But his old dog had died and Finn had an angry, empty feeling inside, because he might never have a dog again. His house had been sold,

and now his parents were looking for a new home far across the sea, in a sky-scraping building in the biggest city in the world.

Finn didn't want to live in an apartment in the biggest city in the world, and he didn't want to be left behind with Aunt Agatha. He was stuck in the middle in a place he didn't want to be, between the home he didn't want to leave and the home he didn't want to go to.

'But I've come this far,' said Finn. 'I'll keep on going.'

He pushed his way through thorny bushes and wire-sharp grass until he could see the corner of a wall. He ducked through tangling vines and scratching branches, and then he saw the shack.

It was so old it looked like part of the bush. The walls were charred black from fire and the door was locked with a big wooden bolt.

A prickle of fear ran up Finn's neck.

'It's just a shack,' he told himself. 'An old deserted shack. You can't be afraid of it.'

The prickle of fear ran faster and colder.

'There might be something interesting,' he decided. 'There might be gold.'

He slid back the bolt, pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The air smelled of wet dogs and stale bread, and it was cold – shivery, clammy cold. The window was so covered by branches that not even the hottest sun could reach inside. Across the walls, lumpy green fungus glowed in the dark.

Then a dog growled, a chair creaked, and a cross, whispery voice snarled, ‘Gazumping galahs! Who’s that, clumping into my shack?’

Finn jumped – and hit the door. It shut tight behind him.

An old man was sitting in a rocking chair with a border collie dog at his knees. The hair on Finn’s head and arms stood up as straight as bristles in a brush, because the old man – a scrawny, skinny old man – had skin that glowed green from the toadstools behind him and a body that was see-through as shimmering glass.

Finn’s knees started rattling. ‘Oh!’ he said, in a squeak that made the dog shake his ears and whine.

The black parts of the dog’s coat were nearly invisible but his white ruff and paws shone as green as his master’s face.

Finn’s teeth started chattering.

‘You woke us up!’ growled the old man, and the dog growled too.

‘I didn’t think anyone lived here,’ said Finn, and now he was clattering from his clenched-tight toes to his quivering hair.

The old man laughed, like gravel in a gold-shaking pan. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost!’

Finn slid sideways to open the door, but his knees were wobbling and his feet were as heavy as if he were walking in glue. The black-and-green dog sneaked towards him and bit his ankle with a sharp cold pinch.

‘Ow!’ Finn shouted. His foot jerked back, his wobbly knees folded, and he slid to the ground.

Cold hands whispered over his face.

Finn couldn’t breathe in and he couldn’t breathe out. He wondered if he was going to die right now.

‘You’ll have a lump like an emu’s egg tomorrow,’ cackled the old man, and held out his hand.

Finn sat up. His head went through the old man’s arm.

‘Waddling wombats!’ hissed the old man. ‘Try that again!’

The old man waved his arm from side to side, right through Finn’s head. Finn saw a blur of green and felt a shiver of cold between his ears.

‘Gazumping galahs,’ breathed the old man, with a sigh like wind blowing through leaves. ‘Looks like you *did* see a ghost!’

Finn didn’t believe in ghosts and he didn’t believe this was happening. If the ghost didn’t believe it either, it was twice as weird but only half as scary.

‘Didn’t you know you were a ghost?’ he asked, and his teeth stopped chattering.

‘I bin asleep,’ said the old man. ‘Didn’t figure I were dead. DEAD!’ he repeated, and plonked down in his rocking chair.

The dog bit Finn’s ankle again.

‘Come here!’ the old man bellowed, and the collie slunk back beside him. ‘Nipper’s a good dog – but he do nip.’

‘I noticed,’ said Finn, and his knees stopped rattling.

‘Reckon he’s a ghost too?’

‘He looks like it,’ said Finn, and the hairs on his head and arms stopped quivering – but he felt as if he were watching a story on TV, because he knew he couldn’t really be talking to a ghost.

‘Good old Nipper.’ The old man patted the dog’s head, watching carefully that his fingers didn’t poke through. ‘How long you reckon we bin dead?’

‘Aunt Agatha says someone lived out here about a hundred years ago – maybe that was you.’

‘Dead,’ the old man repeated. ‘Jack Henry, dead!’ He thought for a moment. ‘I don’t *feel* dead – might be you’re the ghost!’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Finn, though he wasn’t nearly as sure as he would have been an hour ago.

‘Because if *I’m* not, *you* are,’ said Jack Henry. ‘We need to find out.’

‘You’re green and see-through,’ said Finn, but the old man ignored him.

‘Punch the wall! Hard as you can.’

Finn punched. His fist bounced back. His knuckles were bleeding and he wondered if they were broken, but he wasn’t going to cry in front of the old man.

‘Hard wood, that red gum,’ said Jack Henry. He swung his fist and punched. His arm went straight through the wall. ‘OOH!’ he cried, as the rest of his body slid out after his arm.

Finn stared at the wall. There was not a mark or a crack where the ghost had gone through.

Then Jack Henry’s surprised face poked through the

wood, and he stepped back into the shack. 'Looks like I'm the ghost all right!'

He stuck his right hand through his belly and his left thumb through his nose. He kicked his right foot through his left leg without falling over. He bent over and swung his head through his knees. 'Never could do this before,'

he admitted, and put his head out through the wall again. 'It's true what I'm seeing?

The trees are still there, and the birds and beasties? The land's not bin dug up for gold?'



‘There’s gold here?’

Jack Henry’s head popped back inside the shack, shimmering green and angry. ‘That’s what *he* thought, that sneaking, thieving yellow-bellied dingo!’

‘What *who* thought?’

‘No one you ever want to meet,’ said the ghost, and reached for the door handle.

His hand slipped through.

‘Gazumping galahs!’ he muttered, and tried again. This time his hand shot right through the door.

‘Why don’t you just walk through?’

‘I’ll do it the way I’ve always done!’

Jack Henry glared greenly at the handle as his fingers closed around it. Finn held his breath.

The door handle moved.

The ghost shoved the door – and tumbled through to the other side. ‘There’s a trick to it,’ he muttered. ‘Not as easy as it sounds.’

‘Do you want me to do it?’

‘Give us one more try.’ And with a grunt of satisfaction, Jack Henry turned the handle and opened the door.

Out in the sunshine the ghost was nothing but a shimmer, like a cold patch in a warm summer sea. Finn walked through him twice in two steps.

‘Stay still!’ Jack Henry ordered.

Finn stood still. He heard the shack door creak, and the sound of muttering and things being dropped. He tried to imagine what it would be like to wake up one day and discover he was a ghost, with a body that melted



through the solid world like air. Though even air can't go through things the way Jack Henry could: he was more like a radio wave.

Finn couldn't imagine having a body like a radio wave. He couldn't even believe he'd just met a ghost. 'A real ghost!' he said to himself. 'A cranky, bossy, real-dead ghost – and a cranky, biting, real ghost dog!'

He still didn't believe it.

Finally Jack Henry appeared, pale green and glowing. He was carrying a fungus from the wall of the shack, and its light reflected up through his arms and on through his body.

'Ghost fungus,' he said. 'I be the real ghost, but that's its name!' He lifted it higher till his shaggy hair and pale green eyes shone bright. 'Now keep your clodhoppers out of my feet!'

The problem with talking to a ghost was that it was hard to know when he was joking, and harder still to know what might happen if he wasn't.

Jack Henry looked up into the treetops and whistled. The short bell whistle of a parrot, running water notes of a magpie, chirrups and cheeps from every other bird Finn had ever heard, and finally the loud rollicking laugh of a kookaburra.

There was a long silence.

'The birds don't remember me,' the ghost said, sounding so sad that the last of Finn's fear trickled away.

But then a kookaburra began to answer. Another

joined in, and they tossed their laughter back and forth like a ball between the trees. The sound tingled through Finn . . .

And suddenly, he felt what the kookaburra was singing. Not words, not pictures – he simply *was* the bird. He could see the leaves on trees, sharp and clear, the far-below twigs on the ground with a juicy beetle scuttling for cover. He could feel the quick blood running through his veins, and the laughing song rolling out of his throat to fill the air.

‘It’s mighty strange the way I’ve changed,’ said Jack Henry, ‘but the birds sing the same as they always did.’

Finn came out from the spell of the kookaburra’s call. He felt dazed, as if he’d just woken up, and he wasn’t sure at all what had happened.

‘Can you talk to the animals?’ he asked.

‘Not so much talking, as listening . . . feeling what they answer, like that kookiebird.’

A branch above them shuddered and gumnuts scattered.

‘A grunty-bear!’ cried Jack Henry. He dropped his toadstool and disappeared up the tree.

Finn followed. He’d never climbed a tree like this before, straight-trunked and higher than a three-storey building, but it didn’t matter. His hands and feet clung as if they’d grown claws. He climbed straight up behind Jack Henry and stopped at the branch where a koala perched.

The koala snuffled, and Finn and the ghost snuffled back. Leaves hung around them like a banquet, fresh and

sweet; the smell floated through Finn's brain and the taste tingled on his lips. Now the world moved as soft and fuzzy as it had been quick and sharp when the kookaburras called. Finn wedged his back against the trunk and wound his arms around the branch so the tree could rock him, warm and safe.

'That's enough, lad,' said the ghost. 'You'll fall on your head if you don't get your feet back on the ground.'

The further he climbed down, away from the koala, the more Finn's eyes saw like his own eyes and his brain thought like his own brain. And his brain kept thinking, 'This is even better than talking to a ghost – I can hear what the animals are feeling!'

'Could you always do that?' he asked, when he was properly back on the ground.

'I reckon it's stronger now I'm a ghost.'

'Maybe your mind can float through the animals' minds, the way you can float through walls? Then maybe their feelings sort of float around, and I can feel them too.'

'It's not natural!' the ghost snapped. 'Not floating through walls nor floating through minds! I were never a ghost before and I don't know it's what I want to be now!'

'Then why *are* you?' Finn asked. 'Why are you a ghost now?'

## *two*

JACK HENRY'S SHIVERY green fingers scratched his shimmery green head. 'I don't rightly know. Being a ghost weren't what I planned when I were a lad like you!'

Finn shivered. It was sad and scary to think Jack Henry had once been as young and alive as Finn himself.

'I wanted to be a stockman, out on a horse in the bush. But my Pa sent me away to school to be a gentleman.'

Finn decided that was probably even worse than being left for the summer with an aunt he didn't know. 'So what did you do?'

'Skedaddled! Rolled up a swag and climbed out the window, away from the rules and the cane and the bully boys. I ran all night and hid all day, then the first farm I came to, asked for food and work.

'They gave me an axe and a stack of firewood as high as your head. I chopped till my blisters bled, but by the end of the day I'd earned a meal and a place to sleep. From farm to farm I went . . . ' The ghost's voice trailed off as if he'd lost interest in his own story. He squatted

down to look at a lizard, stretched and yawned, looked up at an orange butterfly, and wandered after it. In a moment he was completely invisible.

‘Jack Henry?’ Finn called.

There was no answer.

Finn had no idea how to find an unpredictable ghost. He decided to wait. He sat down under the tree and pulled his ComputerKid out of his pocket. With his eyes on the screen and his thumbs on the buttons, life seemed almost normal again.

A cold draft whistled on his neck. He shivered and hunched his shoulders. The cold grew stronger – icy and sharp as an arrow.

‘Jack Henry?’

The cold disappeared. A shower of gunnuts peppered down. Finn stared up and saw the pale outline of the ghost, hanging upside down from a branch by his knees.

‘You’re not going to catch me in your ghost box!’ Jack Henry shouted, and swung up so hard he flew right off his branch and landed face first in the dirt.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Finn, wondering what a ghost who wasn’t all right would do.

‘You’re not going to trap me in that little box!’

‘It’s not a trap!’

‘Then why are those ghosts trying to get out?’

The tiny men were still jumping and fighting on the ComputerKid screen. They didn’t look very scary to Finn, but Jack Henry had never seen a computer or television

or any kind of battery toy, and he'd just found out he was dead.

Finn held the game out, slowly and carefully, the way heroes laid down their guns in movies. 'It's just a toy – the figures move when I push the buttons.'

'Toy?'" repeated Jack Henry, moving into the sunshine where Finn couldn't see him at all.

Finn put it down on the ground. Nipper growled. There was a flicker of green as the ghost-cold whispered past and the ComputerKid rose into the air with its buttons pressing and its screen flashing. It disappeared round the back of the tree, but Finn could hear Jack Henry muttering.

'I've lost them!'

'I'll show you how,' said Finn, and the game floated slowly back towards him.



It wasn't easy teaching Jack Henry to play, because Finn had to guess where he was by the cold feeling in the air and the shiver in his arm when it went through the ghost's. And he didn't know if Nipper had stopped growling because he was happy or because he was waiting to bite.

'It would be better if I could see you,' he said.

'No tricks?'

'No tricks,' said Finn.

'Spit and swear?'

Finn spat on his hand. 'I hope to drop down dead if I trick you.'

The cold air softened. 'Get me another ghost toadstool – this time I'll carry it where it can't be dropped!'

Finn went back to the shack and pulled two lumps of fungus off the wall.

'They smell like bread.'

'Poison bread,' cackled Jack Henry. 'But I'm already dead; I can't get deader.' He popped the toadstool into his mouth.

As the ghost chewed, his mouth began to glow green, then his jaw and down his throat, and through his middle till the faint colour had spread right through his body.

A centipede of fear crawled up Finn's back. 'That's spooky!'

'Spooky fungus from the spook's shack!' said Jack Henry, wiggling and admiring his green fingers so happily that Finn couldn't be afraid.

Finn picked up the ComputerKid.

‘Ow!’

Red teeth marks appeared on his arm.

‘Nipper thought you were going to take the box,’ said Jack Henry. ‘Good dog, Nipper.’

‘Will he eat toadstools?’

‘Nipper eats everything!’ the ghost said proudly, holding the second toadstool out around his knees.

There was a gulp . . . the outline of the collie’s black body appeared and his white ruff and paws began to glow green. He watched, his head on one side and one ear pricked, as Finn showed Jack Henry how to hold the game and work the buttons with his thumbs. The ghost’s see-through hands were big, and it took him a while to learn how to hold his wide green thumbs in just the right way.

When he finally made one of the robot men run, Jack Henry laughed so hard he fell off his stump.

The kookaburras laughed back.

Finn looked up and saw the sun sinking red over the tops of the trees.

‘I need to go home now,’ he said.

‘Tootle-oo.’

‘Can I have my game back?’

The ghost hunched lower over the screen. ‘Come back tomorrow when I’m finished.’

Finn gave up. He wondered if he’d ever see his game again.

But compared to meeting a ghost, and listening to animals, a computer game didn’t seem very important at



all. What he really wanted to know was whether he'd ever see Jack Henry again.

HALFWAY BETWEEN THE shack and the house, Finn heard another kookaburra. When he tried to call back, the harsh notes came out in a squawk – and no matter how hard he listened, he could only hear the sound of the bird's song, not what it was feeling.

But I *didn't* imagine it, Finn thought. I know it was true, when I was with Jack Henry.

## *three*

AUNT AGATHA WAS Finn's mother's aunt, and long ago when she was young she'd bought the great wild bushland from Boris Banks. He'd sold the land on one side to become a farm with stocky black cattle, and the other side to be a farm with silky-haired goats. He'd laughed at Aunt Agatha because she bought the land that was too steep and hilly for houses and too thick with trees for a farm.

'That's what I wanted!' said Aunt Agatha. 'If I have the money to pay the mortgage and buy my bread, that's all I need.'

So she lived by herself, in a small house with a big garden and the bush spreading down to the creek and through the valley to the hill on the other side. When Finn came to stay, she shoved everything from the spare bedroom into the garage, and Finn dumped all the boxes from his old bedroom into Aunt Agatha's spare room. 'There's no point keeping anything you don't need,' his mother had said, but Finn hadn't felt like sorting through and throwing out.

‘That was a long walk,’ Aunt Agatha said when Finn came in. She sounded wistful, because her bones were too sore now for her to walk through the bush the way she used to. ‘Was it more interesting than you thought it would be?’

Finn tried to remember back to the morning, when going for a walk had seemed only a tiny bit better than doing nothing at all. It was the first time he’d woken up in Aunt Agatha’s house, and the day and the summer had stretched endless and empty in front of him. Yesterday, after his parents had left, Aunt Agatha had warned him about snakes – ‘Leave them alone and they won’t hurt you!’ she’d said. ‘The only thing you really need to be afraid of is fire.’ She gave him a list of things to remember about bushfires, and taught him how to start the pump for the fire hose. None of it made the country sound like a fun place to be.

But now, this morning seemed so long ago it was like remembering what had happened to somebody else. Finn looked around the kitchen: the jug of roses on the table, the gumnuts on the windowsill and jar of feathers on the mantelpiece above the old wood stove. Even if they weren’t the sort of thing his mother had in the kitchen, they were solid and real . . . Suddenly he couldn’t believe he’d spent the afternoon with a ghost, and heard what animals were feeling.



If he couldn't believe it, how could he tell Aunt Agatha?

'It was okay,' he said at last, and went to wash his hands for tea.

But as he clattered the knives and forks onto the table, he couldn't help asking, 'Who was it that lived out in the bush a hundred years ago?'

'An old hermit,' said Aunt Agatha. 'And of course Boris Banks' great-grandfather. He built the mansion that Boris Banks lives in now.'

'What was the hermit's name?'

'I don't suppose anyone knows,' said Aunt Agatha. 'The poor old man is long dead now.'

After dinner they looked at a map and worked out that Finn's parents were still on the plane, on their way to the biggest city in the world. It seemed a lot more than a day since Finn had said goodbye to them. But it had been a very unusual day.

'Do you think there really are ghosts?' Finn asked.



‘I think there are souls who have something left to do on earth,’ said Aunt Agatha. ‘Why?’

‘Just wondered,’ said Finn. He thought that if she looked at him properly she’d see a scar of fear on his face or the print of a green hand on his arm, but Aunt Agatha simply went on stirring honey into her tea.

It was exciting to know something that no one else knew – but it made him feel very alone.

JACK HENRY DIDN’T mind being alone, but he was restless. He explored his shack and found an old tin mug, a spoon, a knife and a belt buckle. Nothing else. Jack Henry hadn’t owned much when he was alive, but now there was nothing except the pants, shirt and boots he’d worn for the last hundred years.

That’s all I need! he thought. They don’t wear out and they don’t need washing. Some handy things about being a spook.

The moon came up, and the ghost and his dog walked through the bush. Their eyes glowed green in the dark and they could see as far as on the brightest sunshine day. ‘We’re night beasties now,’ said Jack Henry. They watched an owl plunge from a tree, with claws outstretched, and fly off again with something small and struggling. Jack Henry felt sorry for the mouse but happy for the owl that she could feed her babies.

‘But not us, no more,’ he told the dog. ‘We don’t have to eat and we don’t have to hunt; don’t have to dig for yams or fish for yabbies.’

Nipper wagged his tail. He liked food, but not as much as he liked Jack Henry being happy.

They listened to the possums squabbling in their treetops, watched a fat wombat waddle out of his hole, and a mob of wallabies grazing. These were the great-great-great-grandchildren of the animals Jack Henry had known, but they wandered around him as if he'd always been there.

'We'll get to know all of them,' said Jack Henry to Nipper. 'We've got all the time in the world. All the time in the universe!' he added, and the thought of that never-ending time made him sit down fast, the way he had when he'd first realised he was a ghost. Nipper gave his face a ghostly lick and Jack Henry rubbed the collie's head.

'A strange thing, having to learn how to pat my old dog,' he admitted, 'but now I've got the hang of it, you feel just like the old Nipper to me.'

They climbed up the hill to Aunt Agatha's garden. Jack Henry pushed the fence wire down to swing his leg over before he remembered that he could walk straight through.

'Still doesn't seem right,' he said to Nipper, and the dog must have agreed because he crawled under the bottom wire the way he always had.

The house was small and white, not very different from houses that Jack Henry had known. The vegetable garden had rows of tomatoes and peppers, strawberries and beans, and the flowers smelled sweet in the darkness. He walked up the path with Nipper at his heels.

It was a hot night, and the back door was open with just the screen door shut. With a shiver as the mesh went through their bodies, the ghost and his dog walked through the screen door into the kitchen.

The wood stove was bright and clean, as if it was never used, and there was something beside it that looked like a stove but had no firebox to heat it. A red light shone from a shiny kettle, and another box had glowing numbers that changed as he watched: 11:23 to 11:24.

But the strangest thing was the tall white box, big as a coffin standing on end, which purred like a contented cat.

Jack Henry walked around it. He couldn't imagine what sort of animal could be kept in a box like that.

'But what can spook a spook?' he wondered, and melted through the heavy white door.



‘Ooh!’ he trembled, as metal racks sliced through his body and a cold shelf slid through his neck.

His head was in a small box, so cold that trays of water and even one tub of milk were frozen into ice.

‘I don’t much like this!’ he said, his voice echoing in the icy box, and he ducked down below the shelf.

‘That’s better!’ he decided, ‘but it’s still as cold as the creek on a frosty winter’s night.’

He wiggled around, perching on a bag of apples with his knees around his ears and his feet in vegetables. There were bottles of milk, baskets of eggs, a bowl of rhubarb crumble and a whole shelf with jars of pickles and jam.

Jack Henry dipped flickering green fingers into the rhubarb crumble and poked his tongue through the bottles to taste chocolate sauce and strawberry jam. ‘These folks are rich!’ he said, when he found a thin silver bar hidden at the back. But the silver coating tore and he smelled chocolate underneath. Jack Henry licked it. Then he smelled the cheeses – ‘Whew!’ he exclaimed. ‘That pong! Here, Nipper!’

Nipper liked stinky things, but not enough to go into a closed-tight box. He didn’t like this house with strange lights and hums, and especially didn’t like Jack being shut up in that box. He stuck his head inside and began to howl.

And since Jack Henry didn’t like his dog being miserable, he pushed the fridge door open and gave him the cheese. Nipper licked it with his green tongue,



sneezed, and the cheese rolled across the kitchen and under the table.

‘Time to go,’ said Jack Henry, and they walked through the screen door and back to the bush.

FINN WOKE UP wondering if Jack Henry was a dream. In Aunt Agatha’s spare bedroom, with the morning sunlight bouncing off the stack of boxes and the faded cotton sheets, ghosts seemed impossible.

‘FINN,’ shouted Aunt Agatha, ‘what is the camembert doing under the table?’

Finn knew he hadn’t been rolling cheese around the kitchen floor – but Aunt Agatha probably hadn’t either. He opened the fridge for the milk for his cereal, and noticed that the silver paper had been pulled off a bar of cooking chocolate.

Either Aunt Agatha was going nuts, or Jack Henry wasn’t a dream.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ said Finn.

‘Sort out one of your boxes first,’ said Aunt Agatha. ‘Don’t leave them all till the end of summer.’

Finn still didn’t feel like sorting out boxes. He got out his old Lego and then put it back in the box, threw out last year’s homework and shoved a bunch of too-small tee-shirts, a toy car and his old radio into an op-shop bag.

Then he took the radio out again and found the batteries he’d bought for his new CD player. He’d thought of a way to get his ComputerKid back.

## *four*

JACK HENRY WAS sitting outside the shack on the stump of an old tree, concentrating so hard on the game that his shoulders were quivering and his green tongue was sticking out between his teeth. Finn took a deep breath. He'd been thinking about Jack Henry all morning, and wondering if he was going to see him again today – but it was still spooky to actually find a ghost sitting there.

But that was why he'd brought the radio.

He turned it on: *'The bushman's life is the life for me...'* the radio wailed, and Finn changed the station quickly, past the talkback and classical music to a rock station.

The ghost and his dog jumped so high they landed on the top of the stump.

'That's another toy?' Jack Henry asked cautiously. 'Not a ghost trap neither?'

'It's like a music box – you move this to change the music.'

Jack Henry fiddled the radio dial with a long green finger, shivering at the static and jumping at each new song.

*'Is there a ghost in the corner in the old rocking chair?'* a deep voice sang. *'Or is it just my memories?'*

'Waddling wombats!' he shouted, laughing till he had to run up a tree and flip over backwards with excitement. 'A song about me!'

THE GHOST LEARNED to use the radio as quickly as he'd figured out the ComputerKid. He tried all the stations and then listened to country and western music till Finn left for the day. But when Finn asked for his game back, Jack Henry changed the subject and looked so sad that Finn decided to let him keep it for now.

The next few mornings, when Finn came down to the shack by the creek, he felt a sharp jolt of shock at seeing a bright green ghost and ghost dog waiting for him. But every day the shock was a bit less, and sometimes Finn forgot that his new friend was someone who'd been dead for a hundred years.

Someone who could hear what animals were feeling, and could let Finn share it. That was the best of all, walking through the bush and hearing the birds warn each other that he was coming, and wondering whether he'd ever be able to call back to them the way Jack Henry could. He always practised on his way home, because he was embarrassed to do it in front of a ghost until he could do it right.

A BLUE-TONGUED LIZARD was sunning itself at the foot of the stump. Its skin was smooth and its body was spread flat across the roots to soak up the warmth, and when Finn lay down to watch it, it didn't move from its spot.

Finn felt the sun warm right through him, so that his blood ran quick and his mind was alert inside his resting body. A breeze quivered against his skin and fluttered the leaves of the grey-green world. He put out his tongue to taste the air.

Jack Henry called Nipper for a walk, but Finn stayed staring into the round eyes of the lizard. Off to the side he saw a snail, fat and happy, with its horns pricked forward as it crawled across a twig.

Faster than thought the lizard darted. Finn felt the juicy crunching between his jaws, the grittiness of shell and the full warmth in his stomach as the snail was swallowed. He stretched contentedly and closed his eyes.

At the back of his mind, Finn thought that he was the only person in the whole world to know just how good it felt to be a lizard in the sun.

Suddenly there was a low growl, and a cold touch on the back of his leg.

'Giant buzzflies are coming!' Jack Henry shouted. 'Listen!'

They ran up the hill through the bush to the Angus farm with the stocky black cattle.

From the top of the hill they could see the road – and roaring towards them, a swarm of . . .

*'Monsters!'* said Jack Henry.

‘A motorbike rally,’ said Finn.

He could feel the ghost trembling and heard his invisible teeth chattering, and realised that the last time Jack Henry had climbed this hill there would have been no motorbikes in the world: no shining motorbike helmets, no dark visors or silver gloves or bright red motorbike gear.

‘They’re just people,’ said Finn, ‘riding motorbikes like you used to ride a horse.’

The bikes snaked along the road, the two front riders leaning low into the curve.

And then a tiny kangaroo leaped out in front of them.

‘A wallaby joey!’ exclaimed Finn.

The bikes swerved around it.

‘Oh, no you don’t!’ Jack Henry shouted, in a voice like a blast from a distant mine. ‘Away back, Nipper!’

There was a flash of cold as the ghost dog streaked off down the hill, and a faint *whoosh* as Jack Henry followed.

Finn couldn’t see the ghostly green shapes, but when the joey turned towards him he knew Nipper was rounding it up the way collies herd sheep. But there were bikes on every side, and one ghost dog couldn’t get the wallaby away.

Suddenly the frightened little animal was scooped up into the air. It was lifted over the wheel of a big red bike and carried like a baby back to the bush.

The riders turned. They swerved and wobbled; they tumbled and rolled. Then they scrambled back to their bikes and screamed on down the road.



'POOR LITTLE GIRL,' Jack Henry crooned as he lifted the joey over the fence. 'Where's your Ma?'

Nipper found the mother wallaby a moment later. She was hidden under a wattle tree, and she was dead.

'She came here to die,' said Jack Henry. 'But I can't figure what hurt her!'

'It was a car,' said Finn. Then he had to explain what a car was, and how headlights confused animals at night.

'Whatever it was,' interrupted Jack Henry, as if he'd heard enough about cars to be sure they weren't true, 'this little beastie needs looking after.'

Finn held out his arms. He could feel the joey's terror tingling through him; his heart thumped and his breath came quick. He hated feeling like this – he wanted to hold and protect this little wallaby more than he'd wanted anything in his life.

But Jack Henry cuddled it closer. 'You can't look after her!' he snapped.

'Better than you!'

'I looked after beasties when I were alive – why not now I'm dead?'

'Because . . .'

The ghost glared greenly, and Finn stopped.

'Her name's Lola,' Jack Henry announced, tickling under the wallaby's chin till she blinked long lashes over her big dark eyes. 'She's as pretty as a dancer I saw once, when I were a lad.'

Lola relaxed as Jack Henry held her. Finn could feel her as snug and comfortable as he felt on the couch between his parents on video nights.

‘Did you really look after animals?’ he asked.

‘Once when I were hunting,’ Jack Henry said sadly, ‘I shot a kangaroo with a joey in her pouch. He were about as old as Lola, not quite ready to live without his ma. I felt so black-miserable about all the jumping and living he’d never do I took him home till he were grown. Used to follow me around even when he were tall as me and king of the mob.

‘I never hunted again. Any sick or baby beastie I found, I cared for till it were strong enough to live alone – but they’d still wander back when they wanted. Cold rainy nights, there’d be a dozen kangaroos, wombats and all in my shack.’

Finn imagined possums perching in the rafters, a sleepy koala on a wardrobe, wombats snoring in front of the fire and an old man kangaroo stretched on a bed.

But he still didn’t know how a ghost could look after a wallaby that was alive right now and needed to be kept warm and fed.

They walked back to the shack, and Jack Henry told Finn to wash the old tin mug in the creek. The cobwebs were so thick and dirty that Finn didn’t even see the hairy black spider in the middle until he’d scraped out the cobweb ball. He was glad he’d used a twig.

‘But can’t she just drink from the creek?’

‘Baby beasties need more than water,’ said the ghost.

They headed back to the farm where the stocky black cows and their calves grazed on the hill. Jack Henry handed the wallaby to Finn and walked through the fence.

‘Away back, Nipper!’



The ghost dog shot off like a green mist around the nearest cow, driving her back to the corner of the paddock. She shook her head at the ghost, but he rubbed between her horns till she was calm, then squatted at her side to milk her into the battered tin mug. Finn didn't know much about cattle, but he thought that was the most surprised cow he'd ever seen.

Then he realised why the ghost wanted the milk, and remembered the day his school had visited the wildlife sanctuary.

'You can't give cow milk to a wallaby!'

'She'll like it.'

'It could make her blind. She needs special wallaby milk.'

'I always gave baby beasties cow milk – ' The ghost stopped, looking bewildered. 'Oh, no! Some *were* blind. I never knew it were because of me . . . But you can't milk a wallaby!'

'The wildlife sanctuary has a special powder they mix up.'

'A potion to make wallaby milk,' Jack Henry repeated thoughtfully. 'Since I've woken up, you've shown me a jumping-ghost toy and a singing box – but a wallaby potion beats all! Can we get some from that wild sanity?'

'They won't give it to us because we're not supposed to keep her.'

'We *have* to keep her,' said Jack Henry. 'This is where Lola belongs.'

They walked slowly back. The wallaby was warm in Finn's arms and her fur was soft, though her legs were scrabbly when she wanted to get down.

'I reckon she'll be ready to join her mob at summer's end.'

'Where will you keep her?'

'I used to have a sack for them to sleep in . . . everything's gone now.'

'I'll see what I can find,' said Finn.

Jack Henry handed him the mug of milk. 'Seems a shame to waste it. Folks still reckon cow milk's good for lads?'

The milk was warm and tasted of the old tin mug – but it was the first time Finn had ever been offered a drink by a ghost.

'Thanks,' he said.

JACK HENRY AND Lola waited at the shack while Finn went back to the house for lunch.

'Your parents called this morning,' Aunt Agatha told him. 'They haven't found an apartment yet.'

Finn felt a quick stab of missing them – but he was even more relieved that he didn't have to leave yet.

'They said they'd try again in a day or two. They'll be asleep now.'

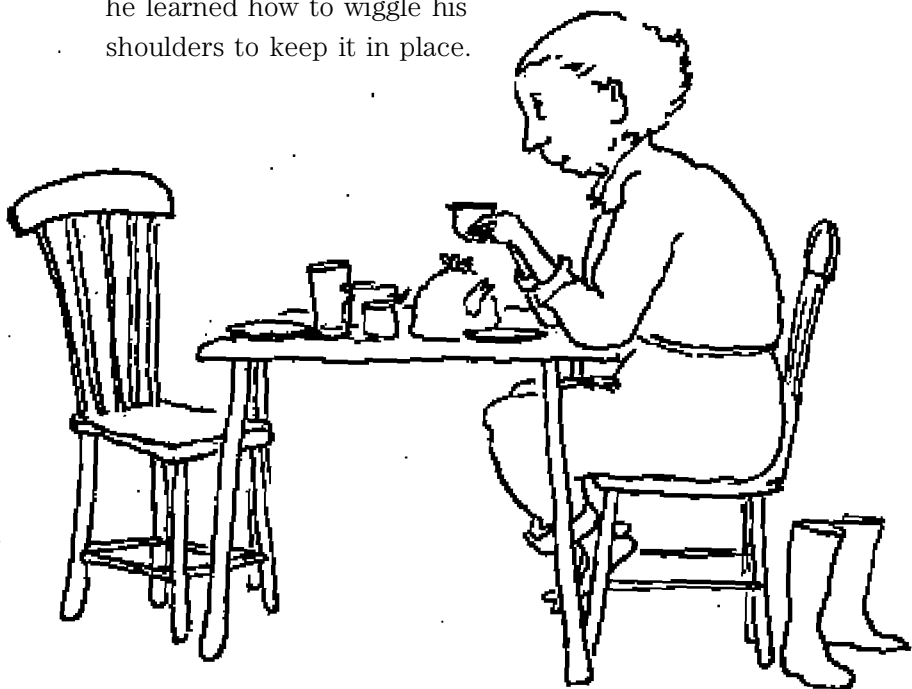
Because it was night on the other side of the world, when it was daytime here, Finn sometimes found it hard to believe that his mother and father were really there, looking for an apartment that they would all live in.

It was almost as strange as helping a ghost look after a wallaby.

Finn finished his sandwich, went to his room and dumped out five boxes. The last one had his backpack from kindergarten. He stuffed it under his tee-shirt, and called goodbye to Aunt Agatha as he slipped out the door.

The backpack had a picture of a teddy bear reading a book and a cuddly bear face peeping out from the top, as if the teddy was trying to crawl out. Finn had hated it when he was five because there was no body, just a strip of fur down the inside – but Lola didn't mind at all. She crawled in, and Jack Henry loosened the straps to slip the backpack over his shoulders.

After it had fallen through his body a few times, he learned how to wiggle his shoulders to keep it in place.



## *five*

FINN GOT UP so early the sky was still pink. He went out the back door, past the carport and Aunt Agatha's car.

The lights were on, the windscreen wipers were flapping and the radio was playing.

Finn turned them all off, hoping they hadn't been going long enough to flatten the battery. Aunt Agatha always left the keys in the car: 'Who'd get into it, out here in the country?' she always said.

Finn could tell her who.

JACK HENRY WAS sitting out on the stump, feeding Lola from a baby bottle with a special teat. A tin labelled *Wallaroo Milk* was at his feet, just by the map Finn had drawn in the dust yesterday, of the road to the wildlife sanctuary.

'Those car-carts you were talking about – reckon they run fast as a good horse?'

'Faster.'

'A noise like the buzzfly bikes, but not so screamy?'

‘Yes.’

‘Lamps outside and music box inside?’

‘Yes. But please don’t play with them, or the car mightn’t start.’

‘Yours is no good anyway,’ the ghost said with dignity. ‘Nipper and me like the ones that move.’

‘You went in a car?’

‘Nipper were chasing it and it stopped, sudden-like, where the other road crossed. Nipper kept on going and fetched up inside.’

‘So you got in too?’

‘Couldn’t let my old dog go alone!’

‘Did he bite anyone?’

‘Nipper’s a good dog,’ the ghost said, which didn’t exactly answer Finn’s question. ‘He barked a bit – he wanted to catch the other cars. The driving man turned green as me. Nipper and me were quiet as fish. Then I saw the Wild Sanity and told him to stop.’

‘Did he?’

‘He surely did! He reined in that car so hard it screamed *eeeeeeeeeeech!* and shook all over. Nipper and me bounced clear through the window. He wasn’t a good driving man.’

‘He was probably scared,’ said Finn.

‘Of Nipper? Nipper’s a good dog.’

‘Of ghosts.’

‘Of me!’ Jack Henry chortled, and then looked sad. ‘I never thought on scaring people. But it do seem to happen now I’m dead.’

‘Is it because of how you died that you’re a ghost?’ asked Finn. He couldn’t stop wondering whether the world was really full of ghosts and Jack Henry was simply the first one he’d met. And sometimes he thought about how much nicer it would be to have the ghost of his own dog than Nipper.

Jack Henry scratched the bushy green whiskers on his chin. ‘I told you I were a swagman,’ he said at last. ‘It were a hard life, but free. I roamed where I wanted and learned what I needed. I built fences, cut hay, planted crops and harvested them. I cared for horses and sheep and cows. I learned most of what there is to know about life in the country.

‘One year there were no rain. The crops died; the grass didn’t grow. There were nothing for animals to eat or drink and not much more for people. I humped my swag from farm to farm: sometimes I got work; sometimes I got food. There weren’t much of neither.’

Lola finished her bottle; the ghost opened the teddy backpack for her to climb into, and continued his story.

‘That’s when I heard the first whisper of gold.

‘Gold in the creeks, gold in the ground – gold for everyone to take.’ Jack Henry looked around as if to see if anyone was listening, his voice whispering low like the barest skim of gravel in a gold-shaking pan. ‘The lad who told me were a yellow-bellied dingo, mad as a meat ant and only half as pretty – but I thought we were pals.

‘We took two horses he swore were his, and rode three long hot days to a tent town full of mud and dreams. We



swore an oath to share all the gold we found, and swapped my horse for a tent, a shovel, a pick, and two gold-shaking pans.'

'Did you find gold?'

'Not a speck,' said Jack Henry. 'Week after week we stood in that miserable, muddy creek, shaking pans of cold water and gravel. But not one speck of gold did we find.'

'We turned to digging, looking for the seams of gold buried deep in the ground. We smashed rocks with picks to find the nuggets inside. But not one speck of gold did we find.'

‘So that’s why you’re a ghost – because you still hadn’t found gold when you died?’

‘No,’ said Jack Henry. ‘No, no, no,’ and his green frame shuddered, sad and cold.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON as Finn walked home, listening to the chirruping, squawking conversations of the bush, he realised that even though he didn’t know what the birds were feeling, the way he did with Jack Henry, he still knew which bird each sound came from. He could tell whether they were startled, or defending their territory, or if they had just found some especially yummy seeds. He clucked back to a pair of red-and-blue parrots swinging in a bush cherry tree, and opened his mouth wide to try his kookaburra laugh, ‘*Ah, ha ha . . .*’

But a whirring clatter drowned out Finn’s call, and the birds screeched and shot off in alarm.

A big black helicopter settled over the bush like a vulture. It looked as if it had taken off from Aunt Agatha’s front garden.

‘It was Boris Banks,’ said Aunt Agatha. ‘He wants to buy this land back.’

‘But he can’t!’

‘He claims he’s just found his great-grandfather’s papers, and realises he made a terrible mistake selling me this land. He says his great-grandfather sacrificed his life for it. His family like to think that his dear great-grandfather died rescuing the old hermit from a bushfire. Ha! I don’t believe that story any more than I believe



Boris Banks wants this land because he loves it. Money is the only thing he cares about, and he wouldn't care if he destroyed the bush to get it.'

'But he can't make you sell it!'

'This is my land,' said Aunt Agatha, 'and I'm staying.'

FINN DREAMED THAT he and Jack Henry were riding through the bush on a cold windy day. Finn's horse bucked like a cowboy bronco.

'Wake up!'

The ghost was bright green in the darkness as he shook Finn's shoulder.

'I thought it were me as was dead – but you sleep like it!'

'What's wrong?'

'Your goats . . .'

'They're not mine.'

'A pack of dogs is a-baying after them. I sent Nipper, but they're too many for one.'

'What can I do?' Finn asked, pulling on his jeans. He didn't know exactly what, but he knew he had to do something. And he he couldn't wake , phone Mr Williams farm to say that a had told him the g were in danger.



Jack Henry shone like a flickering green torch, lighting Finn's way as he tiptoed out the back door, closing the latch with the softest of clicks.

'Quick-quick!'

Finn pulled on his sneakers and began to run.

The night was warm and the moon was full. Finn's shadow danced beside him, long and dark like a spindly monster, while the ghost's green light jogged ahead with no shadow at all. All around was the darkness. Darkness in the waving shadows of tall trees and the thickets of bushes, darkness in the tangles of tussocks and monster stumps, darkness in the wombat holes . . .

Finn crashed to the ground with his foot going one way and his leg going another. His ankle hurt so much he nearly vomited.

'Listen!' shouted Jack Henry.

The deep excited baying of hunting dogs that have found something to kill. The sound shuddered through Finn's veins with a song he'd never heard before: fierce and strong, the joy of tearing and crunching, the thrill of the kill. The hot salt of blood ran in his mouth, and his



ankle stopped hurting as he ran through the darkness on sure-footed paws.

He followed Jack Henry over the fence to the corner of a paddock. Far away from the rest of the flock was a nanny goat with her newborn kid. Four big dogs were circling round them, snapping at their legs and leaping back as the mother goat kicked and butted. Finn heard the song of her white-cold fear through the red mist urge of the attacking dogs, like a high sweet flute under booming drums. The most desperate fear of all, because there were four of them and one of her, and when she was tired, her kid would die.

Finn's mind swirled.

'Don't listen to the goat!' shouted Jack Henry. 'Those dogs are hunting, and if you smell afeared they'll think you're a kid too!'

Finn pushed back the goat's fear and his own, and let the dogs' hunting fury fill his mind. He was hot and glowing as if he'd swallowed fire; his heart was thumping, his mind was racing, and he'd forgotten that his ankle had ever ached.

Screaming like a warrior from an ancient legend, he snatched a good strong stick and raced at the dogs.

Jack Henry picked up another branch and called for Nipper, the two green shadows charging through the bellies of the swirling, snarling dogs. Nipper growled and bit with his cold green teeth; Jack Henry bellowed and whacked till the stick bounced through his arm and out the other side. Finn thumped and shouted – till suddenly

the four big dogs turned and ran into the night, with Nipper at their heels.

The nanny goat butted at Finn as if it were all his fault, but when he moved away she nuzzled and licked her small, woolly kid till Finn could feel it soothed and snug.

‘Victory!’ Jack Henry shouted, hurling his stick so high it whirled and twirled before spearing straight through him into the ground. He laughed and spun round and round it like a kebab around a skewer.

Finn threw his branch like a javelin as far as he could into the bush, because the energy was still bubbling inside him. He knew that he should go home, but he felt so alive and crazy that he never wanted to go to bed again.

But as the dogs ran away they startled the rest of the sleeping flock. The goats started bleating, a dog at the farmhouse began to bark, and lights flashed on in a window.

A man shouted, and a moment later there was a loud sharp crack.

‘Was that a gun?’

‘Time to go,’ said Jack Henry.

The night darkness was fading to grey; they scrambled back over the fence into the bush and ran till the goat farm and farmhouse were well out of sight. Finn knew he should be afraid, but Mr Williams with his gun seemed much less real than feeling the relief of the goat and her kid.

‘Do you think he was really trying to shoot the dogs?’

‘They were trying to kill his goats,’ said Jack Henry.

Finn remembered the dogs’ fierce and hungry joy. He felt again his own rage against them – but he still didn’t want them to die.

‘There’s no living without dying,’ said Jack Henry. ‘Though it do seem some of us aren’t as good at dying as others.’ He stopped to pick a berry, shiny and red from a prickly-leaved bush. ‘Wild currant!’ he exclaimed, and popped it in his mouth. The berry floated down his throat and around his middle, a small red dot in space.

‘Isn’t it poisonous?’

‘Not when I were alive!’

Finn tasted one. It was so small that even its sweetness was tiny, as if the berry couldn’t decide whether it would be sour or sweet, and the seed in the middle was nearly as big as the fruit – but he liked finding something wild to eat.

‘Will you show me more bush food?’

‘It’s not like what’s in the ice chest in your house,’ the ghost warned, but a moment later he pointed to a yellow daisy. ‘The root’s not bad, if you’re hungry enough.’

Finn memorised the flower. He felt like an explorer who belonged in the bush and could stay here forever.

But now the sky was the pale grey before dawn, and Aunt Agatha would be up with the sun. He’d never seen Aunt Agatha angry, but he had a feeling he might if she knew he’d snuck out to the bush in the middle of the night.

THE HOUSE WAS dark and quiet as Finn slipped through the screen door. His worry drained away, and he didn't know why a hollow of loneliness was left behind. He didn't want Aunt Agatha to worry about him – but part of him wished that someone had known he was gone.

A car pulled up in the driveway.

No one would visit this early. The only person it could be was Mr Williams from the goat farm. The man with the gun. And the only reason he would be here now was because he'd seen Finn and thought Finn was chasing the goats instead of saving them.

Finn pushed the kitchen door shut and locked it, as if the house was still closed up tight for the night. Then he splashed his face and hands at the kitchen sink and tried to look like someone who had just got out of the shower and not someone who was hot and sweaty from running all night.

The knock came, loud and angry.

Finn's ankle had started hurting again, but he tried not to limp as he opened the door.

Mr Williams was as red and angry as his knock. 'Did you hear dogs early this morning?' he demanded.

'What's the problem?' asked Aunt Agatha, buttoning her dressing gown as she came in, her grey hair fuzzy but her eyes bright.

'A pack of dogs after my goats! I fired a shot but it was too dark to see. They were gone by the time I got outside. I thought you might have heard something – I know you're always up early.'

Aunt Agatha shook her head. 'How are the goats?'

'Spooked, but not hurt. There's a nanny with a new kid – she wouldn't have had a chance if I hadn't chased them off. So if you know anyone with a dog – tell them to keep it locked up at night, because nothing's going to attack my goats twice.'

Finn went back to bed and started to shake. He remembered the taste of the dogs' excitement, and the feeling of his victory. He thought about the warmth of the nanny goat's love when she and her kid were safe.

But now that he was away from Jack Henry, he realised that he'd been in a paddock where someone had fired a gun, and it hadn't seemed real enough to be afraid. Of all the scary things that had happened to him, that was the scariest.

'That's enough, lad,' Jack Henry had said, the day Finn had met him, when he'd climbed the gum tree and heard what the koala was feeling. 'You'll fall on your head if you don't get your feet back on the ground!'

Now he knew that there were worse dangers than falling out of a tree. The ghost wasn't scary, but living too long in his world was.

But I like it! Finn thought rebelliously. I like being in Jack Henry's world!

## six

A GRAVELLY VOICE was humming along to the radio:

*'I've been rich, and I've been poor,  
'Some say rich is best. . .'*

Jack Henry stopped singing when Finn appeared. 'Sounds as if life's the same as ever it was. This is like those silly duffers on the goldfields – one minute they're lighting cigars with five-pound notes; then along comes a bushranger and they're back where they started, digging like wombats and just as poor.'

Finn had done a project on bushrangers; he'd drawn a map of Mad Dog Morgan's country and made a Ned Kelly mask of cardboard painted grey. This was the first time he'd thought about how people felt when their gold was stolen.

'Did you ever meet a bushranger?'

'I did,' said the ghost, a sigh rasping deep in his green chest. 'Worse yet, I turned a pal into a bushranger.'

'I swung my pick till my hands blistered, panned in cold water till my fingers froze. Not a speck of gold did I



find. Finally I rolled up my swag. "Toodle-oo," I says to my pal. "Give it one more day," he says to me. "I've come for gold, and I'll get what I want."

'So I dug and I panned, one more day. When the sun set, I washed out my pan for the last time – and there they were. Seven fat, beautiful lumps of gold.'

Finn imagined how he would shout and jump around and just about burst if he'd found seven gold nuggets.

'A good pal *would* have jumped and cheered,' Jack Henry agreed. 'We'd sworn to share everything. But I just tied the gold in my scarf, stuffed the scarf down my boot and said goodbye. Not a word about gold did I breathe.'

Finn didn't know what to say.

'When you do something bad,' said Jack Henry, 'sometimes it's even worse than you can reckon.'

'My pal rode alongside me to start me on my way. The lump in my heart were as heavy as the gold in my boot, but still I said nothing. He stopped his horse up the hill, above the road where it curved sharp and steep. His face went white, his eyes went small, and his mouth were like a trap. "You've cheated me out of your gold," he snarled, cracking his whip above my head. "But gold's what I've come for, and I'll get it one way or the other."

"You can have it!" I shouted, because he were mad as a meat ant and only half as pretty. I went to pull off my boot – but it were too late. I'd turned him into a yellow-bellied dingo, and now he wanted more than my seven gold nuggets.

"You'll never beat me, Jack Henry!" he cried, and he

jumped off his horse, kicked me in the bum and tumbled me down the hill. He were twice as big as me and three times as nasty; I fought and I fit, but he tied my hands and tied my feet and dragged me like a log into the middle of the road.

‘Then I heard the stagecoach.

‘The horses were galloping and the whip were cracking; that coach were going as fast as ever it could. It were almost dark; the road were narrow and steep, with nowhere to go but straight ahead.’

Finn shivered.

‘The horses were nearly on me before the driver saw – he reined them back so fast he tumbled off his seat. The coach spun sideways; doors flew open and out tumbled a lady, an old man and a box.

‘A strange creature on a big black horse sprang out of the bush. It were grey and shapeless, with two mean eyes and no mouth, and it rode straight at the people sitting on the road.

“‘The Ghost Bandit thanks you for your gold!’ it said, swooping down to grab the box, and laughed as it booted its horse to a gallop.

‘I knew that horse, I knew that laugh, and I knew my old tent with eyeholes cut out. I knew that ghost bandit were the yellow-bellied dingo who’d once been my pal.

‘The old man and the driver hopped up and chased him, but his horse were good and he were gone.’

‘What about you?’ asked Finn.

‘The lady looked at me, lying like a log in the middle



of the road. "Did he rob you too?" she asked. "Or are you his pal?"

"He's no pal of mine!" I said to her. She pulled out a little silver knife. I were as scared as a frog staring at a snake, but she just slit the ropes on my hands and feet.

"There was a lot of gold in that box," she said. "There'll be a reward if you help catch the Ghost Bandit."

'So did you?' asked Finn.

‘Never! He weren’t my pal, but I couldn’t betray him twice. Soon as those ropes were off, I skedaddled into the bush, as fast and as far as I could from the coach, the goldfields, and the yellow-bellied dingo.’

Finn sat quietly while Jack Henry told his story. Maybe it was because the ghost was nearly invisible in the bright sunlight, so the story seemed to be coming out of thin air, or maybe it was because Finn was so tired his brain wasn’t working, but it seemed that he could see everything the boy that was Jack Henry had seen, and feel everything he’d felt.

AUNT AGATHA HAD made toasted cheese and tomato sandwiches with the first tomatoes from her garden, but she couldn’t eat them and neither could Finn.

Because while Finn had been lost in Jack Henry’s world of bushrangers and gold, Boris Banks had phoned Aunt Agatha to say he was going to take her world away. ‘I’ll be there tomorrow,’ he’d warned. ‘I want this land, and I’m going to have it.’

Finn ran out of the house and all the way to the shack, but he barely saw the trees or heard the birds or smelled the hot bush smell. He tried to feel his feet pumping down onto the dry leaves and long grass and the solid earth beneath them, but they just seemed to pound Aunt Agatha’s words deeper into his brain.

Jack Henry and Nipper were outside with Lola, the joey grazing happily between the two green shapes. The ghost was playing the ComputerKid with a tiny blue wren

perched on one shoulder, a dove on the other, and a green-and-yellow parrot watching from a branch.

‘The birds are getting to know me again,’ said the ghost. ‘It won’t take long.’

‘We don’t have long,’ said Finn.

‘I’m a ghost. I’ve got eternity.’

‘But not here,’ said Finn. ‘Not with the animals. Not once he’s taken the land.’

‘*Who’s* going to take this land?’

‘Boris Banks.’

‘Boris Banks,’ whispered Jack Henry.

‘He’s rich and famous and the meanest man alive.’

‘Boris Banks!’ hissed Jack Henry.

‘Aunt Agatha says if he gets this land, that’ll be the end of the bush.’

‘Boris Banks is the yellow-bellied dingo,’ said Jack Henry. ‘The Ghost Bandit, the very same. He’s the one as made me a ghost.’

‘But that was a hundred years ago – if you’re a ghost he would be too!’

‘Ugly fellow?’ asked Jack Henry. ‘Face like a meat ant and only half as pretty? Teeth like a dingo; eyes like a crow?’

‘That sounds like him,’ said Finn. ‘But he’s not even as old as Aunt Agatha.’

‘Then he’d be the great-grandson of the Boris Banks I knew. The great-grandson of the Ghost Bandit.’

‘But you said you got away – how did he make you a ghost?’

‘Once the goldfields were well behind me, I swagged across the country from farm to farm – and everywhere I went, I heard about the Ghost Bandit. One box of gold hadn’t satisfied that yellow-bellied dingo; he robbed stagecoaches and mail coaches everywhere there were gold. But he always wore my old grey tent over his head so no one knew who he were. Except me.

‘I kept on hoping he’d forget me, and I worked hard and long, year after year. By the time I were a man, I had the money for my own land. This land.’

‘With the gold?’ asked Finn.

Jack Henry shook his head. ‘I never used it. Every night I took the nuggets out of their hiding place and rolled them round in my hand – but they’d made so much trouble, I never showed them to anyone.

‘I built my shack and bought a cow for milk and two hens for eggs. There were fish in the creek, wild yams to dig, mushrooms and berries to pick. There were beasties everywhere, the best friends I ever had.

‘Then when I were old and Boris Banks were too, he found me.

‘He rode up one summer afternoon, a day so hot the air crackled and the birds didn’t sing. He were in his tall black hat on his big black horse, still mad as a meat ant and only half as pretty. I knew him right away.

“I want this land,” says that yellow-bellied dingo, with a rasp in his voice and a squint in his eye.

“This is my land,” I says. “And I’m staying.”

‘I went back inside, and I shut my door.

“Jack Henry!” he shouts. You’ve got to remember he were a rich man then, with people lifting their hats and calling him Sir. No one knew he’d been the Ghost Bandit.

“You want to stay – you can stay!” Then I heard him slide the bolt across the door, and I knew he’d locked me inside.

“You cheated me out of your gold when we were lads!” he shouted. “But you’ll not cheat me out of the gold under your feet. I’ll mine your land from end to end, and I’ll have its gold before I’m done.”

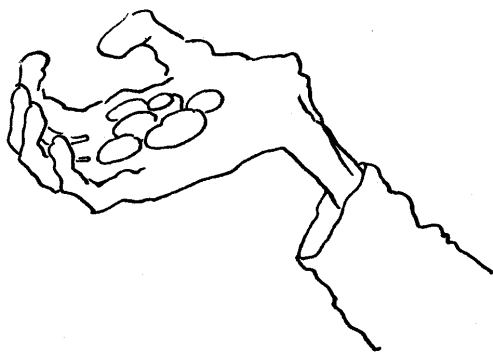
‘Through the crack of the door I saw him climb to his horse, but I reckoned it were just a trick and he’d be back to steal my nuggets. I fetched them out from under my pillow – those seven fat, beautiful lumps of gold.

“‘Till we meet again, Jack!” shouted that yellow-bellied dingo, laughing a laugh that made me shiver.

‘Suddenly there were a boom of thunder and a flash of lightning, as if the sky had split at the end of the world. When I looked again the horse had bolted and Boris Banks were flat on the ground.

‘My only way out were through the window. It would have been tight and it wouldn’t have been easy, but I could have just squeezed through.

‘But I says to myself,  
he’s after my gold and  
he’ll take it from me  
if I climb out to help  
him now. I rolled  
those nuggets in my



hand – then I tucked them in a handkerchief and dug a hole for them, right in the floor.

‘Nipper were smarter than me. He were howling and scratching, frantic to get out, but I smoothed the earth over my gold – and then I went to the window.’

The ghost dog whined as if he were remembering, and Jack Henry stroked his head.

‘That lightning had struck a tree on the other side of the creek – you can still see the lightning mark black down its trunk, if you have a peep. The fire started from there – by the time I looked out, the trees all around it were burning, flames licking up their trunks and flicking over branches. Then it leaped the creek and a wall of flame blocked the sky, with a terrible roar like a great wild beast.’

Jack Henry stopped, and Finn held his breath. He could see the flames and hear the roar, but he couldn’t imagine how hot that red wall would be.

‘What did you do?’ he asked at last.

‘Nothing,’ said Jack Henry. ‘It were too late. If I hadn’t stopped to bury those nuggets, if I hadn’t rolled them in my palm to feel their weight, I could have got out that window and dragged Boris Banks inside. I might have stopped that fire while it were small. But now it were too big and too fierce to stop. The fire had killed the man that used to be my pal, and my dog and I were next.’

‘There were nothing I could do to save our skins – but I dug up my gold, those seven fat, beautiful lumps of gold, and threw them far as I could, out the window and



into the fire. It were up to the shack now, licking at the walls, and a black cloud of smoke were pouring in.

‘Nipper were howling and I were coughing, lying on the floor with our faces in the dirt. We were hot as cakes in an oven, but the smoke were worse. We had smoke in our eyes, smoke in our mouths and scratching in our throats. We breathed smoke in and we breathed smoke out, and in the end, we couldn’t breathe at all.

‘And that,’ said Jack Henry, ‘is all I can remember till you woke me up.’

‘But the shack’s still here,’ said Finn. ‘Why didn’t it burn?’

‘The wind were crazy that day,’ the ghost answered. ‘Blowing one way then circling back, as it sometimes do in valleys like this. I reckon it changed before it took hold of the shack, and there might have been rain, to put all the fire out. But it were too late for us, lying there in the smoke.’

Jack Henry sat quietly when he’d finished the story, while the wallaby joey grazed and the ghost collie watched her with his sharp green eyes. But Finn crossed the creek and found the tree. A black scar zigzagged down the trunk to the ground; pieces of the scorched trunk had worn away so that he could see it was dead and hollow inside. But the other side of the tree had come back to life, and had grown up tall and green.

## *seven*

THE NEXT MORNING Jack Henry was still sitting exactly where he'd been when Finn left the afternoon before. 'If Boris Banks takes this land,' he said gloomily, 'he'll dig it up for gold just like his great-grandpa wanted.'

'We don't know for sure,' said Finn.

'Sure as eggs is eggs!' snapped the ghost. 'He looks like his great-grandpa, talks like his great-grandpa; he'll be after gold like his great-grandpa. And that'll be the end of the bush, and the birds and beasties in it.'

They sat and stared at the trees, at the birds and koalas in the tops and the echidnas and lizards at the bottoms, but they could not think how to save any of them. Jack Henry was too worried to listen to the radio, and even Lola nuzzling at his hands, or Nipper rolling with his green feet in the air, couldn't cheer him up. Finn remembered that his mother and father might phone, but it was easier to stay out in the bush than to figure out what to say to them. They probably wouldn't believe him if he told them his new friend

was dead and green – and he couldn't explain why it hurt him right through to think of Aunt Agatha losing the bush.

At lunchtime, when Lola had squeezed into her backpack for a nap, the ghost slung the pack over his shoulder and followed Finn home. 'Better than sitting here like fungus on a log,' he muttered.

The helicopter was hovering over Aunt Agatha's house, like a great black beetle waiting to pounce. Its roar pounded through Finn's body and Jack Henry's green, as if it would flatten them the way its wind was flattening the tomatoes. They ducked behind a tree as it lowered itself into the garden.

'A humbug!' exclaimed the ghost. 'A thundering humbug!'

The engine died; the whirring slowed into two spinning blades and finally stopped.

A young man with dark sunglasses, a shaved head and a body like a wrestler, climbed out and walked around to open the door for the passenger. Finn saw two shiny black shoes and shiny black suit-legs swing down, and knew there was no one it could be except . . .

'Boris Banks!' growled Jack Henry. 'Big as his great-grandpa and just as nasty.' Nipper growled too, low and rumbling.

Boris Banks was tall, with a soft stomach bulging out of his dark suit, and jowls dangling over his collar like a bloodhound's.

Aunt Agatha came down the path to meet him, but



Boris Banks had a mobile phone at his ear and went on talking as if she wasn't there.

Jack Henry's green shape began to quiver. 'Who's that yellow-bellied dingo talking to?'

'I don't know.'

'Well if you can't see him neither, it's got to be a ghost! And the only ghost that would talk to a yellow-bellied dingo like that is his own great-grandpa! No wonder I'm all a-shiver.'

'It's a telephone,' Finn explained. 'It works through waves in the air, like your radio. Whoever he's talking to is too far away to see – but they're alive.'

Jack Henry thought till his green began to glow brighter again. 'So if I had a telling-bone at the shack, you could hear me at your house?'

'Even if I was in Melbourne – or New York!'

'Handy dandy,' Jack Henry said thoughtfully.

The tough young man with the dark glasses stood between Aunt Agatha and Boris Banks with his arms crossed and his face blank, until the phone call was finished.

'He's a bodyguard!' said Finn. Finn had never seen a helicopter up close before, and he'd never met a bodyguard, or a person who needed one. He didn't know whether he was more excited or scared.

'He's a bother-bully,' said Jack Henry.

Finn decided he was more angry than excited or scared.

'I've decided to give you one more chance,' said Boris

Banks, looming over Aunt Agatha. 'I'll pay you enough to buy a nice little unit in town if you give me the land back right now.'

Aunt Agatha stood up very tall and straight to look him in the eye. 'I've lived here for forty years,' she said. 'I'm not leaving.'

'The only problem is,' said Boris Banks, 'that you don't *really* own it. You still owe me. . . .' He wrote a number on a little card. 'Can you pay me today?'

'Of course I can't!' cried Aunt Agatha. 'It's Sunday. I'll go to the bank on Monday – I'm sure I could get a loan.'

'Monday's too late.' And Boris Banks pulled a fat stack of papers out of an envelope. 'Your contract says that if I ask you for the rest of the money, you have to pay it immediately – or the land is mine again.'

'Where does it say that?'

Boris Banks smirked all over his jowly face. 'In the fine print at the bottom of page 36. You should always read the fine print, my dear.'

Aunt Agatha looked as if she was going to be sick.

Nipper growled. Jack Henry put Lola's backpack down and disappeared from Finn's side.

'If you want to stay,' said Boris Banks, 'you can stay. I'll rent you the house. But don't complain if you don't like the view!'

'What do you mean?'

Boris Banks looked out at the bush, where Lola had just scabbled out from her backpack and was hopping cautiously forward to graze. He laughed like an angry

chainsaw. 'Let's just say the land is finally going to produce something valuable.'

Finn saw a flicker of green inside the helicopter. Suddenly he felt more hopeful. He came out from his hiding place to face Boris Banks.

'Are you going to cut down the trees?'

'He can't,' said Aunt Agatha, but she didn't sound very certain.

'You'd be surprised what I can do,' snarled Boris Banks. 'I always get what I want.'

'Not always,' Finn muttered, and glared back. He didn't care that Boris Banks was a rich and important man. Suddenly he felt as strong and angry as when he'd driven the dogs away from the goats.

The bodyguard stepped forward. Nipper bit his ankle and the bodyguard spun around with a great karate kick, so fast and so high that when Nipper bit the other ankle, he jumped again and fell down hard on his bottom.

Boris Banks glared at him as if he'd gone crazy, and the bodyguard scrambled to his feet to open the helicopter door for his boss.

'If you don't want to stay,' said Boris Banks, 'you've got two weeks to get out.'

He slammed the door. The engine roared; the blades whirled, a mini-tornado whirled around the garden, and the helicopter rose into the air. There was a flash of green as Nipper leaped at it – and just as Aunt Agatha turned away to see where the barking was coming from, Finn saw a green shape lower itself through the helicopter

floor, dangle by one hand from the rocker, and jump to the ground.

Aunt Agatha stumped slowly up the path to her home. Finn followed. He'd never seen her walk like that before: her back was bowed, and she looked very, very old. Neither of them noticed Boris Banks' mobile phone lying on the ground where the helicopter had been. And when they went into the house, they didn't see the shimmer of green that picked up the phone and ran back into the bush.

The next day was sunburn hot. Finn heard the ghost's voice from the tree stump, humming along to his radio,

*'When I call you on the phone,  
I can tell you're not alone...'*

But he couldn't see Jack Henry till there was a flicker of movement as the ghost dropped something behind the stump. Probably the ComputerKid, thought Finn, but getting the game back didn't seem to matter much any more.

'You've gone pale,' Finn said. 'The fungus must be wearing off.'

He picked another one from inside the shack and took it to the ghost.

'I were right about what he wants to do with the land,' said Jack Henry, reappearing as he chewed. 'Same thing as his great-grandpa. That yellow-bellied dingo drew maps of where he was going to dig up my land for gold, before he came to bully me off it. Now this Boris Banks has found the maps.'



‘How do you know?’

‘They were in a little black suitcase with fiddly gold locks, in the humbug. He’s going to dig this land up from one end to the other.’

‘Not if we stop him,’ said Finn, and as he said it he knew that was exactly what they had to do.

‘That’s what I bin thinking,’ said Jack Henry, ‘and we need everything we can find to do it.’ He reached behind the stump and pulled out the mobile phone. ‘I reckon this could be handy – but how did he make it talk?’

Finn didn’t bother arguing with the ghost about whether he should have taken it. ‘You just push the numbers, a bit like using the ComputerKid. Most of them are probably on his directory, so he only has to push one button to call them.’ He took the phone and scrolled through. ‘Look, here’s Aunt Agatha’s number – if I pushed YES now her phone would ring at home and she’d answer it.’

The ghost took the phone back, stared at it and thought. It was too hot for Finn to think, so he ran to the creek and jumped off the bank into the water. He ducked under to get his head wet, dog-paddled up to the bend blocked by a fallen gum tree, and floated back down.

A small brown snout and a spiny bunch of quills moved slowly across the creek ahead of him. It was an echidna, four legs paddling and long snout snorkelling, as if it had just jumped in for a cool swim too.

‘I’ve never seen that before!’

‘Then you’re as blind as joey in a pouch!’ muttered

Jack Henry. 'Why wouldn't these little ant-snufflers cool off the same way you do?'

The echidna ignored Finn and paddled across to a rock pool at the edge of the creek. Its quills pushed against the rocks like sharp stiff fingers as it pulled itself out of the pool and onto the bank.

Finn swam closer.

'Get an earful of that!' Jack Henry laughed. 'That little snout is a-knock-knock-knocking – he doesn't like the way you splash!'

Finn felt cross and nervous, his body felt itchy and his nose was twitchy. When he listened again he could hear a faint tapping. 'Danger!' it said. 'Something big and ugly – beware!' He looked over his shoulder, tense and quick, just the way the echidna was, before he realised that *he* was the danger.

'Echidna-tapping is like the way the air shivers from that telling-bone, but not so sharp and nasty.'

Finn remembered the ghost had quivered when Boris Banks used it. 'You can feel the air waves around the phone?'

'Can't you?'

Finn shook his head.

'Now I think on it,' said Jack Henry, 'I never heard the ant-snufflers tapping when I were alive either. Seems as being a ghost do sharpen up the hearing!'

'So does being around one,' said Finn, watching the echidna climb up the bank and wondering whether he was the only person alive who could go back and forth

from the ghost's world to his own. He floated lazily, eyes closed and drifting in the gentle current.

'Get out slow,' the ghost hissed suddenly.

The pointed head and small black eyes of a tiger snake were swimming towards him. Finn didn't go slow. In one bound he was out of the water and on the bank.

The snake swam across to the other side and slid from sight.

'They're not fellows you like to bump into,' said Jack Henry. 'But they don't go looking for trouble. They's got their place, same as everyone else.'

Finn jumped up and down, shaking himself dry. 'As long as it's not the same place I'm in!'

'If that yellow-bellied dingo digs up the bush they'll be out of a home same as Lola and that little ant-snuffler, and all the rest of the beasties.'



'FINN,' SAID AUNT Agatha, at bedtime, 'don't forget that your mother's going to phone again at eleven tomorrow. Make sure you're here – I've got enough to worry about without your parents thinking I've lost you in the bush.'

## *eight*

IT WAS THE hottest night of the summer. Finn woke with the warm air wrapping him tight in his bed, heavy as a pile of woolly blankets. All the windows were open wide, but even by breakfast time the breeze was too weak to flicker through the fly-wire screens.

If it was this hot in the morning, he couldn't imagine what the afternoon would be like. He wondered if the echidna would have a swim again. Or if Lola had drunk her morning bottle yet.

'It might be better in the bush,' he said to Aunt Agatha.

'It's always better in the bush,' said Aunt Agatha, with a sad sort of smile. 'And I want it to stay that way. That's why I'm going to see the bank manager and the lawyer this morning. I'm not leaving this land without a fight.'

She looked stronger than the day before and not so old. But it was still hard to imagine that one old lady – and a ghost and a boy – could beat someone who went to work every morning with a helicopter and bodyguard.

‘Don’t forget,’ added Aunt Agatha, as she got into the car, ‘your parents are phoning at eleven.’

But I’ll go down to the shack quickly, thought Finn, and be back in time.

THE RADIO WAS ON –

*‘When I was young I did you wrong  
now I’m older and wiser too  
I’ll be strong and I’ll be true’*

– but Jack Henry was nowhere in sight. Lola was nibbling leaves and Nipper was staring mournfully up at an enormous gum tree . . .

‘Up here!’

The voice came from high up, where two koalas perched on a branch, the smaller one clinging to its mother’s back. ‘This lad was off exploring and needed some help to find his way back to his ma!’

Jack Henry jumped down, but Finn could still hardly see him. The fungus didn’t seem to be working as well – the first one had lasted a week, but this one hadn’t kept the ghost visible for twenty-four hours.

‘Maybe you need to eat another toadstool.’

‘What about Nipper?’

‘It’s strange,’ said Finn. ‘He hasn’t faded at all. Just you; just last night.’

Sometimes it seemed that everything in Finn’s life was disappearing – he didn’t want to lose Jack Henry too.

But when Jack Henry chomped on his ghost fungus, and the reassuring green glow spread through his body,

Finn knew he was being silly. Ghosts were already dead. They couldn't disappear any further.

Jack Henry turned off the radio. 'That yellow-bellied dingo's even faster than we reckoned. He's got machines a-waiting to rip the land up for gold.'

'How do you know?'

'A lady on the telling-bone told me,' said the ghost. 'I pushed the buttons like you showed me, and she says, "Mr Banks!"'

"That's me!" I says. No need for her to know I'd rather be a rabbit in a stew than that yellow-bellied dingo.

"The machines are all ready for you," she says. "They'll be there in an hour."

'An hour!'

Jack Henry grinned, a sly green grin. "I've changed my mind," I says to the lady. "That land is a home for birds and beasties, and no nasty digging machine is going to tear it up for gold."

Finn wanted to believe the trick could work. He wanted to believe that Aunt Agatha could go to the bank and the lawyer and find out how to stop Boris Banks. He wanted to believe anything because he couldn't imagine what else they could do.

Jack Henry called the next number in Boris Banks' directory and said, 'Cancel the machines!' He listened for a moment. 'What do you mean, am I feeling all right?' he shouted, his voice hoarse and not sounding at all like Boris Banks. 'I haven't felt this good for a hundred years!'

He was fading as Finn watched, growing paler and paler the longer he talked on the phone. By the time he called the fifth number and shouted, 'No nasty digging machines on my land!' he was hardly there at all.

Finn ran to the shack and picked two more toadstools. 'It's the phone making you fade! You said it made you shiver – the microwaves in the air must be wearing you out!'

The ghost chewed thoughtfully. 'I do feel a tad weary,' he admitted. 'And I never thought that could happen to a spook.'

'So you won't use the phone any more?'

'I'll do what has to be done,' said Jack Henry.

But talking of phones reminded Finn that his mother was going to call, so when Jack Henry had eaten both toadstools, and was glowing brighter and greener than ever, Finn jogged back to Aunt Agatha's house.

When he came out from the deep shade of the trees into the garden, the heat hit him as if he'd run into a wall. He had never been so hot. Sweat poured off him and dried salty on his skin; the air crackled as if it were electric. It was too hot for even the birds to sing.

It was just coming up to eleven o'clock. The empty house was silent and for a moment it felt cool. Finn drank two glasses of water one after the other and filled his glass again. The phone rang.

It was not his mother. It was a terrified, desperate ghost.

'That yellow-bellied dingo's sent a giant bush-basher. It's smashing and crashing – come quick!'

Finn gulped the third glass of water, and ran. Across the garden and back to the welcoming shade, down the hill on his path to the shack. He saw Lola, squeezed into her backpack and slung on the bolt of the door to keep her away from danger – and Jack Henry and Nipper racing to meet him, jostling and hurrying.

But he didn't need their help now to find his way. He could hear the rumble of an enormous engine in an enormous machine. He could hear the ripping and tearing of bark and branches, the crash and crack of falling trees. Worst of all he could feel, through his skin to his bones, the prickling fear of the terrified animals fleeing their homes.

'The poor old trees!' Jack Henry moaned. 'The birds and beasties! He said he'd do it and I should have known he would.'

'What do you mean?'

'The yellow-bellied dingo made the telling-bone ring after you left. He said he was going to do what he wanted, and it would take more than my silly games to stop him.'

He moaned again, sounding so much like a ghost in a movie that suddenly Finn knew exactly what they had to do.

'Eat more toadstools!' he shouted, racing to get them. 'You've faded again and we need you green!'

Jack Henry looked confused but didn't waste time arguing. He ate two toadstools and fed another to Nipper. Then Finn and the bright green ghost and his bright green dog ran towards the terrible crashing.





The bulldozer was huge and yellow. Behind it was a trail of blood-red dirt, scarred with shattered logs and branches. Big trees were smashing the others around them as they toppled to the earth with their roots in the air.

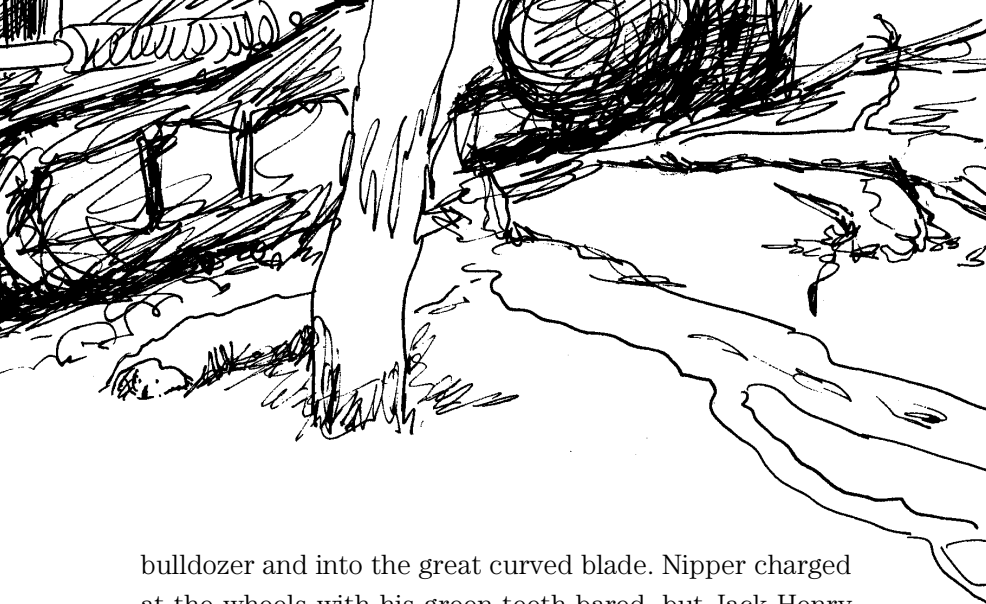
The bodyguard was driving.

‘Don’t tell *me* how angry you are,’ said Finn to Jack Henry. ‘Tell *him!*’

The ghost still looked confused.

‘Remember how you scared the man in the car?’

Then Jack Henry caught Finn’s idea and began to laugh – a wild, crazy laugh that made his hair glow brighter and his beard bristle fierce. He called Nipper, and they walked out from under the trees in front of the



bulldozer and into the great curved blade. Nipper charged at the wheels with his green teeth bared, but Jack Henry swung himself up, balanced for an instant on the top of the blade – and threw himself into the cabin.

The engine stalled; there was sudden silence. Then the bodyguard screamed long and high, jumped out the door and hit the ground running. With Nipper snapping at his heels, he raced down the blood-red track.

Finn came out from behind the tree where he'd been hiding. 'Now,' he said, 'let's get this bulldozer out of here.'

He scrambled up into the cabin. There was a key with a big orange button beside it: 'That must be the starter,' said Finn. He sat in the seat and turned the key while Jack Henry reached through him to push the button.

The bulldozer roared but stayed where it was.

Finn pushed a lever and the tree-smashing blade lifted.

Jack Henry pulled another lever and the machine roared louder. 'That must be the accelerator,' said Finn, 'but how do we make it move?'

In front of the seat, instead of a steering wheel, there were two tall levers. Jack Henry leaned through Finn's shoulder and shoved the levers forward.

The bulldozer lurched towards a tree.

Finn yanked them back the other way, the machine shuddered into reverse – and they zigzagged backwards down the track, with Finn trying to push the levers and look over his shoulder at the same time. It was slow and clumsy, and harder work than he would have ever imagined, but he wasn't sure how to turn the bulldozer around.

Nipper came back, panting with excitement. He scrambled up to the cabin and stood with his back paws through Finn's legs on the seat and his front paws on the front windscreen. Finn didn't mind. The sun glared down on the newly cleared track and the hot air bounced around the cabin like bacon sizzling in a frying pan. Finn's face was red and his throat was dry; his sweaty hands slid up and down on the steering levers and burned if they met anything else – but he was cool wherever Nipper's ghost-cold touched him.

Finally they reached the end of the track, and backed onto the road to Boris Banks' mansion.

'Where should we leave it?' asked Finn.

Jack Henry reached through him, pushed the left lever up and pulled the right one down, till the bulldozer swung around to face forwards. 'Take it back where it belongs,' he said, and Finn drove carefully down the road. It was a short, private road leading from the highway to Boris Banks' driveway, so not many cars used it – but Finn

didn't want to meet any at all. 'It's your turn to steer,' he said, and slid down to the floor.

Jack Henry turned into the driveway. Ahead of them was the great white mansion, with an acre of lawn and gravel pathways, a helicopter hangar on the roof, and black iron gates locked against visitors.

'We can leave it here,' said Finn.

'Not yet,' said Jack Henry, heading straight towards the gates.

'Slow down!' Finn shouted.

But Jack Henry was not slowing down. Finn reached through the ghost and yanked the levers back. The bulldozer jerked to a stop with its blade touching the gates. Finn skidded against the front of the cabin, Jack Henry rolled through the front windscreen, and Nipper catapulted over the blade, over the gates, and into the garden.

Finn climbed out of the bulldozer down to the ground. His knees were weak, his head was light and his teeth were rattling too hard to speak – but he knew he had to disappear fast from Boris Banks' driveway. He ran back down the road, heading for the safety of Aunt Agatha's bush.

'You can skedaddle!' shouted Jack Henry. 'I'm driving the bush-basher!'

And as Finn climbed through the fence, Jack Henry backed the bulldozer a short way down the driveway, accelerated forward – and smashed right through the black iron gates.

## nine

THE GHOST DROVE the bulldozer through the gates and up the driveway to Boris Banks' mansion. His dog was sharing the seat again, balancing his front paws on the windscreen and grinning into the breeze. For just a moment, Jack Henry forgot he was angry. He hummed a song he'd heard on the radio yesterday:

*'there's a time for living, a time for leaving  
and a time for moving along,  
so don't try to see me, don't try to keep me  
'cause one day soon I'll be gone.'*

The front door flew open. Boris Banks stormed down the three marble steps and across the gravel path to the bulldozer – but as he got closer he paused and his face turned pale.

'I'm a green ghost, a mean ghost!' Jack Henry shrieked. 'I'm the ghost of the bush and you'll *never* take my land!'

'What kind of joke is this?' demanded Boris Banks.

'This is no joke!' shouted Jack Henry. He was so angry

now that his green was nearly red. 'Nipper – you show him if we're joking!'

Nipper leapt through the windscreen, down through the great curved bulldozer blade, and bit Boris Banks on the ankle.

Boris Banks jumped, and with a strange high squeak, streaked back inside as fast as he could. The door slammed shut.

'Remember what happened last time?' Jack Henry screeched, forgetting that this was not the same Boris Banks he used to know. 'Remember what you did to *my* front door?'

He drove the bulldozer up the gravel path, up the three wide, marble steps, and stopped with the blade touching the red front door.

'You tried to take this land before, and look what happened then! That bush belongs to the birds and beasties and it'll never be dug up for gold!'

FINN HAD WANTED to be far away before Boris Banks saw the bulldozer. He bolted across the road and followed the jagged track through the bush. The track didn't give much shade from the scorching sun, but it was a lot faster than running through the trees.

Soon he'd reach the creek. He'd have a drink and splash and maybe even swim, because the bulldozer hadn't cut that far into the bush, and he'd be safe once he got there. Safe in the cool water. He was so hot now that it was hard to think. Red spots danced in front of

his eyes and his throat was as dry and scratchy as sandpaper. He could hardly remember what he was running from, except from the heat, the electric hot air pressing around him.

Air that was humming now with an engine's roar; a wind that was pounding him and making the trees shudder. Finn broke out of his dream of cool clear water, and saw the beetle-black helicopter looming overhead.

It was straight above him, swooping down like an owl on a mouse, louder and lower.

Finn dived into the bush. The helicopter couldn't land in the middle of the trees.

It landed on the track. The engine stopped and Boris Banks got out. Finn heard him shout, 'Stop right there!' but Finn didn't stop.

'This land is mine!' the big man bellowed. 'I'll do what I like – and it'll take more than some prankster kid to stop me!'

Finn was faster than Boris Banks; he passed the end of the bulldozer's track and the giant tree with the lightning scar. Soon he'd be at the creek. . .

Suddenly, there was a boom of thunder and a flash of lightning, as if the sky had split at the end of the world. It was so loud and so bright it knocked him to the ground. For a long and terrified moment, Finn couldn't see and couldn't hear, and lay with his face pressed against the dirt. Then he scrambled to his feet and turned around.

Behind him was the tree that had started the fire a





hundred years ago. Smoke was billowing out of it as if its hollow trunk were a chimney. Flames flickered over its branches and sizzled the bark and green leaves of its living side.

The grass around it was starting to burn.

Finn's legs started running before his mind could even think *Bushfire!*

He ran faster than he'd ever thought he could run, and when he reached the creek he didn't stop. He gulped a handful of water as he splashed through, and bolted past the shack towards Aunt Agatha's house. If a wind came up, a bushfire would take off faster than he could run, and not even the creek would stop it. Boris Banks would go back to his helicopter and be safe high above any flames, but Finn had nothing and no one to help him.

Neither did Lola, in her pack on the door.

Then Finn realised his own fear. He saw in his mind a wall of flame like the one Jack Henry had described. He imagined the crackle and roar of blazing trees, and the choking smoke that had killed Jack Henry. He knew he did not want to die.

But he couldn't leave Lola.

He sprinted back to the shack, where she scrabbled in her pouch, her long legs poking out and her nose twitching at the smell of distant smoke. Finn slung the pack over his shoulder, grabbed the phone from the stump, and kept on running. He dialled 000.

'Bushfire,' he gasped as he ran, 'Follow the new track from Boris Banks' road into Agatha Greene's bush.'

The phone slipped from his sweat-wet hands, but the fire trucks were on their way, and he kept on running.

Finn was panting so hard he could barely breathe, running past the paddock where the stocky black cattle were sniffing the air, through the fence to Aunt Agatha's garden and straight into the kitchen. His breath sobbed as he leaned against the sink to gulp a glass of water, but he was safe.

The house was empty. Aunt Agatha was still in town.

Finn hung Lola's backpack on the doorknob so she couldn't run away, drank another glass of water and splashed his face and arms. He remembered Aunt Agatha telling him about bushfires the first day he was here. He'd never imagined that it could really happen.

He shut all the windows and doors and filled the sinks with water.

When he ran back outside, the smoke was rolling towards him, thick, black and heavy. The fire was still down in the valley, so there were no flying sparks yet, but the sky was dark with a haze of red, and ashes drifted in the breeze. Finn ran back to the kitchen, dunked a teatowel in the sink and tied it round his face like a bushranger's mask. There was one more job to do.

The cattle were galloping up to the cleared paddocks at the top of the farm – but the wild animals had nowhere safe to go. The fences would trap them in the burning forest.

Finn got the wire-cutters from the toolbox and ran to

the fence at the bottom of the garden. Smoke filled his eyes and nose and throat. The flames were still too far away to see, but there was a haze of red in the sky, and ashes fell on him as he worked. He cut the top wire, clamping the big cutters down till the wire pinged open. He cut the second and the third – and at the fourth wire the fence fell down.

The animals could go through to safety.

If they could find their way.

Finn ran back up to the house. At the verandah he stopped, lowered his mask – and laughed like a kookaburra, high and loud and clear. Then he made the short bell whistle of a parrot, the running-water notes of a magpie, and chirrups and cheeps of every other bird he had ever heard.

He called and whistled, again and again, till his throat was so dry he could only cough.

They came from out of the bush and out of the sky. Not just the birds, but the other animals too: echidnas and wombats waddling, kangaroos and wallabies leaping, possums and koalas scampering, lizards scurrying and snakes slithering. And herding them all neatly towards the break in the fence was Nipper, with his bossy bark and his green ruff glowing.

Finn ran back to the kitchen for Lola. With the little wallaby beside him, he walked quietly through the animals to wait and watch the red haze of fire, the black smoke above it, and a distant tree burning like a candle. Finn could not understand how one minute something



could be a living tree with green leaves and thick trunk, and the next moment be a dead and dancing flame.

‘But where’s Jack Henry?’ he asked Nipper, when all the animals were around them and there was still no sign of the ghost.

Nipper wagged his tail sadly and rested his head against Finn’s hand.

That was when Finn started to worry. Nipper had never done that before. He had never rested his head against anyone except Jack Henry.

Suddenly a whirlwind, like a miniature tornado full of burning twigs and flaming leaves, gusted over the trees and touched down in a pile of dry weeds at the bottom of the garden.

The weeds burst into flame.

The flames caught the hot dry leaves as they blew in from the bush and danced over the woodpile, neatly stacked for next winter.

Finn ran to the fire pump. All he remembered was that it started with a pull cord, like a lawn mower. He pushed the *Start* button; pulled the cord once and it coughed, pulled it twice and it spluttered; he pulled it three times and it roared into life.

The woodpile was burning now as if it thought it was in a fireplace, but the red flames that should have been warm and cheerful were hot and deadly.

The hose kicked in Finn’s hands as the water gushed through, but he held it firm and sprayed that long jet of water all the way down the garden onto the burning

wood. The fire gave up with a hissing sizzle, steam rose above the pile, and small tongues of flame flicked out from odd places when they thought he wasn't looking.

Finn sprayed them all till they were dead. He sprayed the ashes and the sparks blowing against the trunk of a tree. He sprayed the burning leaves that landed suddenly in a lavender bush. He sprayed the wall of the house in case there was a spark he'd missed.

In the distance, there was another crack of thunder.

Then rain tumbled down like water thrown from a gold-shaking pan. It poured down onto the hot earth, the burning trees and smouldering ashes. The red glow over the bush disappeared into a cloud of steam and smoke, mingling with the rain-dark sky.

Finn turned off the hose. The rain splashed over his hot face, through his smoky hair and clothes, and squelched in his sneakers.

## *ten*

‘COME OUT AND see me, you yellow-bellied dingo!’ Jack Henry shouted, standing on the bulldozer on the front steps of Boris Banks’ mansion. He was getting angrier and angrier because he wanted to scare Boris Banks some more, but he didn’t want to leave the bulldozer, and couldn’t decide which one he wanted most.

There was a noise from the roof. The helicopter’s engine was running and its blades were starting to spin.

Nipper barked his *Danger* bark.

Jack Henry jumped to the ledge above the door and pulled himself up to a windowsill on the second storey.

The helicopter motor whined louder; the blades spun faster.

Jack Henry leaped from the top of the window, grabbed the gutter and threw himself onto the roof.

The helicopter trembled on its rockers and lifted into the air.

Nipper barked frantically from the ground.

Jack Henry jumped, as hard and high as he could, at the rising helicopter. And missed.

He could see Boris Banks laughing as the helicopter flew away.

Jack Henry slid down a drainpipe to the ground. Nipper was still barking, but as if he knew he wouldn't catch anything now. 'Come on, Nip,' the ghost called. 'Wherever that yellow-bellied dingo is off to, he'll be up to no good.'

They ran after the helicopter as it clattered over the bush. Jack Henry shuddered at the sight of the freshly ripped track. The air crackled and the birds didn't sing.

'The last time we saw it like this,' he said to Nipper, 'was that terrible hot hot day, the day we died. Do you reckon it's hot as that today?'

Nipper didn't know.

Then the motor changed. The helicopter was going down.

'It's landing!' the ghost shouted. 'Hurry!'

But before they could get there, Boris Banks had jumped out of the machine and was running down the track, yelling something that they couldn't hear. 'He's chasing the lad!' Jack Henry shrieked.

Suddenly there was a boom of thunder and a flash of lightning, as if the sky had split at the end of the world. It was so loud and so bright it shivered right through them. For a long and terrified moment they couldn't see and couldn't hear.

But then, at the far end of the track they saw the



giant tree that had started the fire a hundred years ago. Smoke was billowing out as if its hollow trunk were a chimney. Flames flickered over its branches and sizzled the bark and green leaves of its living side.

The grass around it was starting to burn.

Boris Banks was standing still as a statue at the end of the track, staring at the ground.

I don't know what's ailing that yellow-bellied dingo,' said Jack Henry. 'But when he wakes up he'll get back to his humbug – save his own skin and leave the lad alone.'

He stared again at the smoking tree. He loved this tree. It was older than him, and it had died and had a second chance to live.

With a crack like another bolt of thunder, the tree collapsed in on its hollow trunk. The fire had already flicked to the other trees around, the grasses and shrubs were ablaze in every direction – and a breeze had come up to push it along.

'I don't know what we can do now,' said Jack Henry, 'but look to the lad and Lola.'

They ran to the creek. Boris Banks was lying in the water, scrabbling through the stones so intently he hadn't even noticed the fire. Jack Henry and Nipper raced past him to the shack. Lola and her pouch were gone.

'The lad's got her,' said Jack Henry, 'but I wish I knew where –'

From the direction of Aunt Agatha's house, he heard a call like a kookaburra, high and loud and clear. Then

the short bell whistle of a parrot, the running-water notes of a magpie, and chirrups and cheeps of every other bird he'd ever heard.

'They're safe!' the ghost grinned.

He felt a whoosh of wind and heard a roar like a great wild beast. He turned and saw a wall of fire on the far side of the creek. His grin died.

Somewhere behind the fire's roar was a wail of sirens, but it would take too long for the firemen to reach Boris Banks. Jack Henry squared his green shoulders.

He knew what he had to do.

'Round up the beasties,' he told the dog, 'and go to the lad.'

Nipper whined and twined around his legs. Jack Henry rubbed the dog's head and looked deep into his eyes to say goodbye.

'I'm sorry, old friend,' said the ghost to his dog. 'But there's jobs as must be done, and we've each got our own. You look after the lad and we'll be together again when the time is right.'

Nipper gave one last whine before he raced after a confused koala, barked at a wandering wombat, and started herding the animals towards Aunt Agatha's house.

Jack Henry turned away.

Boris Banks was slithering out of the creek, shrieking with delight. 'Gold! Great-granddaddy was right – I've got gold!'

'Your great-grandpa were a liar and a thief,' snarled Jack Henry. 'And that gold's nothing but what I threw



away. Those nuggets killed me and your grandpa, and they'll do the same to you!

Boris Banks' eyes opened wide and his hair stood on end, but he went on rolling the gold in his hand. 'You can't scare me!'

'I'm not trying to scare you!' shouted Jack Henry. 'But if you look behind you, there's something as should.'

Boris Banks sat up out of the creek, and woke wide awake from his golden dream. 'Fire!' he screamed. 'My helicopter!'

In the distance, there was a giant *boom!* as something large exploded.

‘You can’t get back to the humbug,’ said Jack Henry. ‘You’re stuck out here with me.’

A flame leaped from the top of a tree, across the creek to a tree on their side. From treetop to treetop it jumped, and now the tangling grasses were crackling and burning.

Boris Banks ran, but the fire was faster. He dashed to the shack; threw himself against the door and slammed it shut behind him.

But before long, the fire licked at the wooden door. It smouldered along the wooden walls. It ate up the leaves on the wooden roof. And the shack started to burn.

Boris Banks flung open the door.

‘You can’t get out now,’ said Jack Henry. ‘There’s only one thing to do.’

Boris Banks screamed and fought, but the ghost knocked him down till he was sitting small and trembling – and then Jack Henry covered him with his green ghost-cold. The bush flamed around them, black smoke covered the sky, and the shack burned until its timbers were ashes and fell to the ground. But Boris Banks was huddled in a cocoon of cool green air.

There was another crack of thunder, and the rain tumbled down like water thrown from a gold-shaking pan.

The flames hissed. The burning bark sizzled. Then the fire began to die, until finally the smouldering trees no longer threw out steam as the water poured over them.

Boris Banks stared through the rain at the steaming

black world. He saw the firefighters coming towards him, but he was shaking so hard he couldn't move or speak. When he opened his hand and saw the gold, he shuddered even more, and dropped the nuggets into the puddle of the burned-out doorway.

The ghost stepped away. It was *really* a spook's shack now, he thought, just ashes and memory, with nothing but its sad and lonely chimney to show that it had ever been real.

But up the hill he could see the bush that was still safe and green. Jack Henry smiled. For a moment he looked young and contented.

He called like a kookaburra, one last time. And then as he walked towards the bush, Jack Henry began to fade

...

... and disappeared.

## *eleven*

FINN'S SNEAKERS WERE squelching, his clothes were drenched and his hair was dripping. But relief flooded through him as he looked out over the bush.

Aunt Agatha's car pulled into the driveway with a spray of gravel. It jerked to a stop and Aunt Agatha raced across the lawn, hugging Finn too tight to breathe. 'Thank heavens,' she kept saying. 'You're all right!'

Then she saw the garden with kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, possums, echidnas, wombats, snakes and lizards – and circling them all, bossily herding, a black and green ghost dog.

Aunt Agatha's mouth dropped open – but she didn't look as if she was going to faint.

'Let them go, Nipper,' said Finn.

The collie ignored him, and barked at a kangaroo that was ready to hop.

'Nipper!' shouted Finn. 'Come behind!'

Nipper slunk behind him, and sat panting at his heels as the animals started wandering back to the bush through the break in the fence.

Aunt Agatha put her hand down cautiously to pat the collie's head. Her hand went through, and Nipper bit her gently on the wrist.

'This dog is a ghost!' said Aunt Agatha.

'Yes,' said Finn. 'His name is Nipper. He's a good dog – but he does nip.'

'I noticed,' said Aunt Agatha.

After a while Finn added, 'He belongs to a ghost. To Jack Henry.'

Nipper threw back his head and howled.

'We'll go look for him,' said Finn.

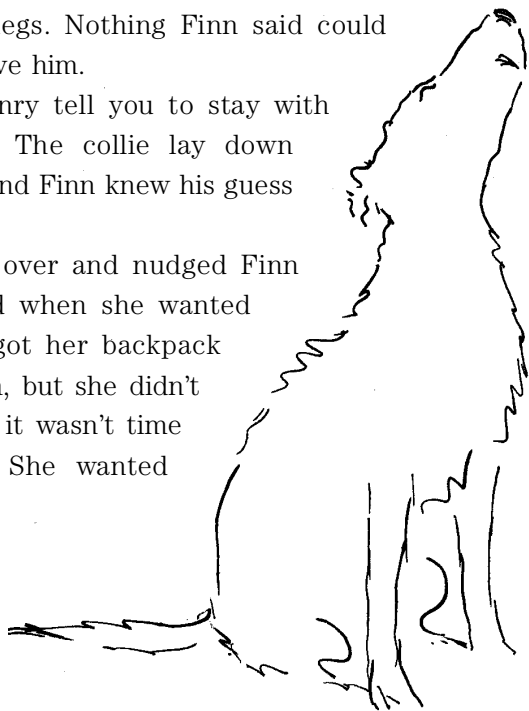
'No,' said Aunt Agatha. 'The bush isn't safe yet. You'll have to wait.'

'You go, Nipper,' said Finn. 'Go find Jack Henry.'

Nipper howled longer, and twined himself through Finn's legs. Nothing Finn said could make Nipper leave him.

'Did Jack Henry tell you to stay with me?' he asked. The collie lay down across his feet, and Finn knew his guess was right.

Lola hopped over and nudged Finn the way she did when she wanted something. He got her backpack from the kitchen, but she didn't want a rest and it wasn't time for her bottle. She wanted Jack Henry.



‘I don’t know where he is,’ Finn told her, stroking her pretty grey face and ears till she stopped nudging and started to graze. As he put the backpack down, he realised that her tin of formula and bottle were inside. And the ComputerKid.

Jack Henry had never left them in there before.

Aunt Agatha watched without speaking. Finally she said, ‘She’ll be big enough to join the mob by the end of summer.’

LATE THAT NIGHT, as Finn and Aunt Agatha sat in the kitchen talking about everything that had happened, a car pulled up in the driveway. It was Boris Banks.

Nipper growled from between Finn’s knees, and Aunt Agatha went pale. But Finn was tired right down to his bones, too tired to be angry or frightened, so he opened the door.

‘May I come in?’ Boris Banks asked politely.

He looks different, Finn thought. He’s shrunk.

‘I hope you didn’t take my little joke seriously,’ said Boris Banks.

‘Little joke?’ repeated Aunt Agatha.

‘About me taking your land. That’s what I’ve come to tell you – you hardly owe anything at all. You can have as long as you like to pay me.’

Aunt Agatha picked up the kettle. For a minute Finn thought she was going to throw it at Boris Banks, but she filled it with water and put it on to boil. ‘Tea?’ she asked.



Boris Banks nodded.

Then Finn saw what was different. Boris Banks didn't have any eyebrows. They had been burned off.

'I was glad to see you were safe from the fire,' said Boris Banks, in his new polite voice.

'Thanks to Finn,' said Aunt Agatha, and Boris Banks looked at Finn properly for the first time. He didn't seem to recognise him.

'I'm glad to see you safe too,' Aunt Agatha added, but her voice was still frosty cold.

'I was in the bush when the fire started,' said Boris Banks. 'I did what I could to fight it – but in the end it was too fierce. The firemen said it's a miracle that I'm alive.'

'A miracle,' Aunt Agatha repeated flatly.

*You're lying!* Finn wanted to scream, but didn't.

Nipper wasn't so polite. He crept forward from behind Finn's knees and bit Boris Banks hard on the ankle.

Boris Banks jumped out of his chair, yelled – and gave another surprised sort of squeak when he saw the green dog. He began to shake.

'What is that?' he demanded, but his voice was so quivery Finn could hardly understand the words.

'His name's Nipper,' said Finn.

'But he's . . . ' Boris Banks stammered, 'I mean, is he . . . ?'

'He's a ghost,' said Finn. 'That's why he's green and see-through. But he's real.'

Boris Banks sat down again. Heavily. 'Ah,' he said, with a shudder that made his jowls wobble.

‘His master is a ghost too,’ said Finn. ‘But we haven’t seen him since the fire.’

‘I s-s-saw him,’ said Boris Banks, shivering so hard that Aunt Agatha got him a blanket to wrap around his shoulders. ‘He was v-v-very cold – like this dog here.’

He shuddered again, and his teeth began to chatter. ‘I s-s-suppose you could say he saved my life.’

Nipper sat with his ears pricked, listening.

‘It’s true that I was in the bush when the fire started – but it was as if I was under a spell. I didn’t see the fire till it was too late to get out. Trees were exploding – the noise was horrible – and the heat! I thought I was going to be burned alive. I ran to an old shack, but it burned too!’

‘How did you survive?’ Aunt Agatha asked suspiciously.

Boris Banks quivered until sweat broke out on his pale face.

‘It – that thing – ’

‘Jack Henry?’ asked Finn.

Boris Banks looked as if he might be sick. ‘He . . . wrapped the cold around me so I didn’t burn.’

‘His ghost-cold?’

Boris Banks nodded. ‘But I don’t believe in ghosts,’ he said miserably.

Nipper glided through his legs, and Boris Banks jumped.

‘And they’re so cold!’ he wailed. ‘Horrible and creepy! And SO cold!’

‘But one saved your life,’ said Aunt Agatha.

Boris Banks still couldn't stop shaking. 'My g-great-grandfather died trying to save an old hermit who was camped on his land.'

Finn coughed.

'But it . . . that horrible thing . . .'

Nipper growled.

'Jack Henry,' said Finn.

'The ghost seemed to think the land belonged to him – the hermit – before he was a ghost. And he said they both died because of . . .'

He stopped and would not go on. Aunt Agatha poured him another cup of tea.

'Forget the mortgage!' Boris Banks said suddenly. 'The land is yours! I don't want anything to do with it, ever again!'

'THAT'S WHAT HE says *now*,' said Aunt Agatha when Boris Banks had left. 'But if I'm to keep this land, I want everything signed and sealed before he's forgotten what it's like to be scared and sorry.'

## *twelve*

RAIN FELL ALL that night. The wind disappeared, and any fire smouldering in the hearts of the trees was washed away. When Finn woke up late next morning, the day was soft and sunny. Aunt Agatha had given Lola a bottle, and the wallaby was grazing on the lawn.

A big red fire truck turned into the driveway, with another behind it.

Finn's heart jumped; but there was no smell of smoke.

'We've been checking the fire site again,' the chief said, jumping down from the truck to shake Finn's hand. 'That rain's put it right out – but it would have been a lot worse if you hadn't called us so quickly. These lightning strikes in dense bush can be a full-on disaster.'

'It could have been a disaster here too,' said Aunt Agatha, pointing to the burned patches where the woodpile and weeds had been. 'If Finn hadn't put out those fires when they started, I don't know if I'd have a house today.'

‘Well, young man,’ said the fire chief, ‘it was lucky for us you’re here for the summer. You’re a real hero!’

He started the siren as he backed out of the driveway, and the other men grinned and waved at Finn.

‘He’s right,’ said Aunt Agatha, ‘you *are* a hero.’

FINN WAS ALMOST sure that Jack Henry was gone; he didn’t want to see what was left of the shack – but he knew he had to. He had to be sure, and so did Nipper and Lola. That afternoon they went back to the bush.

There was a sprinkle of rain, and the sunlight sparkled where it caught the last drops on leaves and grass. The world was fresh and green . . .

. . . until they were deep in the bush, down by the creek where the trees grew thick and the vines twined tall, where Finn had first seen the chimney of Jack Henry’s shack.

Now the vines were gone and the trees were black, and the chimney stood lonely and sad in the ashes of the shack.

There was nothing to show that this hadn’t been a dream, except the melted lump of plastic that had once been a radio on the charred stump where Jack Henry used to sit . . .

. . . Lola sniffing the air beside him, the green ghost dog wailing a deep-throated howl . . .

. . . and five gold nuggets scattered across the bare blackened earth, lying where Jack Henry had thrown them a hundred years before. Finn picked them up and



rolled them in his palm. They were fat and warm and beautiful, and he hated them for the trouble they'd brought his friend.

There were two more, lying in the burned-out doorway. Finn had stepped through that doorway dozens of times, and he'd never seen two gold nuggets there before.

'That's what Boris Banks meant when he said he was under a spell,' said Finn.

He thought a bit longer. ‘And that’s what Jack Henry told him – that Jack Henry and his great-grandfather died because of these nuggets, all those years ago. Boris Banks thinks they’re jinxed.’

Then he had an idea. It was dangerous, but it could work. And if it did, he thought it was an idea Jack Henry would have liked.

THAT EVENING FINN and Aunt Agatha went to see Boris Banks. Nipper got in the car with them, and followed them up the wide marble steps. He sniffed around where the bulldozer had been.

The bodyguard opened the door. He didn’t look pleased to see them. ‘Wait here,’ he said, and let them into the front hall.

Finn wasn’t sure if Nipper should go inside.

‘We might need him,’ said Aunt Agatha.

So Nipper came in too, keeping so close that his nose stuck through Finn’s left knee.

Boris Banks came down the stairs.

‘We want to settle the mortgage,’ said Aunt Agatha.

‘No need,’ said Boris Banks, ‘the land is yours.’ But there was a gleam in his eyes. He was over his shock and looked more like his old self.

‘I want to pay it,’ said Aunt Agatha.

‘And I thought you’d like something from Jack Henry,’ added Finn, ‘to remind you of how he saved your life.’

He poured the seven gold nuggets into Boris Banks’ hand.

Nipper stepped with him, and wove his ghost-cold body through Boris Banks' legs.

Boris Banks turned as white as a dead fish's belly. A moustache of sweat shone above his lip. His fingers seemed stiff, as if they were too numb to move, and the nuggets rolled across the floor.

'The land is yours,' he said at last. 'I don't need the gold.'

'I need to pay out the mortgage,' said Aunt Agatha.

Boris Banks swallowed as if one of the fat gold nuggets was stuck in his throat. 'Consider it paid,' he said.

He crossed the hall to his office and closed the door. The bodyguard glared at Finn and Aunt Agatha, and tried not to look at the green ghost dog or the scattered gold.

Boris Banks returned with a sheet of paper and handed it to Aunt Agatha.

*Title to Land*, it said on the top.

'Yours,' said Boris Banks.

'Thank you,' said Aunt Agatha, folding it safely into her pocket. 'And the mortgage?'

Boris Banks sighed, went back to his office, and brought back another piece of paper. *Mortgage*, this one was marked.

Boris Banks took a pen from his shirt pocket, wrote *All monies paid* across the mortgage, and signed it.

'Thank you,' said Aunt Agatha again, and took the paper outside to the wide marble steps. She lit a match and held it to the paper. The mortgage flamed, but she



held it till the last corner was burned to ashes. Finn and Nipper followed her out.

‘Give them the gold,’ said Boris Banks to the bodyguard.

The bodyguard glared again, and picked the nuggets up from the floor.

‘Don’t you want them, to remind you of your lucky escape?’ asked Aunt Agatha.

‘I’ll remember,’ said Boris Banks.

## *thirteen*

FINN AND NIPPER didn't go down to the creek again till the last day of summer. Finn was carrying a spade, and in his pocket was the gold.

Lola hopped beside them, stopping to nibble bark, bounding ahead and back. She was much too big for her backpack now, and she'd finished her tin of wallaby milk. 'She'll be ready to join her mob at summer's end,' Jack Henry had said, and so had Aunt Agatha, and they were right.

Finn kept on the trail to the shack, trying not to look around, because he was coming up to where the fire had burned, and he never wanted to see it again, so black and dead and empty. He would do what he had to, and never come back.

In fact, he might never come back to the bush at all, because tomorrow his parents were arriving. They would take him to their new home far across the sea, in a sky-scraping building in the biggest city in the world. He was excited about his new life, and sad and scared to leave

his old. At least he could take Nipper with him. Nipper did everything Finn told him now – and *No Dogs Allowed* rules didn't count if the dog was a ghost. But he tried not to think about how Nipper sometimes curled up in the saddest sort of ball, and howled when he thought Finn was asleep.

Suddenly Lola stopped, sniffing the air and quivering so that for just an instant Finn wondered if she'd seen Jack Henry. But it was the mob of wallabies. Shyly, with little half-hops, Lola moved towards them, closer and closer.

Finn felt her quivering, excited about her new life and sad and scared about leaving her old. Jack Henry would be proud of her, Finn thought. She's grown up and knows it's time to join her own world.

He couldn't stop thinking of all the things he and the ghost had done together. He would never have adventures like that, or a friend like that, again. But he might have fun again, with friends who were alive right now.

Lola nibbled as she hopped, and then Finn saw what the wallabies were eating. The ground was covered with a fuzz of green grass and shoots. The burned black trees were covered with a fuzz of new leaves, along their branches and down their trunks.

Lola hopped a little closer to the edge of the mob. She looked just like any other young wallaby, wild and free.

Finn found the stump where Jack Henry used to sit. He took his spade and dug a hole beside it. He dropped



the gold inside, way down deep where no one would ever find it. Then he filled in the hole and smoothed it over, and scattered leaves and twigs across the dirt.

Somewhere in the distance, a kookaburra laughed.

Nipper pricked his ears.

It called again, loud and long and clear.

Nipper whined, straining his head forward as if he wanted to run.

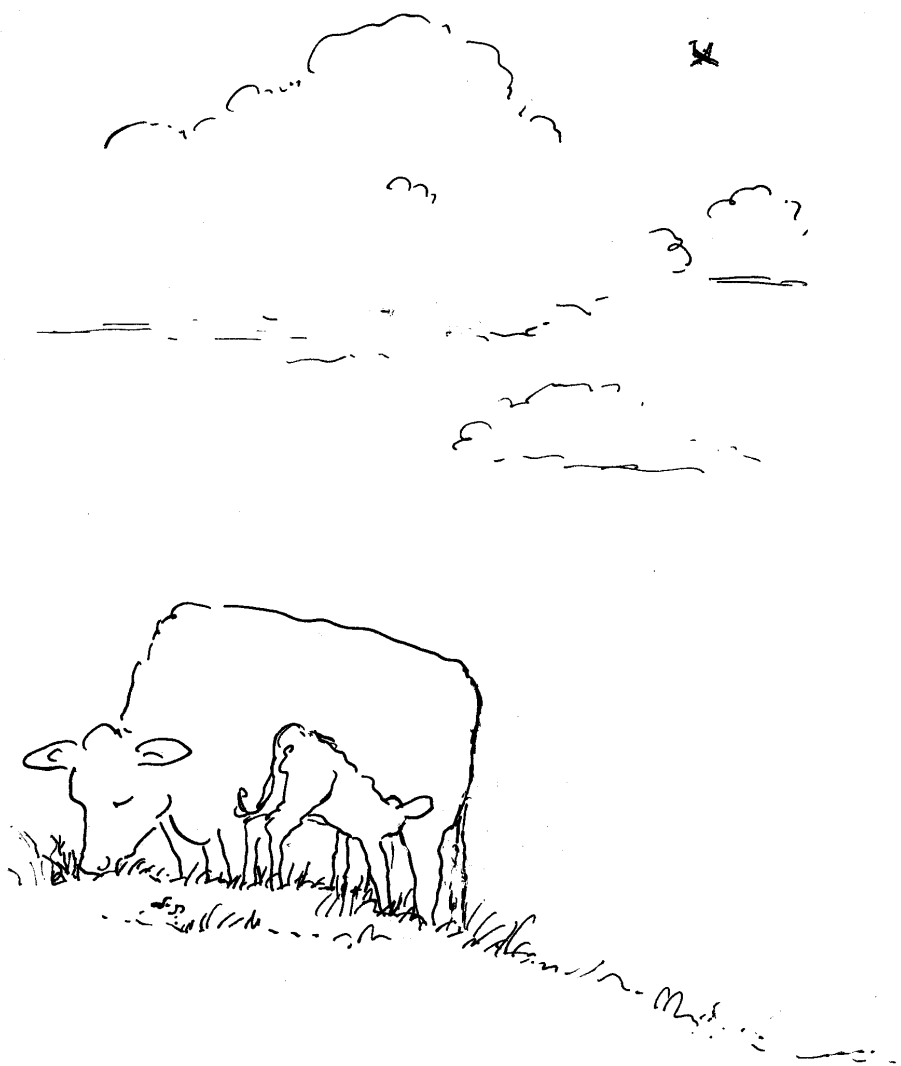
Then Finn knew what he had to do. Lola had gone back to her world, and he would go to his, but there was only one place that Nipper belonged, and one person he belonged with.

‘You’re a good dog,’ Finn said, patting the cold air of the ghost dog’s head. ‘It’s time for you to go.’

Nipper gave a yip of excitement. He licked Finn’s hand to say goodbye. Then he ran towards the bush. He began to fade . . .

. . . and disappeared.

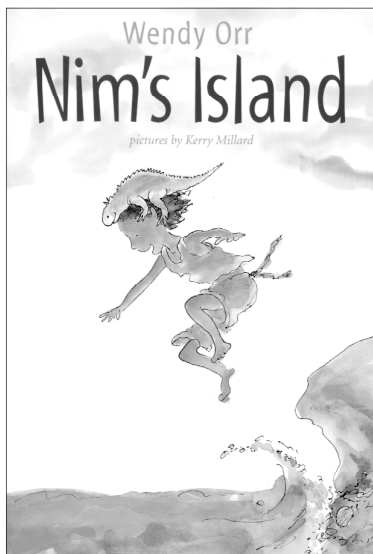
The kookaburra called once more, a song of all the birds that had ever been and ever would be, high and clear through the new life of the burned black branches.



*Look out for these books by Wendy Orr*

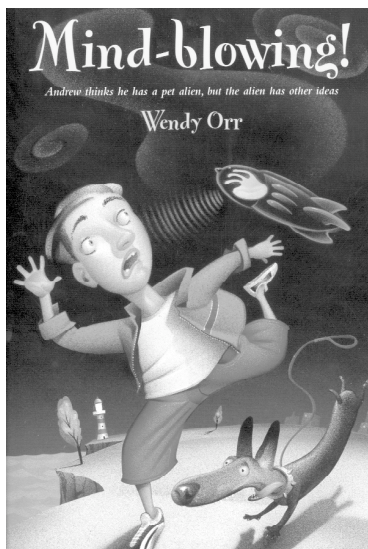
## *Nim's Island*

*With pictures by Kerry Millard*



Nim lives on an island in the middle of the wide blue sea with a marine iguana called Fred, a sea lion called Selkie, a turtle called Chica, and a satellite dish for her e-mail. But when her father disappears and disaster threatens her home, Nim must be braver than she's ever been before.

# *Mind-blowing!*



Andrew thinks it might be fun to have a tiny orange-coloured alien for a pet – especially one that can teach him ‘mind-over-matter’ tricks. But Zidran isn’t cruising the galaxies for fun. She’s an explorer for the Intergalactic Minerals Exploitation Company, and she has her own plans for Andrew and for planet Earth.

A space-adventure story with an intriguing twist.