

Mallee Boys

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Wakefield
Press

CHAPTER 1

Sandy

New Year's Day

You know, when you walk into a murky river you could step on anything. I've never understood how easily some people will just leap on in when they can't see a thing. I suppose it's like life; maybe I could do with just stepping in more and looking less.

We're staying at Uncle Blakey's shack. We've been coming up here every summer for years. The breeze is baking today but at least the air is moving. It's too hot to even go for a walk, almost too hot to swim, but the lure of the river is tempting, so I'm thinking about it.

'Sandy, get your arse in here. It's fine!' Dad's yelling from way out in the water.

He's bright red. His big bald head bobbing on his big round body. A cheerful, bloody snowman. For a farmer he's a surprisingly good swimmer. In fact he loves it. When we're at the shack he gets up early and swims for hours against the flow and then drifts back with the current.

I decide to go in.

I wanna be part of the crowd.

The river is a soft brown colour, a perfect mix of water and mud. There's absolutely no possibility of seeing anything. The

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mud squelches between my toes as I inch away from the bank. I've deliberately chosen the least reedy stretch but even here I can still feel the slippery stalks stroking my legs. I launch off. I'm not out very deep so the slimy bottom skims my bare chest. Yuck. I kick faster and harder to get away.

I swim like a dog, my neck stuck out as far from the water as I can manage.

'Put your head in, Sandy!' I can hear Dad heckling me before he fearlessly ducks down.

No way. Walking and swimming in this is bad enough without getting my head in.

I remember when I was learning to swim Dad used to hold me under and I never really got over it. 'I'm gonna count to three. Here we go. One ... two ... three.' His voice was all muffled as he pushed my head down. My body arched hard against his hand, pressing up, praying he wouldn't mess up the count. So now that I can swim I never put my head in.

The water is cool and it does feel good. I feel clean, washed free of the summer dust. I roll over onto my back. I'd forgotten, since last summer, how nice it is just to float. To let something else do the work.

Dad's shouting for me to swim over to him but I pretend I can't hear him. I know if I go over he'll start tossing me around and pulling my legs under. Then my head will be in for sure. I can hear laughing. Uncle Blakey and Big Joe Barrel have jumped in. They're all splashing and carrying on, three old farmers acting younger than me.

'That boy's got an old head on young shoulders.' If I had a dollar every time someone said that about me I'd be pretty cashed up by now. Apparently my mum, Ellie, even said it about

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me when I was baby. I didn't have those weird rolling eyes that most babies had. I just looked hard and straight at her with my clear blue ones, which never did turn brown like the rest of them. So, why the bloody hell did they call me Sandy?

Think of someone called Sandy and I bet they couldn't look less me. For a start I'm a boy. I was told the name comes from some rellie back in Scotland but secretly I think it comes from Dad's first dog. So do I have blond or red hair? No. Do I have a big friendly smile? Nah, not really. My eyes are still blue, my hair nearly black and I'm tall but not filled out yet. I do smile but it's one of those shy, less-teeth-showy smiles. I've left that to my older brother Red. His real name is Josh. Imagine him: a big handsome redhead.

So, un-sandy Sandy I am.

'Get back over here, mate!' Blakey calls.

I'm not going over to them. They wanna duck me, for a laugh. I push the back of my head deeper into the water and scull away from them, cocooned in the muffled silence.

I don't really think of sculling as swimming. It's keeping me up but it's more like flying, using little flaps of my hands as I look at the sky.

I'll be sixteen in July, and Year Ten starts in a few weeks. I can't believe it. This year is a big one, the last before things really change. Our country school is too small to offer much choice in Year Eleven and Twelve. We either have to leave, do some correspondence study – like that'll ever happen – or go to boarding school in Adelaide or Melbourne.

I decided long ago I wasn't going to Melbourne: too many bad memories. I flap out a little further into the river. What the hell am I gonna do next year?

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I quite like school, not that I'd tell anyone, especially Red. He couldn't wait to get out of the place and caused a lot of trouble on his way through too. But for me it's been alright, once they realised I was nothing like my brother. I like looking at things, taking them apart, trying to figure out how everything works. It doesn't seem hard. In a funny kind of way school makes more sense than a lot of outside stuff.

'Sandy!'

Dad's yelling at me. Off they go again. I can hear them all through the heavy wet.

'Sandy, shift your arse! Quick! Hurry up!'

The tone is unusual, not the normal knockabout teasing. There's a bit more urgency.

I roll over onto my stomach and then I see it. What the hell?

'Sandy, get out of the way!' But the warning is too late. The big brown thing is gonna hit me.

I launch into a pathetic dog paddle trying to get away. My legs kick in a frenzy beneath me and my neck stretches out like a llama. I feel a bash on the back on my head and it pushes me under. All the shouting from the bank softens. My heart is pounding as old memories of being ducked as a kid kick in. I can't get the thing off me. I can't see anything. I push up with my hands and they find something soft but really heavy. My head keeps butting up into it, trying to ram a way through. I panic. My brain doesn't know what to do. My lungs are bursting. I'm desperate for a suck of clean, fresh air but don't dare open my mouth. The burning is excruciating.

I can't believe I'm gonna drown. Not today, surely?

There's a jerk on the bottom of my legs. Something is yanking me under. This is too much. I can't fight it anymore. I surrender

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with one last kick and then my mouth opens, hungrily gulping in water. My body wants it like air and it pours in.

Everything pauses.

There's a bashing on my back, heavy and urgent, shaking me around. I'm floppy, with no resistance. My body stiffens. Rigid. Then the water comes splaying out of my throat and my chest heaves as it sucks in real air. Too desperate, I cough and splutter. I've got no control. My mouth sucking too hard competes against the spasms of my lungs spewing the water out. Eventually the craving and the coughing subsides enough and my heart settles.

Exhausted, I take a calmer breath. As I open my eyes I see I'm still in the river.

'Ya right? Ya right?'

It's Dad. He turns me round to face him, holding me afloat. I see how terrified he is. He hugs me so tight I start coughing again.

'Bloody idiot, I had to bash the crap out of you.'

But there are tears in his eyes. He just holds me safe and strong till I settle. As his panic and mine begin to subside, he pushes me away slightly. It seems a bit awkward now for a grown lad to be clinging to his wet Dad in the middle of the river. We both get it at the same time and grin.

'You've always been a crap swimmer, Sandy. Sometimes you get so lost in your own bloody head you don't know what's going on around you.'

True.

'Was it a log or something?' I ask. 'I just didn't see it coming.'

'No, it was a bloody dead cow! Looks like it died upstream and got washed down.'

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I hear cheers and moos from the bank. Looking down the
river I see the dead cow.

Bloated, floating and limp from trying to kill me.

CHAPTER 2

Red

Ringer

Sandy's a funny kid. I say kid but he's not that much younger than me. He's fifteen, I'm eighteen. It's only three years but sometimes it seems like thirty. Dad said I burst into the world, born effortlessly on the way to the hospital, which for a first baby was something. I screamed my lungs out and the doc told Mum she was a natural. Sandy though was way too early. Born premmie, he had to spend his first few months in hospital. Probably daydreaming in the womb and before he knew it he'd just drifted out.

Typical. Sandy causing a lot of drama for everyone. They had to get the flying doctors out and all sorts.

Even though I was only a real little kid, I remember the panic. Mum was screaming and holding her stomach, like she could stop him. Dad called emergency and got us all in the ute. No mobile phones. Coverage was, and still is, crap. We raced into town. It was a Saturday night and the pub was packed. Dad grabbed me out of the ute and rushed in to the front bar. He yelled at Molly and George that the baby was coming. Then he just held me up, like I was some sort of sacrifice and shouted, 'Take the boy.'

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I look back now and am like, 'Great. Thanks, Dad.'

I stayed with Molly and George at the pub for a few days, until Grandma Margy got the bus up from Melbourne. Maybe that beer-mixed-with-deep-fryer smell got into my head because I've always liked pubs.

Sandy came to the farm four months later and stuffed everything up. Our farm is north of the township of Millewa, deep in the heart of the Mallee. When they brought him home I remember having my nose out of joint. He wasn't a real brother like they'd all promised, he just lay there in his stinky nappies. I'd find myself staring at him in the cot, disappointed. Confiding to Grandma Margy that I didn't like Sandy.

When you're a little kid you can't explain how you feel, you just feel it. Who am I kidding? I'm still a bit that way. So with Sandy I think I was worried he'd steal my spot or something. No need though. It wasn't long before I realised he was no competition. He's brainy and all but not practical and he drifts off. When it comes to real physical work he's about as useful as a fart in a bottle. Funny, yeah. But he does things weird. Take this bloody cow thing. He has the whole river to swim in. It's freakin' enormous. But only Sandy would be the one donged by a dead cow.

Looking at the river I felt for Dad. Even though everyone thought it was a laugh and not that bad, I could see the horror on his face. The fear he could lose him. I was worried too, not that I'd admit it. He was clinging and bashing Sandy, forcing him to take a breath. Holding him, hugging him with relief when it was over and the worst hadn't happened. I've seen Dad like that a few times with Sandy over the years. For a second, with his black hair swept back, Sandy looked like Mum and Dad

was holding her. Holding her, like he had on that Melbourne street. *No!* I'm not thinking about that.

'Dad! Sandy! Ya right? I'll get the tinny out and come and get you.'

I pull out Uncle Blakey's crappy little boat and make the rescue.

It was a laugh, later, harpooning the cow. Mickey and I made up these spear things using tent poles, tape and rope. When we pierced it the first time the air hissed out of the cow and it stank something putrid. We'd pulled it back onto the bank because Dad and Blakey reckoned it was dangerous to just leave a dead cow floating around. Then all the little kids started poking it with sticks, trying to make it pop.

You might think with Sandy being the way he is he might get picked on or something. But it isn't like that. He's got good mates who look out for him and he can be bloody funny. When disaster strikes, he seems to be able to sidestep it.

Grandma Margy said that he was born under a lucky star.

'He's a thinker, an old soul with things to do.'

That was after he'd pulled a dresser down on himself and been rescued without a scratch, because he was curled up in the open cupboard.

Sometimes that does annoy me, because I'm a charger. I can't be arsed weighing things up and thinking things through. Worse is not making a decision at all. When I jumped off the hay stack it bloody hurt and I broke my arm. But it was my decision to jump and I took that fall. I've taken many after and no doubt more to come. So sometimes looking out for Sandy is frustrating.

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Since Mum's funeral things have been pretty messed up. I still can't believe it was over a year ago. It seems like only yesterday. Some counsellor kept telling me crap, like it was okay to be angry and to let it work its way out. But all I wanted to do was bash the shit out of everything. I remember Brent Harvey looking at me sideways in maths. I jumped up and started knocking him around, like a psycho. Got suspended again.

But I didn't care. The next week I hitched into Mildura, went to the pub and tried to get in another fight. The landlord thought I was some strung out grape picker or something and I got locked up in the cop shop without laying a punch. Fighting was immediate. It took away the numb feeling and the physical pain masked the grief.

Dad came and got me and we didn't say one word all the drive home. Seriously, I can't understand why he's not as angry as me.

That all carried on for months. Me fighting and feeling crap and fighting again until I saw this *Dogs for Sale* sign. We had a dog at home, Muttley, a narky old blue heeler. He'd bite you as soon as look at you, a good farm dog though. But when I saw those little kelpie puppies I had to get one. That sounds soft but there was something about Ringer that got me. Cost me fifty bucks which I thought was quite steep but he's been worth every penny. Now I'm like one of those old farmers with a dog by my side. Go figure.

Since I quit school he goes everywhere he can with me. I'm mostly working with Dad but starting to do a bit of shearing on the side and Ringer loves that. He's grown up to be a cute dog. Sleek black fur, with patches of tan and white, but the best thing about him is his ear. Most kelpies have those stick-up, alert, straight ears, but not Ringer. His right one flops down

and it makes him look pretty smart. He always looks like he's sussing you out. You can see him watching other farm dogs and learning how to work. Clever little bugger.

Walking back to the shack I see Sandy's still wrapped in a blanket reading with Ringer by his feet. He's a bloody good dog, Ringer. He knows Sandy needs watching for a while. Keeping an eye on him, like we all have to.

'You right, moo?'

Sandy doesn't respond, just glares at me and gives me the finger. Ah, that's good. He's back in the game. I glance over at Dad, sitting on a chair, two empty cans by his feet and a third in his hand. He's dealing with it. Suddenly, everyone making a fuss about Sandy irritates me.

'Ringer, here boy!' I whistle and call him down. He comes straight away. Yep, he's still my dog. 'Good boy. Back!'

I point to dopey Sandy and he trots over to his charge.

CHAPTER 3

Sandy

Millewa

'Hey, Sandy mate, she was checking you out!'

Chris is elbowing me as we walk through the school gates.

'Rack off, Chris. She was looking over at the bus.'

I'm embarrassed. He's talking really loud. I pretend to look over at the battered bus lurching out of the car park.

'Nah, it's all you, man. Where did you say you went over the break? Bloody boot camp or something? You're all brown and buffed up and those blue eyes are shining. This is gonna be a good year for the girls, my friend.' He bashes me on the back then calls after some girls in our year.

'Well hello! Looking good, Stella!'

'Whatever, Chris!'

Stella's sour face says it all. She's so unimpressed.

We've only been back at school for a few days and I can tell Chris is bored already. He's my best mate. We've been friends since primary school. He can be a bit annoying, like now, but he's solid. Chris is a lot louder and funnier than me which suits me fine. I'm quite happy to be cool by association.

I'm glad to be back at school. The holidays dragged. Once we got back from the shack I did nothing but gaming and helping

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Dad. Home is so quiet now, unless Red is on a bender. And at least school is predictable. I like knowing what I'm doing every day. I like seeing my mates and I'm actually looking forward to maths and science.

God, I'm such a nerd.

'I can't believe we're back here again. This place is so lame. I wouldn't bother coming if it wasn't for the girls and Mr T.' Chris really likes Mr Thomson, our PE teacher. Probably because he's good at sport. 'Just think mate, one more year and we're outta here.'

'Yeah, can't wait,' I lie.

It's alright for Chris. He knows he's going to some swanky boarding school next year, probably just to run round some footy oval. Chris doesn't even like school but he's gonna be able to carry on. His parents have got a huge property up north, about ten thousand acres, and they're good with their money. Make a lot on the stock market. The internet has been good for the switched-on farmers. I wish Dad would listen to me about that kinda thing and let me help him. He won't do anything with computers. It's so frustrating. Even Red gets cross with him. It's like he's being stubborn on purpose. We're a small farm by comparison, only five blocks, about three-and-a-half thousand acres. We do okay, but not much spare cash.

'And when were you gonna tell me about the cow, Sandy? I heard from Matty.'

Great. I thought I'd escaped Chris finding out. I didn't see him all holiday as his parents went on this Queensland four-wheel-drive trip. He'd asked me to go but Dad couldn't spare me from the farm that long.

'What a hilarious story. Sandy, you're an absolute classic.'

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Face it mate, you need me. Without me you'd be such a loser. Oh, I could really go an ice coffee, anyone got any milk?!

'Piss off.' I hit him hard with my bag as we walk down the corridor, thick with school traffic.

As usual the day goes too quick.

The bell rings for the end of the last lesson, maths, which is nobody's favourite but mine. The best thing about Year Ten is that we got to choose a lot more of our own subjects, which means I'm not with Chris and my other mate Matty all the time. I don't mean that in a bad way, but I can concentrate better when they're not there. They like to muck up and I get sucked in. When I'm not with them I get into the work. It's interesting and the teachers seem to notice too. I did well last year.

'Yes! All over!' I hear Chris call out from the back of the room. We still have maths together, but I sit a bit nearer the front so I can see the board. Dad hasn't got round to getting my glasses yet.

Mr Elliot hears him as well.

'Thank you, Chris Turner. I am glad you have found my lesson such a pleasure. As always, I look forward to the rest of the year.'

'Argh! Mr Elliot, maths is too good. If I do it too much I'll go blind!'

Everyone laughs as they walk out. Chris has got a smart mouth.

'Sandy, can I have a word?'

'Yeah sure, Mr Elliot, but I need to be quick.'

I'm torn because I know he can go on and I don't want to miss

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the bus. It's a real pain for Dad or Red to drive into town to get me and I'll probably have to sit around for hours.

'Of course, this won't take long. Look, Sandy, the teachers and I have been talking about you and wondered what your plans were for Year Eleven and Twelve? Remember we talked about this with you and your father last year? We wondered what was happening.'

Uh oh! Mr No-Plans here doesn't know what to say. I vaguely remember the conversation but it wasn't long after Mum's funeral. Everyone was talking at me and about me. Most of that time is a blur and I don't even wanna think about it.

'We think you should apply for scholarships – to complete Year Eleven and Twelve in Melbourne or Adelaide. Unless you've done so already?' As he asks me I think he knows the answer. Of course I haven't applied for anything.

I'm silent and shake my head.

'I thought so. The thing is, Sandy, you need to make a decision and get on with it. Most of the schools close applications by the middle of term, with the exams not long after. We really think you stand a good chance, particularly in the maths and science areas, so I have made a list of possible schools. Take it home, check them out online and have a chat with your father. If you're interested we need to get moving.'

'Thanks, Mr Elliot.' He's a good teacher and I take the paper.

By the time I get out of school the bus has pulled out of the car park. Chris and Matty are laughing and jeering at me from the backseat as it disappears round the corner. I knew I'd miss it. Andy Johnson, the bus driver, is a miserable bastard and won't stop the bus for anyone.

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Great! I'll have to give Red a call.

Miraculously, he answers. He must be up in Jasper's Paddock where the reception is better. 'Hey, can you pick me up?'

'What?!'

'I missed the bus.'

'No way. Already, Sandy? You've only just gone back to school!'

'I know.'

'Dad's up spraying weeds at Tull's Paddock, so I guess I'll have to come. I'll get down when I've finished here. This place is shot full of bloody caltrop. Pisses me off. I'll see you outside the pub in an hour or so.'

Dad and Red are spraying weeds at the moment. We did it after harvest and need to do it again now. Spraying seems to keep them down but we had quite a bit of summer rain so the weeds are thicker this year. I sound like a greenie but sometimes too much herbicide exposes the soil to wind erosion and the ground gets worse. You can get this GPS system which detects where the weeds are, so you don't just spray randomly. Records it all. Chris's old man has got the software in all his machinery. Saves the dirt and money because you're only using chemicals where you need them. Red and I are trying to convince Dad it's a good investment, using the money argument rather than the greenie one, but he's not interested.

I feel odd walking round town. There's no one around. It's really hot, like about a zillion degrees. It always is when we go back to school, summer blazing into autumn as if someone forgot to change the switch. The bright blue of the town pool sparkles and I drift down toward it.

Sometimes I feel like I'm neither one thing nor another. I live in the Mallee but I don't like the desert. I live on a farm but I

get hay fever and I'm scared of goats. I like school but my best mates don't. I'm stuck between things. It's like I'm not meant to be here but I am.

The sun is reflecting off the water in the pool so it's hard to see who's there. Definitely need some sunnies. Hard to hear, too. Just a mixed-up sound of splashing and laughing. I don't come here much because I don't like swimming and no one'll take me into town unless they have to. As my eyes get used to the glare they focus on all the grown-ups and little kids cooling off, squashed in under the tatty shade sail. It reminds me of one time Mum had me down here, putting me into a zip-up sun rashie. She was busy chatting away to Molly and pulled up the zip too fast. My skin got snagged in the zip teeth, which ripped a load off. Ouch, still hurts thinking about it. Left a scar at the top of my back which she used to kiss after a bath, until I got too big. She always felt bad about it.

Hanging on the pool fence, daydreaming, I realise what I'm doing.

Yikes.

I'm staring full-on at Becky Holder swimming laps in the pool. This is awkward. Becky's in my year and most of my classes. She doesn't hang round with our group but I'll often catch myself looking at her, like now. Her dad is the local copper and she started at our school last year. I think they were down in Bendigo before that. She's a good swimmer, does district swimming carnivals. Watching her slicing through the water she seems totally at odds with the place we're in, too. Like a penguin in the desert.

She stops at the end of the lap and looks up at me staring at her through the fence.

Her sleek and wet to my dry and dusty.

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She smiles slowly.

I panic and look away.

Idiot.

I turn back, but she's gone, halfway down the pool.

Embarrassed, I turn away and start another lap of town.

Millewa is just off the highway. It's no joke but if you blinked you'd miss it. Like most things in the Mallee the town is functional and predictable. Off the highway is a main street called Main Street. All the shops and a bank are here and, of course, the pub. I say all the shops but there are only five, snuggled in under old rusty verandas. I always feel the Mallee is trying to claim the town back and we're just a glitch in time. Between the houses are things like the police station, the pool and a lot of churches. Apart from the oldies no one goes to them unless it's for a wedding or a funeral. The school is at the back end of town which looks out over paddocks. We're on the verge of being a ghost town, like in American westerns, but without cool cowboys. I'm glad I live out on the farm. It seems more alive than town.

What the hell am I doing?

I've ended up back near the pool again. This is really bad. I feel like a crazy stalker.

Beep. Beep.

It's Red. The window's down and he's yelling.

'Jeez, Sandy. Why aren't you at the pub? And what the bloody hell are you doing perving round the pool?'

I can't answer. The pool noise has gone quiet, all the swimmers are tuning into our conversation.

'Get in.'

Ringer is cross I'm taking the front seat and sulks into the

Sandy

back of the ute. He gives me a grumpy dog sniff on the way past. Red pats him. 'Good dog.'

I don't look at the pool. How embarrassing to have Red pull up shouting and honking. So I change the subject to weeds.