

*Excerpt chapter from In My Father's Shadow manuscript...*

# One

I don't know why Dad never comes to the farm. Even Mum and my sister, Elle, have been. Dad refuses. He grew up on the farm, left when he was fifteen, and never came back. He won't tell me why. When I ask, he shakes his head and says, 'I promised I'd never go back.' So, here I am, enjoying time on my uncle's motorbike, scanning the fence for holes and breaks where rabbits get in. Sunshine floods across the farm, soaks up the winter dew and evaporates my tiredness. Morning rain clouds are retreating south. Sharp green paddocks and stone skeletons of abandoned farms flicker between lines of grey-green mallee.

At the west gate, I rattle over a cattle grid and accelerate towards a gap in the scrub. I drop speed, and weave between the trees, branches slapping my head and shoulders, until I climb an embankment that opens over a gypsum quarry. Ruts criss-cross the quarry floor. The cliffs sparkle white. I grin and plunge down a run.

The quarry echoes to the two-stroke, screaming into the power band as I charge cliffs, dying as I slide to standstills. Twice I stall, once I bail as the bike topples sideways. Blue smoke drifts through the morning. I'm pumped. I love this rush, the fun. Half an hour later, satisfied, I ride out of the quarry and putter along the narrow track, back to the gate. I can't understand why Dad wouldn't enjoy this.

With time to kill, I head north, towards the rising hills and a thicker scrub wall, noting three rabbit-runs through the boundary fence that Uncle Ian will have to repair. The north paddock is virgin bush, land my grandfather never cleared. This is the first time I've ventured to the back of my uncle's property.

As I angle through the gate, where the ragged mallee thickens, and dark yakka bushes sprout brown-gold spears, I spot a rabbit bounding into the undergrowth, white tail bobbing through the tangled twigs and leaves. I almost give chase, but I relent and let the bike pop along at walking pace, until the pink face of a sandhill appears. I cruise into a lush green clearing and consider my options. Straight up the sandy hill face would be the biggest challenge, but I decide to skirt the sand and follow the green verge to the top.

The hill is the highest vantage point in a deceptively rising landscape, and from the apex I can see kilometres in every direction - dark bush and open paddocks, the glittering iron of isolated shed roofs on neighbouring farms. The sandhill sits in a long ridge of hills sweeping west, before falling away into a broad shallow valley where the Adelaide to Melbourne highway whispers with traffic.

I rock the bike, pull in the clutch, and free-wheel down the grassy slope. At the base, I release the clutch and, with a throttle twist, spin the rear wheel and snake towards the track, but a flash of white makes me brake sharply. I scan the scrub. Then I see a figure flitting through the trees – someone in a white top. ‘Hey!’ I call. The figure doesn’t stop. I crank the bike over, revving to turn quickly, and burst back into the clearing, racing along the tree line to the point where I’d seen the apparition. ‘Hey!’ I yell again, and slide to a standstill. ‘Hey!’ Nothing moves. I’m alone.

I mention I’ve seen someone in the north paddock to Uncle Ian, who’s locking up the shed when I return to the farmhouse, and he says he’ll look into it with the neighbouring farmers at the Murray Bridge market. I go inside, forgetting to stop the screen door from banging, answer Aunt Theresa who calls to me from the kitchen, and check my phone on its charger. There’s a text from Tara. I smile and reply ‘all gd, u? soz missed msg’ I wait for her reply, but the phone doesn’t buzz so I head for the kitchen to get a banana. Then I tap another message. ‘Miss u’. I hesitate before sending. We’re really good friends, but we’re not going

out. As I start peeling the banana, my phone buzzes. Tara. I read her message – ‘miss u 2 xx.’ Nice. That makes me feel good. I eat the banana and think about the stranger in the north paddock. I know my uncle wants me to shift sheep from one paddock to another tomorrow so I’ll get a chance to go back to the sandhill. For now, I’m hungry and Aunt Theresa is calling us for dinner.

Chips races towards me, black and white coat flowing in the wind. Metres away, the Border Collie launches and lands squarely across the bike tank and my lap. I grunt at the impact, laugh, and scruff his ears. He licks my face. ‘Yuck! Good one!’ I scowl playfully. The dog’s tongue lolls from his jaws in a supercilious canine grin. I love how dogs smile. I want a dog, but Mum says the cat is enough responsibility. Chunk is Elle’s cat. He’s a big, soft tabby, who spends most days cleaning himself, when he’s not eating tuna. The only smile I’ve seen on him is self-satisfaction when he’s being petted.

The scraggly herd is meandering towards the middle of the paddock, away from the gateway Chips expertly steered them through. Dog aboard, I ride to the gate and close it. ‘So, where to?’ I ask, and Chips cocks his head attentively. ‘Okay, let’s you and I check out the north paddock.’ Soft thunder ripples across the western sky. I look up at the rain clouds drifting in. ‘And we’d better hurry.’

I charge through the open gate, onto the bush track, emerging in the clearing as thunder rolls across the countryside. I want to climb the hill on foot to survey the landscape. Chips leaps from the bike and eagerly sniffs the earth. ‘Anyone been here?’ I ask. He gathers scents, weaving back and forth, returning to interesting odours before skirting wider, and I smile at his efforts to piece together a canine jigsaw puzzle. He suddenly stops, pricks his ears. ‘What is it?’ I ask. The dog stares at the side of the hill, then lowers his tail, back-steps several paces, turns warily, and skulks with flattened ears towards the track. ‘Chips!’ I call, ‘Chips!’ but he doesn’t falter in his retreat.

Unnerved, I resist my instinctive urge to follow the dog and look at the hillside. A boy in faded denim jeans and a white t-shirt, with long blond hair - someone near my age - walks along the face of the hill. He reaches the edge of the sand and sinks to a sitting position, so I walk forward, hoping the boy will look up, but he doesn't. 'Hi!' I yell, advancing. He doesn't respond. 'Hello?' I venture, puzzled by his failure to hear my first call. This time, he turns. 'Hi,' I offer again. 'My name's Josh.' The fair-haired boy rises and stares – an unnerving stare – but I go on. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Peter Lawson,' the stranger answers cautiously.

'You live near here?'

'I do – well, I mean I used to,' he says. A serious expression darkens his handsome face. 'My family moved away years ago. You?'

'This is my uncle's property,' I explain, feigning authority. Thunder echoes across the valley.

'Seriously cool wheels,' Peter says.

I glance back at the Suzuki. 'It's okay. You got a bike?'

'No.'

'How did you get out here?'

'Walked.'

'Oh,' I say, lamely. 'Whose farm are you staying on?'

'No one's,' he replies. 'I just hang out here.'

'I saw you yesterday.'

'Did you? I'm surprised.'

'Why?'

'People don't usually see me.'

'You're pretty easy to spot with that white t-shirt.'

He glances down at his t-shirt. 'Yeah, I expect so. It's not exactly a cool t-shirt.' He laughs.  
'It's the only one I've got.'

'So where do your parents live?'

He pauses, as if thinking through a difficult problem, and says, 'I think they're dead.'

'I don't understand.'

'It's complicated.' Lightning flashes, and he looks up at the grey sky. 'And today is not a good time to tell you about it. See that?' He points at a looming thundercloud. 'That one's going to chuck it down. You better cruise.'

'Yeah, guess you're right. And I better find the dog. You going to be out here again this week?'

'I'm here all the time.'

'Might see you then.'

'Sure. That would be very cool.' And he turns to leave.

'I'll see you later,' I promise.

Peter turns back, grinning. 'It's a deal. And your dog's waiting for you at the gate.' He winks, and walks towards the scrub.

'How do you know that?' I ask, but he doesn't answer. I notice the dark, rust-coloured stain across the shoulders and down the middle of his t-shirt, but he disappears into the mallee as the first heavy raindrops tap my shoulder. I jog to my motorbike and head along the track, searching for Chips, and find him waiting at the gate, tail wagging, just as Peter said he would be.