

down through the last glimmer of twilight, stepping high and free,
like a cloud, a moth, a ghost in the shape of a horse
—Elyne Mitchell



PART I

Francis



*T*he newborn foal tested his hooves.

Frost crackled as his legs slipped further apart.

Mother nudged him to try again.

Sandy was soon frisking with the other foals. They shivered when the wild brumbies whinnied on winter evenings and chased Bogong moths in the spring. Sandy grew bold in the crisp mountain air.

Summer came and eucalypts burst into flower. The horses lazed in their lush paddock swishing blowflies with their tails. As the moths flew back from their summer migration the nights became cooler. Once again frost crackled under Sandy's hooves.





Sandy's bay coat darkened and he grew to over 15 hands high. During his third winter, Sandy wore a bridle and saddle. He learned to carry a rider on his back. That felt strange at first. Sandy was skittish, but roaming beyond the home paddock was exciting. There was so much to discover.

One morning a stranger opened the gate.

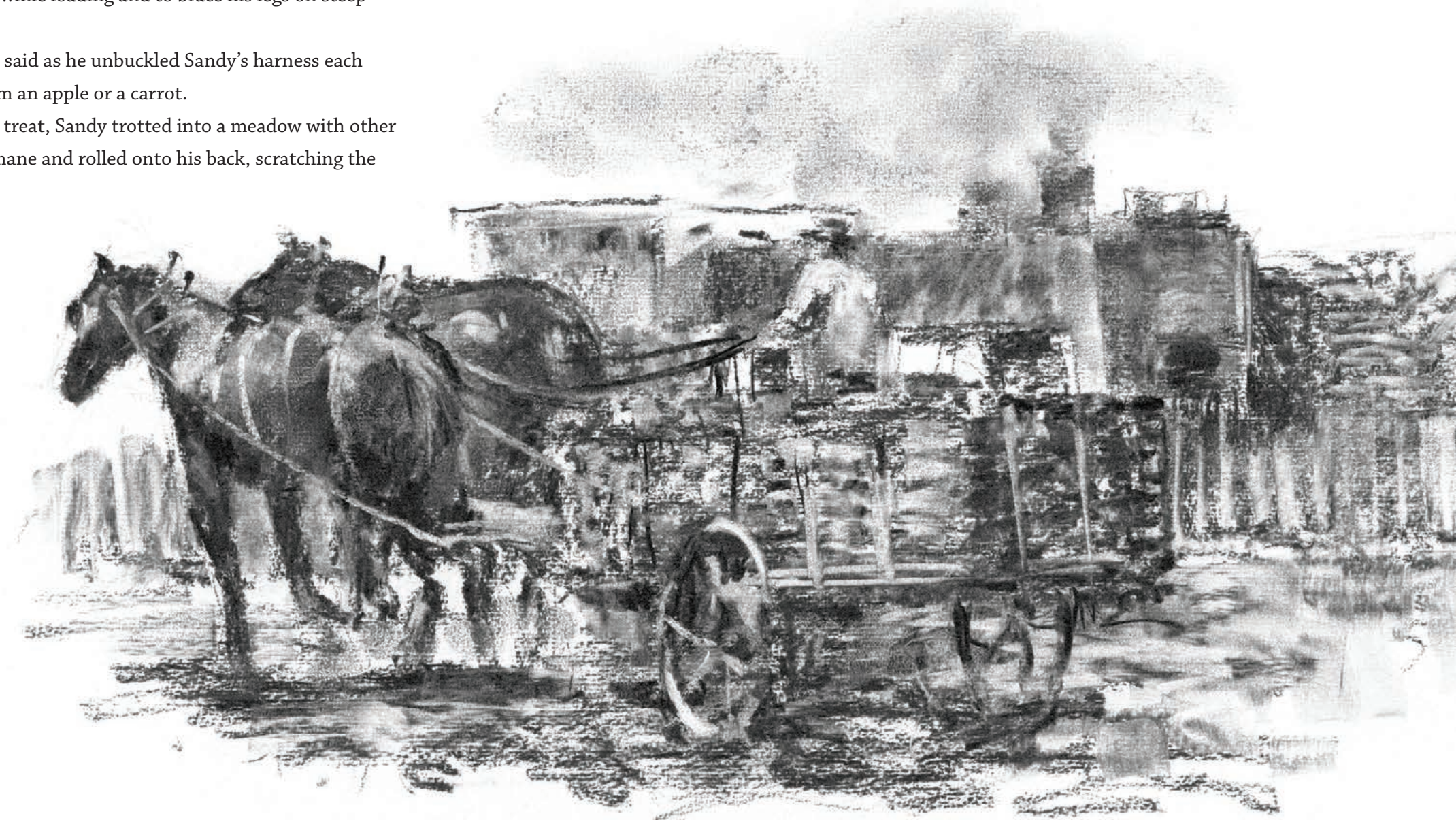
'G'day,' he called. 'You must be Sandy, I'm Francis.'

The man held something sweet-smelling. Sandy nibbled. The apple was like sunshine on crunchy snow.

*F*rancis took Sandy to work at his family kiln in Tallangatta. Carting bricks was heavy work but Francis was patient. He taught Sandy to stand steady while loading and to brace his legs on steep hills.

‘Well done,’ Francis said as he unbuckled Sandy’s harness each afternoon and gave him an apple or a carrot.

After chomping his treat, Sandy trotted into a meadow with other horses. He shook his mane and rolled onto his back, scratching the day away.



Francis rode Sandy to football games in winter and they cantered through the high country in summer, following wild brumbies and startling wombats.

In August 1914, Francis returned from town, waving a newspaper.

'War's been declared,' he shouted. 'I'm going to join up.'

'Our bishop will have something to say about that,' Francis' brother muttered. 'He'll not be letting an Irishman join a British battalion.'

'But I'm Australian.'

'Tis the same army,' his brother replied.

A notice went around the district.

The government needed to buy horses for the war. There was going to be a muster at Tallangatta. Francis cantered Sandy to the saleyards to watch the excitement.

NEWSPAPER

Friday 7 August 1914

Declaration of War!

Excitement was keen on Wednesday with news that war has broken out between Great Britain and Germany. Following this announcement, Prime Minister Cook confirmed that Australia is also at war.

The Governor-General has received a cable expressing His Majesty the King's appreciation of Australia's offer of an expeditionary force.

Men, nurses and horses will be sent to the aid of the Motherland.

HORSES NEEDED FOR THE EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

The Minister of Defence is looking to purchase horses for the use of the Australian Expeditionary Forces. Horses are to be 15-16 hands in height and aged between 4-10 years. Greys, washy chestnuts or piebalds will not be accepted. Owners are invited to bring their horses for selection to Tallangatta on 19th August at 9 a.m.

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A tall, thin man with bristling energy was also watching the muster. Soldiers and officials stood straight to salute him.

Sandy snorted when the man stopped in front of him.

Major General Bridges laughed.

‘What a fine horse,’ he told Francis.

‘He is that,’ Francis replied. ‘Nothing special to look at, but raised in the high country, perhaps with a dash of brumby blood.’

‘They breed exceptional horses up there. Is he part of the sale?’

‘No, Sir, his trade is hauling bricks.’

‘Ah, that’s a pity. I’m looking for a strong charger.’

Francis stroked Sandy’s neck. ‘Take him for a ride if you like.’

Instead of signing up, Francis donated the best horse he’d ever known to Major General Bridges and the war effort. As soldiers led away his gentle bay gelding, Francis swallowed his sadness and whispered, ‘Do us proud, Sandy.’

At Maribyrnong Remount Depot, Sandy was branded with a government imprint. Then he joined a yard with other sturdy Australian horses known as Walers.

The horses ate chaff from nose bags, while kit weighing 130 kilograms was loaded onto their backs. Sandy stood steady. He was used to hauling heavy loads.

There were new skills to learn: marching, turning back and forth, while the men shouted.

'Sections right.'

'Form troop.'

'Walk, march, halt.'

When the Light Horse soldiers yelled, 'Charge', the horses galloped. Sandy had a broad back and his gait was sure, but some riders still fell off. No soldier was as kind as Francis, and no one brought him apples.

'Hello again,' Major General Bridges said when he saw Sandy. 'How's your training going?'

They walked around the yard, then cantered beside the river. After trotting back, the major general stroked the white blaze on Sandy's forehead and said, 'I think you'll do nicely.'

