

SAMPLE CHAPTER

"A story that
transcends time –
Tilda is all grit,
resilience and heart."

MEGAN DALEY

Sue
Whiting

Tilda

prologue

February 7th, 1900

Norwood, South Australia

I was two months shy of my eleventh birthday when I first laid eyes on Brushwood Convent and Orphanage for Girls.

Sweat trickled down my back and my head throbbed from the long, hot walk from the city to Norwood. I took in the high stone wall, weeds bursting out in unexpected cracks and crevices, as if trying to escape. Black iron gates broke the wall in the middle and rattled in the sizzling wind gusting down from the hills. Red dust swirled around enormous eucalypts. I grabbed hold of Papa's hand as tightly as an infant, our fingers laced together in a grip that I didn't ever want to release.

"Those bars are very pointy," I observed. "Are you sure Mama would want this?" I was clutching at clouds,

and I knew it. I frowned up at Papa, my legs jiggling. “But Papa, I’m not an orphan.”

“Of course, you’re not, Tilda love,” he said. He bent down on one knee, and took both my hands in his. “You have me. You always will. I know what I am asking is hard, but remember this is only temporary – temporary pain, for brighter days ahead.” He gazed at me intently, his eyes moist, his one bushy eyebrow raised, the red scar of his missing eyebrow crinkled. “It will only be for a short while,” he added softly. “I will be back before you know it. And there will be other girls to meet, friends to make.” He paused, jiggled my hands up and down to try to jolly me, but I was in no mind to be jollied. I may have only been ten years old but I knew that once I stepped through those pointy gates and inside that bluestone building, I would be alone in the world and Papa would be thousands of miles away.

“Pa-pa!” I whined, and he pulled me close, my tears making wet splotches on his jacket shoulder. I breathed in his Papa smells – tobacco and sweat.

He whispered directly into my ear. “The nuns will be able to teach you about Mama’s faith. And I will be getting a wage at last, and when I return, we can get some decent lodgings and I’ll be able to get a proper job and our

life will be set. Please, Tilda, be a good girl, don't make this harder than it already is. Focus on our future lives. Picture us sitting on our new porch each evening, writing in our notebooks, reading. Picture us planting daisies in pots and picking lemons from our lemon tree ...”

I closed my eyes but I couldn't picture any of this. All I could see was *that* day. The day that changed everything. The column of thick black smoke filling the sky. The fire carts' bells ringing. Papa's face covered in soot. His clothes blackened. The slump of his shoulders as the Nimble Ninepence went up in flames – the bolts of fabric turning to cinders, the pots and pans, buckets and mops melting before our eyes. And then the cans of gunpowder exploding, finishing it off, making sure there was nothing left to salvage.

Once the fire was out and the crowd dispersed, the street filled with a new, even scarier threat as Aunty Hannah and Uncle Joseph bombarded Papa with angry accusations.

How could you let this happen?

A lamp knocked over? Where were you?

Our business, our home – all gone. And all because of your negligence.

Negligence. The word hung in the smoky air.

A word I didn't really understand at the time, but a word that was thrown at Papa like a poisonous dart. A word that meant Aunty Hannah and Uncle Joseph would turn their backs on us, a word that meant no one would give Papa a job and that we had no money for rent or food. That the only way Papa could survive was to enlist in the South Australian Citizen Bushmen Contingent and sail away to South Africa to fight the Boers, and for me to come here to Brushwood.

Papa released me from our hug. He smiled a wobbly smile. "Remember Mama used to live just a few streets away. This was her neighbourhood. You'll feel closer to her, I'm sure." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a gold chain with a tiny cross. He spun me round, slipped the necklace under my chin, lifted up my hair and fastened the clasp. "This was your mama's. She will be smiling in heaven watching you wear it here." I tilted my head and twiddled the cross between my fingers. I had no words, my throat felt as if it had closed over.

But Papa wasn't finished yet. He reached into his jacket and this time pulled out two notebooks – one green, one brown – both tied with thin leather strapping. "I bought these a long time ago. I was saving them as a gift for when you finished your schooling, but they have a

better use now.” He handed me the green one. The leather was soft to touch, the pages inside creamy and bursting with possibility. I clutched it to my chest.

“One for you and one for me,” he said. “I will write about my life abroad, and you can collect facts, like you love to do, and write all about Brushwood. Then when I return we can swap books and it will be like we have never been apart. We can even read them at Mama’s grave, so she doesn’t miss out either. What do you think?”

I didn’t know what to think.

I looked through those gates again. I gazed at that building. All I wanted to do was yell, “But Papa, I am no orphan. I don’t belong here.”

Of course, I didn’t.

I let the words remain unsaid on my tongue, picked up my carpetbag and lifted the latch to those gates.

Temporary pain, for brighter days, I told myself.



Chapter 1

May 20th, 1901

I don't remember my mama's face – can't even conjure a hazy picture of it in my mind. But I hear her. All the time.

Sometimes she sings to me at night as I wait for sleep to claim me.

Other times she whispers to me in the chapel as I work the scrubbing brush across the orange tiles, my arm aching, my hands raw.

I admit this sounds unusual, as my mama died of the influenza when I was only two years old, and I don't recall a single word she ever uttered. In fact, I'd know nothing of her if not for the stories Papa has told me over the years. But there's no need to fear. I don't hear her in a ghostly "I'm coming to haunt you" way. But rather in a

“soothing voice in my head” kind of way. And I love her for it.

Especially as Mama whispers to me when I need her most, like when I stand at the back of the schoolroom, nose against the cold bluestone wall, taking my punishment from Sister Agatha. And boyo does that make me smile. *Be strong, Tilda*, she says, her voice full of loving in my ears. *Be bright like warm spring sunshine. Stand tall like the mighty blue gums. Because any day now, any day, your papa will return and then you can spit that Sister Agatha right in the eye.*

I am pretty sure my mama wouldn't say that last bit. I think that's just me projecting. Because, hand on heart, honest-to-God, that's what I would like to do more than anything else in the world when Sister Agatha is dishing out her punishments.

Don't fret, Mama is telling me now, as I sweep the dust and leaves off the back steps. *It's going to work out just fine.*

Funny that it's my dead mama's whisperings that keep me going in this place. That and Papa's promise that my time here is only temporary. And, of course, the friendship of my lovely Annie Smith.

I see Annie now. Boyo, is she a sight for sore eyes. Her cheeks are as red as cherries, which is such a relief

after how pale and sick she was just last week. Her plaits swing from side to side as she rushes towards me, kicking up whirls of dust.

I drop the broom, empty the dustpan into the dirt and scurry across the courtyard to meet her, the wind biting at my ankles and swooshing my skirts about. I can tell by the look on her face she has something to tell me. I bet she's spied that letter carrier, Joshua Jones. I don't know what she sees in him. He's no more than a bag of bones and a nest for pimples. He's only a letter carrier because his papa is the postmaster and the real letter carrier broke his ankle. But Annie is obsessed with him. She is convinced that Joshua Jones is her ticket out of Brushwood.

Annie shrieks when we meet in the middle of the yard. She grabs my arm and pulls me past Sister Catherine's vegetable garden to behind the chook pen. We huddle against the north wall of the coop, out of the wind, pressing our backs against the warm tin as Cherry-neck, Layla and Rhubarb-pie cluck their disgust behind us.

"What?" I whisper.

"He *spoke* to me!" The words gush from Annie's mouth. She is overexcited to the point that she is almost wheezing, which is a problem for Annie as she is prone to chesty coughs.

“Calm down. You’ll get a wheeze again.” I try not to click my tongue at her. “By *he*, I presume you mean Joshua Jones?”

“Yes! I just *happened* to be raking leaves near the front gate as he delivered the mail next door, and he said ‘Hello, Annie, isn’t it windy today?’ And I said ‘Yes the wind is in a temper. Look at the leaves – they’re flying.’”

“And?”

“That’s it. But he used my *name*, Tilda. He remembered my name.”

“Oh, Annie. What am I going to do with you? You can do so much better than Joshua Jones – or any pimply boy, for that matter. Besides, you’re only thirteen.”

Annie presses her lips into a thin line. She can be stubborn sometimes.

“You don’t need a boy. You know that. When Papa returns from fighting those Boers, he’ll have pockets filled with cash, and he will adopt you – and then we can be real sisters.” I don’t add that he better hurry and return before Annie is sent away into service. She turned thirteen five months ago, and I am positive she is only still here because she is so sickly and hard to place. The worry of her leaving keeps me awake at night.

Sister Geraldine appears suddenly. “There you are,

Matilda!” she says, using my actual name like all the nuns here do. She holds her long black veil against the sides of her face as if she is afraid the wind is going to steal it right off her head. “Sister Agatha is looking for you!” She steps out and looks back up to the convent, then back to me. She appears unusually agitated, which is troubling because Sister Geraldine is my trusted Fountain of Calm in this place. “Hurry! Before she notices your broom sprawled across the steps without you attached to it. She is in a real dither. Honestly, Matilda, what have you done now? I’ve never seen her in such a state.”

Annie grips me so fiercely her fingernails dig into my arm. I wrench my arm free and stagger to my feet. I am used to Sister Agatha’s scorn. But this feels different. Most times, I have a pretty good idea of what I’ve done to receive it.

This time, I have no clue.

I march across the courtyard, my heart louder than the blacksmith hammering his anvil and not even my dead mama’s gentle whispers can calm me.

Facts of Brushwood by Matilda Moss

Brushwood Convent and Orphanage for Girls is run by five nuns from the Sisters of Benevolence order. This important fact dictates the very rhythm of our days from dawn till dusk. It means bare knees on cold floorboards for morning prayers before the sun has even had the opportunity to grace the day. It means poverty: meagre offerings at mealtimes, threadbare dresses, patched pinafores and too-tight boots. It means daily chapel and remembering to genuflect and to cross yourself at the right time, or else the wrath of the sisters is upon you.

The nuns wear the same black and white habit and outwardly follow the same holy life. But underneath those habits live very different human beings - some kind and good, some not so - and I have concluded that choosing a holy life doesn't necessarily equate to being a good person.

Opinions by Annie Smith

Annie believes that it's fine for one to decide to become a nun and choose to live a dull life. But if you have the misfortune of becoming an inmate of Brushwood, it shouldn't mean that you also have to live like a nun, and endure the same dull life. Why does life have to be so dreary to serve God? She says that if it were up to her, she would paint all the walls canary yellow and sunset orange and hang curtains with huge sunflowers printed on them, because this place could use some colour.