

'I want Addie to be
my best friend'

– Katrina Nannestad



Sweet
ADVERSITY
SHERYL GWYTHYR



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 Angus & Robertson
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Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.

– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Prologue

1 March 1929

A spotlight wanders across the Cessnock School of Arts stage, sliding past the solitary figure of the next eisteddfod finalist. In jerky movements, it finds the girl again. She startles, like a small animal caught in its beam, her fingers twisting the end of her thick coppery plait. The girl lifts her chin with quiet bravado. Then she begins to sing and her voice soars to the rafters, perfect in pitch and melody.

Nobody notices the dark-suited man in the shadows at the back of the School of Arts hall. He's heard this version of 'She Moved Through the Fair' before, but never with such purity of sound. The girl has the voice of an angel. It's not only her voice that pleases; she shows promise of great beauty as well. An image flickers through his mind ... *yes, a songbird in a golden cage.*

All in all, she's a good business decision, especially in these hard times. Talented children show their value in the end. If they survive.

The stranger pauses at the door. Backlit by the street lamp outside, his burly figure casts a long shadow up the aisle like a stain on the threadbare carpet. He stares at the stage for several moments, then turns and disappears out into the darkness.

The girl sings the melody's poignant final lyrics, her voice powerful and perfect. She grins with relief and bows, and the audience cheers, their thunderous applause leaving no doubt who will claim the Coal County Eisteddfod's first prize.

ACT I

Chapter 1

Sweet are the uses of adversity,

5 April 1930

It was a good day to break a bad rule. Addie McAllister straightened her gilt tiara and shivered at at her bold, dangerous idea. Performing Shakespeare down in the orphanage's paddock instead of hanging out the washing definitely qualified.

She tossed back her coppery-red hair, hitched up her gown and climbed the gate. Below, the audience waited. Addie glanced at the track leading back to the orphanage, and wriggled with glee. Matron Maddock couldn't see her here.

A cockatiel perched on a nearby branch, his yellow and grey feathers fluffy after a vigorous grooming session.

'Fiddlesticks to her Rules for Obedient Children, eh, Macbeth?' Addie said to the bird. He watched her, his head on one side. Then he lost interest, twisting to chew a tail feather itch.

If Macbeth didn't care about rules, then neither would she. Far better to be acting and singing than doing chores anyway. Pity this audience showed as much interest in her skills as Matron did.

Addie spread her arms wide. 'Never before has a girl performed the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* while playing both roles. Macbeth, look!'

The cockatiel bowed and nodded on his branch, chattering a response.

Addie bobbed a curtsy, keeping her balance on the wobbly gate. 'Thank you, my fine bird! Glad you recognise my brilliance.'

She gazed across to the distant Blue Gum Ridges, smelled their tang of eucalyptus in the breeze. Then she closed her eyes and stilled her thoughts, until her father's voice whispered from a secret, happy place in her memory ... guiding her in the craft of acting, of projecting her voice.

Relax your neck muscles, Adversity. Now breathe through your nose. Feel the air fill your diaphragm first, then your lungs.

Addie breathed the cool air.

That's right, my girl. Hold it. Release through your mouth. Slowly.

Now start again.

Addie opened her arms wide, like in the play when Juliet stood on her balcony in Verona. Her voice rang through the air – clear, powerful and filled with longing.

‘O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo?’

Below, the nearest member of her audience, a Jersey cow, chewed her cud and stared into space. None of the other cows raised their heads from the hay trough.

Addie frowned and refilled her lungs. She should be able to make them listen. Papa always said, *When facing failure, an actor must keep going, no matter what.*

She leaned forward, took a deep breath and sent her voice above the cows and beyond to the far fence.

‘O ROMEO, ROMEO! WHERE – ahhhhh!’

Addie’s feet slipped out of her too-big shoes. Over the gate she toppled, landing on her hands and knees in a fresh cow pat. The Jersey cow jumped back in fright. Her agitation spread and, with a chorus of bellows and udders swinging, all seven cows bolted across the paddock.

‘Blast it!’ Addie scrambled to her feet. The cow poo’s acrid smell made her eyes water, but thankfully the landing had been soft. ‘Silly cows! I bet William Shakespeare didn’t have a stampeding audience.’

She brushed the dung off the front of her gown, managing to spread it further in yellowy-green streaks. At least it hadn’t got on her shoes.

Up on the gate now, Macbeth chattered to himself. Addie caught some of his words: *'Sweet are the uses of adversity'*. It was what her father always said when she'd been punished for climbing trees at the Sydney Academy for Young Ladies. *Always climb the highest ones, Adversity*, he'd added, *no matter what the punishment may be. Remember, those without adventure in their souls are as dull as stale toast.* How long ago that seemed now.

Addie wiped her hands on the fence post and climbed over the gate. She sat and tightened her string shoelaces. Macbeth flew down beside her to peck grass seeds and she reached forward to scratch beneath his beak. How lucky she was to have him when no other orphan was allowed a pet at the Emu Swamp Children's Home. Imagine losing Macbeth *and* her parents in one go. A sting of sorrow swelled in Addie's throat.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Over the rise came the breakfast gong ... strident, insistent.

'Hell's bells!' Addie jumped to her feet, startling Macbeth into the trees. The wet towels. She was meant to hang them on the drying line before breakfast. If Matron knew she'd been wasting time performing for cows, she'd cop an earful.

Up the hill Addie galloped, jumping over rabbit holes and dodging cow pats. Spiky thistle flowers caught in her hem, but she didn't stop to pull them out. To miss

breakfast by accident was foolish. To go hungry because of carelessness was ... well, it served her right.

She stopped to catch her breath. On the flats below, the orphanage spread like the spokes of a half-cartwheel. A large bluestone building containing Matron Maddock's office sat at the end of a gravel carriageway curving away beneath the pepper trees to the front gate. Behind Matron's office huddled the wooden buildings that housed the dining room, kitchen, two dormitories, a schoolroom and further away, out of smelling range, the two dunnies with their peaked roofs and metal chimneys. Beyond lay the vegetable garden and orchard.

Addie scanned the empty area around the laundry. Everyone was inside the dining room, eating breakfast. And today their porridge was free of weevils because she'd helped the cook by catching and killing the little beggars between her fingernails.

Matron Maddock's black Buick crouched like a shiny rhinoceros beetle in its shed at the back of the main building. An image from eighteen months ago slipped into Addie's memory ... her father bending his tall frame to look at the car's gleaming lacquered dashboard, envy in his voice.

It was the same day her parents had left her at the Emu Swamp Children's Home when they drove away to find work as travelling actors.

A year later, their truck had been caught in a flooded creek.

Five months and three weeks had passed since Matron's shaking voice had told Addie the news that tore her life apart.

Four months since she'd lost all hope that her parents' bodies would ever be found.

Addie brushed away her tears and raced down the hill. When she neared the main building, she bent low and scurried past Matron's office window and around to the front. It squatted beneath the trees – a giant shabby toad of a building, with mould-streaked walls, leaf-choked gutters and window frames peeling paint like sunburned skin.

Catching her reflection in a window, Addie spun to swirl her gown, loving its midnight blue velvet. It was a perfect colour to show off her shiny red-gold hair. She pushed back her shoulders and tilted her head to admire the diamond tiara. It didn't matter that the jewels were fake, they still sparkled in the sunlight. Now she was Titania, the queen of the fairies in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Addie held out her skirt to bow, then stopped. Matron might catch her admiring herself in the glass.

Vain little peacock! she'd say. Addie snorted, then poked out her tongue at the window.

One day, when a long-lost relative arrived to take her away from the Emu Swamp Children's Home, she would go to live in the city again. And if the theatres hadn't all closed down because of the hard times, she'd see every play she could. Then she would train to be a real Shakespearean actress.

Chapter 2

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark

With a creak of rusty hinges, the front door opened without warning. Addie darted out of sight behind a camellia hedge. She peered through the leaves as a man stumbled from the building's gloomy interior onto the porch.

Matron Maddock's precise, clear voice followed him. 'No, I *can't* feed beggars. Tell that to your fellow swagmen too.'

The stranger retreated down the steps, a rolled swag blanket swinging from his shoulder. He stared up at the tall, blonde-haired woman at the door. 'I could chop firewood in exchange for a meal.'

'We don't need firewood.' Matron crossed her arms and glared at the man. Her voice grew sharper. 'Nor do our gutters need cleaning.'

The man pointed to the gum leaves poking from the roof above. 'What about *that* gutter?'

Addie winced. He didn't know about Matron Maddock's short temper.

Matron frowned, her eyes pinning him down. 'Didn't I just say *no*?' The swaggie backed away as her finger stabbed the air. 'It's hard enough these days looking after thirty children and useless staff. Go!' The doorknocker rattled as Matron disappeared inside and slammed the door shut.

The swagman's shoulders slumped. Exhaustion lined his face beneath a shabby felt hat.

Addie shrank into the hedge's gloom as he passed. A battered frying pan clanged against a small axe tied to his rolled swag, and dust covered his brown suit and shoes. He smelled of sweat, dust and pipe smoke.

'Sir?' Addie stepped out from the hedge. 'You might find work at Emu Swamp, although it's ten miles away.'

The stranger spun around. His frown disappeared when he saw her, and he dropped the swag. His words tumbled out as if they'd been locked up for a long time.

'Thank you, lass. Bill's the name, although I get called hobo and worse. Still, that's better than their dogs chasing me. Been on the road for ten months now. Lovely way to see the country, eh?' The skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled, but his voice was sad. 'I used to own a bookshop in the city. Nobody wants books any more. A fella can barely earn enough to feed his family these days.'

‘*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,*’ said Addie. Then her face burned pink under his curious stare.

‘That’s from *Hamlet*. You’re familiar with William Shakespeare’s plays? Unusual in a child, Miss ...?’

‘My name’s Adversity McAllister. I’m not a child; I’m twelve years and eleven months old.’

‘You’re an orphan here?’

‘No ... I mean ... Macbeth and I came to stay here when my parents took their acting troupe into the outback. Papa said they might find work in the smaller towns.’

The swaggie shook his head, his voice sombre. ‘Here we are in 1930 and the country’s no better off than before. We pinned such high hopes on the new man, Prime Minister Scullin. But ...’ He shrugged, then glanced at Addie’s face. ‘Don’t worry, your parents will return soon, lass.’

‘No, they drowned in a flooded creek. Six months ago.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ His eyes filled with sympathy before he looked down and tightened the thin rope he used as a trouser belt. ‘So, Adversity, who’s Macbeth? Your brother? Unusual name for a boy in this country of literary barbarians.’

‘He’s not a boy. Well, he *is* a boy. Macbeth’s my pet cockatiel.’

‘A fine name for a bird.’

‘Macbeth’s the best talker north of the Hawkesbury River,’ Addie said, warming to his interest. ‘He quotes Shakespeare, and does acrobatics too.’

‘I’d like to see that one day.’ The swaggie lifted his hat and then his swag. ‘Best be off. It’s been a pleasure talking to you, lass. Better than one-sided conversations with my swag.’

A front window swung open and Matron leaned out, her blonde hair gleaming in the sunlight. ‘Adversity! Children shouldn’t speak to strangers. Come to the office. Now!’ She disappeared back inside.

‘Yes, Matron.’ Addie rolled her eyes and grinned at Bill, then pointed past the bluestone building. ‘Go around to the kitchen – Mary will give you something to eat. Stay out of sight though. Matron’s clerk could be lurking.’

The swagman narrowed his eyes and nodded towards the building. ‘You mean *him* in her office? The spiffy, sniffy one with shiny leather shoes.’

Addie snorted back a giggle. ‘That’s him. Algernon Parris.’

She waved farewell to Bill and sympathy filled her chest. At the orphanage, they had three meals a day – skimpy ones, but nobody starved. The blanket on her bed was thin and the coir mattress felt like lumpy tree roots, but she had a roof over her head. Imagine

begging for food, and sleeping in the open with only a thin blanket between you and winter's rain. Imagine being alone all the time. Matron Maddock's Rules for Obedient Children were a daily reminder of how much Addie's life had changed in a year and a half. But at least she had friends.

No, however much she longed to escape the orphanage, the last thing she would do was join the waves of ragged people on dusty roads to nowhere.

Addie crunched across the gravel and up the steps onto the front porch. Inside, dust motes swayed in sunlight streaming through arched windows along the corridor. From a nearby sideboard, scent from a vase of lavender mingled with the smell of beeswax polish.

Resisting the urge to play hopscotch along the patterned Turkish carpet, Addie continued to Matron's office at the end of the corridor.

Algernon Parris opened the door. He frowned and peered down his sharp nose as if she had no business being there.

'Matron called me,' Addie said.

Mr Parris nodded, then pointed her to a chair in front of the wide oak desk. He plopped into his seat at

a cramped desk against the wall and began shifting bits of paper strewn across its surface, regularly sniffing with his hay fever.

Matron Maddock sat at her desk, writing a letter. On the polished oak surface stood a slim crystal vase of rosebuds and a brass inkwell. An oil lamp cast its glow across the desk, glinting on a strand of hair caught on her silver filigree brooch.

‘Haven’t I told you a dozen times? You’re too old to play dress-ups,’ Matron said without lifting her head. ‘Get rid of that silly thing!’

Addie untangled the tiara’s arms from her hair and waited in silence, the circlet on her lap. High on the wall to her left hung a round clock. The second hand *tick-ticked* its way around the clock face several times. She studied the row of squashed-nosed carved gargoyle faces edging Matron’s desk. Each was uglier than the next with its sightless eyes.

Matron’s hated bamboo cane, Stinging Bessie, hung from a hook on the wall in reaching distance. It rarely came down now the older boys had left the orphanage.

Matron Maddock took off her tortoiseshell-framed spectacles, laid down her pen and screwed up her nose. ‘What’s that smell?’

Addie glanced at the green-yellow streaks across her Juliet gown.

Matron shook her head in disgust. ‘You’ve been down in the paddock again, Adversity. Why?’

‘Umm ... I was ... milking the cows, Matron.’

‘Milking the cows?’ Matron frowned. ‘That’s the gardener’s job, not yours. I presume you haven’t done *your* chores this morning.’ She huffed, then leaned to pull a brown envelope from a lower drawer. ‘A letter arrived for you, Adversity.’

‘A letter for me?’ Hope filled Addie’s chest. Her long-lost relatives had finally found her. She’d have a family of her own again.

‘I’ve already opened it,’ Matron said. ‘It will change your future, and mine.’

Addie’s heart faltered. Dread shifted deep in her core and her hand trembled as she unfolded the paper. *The State Government Department for Children* had been typed across the top. A signature was scrawled at the bottom in blue ink. She scanned the letter’s content. Its words jumbled in her head.

Adversity Isabel McAllister, age 12 ... abandoned by parents at the Emu Swamp Children’s Home ... Following their unfortunate deaths ... no other living relatives found ... therefore guardianship of Adversity McAllister is hereby granted to Matron Moira Maddock, Manageress, Emu Swamp Children’s Home.

Addie thrust the letter back at Matron. ‘My parents didn’t abandon me. That’s a lie.’

‘It’s what happens when economic disaster cripples the world. They’re calling it the Great Depression. Count yourself lucky you’re not one of those starving, homeless children on Sydney’s back streets. At least our garden, orchard and cows provide enough food – except when you children eat me out of house and home. You’re like a plague of grasshoppers.’

A plague of grasshoppers? Addie snorted to herself. There’d be plenty of food for everyone if Matron didn’t sell their freshest vegetables and creamiest cows’ milk to the shopkeeper in Emu Swamp.

If her father was here, his booming theatre voice would blast Matron with thundering Shakespearean insults, scaring the bloomers off her. Then he’d take Addie home.

Matron fluttered the letter in the air. ‘I’ve let you continue staying here for free, purely out of the goodness of my heart.’ She glanced at the clock. ‘But you’re nearly thirteen. Girls your age have jobs as housemaids in hotels, or looking after rich people’s children. Hard physical work never hurt anyone.’

Addie frowned. Her parents would never approve of her leaving school to work in a hotel. Deep in her chest, grief coiled and squeezed. Her mother and father would *never* decide her future. She was on her own.

‘You’re the eldest child here now, Adversity, and the young ones follow your lead. Imagine the mayhem

if nobody cared about rules? That's why I can't allow a skerrick of disobedience.' Matron nodded slowly, emphasising her words. 'You've heard the saying, *One must be cruel to be kind?*'

Of course Addie knew the quote. It was from *Hamlet*.

'Actually, it's *I must be cruel, only to be kind,*' she said.

Matron frowned, and Addie groaned inside. Not thinking before she opened her mouth. *Again!*

'Stop showing off, Adversity. As I was saying, this is how I run the orphanage. Children must learn how to survive whatever life throws at them.'

Addie nodded. Best to agree with everything and keep her mouth shut.

Matron Maddock leaned back in her chair. 'I applied to become your guardian because you and I share a sad past. When I was the same age as you, my family died as well.' Her voice trembled, and her finger followed the curve of the filigree brooch on her shoulder. 'We came out from England as a family, but when I walked down the ship's gangplank in Sydney, I was an orphan. An orphan who knew not a soul here.'

Matron gazed at the crystal vase as if her mind was in another place. Her pale, drawn face shocked Addie. To arrive in a strange country a girl alone, all her family dead. A wave of sympathy swept across Addie's heart.

Maybe that delicate silver brooch had belonged to Matron's now-dead mother?

Matron leaned forward, her arms folded on the desk. 'I had to survive without family. You will too, Adversity, whatever your future holds. I'll look after you until you get a job. You'll have extra privileges here as my ward. A lighter workload perhaps? Or I could arrange for you to have your own bedroom instead of sleeping in the dormitory.'

A bedroom all to herself? None of the orphans had their own room at the orphanage.

'In return, you could help me,' added Matron. 'Do your chores every day without complaining; and report to me when children break the rules.'

Addie shook her head, then caught the wrinkle of annoyance between Matron's eyebrows. She nodded instead, but beneath the tiara in her lap she crossed her fingers for the lie. She would *never* tell tales on the others. Her sympathy for Matron vanished.

'*Guardianship* does sound rather formal, doesn't it? Think of it as ... you becoming my daughter.' Matron's cherry-red lips parted in a smile that showed neat, pearly teeth. 'Your parents are dead and it's time to get on with your life. I'll find you a job one day so you can earn lots of money. Won't that be nice?'

She walked around the desk and smoothed the back of her hand against Addie's cheek. Just like Mama used to do.

Stunned, Addie pulled back. Become Matron's daughter? Never! She scowled at a gargoyle face on the desk.

Matron sat back in her chair, picked up the government letter and tucked it into its envelope. 'Well, that's sorted,' she said, shooing Addie away like an annoying bush fly. 'I believe you have washing to hang out?'

Addie stood on the front porch, her thoughts in turmoil. What did *guardianship* mean? Could Matron force her to leave school and work in a hotel? Would she insist on Addie calling her Mama?

No! As long as she lived, she would never accept Matron as her mother. Nobody could replace her mother and father.

Another rush of grief swept through Addie's chest. She would never again feel Papa's strong arms swinging her down from the back of their truck, nor Mama's kiss on her forehead when she was sick. Nor would she ever get the chance to become an actress; to join them on the stage one day, and to play the role of Lady Macbeth.

Nothing made sense any more. And the day had started with such promise.

Chapter 3

This above all; to thine own self be true

Inside the laundry, Addie's eyes adjusted to the dim light. A rumble came from the corner of the low, wooden building, vibrating through the soles of her shoes. She froze, staring at the black metal monster squatting against the wall. It was the hot-water boiler and its chugging and snorting caused alarm to prickle her scalp.

Addie shook off her apprehension and edged closer. It was a machine, not a monster, even though the orphans called it the Beast in the Boiler, and trembled every time it gurgled and puffed before releasing steam through the safety valve.

Heat radiated from the tank. A pool of oily water spread across the floorboards, its metallic stink swamping any lingering mildew smells. A cane basket piled with damp towels sat on the floor beside the boiler. She hesitated, then stepped closer to lift the basket to her hip.

‘Swarkkkkk!’ In a flash of yellow and grey feathers, Macbeth swooped through the doorway and landed on a drying rack. The basket slipped from Addie’s hip. She caught it just in time.

‘Macbeth, you dolt! You half scared me out of my knickers.’

The bird puffed out his feathers and scratched himself beneath a wing. ‘*All the world’s a stage. All the world’s a stage,*’ he said.

Addie laughed. ‘You’d better not annoy Matron with your chatter, or she’ll lock you in a cage!’

It hadn’t happened yet, even though Matron complained regularly about that bird *babbling on too much and annoying decent folk*, and how Macbeth shouldn’t be sitting on Addie’s shoulder *because it is unhygienic*.

Another rumble came from the boiler and wet heat swamped the air. Addie edged closer to the beast. She needed to check the pressure gauge, but her arms and face tingled with heat.

The long needle pointer on the gauge’s face wobbled and inched forward ... towards the red-for-danger section. It wasn’t at the critical point yet, but she had to tell Matron.

A menacing growl shook the floor. Addie backed away. Macbeth flapped on his perch, his yellow crest feathers flaring with alarm.

The boiler's innards gave a strange deep thump, then the tank rattled and groaned, much louder this time.

Macbeth screeched, and swooped around Addie's head, flicking his wings at her face again and again, pushing her back from the boiler. Addie dropped the basket and raced back down the ramp, following Macbeth outside.

A sharp, violent crack ripped the air, rattling her eardrums. Scalding steam spat from the boiler's safety valve and shot across the laundry with a high-pitched whoosh – right where she'd stood moments before.

Addie stared, legs shaking and heart racing. Her ears filled with a high-pitched whine.

Children spilled from the dining room and swarmed around her. Young Jack Roo grabbed her arm, his dark eyes like saucers. Mary rushed from the kitchen, still holding a saucepan. Blobs of porridge and soap suds plopped on the dirt. Her dark eyes glistened with fright and her mouth moved, but Addie heard nothing except the ringing in her ears.

Matron Maddock trotted along the track, white-faced, and tall and sure-footed in her high heels. In her wake loped Mr Parris, his black suit coat flapping and his patent leather shoes sliding on the gravel.

Everyone stared at the steam billowing through the laundry door and windows. Finally, as the whooshing faded, Addie's hearing returned.

‘Adversity, what did you do to the boiler?’ Matron’s voice shrilled with anxiety. She pressed a hand against her cream dress’s lacy bodice as if to slow her racing heart.

‘I didn’t do anything, Matron. The safety valve must’ve broken.’ Addie shook her head. ‘That blasted boiler nearly burned Macbeth and me.’

At the mention of his name, the cockatiel flew down to her shoulder.

‘Don’t use rough language, child!’ Matron frowned and shook her head, frustration in her voice. ‘I can’t afford to get the boiler repaired. Mr Parris, add it to your jobs.’

Algernon Parris’s cheeks flared with indignation. ‘I’m an accountant, not the odd-job man!’

Matron’s gaze fixed on him. ‘Algernon, you’re not a registered accountant, you’re a clerk. You’re also a man. Surely you can use a spanner?’

‘Why do I have to do *everything* in this place?’ Parris frowned and began to chew a fingernail.

When Matron didn’t react, he scurried away, muttering to himself. Matron watched him disappear around the corner, then clapped her hands at the excited orphans now running around the laundry building.

‘Children! Go finish your chores. The doctor arrives tomorrow for his monthly check-ups and I want the place spick-and-span before he gets here.’

She walked up the ramp to the laundry door, shaking her head and tut-tutting. ‘Adversity by name, *adversity* by nature. You attract trouble, my girl, no doubt about that.’

For once, Addie agreed with her. She didn’t look for trouble, but it seemed to be always there, ready to pounce. She hadn’t see this trouble coming, but something had. She reached up to scratch Macbeth’s belly. Somehow, the cockatiel knew the boiler’s steam was about to explode through the safety valve. A bit like birds and kangaroos fleeing a bushfire before humans even smelled smoke. If he hadn’t forced her outside ...

Shivers prickled her arms as she imagined the whoosh of scorching water that could’ve burned her skin; a blast of heat thumping against her back as she fled. Macbeth had saved her life. Addie’s head spun and she leaned against a nearby stump post.

Matron Maddock stared inside the laundry, hands on her hips. Then her heels clicked back down the ramp.

‘Why are you carrying that bird on your shoulder when I’ve asked you not to?’ she asked Addie. ‘It’s unhygienic!’

‘*Unhygienic. Unhygienic.*’ mimicked Macbeth.

Matron Maddock glared at the cockatiel. ‘Did I hear it swearing the other day? You shouldn’t be teaching it rude words.’

Macbeth nudged his head against Addie's cheek, bolstering her courage. 'My father taught him all those Shakespearean insults, not me.'

'If it annoys me again, I shall cage it in the shed. It's already too noisy around here with thirty children.'

'Macbeth can't help it – he's a talking cockatiel!'

Addie clamped her mouth shut, too late. Matron's pale blue eyes flashed her disapproval.

'Such disrespect for your elders, Adversity. That's what happens when parents gallivant around the countryside putting on plays instead of looking for honest work and caring for their child.' She sniffed, then added in a scornful voice, 'The Famous Shakespearean Theatrical Troupe indeed!'

'My parents didn't gallivant.' Addie was tempted to stamp her foot for emphasis. 'And they do ... they *did* care about me.'

'No need to get into a huff, my dear girl. Now off you go. You've got a lot of work to do before the doctor arrives tomorrow.'

I'm not your dear girl, Addie thought. *Not ever*. But there was something she needed from Matron Maddock. She put on her polite voice. 'Matron, please can you make sure the hot-water boiler gets fixed? The children are afraid of it.'

Matron dismissed Addie with a wave of her hand.

‘You don’t need to worry about adult things like that. I’ll sort it out.’

Doubt pricked Addie’s mind like a spiky bindi-eye, then she pushed it away. Matron was right: children couldn’t fix a broken boiler. It was best to leave it to adults.

Addie kept busy for the rest of the day to stop herself thinking about the letter from the State Government Department for Children.

In bed that evening, she turned on her side, facing the shelf where a silver-plated trophy sat on display – her first prize from the Coal County Eisteddfod last year. Matron had insisted she practise her scales and voice exercises every day before the singing competition, but afterwards the usual rules had returned – no acting, no singing and definitely no mimicking.

Addie lifted her most treasured possession from the wall: a framed sepia photograph of her parents taken before they were married. Her mother’s Juliet costume would have been her favourite green, with criss-crossed golden embroidery across its bodice. Her tumble of curls would have shone like a new copper coin. Juliet gazed from a stage balcony upon Romeo, Addie’s father.

He stood below with his arms outstretched, dark-haired and handsome. Mama looked like she might burst into giggles as soon as the camera had whirred and clicked.

They should never have left me here.

Addie clamped her teeth together. She would *not* cry.

Memories flooded her mind. That day eighteen months ago when her mother had hugged her goodbye and her lily-of-the-valley perfume lingered on Addie's pinafore.

Mama tried to smile. 'Matron Maddock says she won't charge us a boarding fee if you help out in the school.'

Papa's eyes were sad too, like his voice. 'We'll come back to get you, Addie, and we'll go home to Sydney.'

'You'll be happy here,' her mother added, drying her eyes, her tone hopeful. 'The schoolroom looked quite functional, and it'll be better than us trying to teach you. Matron says because you read well she'll train you as a teacher's helper.'

'I don't like Matron Maddock, and I don't want to be a teacher's helper. I'm going to be an actress,' Addie had wailed. She'd stamped her foot. 'And I *won't* stay here without Macbeth!'

'He *is* staying with you, my darling. Matron has agreed.' Papa pulled her close then and whispered kind

words in her ear. ‘Look for the good in people. It’s there, hiding in the shadows, waiting for them to let in the light.’

But they weren’t the words Addie wanted to hear.

Her parents had driven away in their rattling truck with its grinding gears. She’d climbed the orphanage’s front gate to watch, and the metal had left a bright orange band of rust across her pinafore. It stained her hands and they smelled like blood for days, but she refused to wash the rust away.

Addie hung the sepia photograph back on the wall. Sometimes she imagined her parents driving back through the orphanage gate; their joyful reunion.

Matron Maddock had said she should move on with her life. But how could she forget her parents?