PROLOGUE

Mundaring – August 1899

The Whistling Man strolled down the red path. His gun swung with each step, tapping lightly against his thigh. Birds had scattered with the first shot and they were still unsettled, wheeling through the air with the occasional keening cry. His whistle wove a shrill thread of 'The Wild Colonial Boy'. The sun had set and the last wisps of light were dying, but he was sure-footed in the gloom.

The girl watched him through the long spines of the balga. She was perched between two, her foot pressed into the skirt of one and the other leg bent hard and holding most of her weight. Her thighs trembled and burnt. Sweat ran along the backs of her knees.

The way down to the river was steep and strewn with prickly hard bushes that scraped against the Whistling Man's clothes. He grabbed a branch and swung himself further down the bank. The sucking clay clung to his boots. When he reached the body he stopped whistling and walked in a slow circle, inspecting his work.

The body had dropped at the top of the bank with his shot, rolled through the mud and stopped just by the river. The ribbons and frills were filthy and drenched. He crouched and turned the body over. He drew a small knife from his side and cut a lock of bright hair that had somehow escaped the smut of the river. He tucked it into his breast pocket.

The girl pressed both hands over her mouth. Tears slipped between her fingers. The bush was quiet, so dreadfully quiet. She had never known it to be so still. Could he hear her breathing?

He reached over and carefully pulled the delicate necklace over the head, inspected the pendant. It was only nickel, but he smoothed the dirt away from it with his thumb and it, too, followed the lock of hair into his pocket.

When he had claimed all he wanted, he dug out fist-sized, dense black slabs of granite from the bank. He put them inside the woman's shawl and tied it to her, then filled her skirts with more stones and tied them around her legs. Then he dragged the body into the river, walking it out as far as he could before the water became too strong. He let the body go. It sank swiftly.

Fury and grief ripped through the girl.

The Whistling Man waded back to the bank and clambered out. He stood still, facing the river, but the girl could see him tracking the area. 'I know you're there.' His voice was soft. 'I heard you calling.'

The girl clamped her teeth together. There was no-one to help her. Not now.

He straightened and started to whistle again as he picked his way across the reeds and low shrubs. The girl tried to memorise every detail. The crisp collar, the neat beard, the wide-set blue eyes. You would lose him in a crowded room if he wasn't moving the way he was right now. Like an animal stalking its prey.

'You don't have to be afraid,' he said. 'I'm not going to hurt you, little girl. You're not part of this.'

She stayed where she was, limbs shivering and sweat soaking through her borrowed clothes. He swept through the undergrowth near her, using his gun to move branches aside. The girl squeezed her eyes closed. Dreadful to die alone.

A voice floated down the hill, calling for the girl. Hope flared in her chest. The Whistling Man was very still now. The girl bit her tongue until she tasted copper. She couldn't call out. A gun could fire quicker than she could run.

The voice called again, closer this time.

The Whistling Man turned slowly, his bright eyes scraping the trees and the rocks for any trace of her.

'No-one will believe you,' he said. That voice was so even, so pleasant. 'And even if they do, they won't care.'

He left her then, that whistle back on his lips as he strolled down to the river, past where he had so casually

dropped the body. He paused, watching the water for a moment.

The girl was desperate to splash out into the water, to grab the body and drag her back, to let her at least be buried by those who loved her. But she couldn't. She couldn't bring herself to move, even when the man was out of sight.

It was full dark by the time she staggered down to the construction camp, sobs stuck in her throat.

And the Whistling Man had been right.

No-one believed her.

CHAPTER 1

Brady

Fremantle – August 1899

The new girl was screaming, but I was used to that.

Everyone screamed, especially at the beginning. New girls were dragged in by the orderlies, shoved onto a stone floor and scrubbed with blinding soap and cold water. Their hair was hacked off and then shaved with blunt razors until the skin was raw and red. New patients were stuffed into a strait-waistcoat with the sleeves fastened behind the back so they could not move or struggle. Then they were left in the wards, at the mercy of the other inmates, or locked in a padded cell for the dangerous.

There was plenty to scream about.

The wards were full. I was 'long-term', so they had moved my bed into the corridor, knowing I would not give them any trouble. It was supposed to be temporary. It had been months, though.

We were stacked there end-to-end, lining the walls, and I was dozing off when they brought her in. They hauled her past my bed as she kicked and bit and yelled. I watched,

crust-eyed from sleep and propped on one elbow, as they took her from one place to another. She was full-figured and short, with a mop of black curls. Those wouldn't last long. Everyone had their heads shaved on admission, and it had been done again more recently. It was done to prevent lice and fleas, and vanity, but all three still ran rife through the wards.

The new patient was a Colony girl, that much was plain from her yelling. Her pale skin was a patchwork of bruises and there was a cut on her head, clear even in the dim light of the lamps the orderlies were carrying. I wondered whether she had been brought in by family or by the police.

'Brady. Head down.'

I jumped and moved my elbow, put my head flat down on the bed as the orderly came past. Thomson was a hulking man, and he was quick to twist your arm or miss your plate when he was serving food. I had heard Polly tell Clara that Eliza heard he had been demoted from the prison and sent here. It would explain the bitterness that seemed to sit deep in him, for he hated the asylum and all its inmates. Thomson mostly worked with the men. He only came across to the women's wing when there was someone who posed a serious threat to herself or others.

Usually at this time of night there were just a few attendants wandering the halls on their rounds and sometimes calming whatever nonsense was happening in the wards (and there was *always* some nonsense happening

in the wards, especially when we were so crowded). Under Doctor Barnett they had been more vigilant, but he had been gone two years now and Matron Armstrong had been ill again, so they took advantage and only monitored the corridors for an hour or so before finding a place to bed down for the night.

For now, though, no-one was sleeping: doctors and attendants talked, women in the wards protested the noise. I kept my head on the bed and closed my eyes, listening as the sounds slurred into one another. Hours passed. I could still hear the new girl in the cell at the end of the corridor, but the rest of the night died to the usual shuffle and creaks of beds and feet, the sounds of women crying or talking in low mutters. One of the other girls in the corridor had a cough and she hacked her way through most of the night.

'He's a murderer! He's a *murderer*!'

Paranoid, delusional, prone to hysterics; I diagnosed the new girl as I fell asleep to the sound of her distress. When I first arrived, these nocturnal shiftings and shouts kept me awake all night. Now they were just the asylum's lullaby. I did not know if I would be able to sleep without them.

The weather swung wildly in spring, and the day dawned warm and thick. My thin grey shift stuck to my sweaty skin. We all wore drawers beneath our nightclothes in some vain attempt at improving hygiene, and those bunched up awkwardly around the waist. There was no looking glass,

which was just as well. I had never been vain, but I had been particular and neat all my life, and I did not want to see how far I had slipped out of proper society.

I donned a scratchy grey dress and waited patiently. Women in the ward were already clamouring to be let out. The attendant stationed at the end of the corridor came through with the keys and unlocked the door. The women pushed their way through, some of them carrying the bedpans to be emptied. I kept close to the corridor wall and let them all pass. Best to wait until the ruckus was done and follow with the dribs and drabs, the slow and the tired.

This was the worst part of the day. After breakfast we would all be put to our tasks, sewing and laundry – quiet industry that kept hands and minds from resting too idle. But in the wards and dining hall, the lull of night and the stiff routine of the workday were ruptured by feuds and quarrels, spilt food and the occasional fight.

The tables were of kauri pine, roughly hewn and bare. Hard to know whether we could not be trusted with tablecloths or whether they were simply considered a luxury wasted on us.

I collected my pannikin of tea and my bowl of oatmeal from the attendants. The tin made the tea taste strange, and nothing was warmer than tepid, but I was accustomed to it. I took my seat in the corner of a bench at the far side of the room, where the older women tended to gather. I didn't mind them. We didn't talk much and we didn't draw attention.

My eyes flicked over to Maude, an Englishwoman who had been brought in for her drinking. She was in her forties, but she could have been older. Her face was hard and freckled, and her lips were split. She was leaning across the table, tearing another girl's portion of bread to shreds. I watched as she took the girl's tea and poured it into her oatmeal. No-one intervened. The attendants were too busy to care, and the other girls knew better than to cross Maude. She had a wild meanness to her, unpredictable and contagious. A knot of girls mustered close to her. Whether it was for protection or for vicarious power, I didn't care to know.

I was grateful to escape to toil. I had been in the laundry for my first six months, stuck in the sweat and swelter, the soap cracking my hands and the steam burning my skin. Once I learnt to behave, though, they moved me to cleaning, and then to sewing, and then to keeping office for Matron Armstrong and Doctor Barnett.

My family had been some of the first up at the Halls Creek gold rush, back when I was little more than a toddler. In Australia it didn't matter how Irish or Catholic you were, so long as your father found gold. So, I was educated. I could read and write, copy letters, organise records for the doctor. They knew me to be quiet and discreet, a good patient. I had worked hard to earn my place there. Doctor Barnett had even let me read the books when there was little work to be done. I had filled the corners of my days with Gray and Wundt and Osler.

Doctor Barnett had spent years writing to the newspapers, to the governors and the Crown. He had begged for assistance, for resources, for anything to help accommodate the rising number of lunatics admitted to his grounds. Sometimes in his letters to the press he showed glimmers of a sparking humour: he signed many of these letters *Uniped* due to having lost one of his legs many years before. Women in the asylum muttered that he had performed the amputation himself. It wouldn't have surprised me much; the doctor had steel in his soul. I liked him. I was grateful to him. He was a good man. I had read many of his letters myself, and the disheartening replies. The Crown had no help to offer an asylum in the 'Cinderella' state. Western Australia, gold rush and all, was a dusty and forgotten space to the Empire.

Doctor Barnett had died the year after I arrived. And when that happened, the asylum was left in a worse state than it had ever been. So I did not dare read at all now, especially under Doctor March.

Still, even being able to dust and organise the books was a delight and a privilege I knew none of the other girls had. I wiped Doctor March's desk and sorted his correspondences into neat piles. The asylum was suffering in condition, but it was through no fault of the doctor.

Doctor March's coat was cast carelessly over the arm of his chair, so he must have arrived earlier, perhaps while we were taking breakfast. My hands were clean, but I brushed

them down on my uniform before taking up his coat. It was well-tailored, handsome, the sort of thing my brother might wear to a business meeting. The lining inside was smooth and soft to the touch. My fingers lingered across the material, the shining buttons.

'Brady.'

I remembered myself with a jolt and set the coat neatly on its hook by the door. Even now, three years into my treatment, I sometimes forgot who and where I was.

Doctor March stood in the doorway. He had a round face, a receding hairline and an enormous moustache. His bearing was military, though I had not heard any rumours of a military background. His eyes were hard and cool.

He waited, and the moment was heavy on my shoulders before I realised he was expecting me to speak. Doctor Barnett had been patient with my silences, but they seemed to irritate Doctor March. I didn't know if he considered them a part of my affliction or whether he simply thought I was a little dull.

'Good morning, Doctor March.'

'How are you today?'

'Tolerable, sir.'

'Good.' He took a seat and started to look through his letters. His eyes flicked in my direction once or twice. I was hovering. I quickly poured tea from the pot I had brought in with me.

'You are aware of our new patient, I take it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'She has come to us from Mundaring.' He looked up at me and sat back, sipping at his tea. 'She was quite distressed when she arrived last night.'

'Yes, sir.' *Weren't we all?*

'She will need some help settling in. I am sure you remember how difficult it can be. And she is, unfortunately, beset by delusion.' He studied me. 'You know as well as any that it is a difficult time for new patients to be admitted.'

'Yes, sir.' There was no easy time, but the crowded wards were particularly hard for new patients.

'I have a task for you.'

'Sir?'

'Help her to find her way here, encourage her to cooperate with the treatment we give.'

A sick coil of worry tightened in my stomach. The doctor must have seen it, because now he set his tea down and leant in. His eyes pinned me in place. Heat crept along my neck and into my cheeks. I could not meet his gaze any longer and I dropped my chin.

'Doctor Barnett always maintained you would swiftly recover and find your place in society once more. Your ability to interact well with others has been in question before: this would be a fine opportunity for you to demonstrate to *me* that this is no longer a concern.'

I did not want to risk my recovery. Three years had seen so many stumbles and falters. But if he thought I could be

released soon, if there was a way I could prove that I was well again, or at least well enough to go home to my mother and brother …

'Brady?'

He was done with his tea. How long had I stood there in silence? I never really knew. Time was slippery in the asylum. I gathered his cup and tray.

'I will help in any way I can, sir.'

'Good.' He offered me a taut smile. 'Your brother will be pleased to hear it, I'm sure.'

'Thank you, sir.'

I waited a beat to be sure he did not want anything more from me. He turned away and sliced a letter open, his hand going to knuckle his forehead. I took it as my dismissal and made a hasty escape from his office, tray in hand. It was a relief to be out from under his scrutiny, if only for a short while.