

Prologue

Bannin Bay, Western Australia, 1886

Eliza has never seen a land that looks so very much like blood. From the deck of the steamer it glistens, stretching wide in a lazy, sun-blurred smear.

She raises a hand against the glare, taking to tiptoes to squint over the polished guard rail. Before her, red dirt jitters in the heat, and the sea is a boisterous, blistering green. There is something unsettling about the weariness of the breeze, hot and filled with the mineral stench of seagrass.

‘We made it, my loves, we did it. Marvellous.’ Her father’s oiled moustache lifts upwards as he grins. He turns from his family to look out across the strange landscape – mirrored bays and shadowy crags the colour of crushed insects.

This journey will be what saves them. Father had told them so over mutton and gravy back home. He regaled them with tales of pearl shells first, their shining nacles of champagne, silver and cream. He was to work with his brother to launch a fleet of luggers, hauling shell to sell in bulk to the Americans and the French. The world was already lapping up the spoils of Bannin Bay, turning mother-of-pearl into buttons and the prettiest pistol handles you ever did see.

They'd watched, with jaws slack, as Father had pulled out his old atlas, folded down the page and smoothed his palm across the place called New Holland. 'Look.' He showed them, trailing a finger down its western coast. 'When we're there, we will be able to forget about all that has happened.'

The beach in front of Eliza flares white and harsh. Dunes, sharp with swaying saltbush, ripple far into the distance. Below the rail, gulls skirl around a jetty that unfurls like a crocodile's crooked tail into a long gut of mangroves.

Her father gives the order and leads them steadily off the ship – her uncle Willem, her aunt Martha, followed closely by her mother and brother. Thomas is a head taller than her now, conspicuous in this heat in his short trousers and smart pressed jacket. Glancing back, she can see the hunched shoulders of stevedores. In grubby vests and moleskins to the knee, they lug what remains of the Brightwells' belongings out of the ship.

Grasping at her mother's skirts, Eliza steps down to the jetty. As she does, and with the speed of a knife over lard, her feet slide from beneath her and she thuds, backside first, onto the planks. The odour is obscene but she places a flat palm on the greasy wood. There are fish scales smeared about and stringy meat going crisp in the sun. 'Come, Eliza. Brush yourself off.' Her mother extends a broad, comforting hand.

Eliza rubs her elbows, smooths her skirts and lets her mother tug her to her feet. The sun has scattered coins of light across the sea; they make her eyes swim with stars. Looking up, she finds the sky obscured by the crescent of her mother's silk hat, the brim so absurdly wide she has seen men cowering from it back home. *How odd she seems against this strange new place*, Eliza thinks, *like a dragonfly, once resplendent, marooned in a bucket of old slop water.*

They continue down the jetty, her father and brother

striding ahead. Sweat pools in the crooks of her elbows and at the creases behind her knees. Beside them, men watch unflinchingly as they pass, turning caulking mallets, hammers and dirtied blades in rough hands. Her mother pays them no heed – an easy task for someone accustomed to admiration – and looks instead across the shoreline and out to the shot silk of the sea.

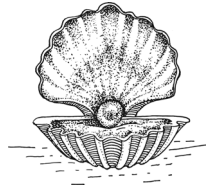
'You see, my girl, it's beautiful.' She smiles and kneels to the height of her daughter. Eliza hears the rush of liquid before it happens. Sees the movement at the corner of her eye but turns away a heartbeat too late. With a sigh it splashes across them – thick with chunks and foul-smelling. It slides with grim slowness down Eliza's face. They turn together towards a man who has frozen in position, sun-grizzled as a raisin and with only a few grey teeth. He holds a barrel full of fish guts under an arm and a cracked palm raised in surrender.

'My apologies,' he gasps, although a smile plays about his lips. 'You ladies got right in the way. I beg your pardon.' He stands aside to let them pass. 'Please.'

Her mother gives a huff as she jerks her daughter sharply onwards. Smearing the guts from her cheeks, Eliza turns to see the man remove his hat. She watches as he hawks a knot of phlegm from his throat, depositing it at his feet with a gluey string of spittle. Her mother quickens to an appalled trot, still pulling at Eliza's arm, but she keeps her head turned backwards.

The words barely reach her before they are snatched by the breeze. Four words she'll always remember.

'Welcome to Bannin Bay,' they say.



Chapter One

Ten years later
Bannin Bay, Western Australia, 1896

She will simply leave the cockroach to die. That's what she'll do. Stranded on its back in the coddling wet-season heat, its legs will slow, then twitch, then cease to move entirely.

Outside, the rising sun lays soft fingers on the land. Above the bay, gathering seabirds soar and the dirt blushes pink in the gauzy light of dawn. Eliza's eyes flick to the clock on the dresser, its four moons shimmering behind dusty bevelled glass. Her fingers dance as she runs the numbers in her head.

Sixty-one.

That's how many days she has slept alone in this bungalow. And with every night, the loneliness has built like compacted soot. On her own, as she so often is, she has made companions of the noises: the impatient ticking of corrugated iron, the faint *click click click* of a roach's legs on polished jarrah wood. Today though – a day so humid it's there to be tasted – today her home will come alive once more.

She pulls on boots and smooths down her skirts, pictures Bannin Bay beginning to stir – the shutters in town cast wide open, merchants with sagging shoulders sweeping the pathways

to their shops. The wind will sing down muddy laneways, carrying with it tales of death at sea. People will greet one another with mutters of shell tallies and whispers of the coming storms that mottle the sky like rotting teeth. At the foreshore, the first of the luggers will slump on their sides in the blue-black mud. Later, the remaining fleets will return from months spent pearling. Her father and brother will be with them. Eliza will no longer be alone.

She tugs her hair into a bow and wipes a smear from her neck. The morning sun, sharper with every minute, bleeds through the window lattice and casts bold patterns onto the furniture. A glance over her shoulder confirms the insect is still alive. Ten years now and she's still not accustomed to the roaches. She's not sure she ever will be. She steps towards the creature and considers it, shiny and upended, legs like fractured twigs. *This is a place where dead things hover*, she thinks. The town is full of them: gas-bloated crocodiles in the traps by the Kingfish, the corpses of drowned pearl divers sunk into the sand above the tideline.

She fixes the buttons at her neck and slips out of the bungalow. The dirt tracks are as familiar to her now as the streets of London once were. But in the place of thick smog and gutter muck, tangerine dust billows skyward as she walks. Galahs scream furiously in the blossoms and overripe mangoes gloat like plump queens in the trees.

It takes only a few yards; she comes to an abrupt stop in the dirt. She turns, looks to the bungalow, set above the ground on grey stone stilts. Her shoulders sink. With heavy breaths she trudges back up the steps and through the door. She crosses the boards and bends, skirts sweeping weeks-old turpentine polish. Taking a forefinger, she reaches under the insect and, with the gentlest of flicks, uprights it. Its body

seems to shiver slightly, then it probes the air with thin antennae. It is already on the move as Eliza steps back out into the heat.

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A pearling lugger can find itself at sea for several long months, its crew returning to shore preserved in thick layers of salt like dried herrings. Alone on their small wooden boats, facing riptides and swirling currents, it is no surprise bonds are formed out at sea that no incident nor man could ever break. As they toil, lead-weighted boots keep the divers fixed to the ocean floor, along with heavy chest plates and a copper corset worn over the shoulders. Eliza has read newspaper reports detailing men knocked off their boats by the boom, left to sink to their deaths under the weight of all that metal. 'The tender must take care to pull his diver up slowly,' her father would say. 'Not to do so could leave him agonizingly crippled.' Men were pulled up dead, of course they were. Crushed out of recognition, stomachs forced into their chest cavities. Others met death with bloated faces, tongues black and swollen, frantic eyes popped clean from their sockets.

The *White Starling* has been out for nearly nine weeks now, its men plucking shell from the seabed and stashing it in the hold with the dried fish and curry powder. Eliza has witnessed many times the men's return from sea: pinched, hollow-eyed apparitions drifting listlessly from their ships, their visible bones just like a collection of piano keys, ready to be played.

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She makes her way towards the jetty, drawing enervated nods from the townsfolk as she passes. Their low-browed bungalows shelter under swaying palms and silvery gums. They have all

been painted beige or underbelly green, but it's not enough to stop the crawling stain of pindan dirt.

'You off to see them in?' Mrs Riesly peers out from under a cooling cloth. Eliza strains to hear the words above the quarrel of corellas on the roof. 'Back today, are they?' The old widow heaves her weight off the verandah chair. Eliza nods, smiles thinly, leaving eyes squinting eagerly after her.

Bushes buzz with the frenzy of insects as Eliza passes quickly by. Ahead, red soil gives way to pale, gilded sand. In the distance, storm-battered shacks brood under stark eucalyptus trees. The contrast still makes her swallow: the bungalows with their lush half-acre plots, and the sea of crushed iron beyond them, rippling in the stultifying heat.

'Didn't fancy putting a brush through that hair?' Min calls from a nearby doorway. She must be working. Eliza smiles, goes to her. 'Today's the day, correct?' her friend asks. Min's hair is pinned in a neat chignon, secured with mother-of-pearl grips that shimmer like snail trails in the sun. Eliza shifts as a muffled cough sails out from the depths of the hut.

'Should be.' She nods tightly, her heart twitching at the thought of seeing her father soon. 'This one's felt long. But I'm fine, really. I'm fine.' She keeps her voice clipped, she always does. A tiny diamond dove lands on a branch above the hut. They watch it briefly arrange its wing feathers until it stoops and turns its red-ringed eye upon them.

'Well, they're all hard, I should expect,' says Min eventually. 'Especially now you're on your nelly.' She chews distractedly on the side of her lip. Her features are sharp, as if whittled to points.

'You are testing my patience, girl,' a brusque voice yells from the darkness. Eliza flinches but can't mask her expression quickly enough.

'Oh, Missy, need I remind you that not all of us have fathers with their own fleets?' Min tucks a loose hair behind her ear. Eliza feels a stab of guilt, notices the jewels fastened to Min's small earlobes – a gift from an admirer, perhaps. More likely an apology.

It wasn't always this way. When they were children, drawn together in this town that seemed to teeter at the edge of the earth, they would talk excitedly of adventures at sea – sharing murmured dreams of exploring exotic lands. Min would speak plainly of the romances she would enjoy, the fine sailor she would marry and the children they would feed up to be happy and plump. She would coo at the babies paraded by the society women of Bannin. But when she neared them, the women would suck their cheeks in and bat her off like a blowfly. As they grew older, Min became more beautiful and Eliza more plain. Her friend would tease her, 'You'll never get anywhere in this town if you show no interest in men.'

'I do have an interest in men,' Eliza would reply coolly. 'I've merely no interest in a husband.'

'An interest in the contents of a man's library does not constitute an interest in men,' Min would scold.

'Oi!' The angered voice claws its way back out of the hut. 'I'm not paying you to have a bastard conversation.'

Min glances behind her, loosens the shawl at her shoulders.

'Better go.' She kisses Eliza quietly and retreats into the gloom.

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When she comes to it, the jetty is hot with activity, jellied under the glare of the lurid sun. The men hauling baskets off the luggers look like ants ferrying leaves to their queen, their chatter drifting towards her on the warm breeze. The stench of

the place is engulfing – ripe sweat, soft creek mud and rotting oyster flesh. It smells, she realizes with a long, deep inhalation, of life and death both at once.

Some of the boats are moored already; soon they will be dug into trenches to protect them from the blows. In the mud, the cajeput ribs of a lugger are being tipped on their side. When the tide comes in fully, the water will wash over the boat, spilling disoriented rats out into the open and sending cockroaches streaking across the beach.

She casts her eye out to the retreating water but sees no sign of her father's ship. She is always surprised by the urgency of the tide in Bannin Bay. How it gushes, fast and high around the mangroves, then – in just the blink of an eyelid – draws back in on itself. The pearl-ers and their crews live and die by the moon's pull here; spring tides, neap tides. An endless loop of boats coming in, boats going out.

The heat is torturous; she pulls her collar from her neck and rolls her sleeves to the elbow. Her once-pale forearms have been tanned to light brown. Her mother's old acquaintances would not approve. After years in Bannin Bay, Eliza knows that a woman is expected to be one of two things: a white-glove wearer or a common harlot. She is neither, and her refusal to demure to the first had infuriated the society women of the bay. When she sees them in the streets now, they pass like something you might find atop a cake – taffeta day dresses, veiled hats and gloves, clutches of pearl blister brooches clamped to their bosoms. They do not spare a glance for her.

She settles on a loose plank and tucks her skirts beneath her legs, pressing her fingers into the burnt skin of her scalp. The pain of it sends a brief thrill through her blood. Nearby, pelicans preen and a lone osprey patrols the dunes. She scrapes the hair from her forehead and fixes her eyes on the ocean.

Sails are beginning to break the horizon, glistening like slick bones in the haze.

'They've probably all perished.' A phlegmy voice rasps behind her, followed by a wheezy crow's cackle. She turns the top half of her body until she's nose-to-nose with a large wooden leg. This close she can see it has been picked at and pockmarked by the jaws of burrowing worms. 'Charles has never been much of a sailor.' Her uncle grins. He has sunken cheeks and the type of skin that appears unfortunately waxy. He wears a white suit darkened to brown by dirt and sucks shakily on a short-stemmed tobacco pipe. The skin of his hands is livid with sandfly bites.

'Willem.' She rises to be met by his sour grog breath. She ignores it. 'Just thought I'd represent the welcoming party. Are you well?' She hopes her feigned pleasantness is half-way convincing. She is quite sure her uncle's timing is intentional; he can often be found lurking once the schooners have signalled the return of the fleets. He lusts so clearly after shell he himself will no longer haul in, side-eyeing the pearlers' smart sola topis, wetting his lips at the whiteness of their shining shoes.

'Tell your father to come see me when he gets in, if you will,' orders Willem. 'We've certain matters to discuss.' Eliza does not turn to watch him go.

The afternoon passes in a drawn-out blaze, the sun a clean penny, high in the sky. She occupies her mind with images of her father's lugger, rolling low in the water, sails belly-out, coasting on chalky turquoise seas. She pictures Shuzo Saionji, the boat's lead diver, descending slowly to the seabed at murky first light. She can almost taste the reek of drying pearl meat hanging from every beam of the ship; the sharp-sweet sweat of the rest of the crew – barefoot tenders, shell-openers and cooks who trail slack fishing lines off the gunwale. Finally, she sees

the familiar face of Balarri, the scores of age carved deep into his sun-battered skin.

As her ears ring in the heat, more luggers limp their way to the jetty. They bring with them a creeping sensation that begins its slow, caustic movement through her body. She watches as spent crews stagger off the boats, reaching for rum and comfort after so long among the tarpaulins and the planks. From one vessel, two scrawny capuchin monkeys detach themselves from the mast and scamper onto the jetty. They're dressed in finely embroidered waistcoats and fez hats. Eliza barely blinks. Rakish pearl-ers stroll by like the men she's seen in her father's history books, with raised knees, smoking rifles and fluttering flags. She knows their in-port uniform so well, she could draw the felt hats, white shirts, pyjamas and silk neckerchiefs on cue.

The sun is crawling down the rear of the dunes now, illuminating the teasel heads of parched spinifex grass. But still there is no sign of the *Starling*. The fact hooks itself into Eliza's guts and squeezes. She tries to ignore it. She has played this waiting game before; soon the boat will be here, then all will be in order. That's how it goes. She swallows a sour taste and moves her eyes to the working men. She is aware that none would be interested in her plain physicality: her grey eyes, her boyish body, a nose set out of joint by a brother's fist. So she feels at liberty to watch them, taking their familiarity for a balm. But as she moves her gaze across broad shoulders and sweaty napes of necks, an itchy sensation arrives. First across her chest then up to the backs of her ears. As her eyes skim over to the horizon, she realizes, with a start, that she is being observed. A man with a wide-brimmed hat tipped far back on his head, a thin face

and an angular chin, is smiling peculiarly in her direction. The feeling it evokes is not entirely pleasant. She turns pointedly the other way.

More hours slide past and the dread thickens to something solid. The other luggers have all been strung up and stripped. The light is fading and there are just a few workers left tapping away. She is about to surrender, to make her fearful way back to the bungalow alone, when a pinhead appears on the horizon. It brings her to her feet and pushes her head to a tilt. If she squints, she can just make out the tiny silhouette of a lugger. Her throat tightens. She squeezes her eyes near shut. She can see the distinctive paintwork now, too. The *Starling* has always been entirely washed in white, a ghost ship tossed on marbled blue-green seas.

As it comes in, and although there are men busying about its deck, she can sense something is wrong. She scans the lugger, a coil of terror in her stomach. There: the flag is not where it should be. Instead, it sits low, forlorn at half-mast. Eliza gulps dryly. The blood ticks in her ears. She has seen flags like this before.

The deckhands leap off to haul in the mooring line, and Eliza's toes clench as she waits for her brother and father to emerge. It's Shuzo, the diver, who shows first, jaw tight, eyes chillingly wide. She calls out to him but he avoids her gaze.

'I'm so sorry, Eliza.' His voice is a trickle of water, the medals at his breast winking in the low sun. He slips past and is quickly inhaled by the town. She rushes forwards as her brother scrambles into sight. His shirt is dirtied, trousers salt-stained and tattered. She wonders why he has not changed into his whites like Shuzo. Usually lean like a cattle dog, Thomas is thinner than she has ever seen, his hat jammed down so tight

over his eyes it casts his whole unshaven face in shadow. Something dark moves through Eliza from her feet to her throat. She pushes through the crowd, calling his name until their eyes eventually meet. His look hollows her out like a gourd. Inside of her, nerves crackle against skin. The earth seems to stop dead on its axis.

‘Where is he?’ She is not sure how her mouth forms the words.

He blinks once. Eyes like stones. ‘Gone.’