

CHAPTER ONE

The elegant young woman in the emerald bustle dress shivered as the police steamer made its way up the East River toward Blackwell's Island. The temperature hovered around freezing, and a soupy mist made the winter air feel even colder, but the real source of her trembling lay in their destination: the Bellevue Asylum, New York's only hospital for the insane. The other nine women aboard shared her fears. One with raspberry blotches all over her face and a grayish-yellow fungus on her scalp babbled incessantly and pulled out tufts of her hair near the roots. Another with a high fever ranted incoherently. A third seemed perfectly normal and pleaded to be returned to shore, but spoke only French. The young woman tried to engage several of the women in conversation, but the policeman who kept eying her told her to be quiet, patting his billy club to show he meant it.

Hours earlier, at the Essex Market Court on the Lower East Side, the young woman had been unable to recall her name or anything of her past. Presiding Judge Duffy had ordered her committed to Bellevue, drawing gasps from the courtroom, and then summoned reporters from all seven of New York's major newspapers to ask for their help in locating the young woman's family. When the reporters saw her rich auburn hair, mournful green eyes and beige freckles sprinkled on a lovely face, to a man they had wanted to comfort her and make her world right. But male stirrings and judicial entreaties aside, they also knew a good story when they saw one. And New Yorkers needed a good story. The city was still recovering from the February, 1888 blizzard that had dumped 40 to 50 inches of snow on the streets and produced drifts 50 feet high that still lined the

Manhattan shore. People had been confined to their homes for weeks. They would be more than ready to grab on to the tale of a halting young woman with a hard-to-place accent who had no idea who she was.

But the gentlemen of the press seemed far away right now. The young woman was no longer in the relative safety of a New York courtroom. She was in a filthy police boat with at least six babbling lunatics and two sadistic policemen steaming up the East River to an insane asylum.

The boat docked in front of an enormous white concrete warehouse more than two hundred yards wide and four stories tall, surrounded by a wrought iron fence with jutting spears. This was the Bellevue Hospital Asylum, and upon visiting it forty years earlier, Charles Dickens had described his reaction as “deep disgust and measureless contempt.” A half-dozen female guards, steel-eyed and gruff-looking, stood by idly and made no effort to help with the landing or unloading. One of the policemen muttered that they were inmates from the women’s prison up the road – convicted prostitutes, thieves, even a murderer. The chief female guard, tall, broad-shouldered and mannish-looking in her late-30’s, signed the receiving papers and bantered with a police guard. None of the women guards bothered to make conversation or smile hello.

The chief female guard signed the last document and handed it to the policeman, who hopped back on board. The steamer shoved off. The young woman watched it head downriver toward Battery Park, and with it her last connection to the outside world.

The chief guard turned to the new arrivals. Her smile disappeared.

“My name is Grady. Miss Grady. You are now on Blackwell’s Island. I hope you plan on staying here awhile, because you will not be leaving anytime soon. Do as I say,

and we will get along nicely. Question me or disobey me, and your life here will be unpleasant. That I promise. Now, follow me inside.”

She walked toward the main entrance to the building. The other guards surrounded the women like cowboys herding cattle and prodded them along. The young woman looked around to get her bearings.

“Move along,” snapped a guard and gave her a firm push.

The young woman clenched a fist and shot her an angry look but nevertheless trudged inside with the others, to a large brick room, damp and cold, with a dirt floor and high windows that shed little light. In the center of the room was a cast iron bathtub that resembled a horse trough, a wooden barrel of water and some oaken buckets.

“Take off all your clothes,” Miss Grady ordered the group.

The women balked.

“Do it now or we will do it for you,” snapped Miss Grady.

The guards held out their hands for the clothes. The women reluctantly began undressing but the young woman wanted no part of this. She didn’t like the idea of taking off her clothes in front of strangers, and certainly not when she was shivering from cold.

“It’s freezing!” she protested.

“And it’s going to get colder,” snorted Miss Grady. She motioned for one of the guards to start undressing the young woman.

“I’ll do it,” said the young woman, and took off her shawl, bodice and skirt.

“Underskirts too,” said Miss Grady.

The young woman recognized the inevitable and reluctantly took off her underskirts. She stood there in only a slip, covering up against the damp chill.

Miss Grady smiled approvingly. "Now your slips," she ordered.

The women didn't move. None of them had ever been naked in front of another woman.

"Now!"

The guards took a menacing step forward, and the women compliantly took off their slips, each of them now standing naked, pointlessly trying to cover up in the freezing cold.

"You!" Miss Grady motioned to the woman with the terrible skin disease who had pulled out clumps of her hair. "Get in the tub!"

The woman submissively stepped into the empty tub and slowly sank down. One of the guards filled a bucket with water from the barrel and poured it on her. The woman gasped.

"It's cold!"

"Of course it's cold," said Miss Grady. "Now be still."

They poured two more buckets on her. The woman cried out from the cold. One of the guards grabbed her by the hair and scrubbed her with some soap and a brush that made deep red scratches on her head and back.

"Stop! Please!" screamed the woman.

"Quiet!" barked Miss Grady. "It's just a bath!"

The guard kept scrubbing, drawing blood on the back and scalp, while the woman cried and whimpered and begged her to stop.

"No more! Please, no more!"

Finally, mercifully, the guard lost patience.

“All right. Done!” said the guard and stood up. Two other guards filled buckets from the water barrel and flung the contents at the woman, rinsing her off. The woman sputtered and fought for air.

“You’re clean. Get out!” shouted Miss Grady.

Dripping wet with cold water and crying from the shock and humiliation, the woman stepped out on to the dirt floor. One of the guards handed her a towel. The woman dried herself furiously, trying to warm up, yanking tufts of hair from her scalp on to the towel. One of the guards tossed her a ratty slip and motioned for her to put it on, and grabbed the towel back. The woman stood there in the moth-eaten slip, her hair still wet, rubbing her body to try and get warm.

“You!” said Miss Grady to the woman who spoke no English and pointed to the tub.

The woman hesitated. “*Pardon?*”

“Get in!”

The woman waited for the guards to drain the tub. But nobody moved.

“Now!”

Miss Grady shoved her forward. The woman looked at the dirty water with revulsion but as the guards menacingly stepped toward her, she got in the tub, cringing and trembling with fear.

“Sit down!” Miss Grady motioned for her to sit, and the woman willed herself to sit in the cold, dirty water. The woman shut her eyes hoping to block out all sensation. The same guard as before began scrubbing her with the same harsh brush and soap. The

Frenchwoman tried to maintain her dignity and suffer in silence, but she sobbed from the pain and humiliation, her shoulders heaving with shame.

Finally the scrubbing guard stood up. "Done."

"Up!" snapped Miss Grady.

The Frenchwoman stood up. The two guards once again filled their buckets from the barrel and tossed cold water on her. She gasped as if lashed by a whip.

One of the guards handed her the same towel the woman with the skin disease had used, the tufts of hair and fungus still on it. The Frenchwoman shook her head adamantly.

"Use it, or stand there and freeze!" said Miss Grady.

But the Frenchwoman just shook her head.

"Suit yourself."

She motioned for the guards to remove her from the tub. Two of them grabbed her and pulled her out, her leg smacking hard against the side, and deposited her on the dirt floor. The woman sat there in the freezing air, soaked, shivering and dirty. A guard tossed her a ragged slip. She put it on. It became wet immediately but at least she had covered herself. The guards lifted her again and moved her away from the tub.

Miss Grady pointed at the elegant young woman.

"No, thank you," said the young woman. "I don't need a bath."

"A funny one, eh?" Miss Grady nodded and two guards grabbed the young woman by the arms. She tried to resist but the guards were stronger and lifted her harshly into the tub. The water was brown from the two other baths.

"Sit down!" snapped Miss Grady. "Now!"

The young woman looked at Miss Grady with pure hatred and sat. The water was so cold that it burned but the young woman masked any reaction except loathing and didn't say a word. As the scrub guard grabbed her arm, however, the young woman made a request.

"Please don't touch my hair." She loved her hair. As a child she had always brushed her hair a hundred times on each side before going to sleep.

"I won't," said the guard quietly. The two guards poured the buckets of cold water on the young woman.

The young woman had gone swimming in cold water as a child but never in something like this. She bit her lip, hoping that would help the pain pass.

Suddenly the guard grabbed her hair and started scrubbing.

"I said not my hair!"

"Yes. You did, didn't you?" said the guard and laughed. She scrubbed the hair with the same brush she had used on the other two women, with even more intensity. The young woman tried to break free but the guard had her by the hair and yanked it to get her under control.

"Stop!" cried the young woman. She despised them. She wished they were all dead. But the guard seemed to savor the humiliation and scrubbed the hair extra slowly.

"Do her back!" barked Miss Grady.

The guard, still holding onto the hair like the mane of a horse, began scrubbing the young woman's back. The young woman felt wire tearing at her skin. She tried to block out the pain and humiliation with thoughts of revenge, a vow to remember every single moment of the suffering and make these people pay.

Finally the scrubber backed away.

“Done!”

The young woman opened her eyes. A moment later she was drenched in two buckets of cold water that took her breath away.

“Get out!” said Miss Grady.

The young woman stood up. As the water fell off her, she saw the guards appraising her lustily. She grabbed the used towel and covered up her breasts and genitals, but she thought of the blotches on the first woman’s face and saw the clumps of hair still on the towel, and could not bring herself to use it. One of the guards tossed her a ragged slip, and she put it on before she bothered to dry herself. She stood there shivering, her teeth chattering. It was the coldest she had ever been in her life. But the cold did not temper her fury.

And so it went with the rest of the women: a scrub bath in the freezing, filthy water, drying off with the same damp, contaminated towel, then putting on a ragged slip and standing on the dirt floor in the bitter cold waiting for the others.

After the baths the women were herded to a large hall for their first Bellevue Hospital Asylum meal: spoiled, fatty meat and molded toast, with tea that was essentially undrinkable. The young woman cried silently in frustration. She had not eaten in two days, yet she could not bring herself to eat the putrid meat or molded bread. She wondered how long she could survive this ordeal. And she was one of the stronger ones. Most of the other women, she realized, would not last a month.

Following the meal, the women were ordered to sit on stiff-backed chairs outside the dining hall, in complete silence. After four hours the women were taken to a dark

room with thirty beds, no windows and no heat. The mattresses were wafer-thin and lumpy, resting on uneven planks, and the pillows were stuffed with straw. The women were each assigned a bed. There were no lockers, of course; the clothes the women wore upon their arrival had been confiscated. The new arrivals sat on their beds, trying desperately to get warm with the thin cotton blankets. But even with comfortable bedding and thick blankets, extended sleep at Bellevue would be impossible – a half dozen women in the room screamed continuously from delusion or fever.

The young woman felt completely alone and abandoned as she lay in bed that night, but she was wrong about one thing: the outside world had not forgotten about her.

The *Sun* had placed the story in the lead right-hand column under the banner headline “WHO IS THIS INSANE GIRL?” The more cerebral *New York Herald* approached it as a medical mystery: “WHAT AILS THE POOR DARLING?” To *The Evening Telegram* she was “undoubtedly, hopelessly, sadly insane.” The *Times* wrote movingly of the “mysterious waif” with the “wild, hunted look in her eyes and despairing cry, ‘I can’t remember! I can’t remember!’ ”

The public became obsessed with the story, as they had been with Jay Gould cornering the Gold Market twenty years before, Reverend Henry Ward Beecher facing adultery charges a decade ago, and the bachelor President Grover Cleveland siring a child out of wedlock three years past. Who was this pitiful young woman, and what would become of her? Her plight was the talk of supper clubs, train stations, streetcars, hansom stables, afternoon teas. Yet none of the stories mentioned the abominable conditions at New York’s main asylum for women, because none of the reporters had ever been inside Bellevue Hospital nor interviewed former patients. None of them, in point of fact, ever

thought to question the assurance from Bellevue's warden, which they repeated verbatim in their papers, that New York's mentally ill were being cared for in a "most humane and generous way, for which the city fathers should be exceedingly proud."

The young woman, of course, never read any of the press reports on Blackwell's Island. Her days consisted of sitting on the stiff-backed benches from morning until night, save for the meals in the dining hall, from which she could only avert her eyes from the inedible food. Her nights consisted of lying on her bed, eyes staring at the rafters, listening to patients wailing, occasionally trying to comfort one of the women pleading for their daughters or husbands or mothers. By the third day she was half-crazed from not eating or sleeping. Two of the guards made it clear that for sexual favors she could have warmth and food choices other than putrid meat or molded toast, but she wanted no part of that either. If delusion and a blinding headache was her lot, so be it.

Over the next week the young woman saw more things that shocked her. An elderly woman who cried uncontrollably was beaten and then tossed on a bed unconscious. The next morning she was dead. The doctors attributed her demise to "convulsions," and that was the end of it. Patients injected freely with morphine or chloral would beg for water when the drugs made them thirsty, and the nurses would deny them even a drop. Nurses would take raisins and grapes and nuts left over from the doctors' meals and eat them slowly in front of the patients to torment them. Women who upset the nurses, whatever the reason, were put on the "rope gang," where they were dragged around by the hair, kicked, and choked, while one of the nurses stood guard in case a doctor approached. One victim of the rope gang did tell a doctor what had

happened, but he dismissed her complaints as the ravings of a madwoman and never bothered to investigate further.

And then, ten days after the young woman had been taken away from the Essex Market Court to Bellevue State Hospital, the public's prayers were answered. Attorney Peter A. Hendricks, a prominent member of the New York bar, came forward and arranged for the young woman's release to the custody of anonymous clients. All seven newspapers trumpeted this development on their front page. The *Sun* attributed it to the vigilance of the *Sun*'s loyal readers. The *Times* credited the medical staff at Bellevue, concluding that it had achieved "gratifying results," and with further care "the poor waif might have a complete recovery." Two days after the release, however, the *World* gave a fuller account of exactly what had happened:

INSIDE THE MADHOUSE

Nellie Bly's Experience in the Blackwell's Island Asylum

Ten Days with Lunatics

How the City's Unfortunate Wards Are Fed and Treated

Attendants Who Harass and Abuse Patients

and Laugh at Their Miseries

The young woman in the Essex Market courtroom had not been insane at all, but a 24-year-old reporter named Nellie Bly, out to reveal the horrors of Bellevue. And she held back nothing, setting out in detail everything she had experienced and witnessed. Her powerful account swept the country. Newspapers all over North America carried the

story, extolling Nellie Bly's daring and courage and castigating Bellevue State Hospital and the city of New York. The embarrassed *New York Times* dropped all mention of the story it had placed on page one every day for two weeks, but the *Sun* unabashedly interviewed medical personnel and ran a story on Nellie Bly's stay in the asylum, with a rare headline praising a rival's reporter:

PLAYING MAD WOMAN

Nellie Bly Too Sharp for the Island Doctors

The Sun Finishes Up its Story of the "Pretty Crazy Girl"

Sitting at the writing desk in her tiny Harlem bedroom, her mother asleep on their bed, Nellie felt unabashed pride. The New York City Council had toured the hospital with her and appropriated an additional \$1 million to the Department of Public Charities and Corrections to improve conditions at Bellevue. The entire nursing staff was either fired or placed under arrest, and the mayor took personal responsibility for installing a new administration. Journalistically her feat was unprecedented. No reporter had ever become a victim in order to write a major story. Reporters would routinely identify themselves and even give their subjects a chance to comment before a story was published, but Nellie had seen people get away with murder that way. The rules of journalism, she smiled to herself, were about to change.

Just as revolutionary, and an even greater source of pride, was the fact that the person so dramatically changing the practice of American journalism was a woman. No woman had ever had a front-page story before, certainly not like this.

But the ten days had been hell. Their memory would not go away soon. Her limbs ached, her lungs felt singed, her stomach could still not tolerate solid food. She wrote about it every day in her journal, sometimes twice a day. Yet it had all been worth it. Nellie reread again and again the telegram she had received only minutes ago. Colonel John Cockerill, the editor-in-chief at the *New York World*, wanted to see her immediately. Of New York's seven major newspapers, six – including *The Sun*, the most sophisticated, and the *Herald*, the wealthiest – were owned by well-heeled Republicans and spouted the pro-capitalist, anti-labor, anti-immigrant polemics of their publishers. The seventh, the *World*, was owned by Joseph Pulitzer, a Hungarian-born immigrant of reputedly Jewish ancestry, and directed toward the middle-class, the poor, and the scandal-mongers. That the *World* had catapulted into first place in both circulation and revenues in only four years under Pulitzer's ownership stuck in the craws of established newspapermen, who considered their papers far better written, far better edited, and infinitely more American. The *World* was where she belonged.

To be invited back to the *World* by Cockerill was a remarkable accomplishment – one more reason her story had been worth it. She had taken quite a chance leaving the *Pittsburg Dispatch* a year before. Her editors had reassigned her to gardening and fashion stories after advertisers complained about her investigative pieces. She quit on the spot, even though she had several family members to support. She had moved to New York City with her frail mother and for eight months tried to find newspaper work, but literally could not even get through a front door, as company after company along Newspaper Row stationed bodyguards to keep out unwanted jobseekers and irate readers. Several sentries offered to provide assistance in return for an afternoon of fornication, but Nellie