TRAPPED!

First published 2025 by FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159 fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover design by Carolyn Brown, tendeersigh.com.au Map by Chris Crook. Printed by Leo Paper Products Ltd. Guangdong, China



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760994990 (paperback) ISBN 9781760995003 (ebook)



Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries



Publication of this title was assisted by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.

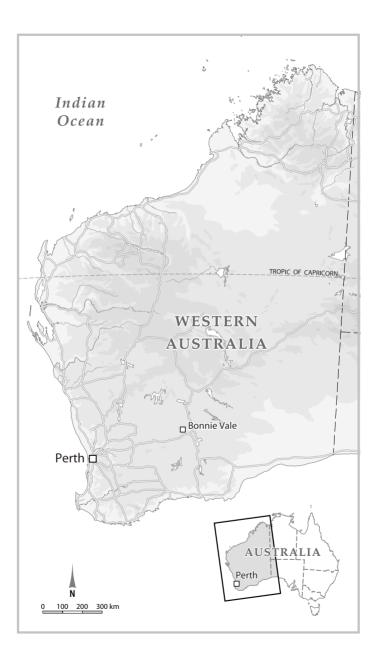


TRAPPED!

The Entombed Miner of Bonnie Vale

JULIA LAWRINSON





Our educational authorities would do well to find a place in the school reading books for so inspiring a story from real life.

> 'Back from the Tomb' *The West Australian* 29 March 1907

DAY 1 4pm, 19 March 1907 Bonnie Vale, Western Australian goldfields, Australia

'Quick, quick! Everyone, come quick!'

Joe thinks he hears shouting over the rain tap-tap-tapping on the tin roof turning the floor to mud

Behind the canvas wall Joe gathers rocks in his hands to throw in case it's the Aussie kids again

Papà told him not to But Papà's not here

He leans his ear toward the path that is now a river thanks to the endless rain

The voice calls again

'Everyone, help!' Joe breathes out with relief It isn't the Aussie kids It's one of the workers from the Britishers camp

Joe sticks his head through the flap while the mud squelches through his bare toes

'The mine has flooded!' the worker calls

Before he has time to think Joe is running to the mine where his Papà works deep underground. BEFORE September 1906 Gorno, Italy

'Giuseppe!' Zio Tommaso is yelling again 'You haven't chopped this wood properly!'

Joe's hands are red and his arms are aching He wants to yell, 'I did so!' No point Zio Tommaso hates him Nothing is good enough

He doesn't turn the soil the way he should He yanks the apples off the tree instead of twisting them He once forgot to secure the pig's pen and the pig could have got out (The pig didn't escape but she could have)

On and on and on Pick, pick, pick

Zia Olivia tries to make up for her husband being harsh She smiles and gives Joe extra slices of bread when Zio isn't around She reaches out and squeezes Joe to her as she kneads dough stirs polenta chops vegetables for dinner

'Your Mamma would be so proud' she says, her eyes full of tears 'I miss my sister every day'

But if Zio Tommaso catches her being kind he yells 'He's nearly a man, Livia! He'll be soft if you keep treating him this way' Joe wonders if his uncle is right He still cries at night sometimes when his sisters are asleep He cries remembering Mamma's warm arms the way she sang when she was putting wood in the stove the way she smiled when the children were all tucked in bed together

Joe doesn't mention Mamma when Zio's around If he does, his uncle snaps 'Your mother is in heaven She's watching what you do so don't shame her'

So now when he prays to Mother Maria he thinks of Mamma asks her to help him

And sometimes she does.

BEFORE October 1906 Gorno, Italy

When Papà comes back from Australia when he has slept after his long, long journey Joe begs him

'Please Papà Let me come back to Australia with you I'll get a job I can help on the mines Anything will do I could help send money back to Zio and Zia Please!'

Joe is leaving school soon along with the other boys in the village When summer comes he'll be herding goats in the mountains Or he'll start work on the zinc mine the mine Papà worked before he left for Australia

Now Papà squints at his eldest son Papà is wiry and strong even though he is not much taller than Joe His skin is so creased around his eyes Joe can't tell whether he is pleased or upset 'La calma è la virtù dei forti' Papà says 'Calm is the virtue of the strong'

Joe wants to protest that it is Zio who is never calm But then Papà says something else 'Turn around, Beppe'

Joe is confused That's what Zio Tommaso says before he brings down a belt on Joe's legs But Papà's voice is soft

Joe turns around

Papà runs a rough palm over the welts Zio left on Joe's legs a few weeks ago because he let the fire go out

Now Papà turns Joe back around and holds him by the shoulders He says 'You have to be fourteen to work in Australia'

Joe's stomach drops with disappointment Fourteen is too far away Fourteen means nearly two more years of dreading the sight of Zio of never being able to do the right thing of being kept awake by hot pain after a whipping

Then Papà goes on 'But if you are willing to go to school and learn some English you will be ready to work when you are old enough'

Joe doesn't have to think before he says yes

He will have plenty of time to wonder if he did the right thing later.