

BARREN GROUNDS

B. MICHAEL RADBURN



**PANTERA
PRESS**

PROLOGUE

The Field of Bones

1942

Its footfalls grew louder as it drew nearer. Twelve-year-old Joseph Capello recognised the sound as coming from a nightmare – a lie of the subconscious that would dissolve with dawn’s light. And yet, the terror was real enough, as the cloaked figure stalked the shadowed passageways between the camp huts.

Joseph’s coarse blankets pressed him into the mattress, his chest too constricted for him to scream as the murky figure sought him out. It could smell souls like a child smells a freshly baked pie; taste coppery blood like a boy tastes caramel. The footsteps halted outside their hut and Joseph withered into the mattress as a talon scratched at an eddied knot in the wall just inches from his face.

The scratching woke him.

He cast the blankets aside and sprang upright in bed. Joseph

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focused on the familiar knothole, a tight wad of newspaper plugged firmly against the night and whatever lay beyond.

He didn't know what time it was, but it was still dark outside the window, his bedroom door open enough to let in some of the kitchen's light. Joseph concentrated on his breathing as he sank back down, hugging his knees. He strained to hear the scratching again. Just a dream – another lie. He studied the twisted trail of the blankets he had cast across the floor, to the mirror opposite, the auburn-eyed twelve-year-old boy in the mirror staring back at him. His once plump cheeks had wasted away along with his appetite since Mama, Papa and he had been exiled to the camps, with busloads of other Italian immigrants.

Joseph stood warily so as not to make the floorboards creak. He stepped into the rectangle of kitchen light as he heard the front door open slowly, the rabbit snares that hung from the handle chiming his father's entry. Joseph held his breath, stood stock-still as Papa skulked in, having defied the camp curfew, and Mama's feelings, for the German bathtub gin in the adjoining compound. Joseph couldn't let his father see him witness this indiscretion. He waited for Papa to steal into his and Mama's bedroom before moving so much as an eyelash, then returned to bed, the blankets he'd gathered covering his head as he waited for the shouting to begin.

And it did.

Joseph thrust his head deep into the pillow and pressed his hands to his ears, the memory of bus tyres on dirt roads slowly overpowering the yelling in their little cabin. Eventually, the memories of last summer's heat haze thawed the winter cold.

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Joseph watched his mother write the latest entry in her diary and place the strip of gold cotton in the crease between the pages. Her handwriting was elegant, flowing across the page like a trail to something wonderful. Everything about Mama, a Roman dressmaker, was elegant: style and grace wrapped in a ribbon of melancholy.

She had let Joseph take the window seat. As the wind cooled the sweat on his temples, he was conscious that his father sat alone, across the aisle. Papa looked pitiful, defeated, head resting on his arms against the seat in front, his brown leather jacket with its olive-green cotton waistband across his legs. What they couldn't pack, they wore, and what they couldn't wear, they carried, the rest of their belongings stuffed into a steamer trunk on the bus roof. His father was frightened, Joseph could tell, but Papa chose to carry that fear alone. Whereas Mama tried to resist being forced to become something else, Papa simply succumbed to it.

The bus slowed as they passed through large gates. Tall barbwire fences stretched for miles beneath the noontday sun. A guard waved them through, eyes hidden beneath his slouch hat, rifle slung over one shoulder, khaki shirt stained with sweat. A sergeant's three stripes were on his rolled-up shirtsleeves. The man became still as they passed, his steely, pale blue eyes fixed on Mama, who remained oblivious to his attention. His face had the weathered lines of a man much out of doors, but soon creased into a kind smile before he turned his back on the dust kicked up by the passing bus.

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The world was different inside the fence – it felt limited, as if the barbwire was wrapped around Joseph’s chest. West beyond the fence, a single windmill stood idle in a field of sun-bleached cattle bones, its sails motionless in the stagnant air, its bright red windvane like a drop of blood against the blue fabric of the sky.

Joseph and his family would be living here for however long the war lasted.

The outside air had a dryness that reached into his lungs with each breath as he stepped off the bus. He and Mama rested beneath the dappled shade of a stringy-bark tree outside a building with the sign *STORE & REGISTRATION*. Joseph sat on their steamer trunk, *Capello* carved above the brass lock, wilting against his mother’s arm and watching his father queue for blankets and their hut allocation. A black-and-white fox terrier with a grey, whiskery face, ears upright and eyes bright, sat panting by its dish in the doorway, oblivious to the passing humanity.

Joseph’s fingers drifted languidly across his family’s name carved into the trunk, his lips silently mouthing each letter. He watched the dog as she rose and wandered over to sniff warily at something blue – thumb sized – on the tree bark. Curious, Joseph followed. He nudged the dog away, and saw that the shape was an insect. He tapped it lightly, but it didn’t move.

‘Be careful,’ Mama called.

‘It’s dead,’ he declared. ‘Just a shell.’ Joseph delicately unhooked the insect’s casing from the tree and held it up to the light, amazed at the iridescent blues, fierce and beautiful. ‘What is it, Mama?’

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She lit a cigarette, drew the smoke delicately between her red lips, a ring of colour left on the white tip, as she examined his find.

‘I don’t know,’ she confessed. ‘But it’s quite lovely.’

Joseph found the smell of her Chesterfields comforting. He sat beside his mother and they examined the strange translucent shell, wondering what it was called. After all, everything had a name.

‘Mama?’ Joseph asked in Italian. ‘Does Capello mean the same here as it does back home?’

She looked down at him with sad eyes. ‘English,’ she reminded him in a blunt tone. ‘Australia is your home now. You can dream in Italian, but you must speak in English.’ She paused to consider his question. ‘Of course your name means the same in both countries.’

‘But you’ve never told me the meaning.’

His mother was silent for a moment. ‘You need to know your Latin,’ she said finally. ‘Your name has two meanings. One is the name for a trickster, from the Latin: *capullum*.’ She tapped his nose playfully. ‘Just like you, my little lamb.’

Joseph *did* like that idea. ‘And the other meaning?’ he asked.

‘Again from the Latin,’ she said. ‘*Capa*, as in cloak, or cape.’ She lifted Joseph’s chin, brushed the dust from his lips with her thumb. ‘Have you heard of the Cloakman?’

‘No.’

‘I see.’ She drew on her cigarette, stared across the road as her husband finally stepped inside the store. ‘The Cloakman is a combination of the two. He is the trickster who hides

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behind his black cloak, with his pockets full of mischief. The Cloakman will bring nothing but trouble and is to be avoided.’ Her fingers trembled as she dropped her cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath her shoe.

‘The Cloakman,’ he whispered as a stifling gust of wind blew a dust devil across the road.



A blast of winter wind buffeted the window in Joseph’s bedroom. He rode the gust back to his hiding place beneath the blankets, realising that his breath and the wind were the only sounds remaining – that the shouting had ceased. He pulled down the covers and saw the first light of dawn emerging through his window. Joseph sat up, and heard something roll from his bed to the floor.

The chill from the frigid air cut deeper when he saw the familiar newspaper plug pushed out from its place in the wall. Joseph stared at the open knothole and listened to the wind’s mournful tune beneath the eaves. He crept closer, bedsprings creaking beneath his knees, hesitating a moment before pressing his eye to the opening – at last brave enough to glimpse the Cloakman, with his pockets full of mischief.

PART ONE

Legacy of Ruin

1962

1

Joe Capello had left his police coat and hat in the car downstairs, preferring to cover his badge and sergeant's stripes with a black sweater when off duty. The leather bench outside Dr Alice Simone's office was hard as stone, but was the only seat close to the waiting-room window Joe preferred to sit near. He glanced at his watch and sighed. Dr Simone was twenty minutes late already. *Why do they make appointments if they can't keep them?* He glared at the gold-leaf sign on the office door.

Dr A. Simone, MD, Ph.D.

Psychiatrist

Once a week, for three long months now, he had sat here staring at that sign, dreading the hour ahead. He wouldn't go if he was paying for the sessions. In Joe's opinion, it was just good departmental money being pissed against the wall. And he certainly wouldn't go if it wasn't a condition of his employment since the accident. And if having to see some

head doc wasn't enough, she was a woman. All his life, doctors had been old men in tweed coats, who always looked sicker than Joe ever felt. Dr Simone was the exception, not the rule, and she had a fierce confidence, something Joe felt himself reluctantly admiring.

Behind the reception desk was a mirrored wall, perhaps intended to make the room look bigger. The receptionist was a redhaired girl in her mid-twenties, who today wore a lemon-coloured cotton top, buttoned up to the neck, her posture as straight as a telegraph pole. She gave Joe a glancing smile, and he smiled awkwardly back, catching his reflection in the mirror, hair swept into shape with Brylcreem. He pressed at the crow's feet in the corners of his eyes. His only remaining youthful feature was the fine scar that cut neatly through his right eyebrow. A scar from Rushworth – so long ago now, he couldn't remember how he'd earned it. *Maybe Dr Simone could unearth that little gem too.* Joe touched the hair at his temples, where a light peppering of grey had begun to emerge.

He turned from the flatness of his reflection to stare out over Sydney Harbour. From Dr Simone's eighth-floor office, he had a clear view of the staggered foundations of the new Opera House. He had seen an artist's impression of it in the newspaper, its towering sails and cathedral windows mirroring the harbour like something from a science-fiction movie. But then he was staring at his reflection again, ghostly in the glass, and was back to thinking about Rushworth and the bus ride all those years ago. That was the thing about Dr Simone's sessions. They were always dragging up memories

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he would rather leave buried. Hell, he could almost taste the camp's dust again.

A familiar rage started to build. Joe could feel his hands begin to tremble, and clasped them tightly together until it passed. He didn't need a shrink to name it. Rage was an emotion as natural as any other, its genesis in some moment that would eventually pass. *Better to let it do its job and run its course*, he decided, *than keep it alive in Dr Simone's scab-picking sessions.*

He cast about for a distraction, and found it in Lucille Ball's smile on the cover of a *TIME* magazine on the table beside him. 'Who loves ya, Lucy?' he whispered to her.

The receptionist's intercom buzzed. 'I'll send him through,' she said, lifting her finger from the talk button and walking to the door. 'You can go in now, Mr Capello.'

As Joe entered, Dr Simone – tall and slender, looking half her age – stepped out from behind the desk. The wall behind her was arrayed with gilded-framed credentials, and photographs of the doctor with various mayors, the state premier and the current police commissioner. They were her trophies; a display of her successful career's pathway, and a reminder to her patients that she had friends in high places. She sat down on one of two deep-blue velour sofas facing each other in the centre of the room. A smoked glass coffee table stood between them, a copy of today's *Herald* beside a clean ashtray. She wore a black suit, the jacket open over a bone-coloured top, the solitaire diamond pendant that hung from her neck catching the light. Her tawny hair was in its usual bun, and her hazel eyes shone confidently.

‘Good to see you again, Joe,’ she said with a smile. She gestured to the sofa opposite. ‘Won’t you sit?’

‘Thanks,’ Joe said, taking his seat. He eyed the folder beside her with his name on the cover, which grew thicker with each visit. *Maybe she’s gonna write a book about me.* ‘That can’t all be about me?’ He tried to sound jovial.

‘Every word.’ Dr Simone looked at the folder for a moment, then handed it to him. ‘Twelve sessions,’ she said. ‘You’re welcome to read it if you’d like.’

‘I’ll wait for the movie.’ Another attempt at humour.

She smiled again and put the folder down. ‘There’s nothing in there that we haven’t already discussed, Joe.’ She gently patted it. ‘Your journey here so far.’

Joe relaxed back into the sofa, which was far more comfortable than the waiting-room bench. ‘And yet, I’m still not sure how I got here, Doc.’

Dr Simone shifted slightly in her seat. ‘I can recommend the number fourteen bus,’ she said.

Joe raised his eyebrows. It was her first attempt at a quip in three months. ‘You’re cracking jokes now, Doctor?’

‘You started it,’ she bantered. ‘And, besides, I thought it might break that tension you’ve been working on in my waiting room.’

‘That obvious, huh?’

‘You wear your heart on your sleeve, Joe.’ She paused, looking at him. ‘If your journey is still uncertain after all this therapy, why don’t we take some time to recap?’ She gently tapped the little finger of her left hand on the sofa armrest. ‘Perhaps start by telling me where you *think* it all began?’

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Joe opened his mouth, ready to reply that it was the first day of the Jeweller case, but then paused, no longer sure. He wished he possessed her certitude, just long enough to get him through this session, then recalled he'd once had self-confidence in spades. Before his demotion. Before the fatal accident.

His gaze fell upon the *Herald* on the coffee table between them. 'I think it all began with an article in the paper last year,' Joe said.

2

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Joe climbed the steps to Mama's veranda, where a porch swing swayed in the gentle breeze. He rested a cumbersome box on his hip while he negotiated the tricky front door handle. Nudging the door open with his knee, he stepped inside, the early morning light casting his shadow along the hall rug.

'Mama, it's me,' he called, placing the box on the hallstand. 'Mama?' He closed the door, and could just make out Frank Sinatra crooning from the record player in the parlour.

The hum of a sewing machine suddenly smothered Frank's dulcet tones. 'Mama. It's me, Joe,' he called again, passing his old bedroom. 'I brought you a present.'

'Joseph?' she called back from the sewing room. Her once-soft voice had a coarser edge these days. 'That you?'

Joe shook his head and smiled. Her hearing was getting worse. *It wasn't the only thing going south.* He could smell a

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hint of cigarette smoke in the air; she'd promised him she'd give them up.

He followed the sewing machine's whirr, glancing at the collection of photographs along the walls. Lives captured through Papa's camera lens – an alchemy of light, paper and chemicals that preserved these black-and-white memories. Mama, so young, standing on a rocky hill with Rome spread out behind her. Joe as a wide-eyed baby in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. The two of them in later years, on the deck of the HMT *Dunera*, fleeing Mussolini's war. But no photographs of Papa, who was always on the other side of the camera; a witness to their lives, rather than a participant. With every passing year, it became harder for Joe to remember his facial features.

There were no photos of Rushworth, which was better left forgotten. For all Joe knew, though, they were stuffed firmly in that old steamer trunk Mama kept locked away somewhere. He got to the Kodachrome years: colour pictures capturing Joe at the police academy; his promotion to senior constable; and, finally, his recent promotion to detective.

'You're late,' said Mama, as he stood in the sewing room doorway. She was pinning the hem of a dress on one of the mannequins, refusing to look at him. The clothes she made these days were for the young – the colours getting brighter and the hems getting shorter every year.

'I made us coffee, and now it's cold,' she said.

Joe looked at his scratched-up Timex, annoyed. *That can't be the right time.* If it wasn't his academy graduation present from Mama, he would have junked it long ago. He held it up

to his ear, the cadence of its irregular ticking like the heart of an old man on his deathbed. ‘Shit!’ he whispered. He’d have to push on or he’d be late for work.

‘You kiss your mama with that mouth, young man?’ Her English was as good as it was ever going to get at her age, but the Italian accent lingered. She tried to remain stern, like the titan she believed herself to be, but Joe could see a smile pressing at her lips.

He captured that moment in his heart, the vision more precious than any photo on a wall.

‘I’ll put a fresh pot on,’ Joe said. Then, over his shoulder, ‘You’ve been smoking again, Mama. I can smell it.’

‘I had *one*.’ Her reply was sheepish.

‘Dr Barker said you have to give them up.’ Joe got the box from the hallstand and entered the kitchen. ‘He said you’re just one pack away from emphysema. Is that how you want to die?’

‘You have a killer to catch, but you prefer to catch your mama smoking,’ she called from the sewing room. ‘What sort of detective are you?’

‘A good one, Mama.’ Joe’s voice wasn’t raised, his answer being more for himself.

‘What is this present you brought me?’

He placed the box on the bench, took out the heavy answering machine – unclaimed from the stolen property department – and lay it near the phone. ‘I’m not so sure you deserve it now after lying to me, Mama!’ he called back.

Joe emptied the tepid plunger coffee down the sink. When he opened the window, the late spring air bore the warm promise of summer. The added light made the kitchen walls

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look tired, and Joe made a note to get some colour swatches so Mama could choose new paint. He filled the kettle and placed it on the hotplate, then sat at the table to wait for it to boil. Two Chesterfield butts were crushed out in the ashtray. Joe pushed it away in disgust.

‘Just one, my arse, Mama.’ He placed one of her magazines over it. Beside it was the daily newspaper, still rolled up and damp from the morning dew. Joe unfurled it, well aware that Mama didn’t like other people reading the paper before her. Then he saw the front page – two faces staring back at him, accusing. *You have a killer to catch.*



Lynette Saunders and Graham King. Joe knew them more intimately than he cared to, and for all the wrong reasons. The pictures were recent, but weren’t the ones in their case files. Both in their late twenties, they smiled from the head and shoulder portraits with the confidence of two people with their whole lives ahead of them. This Joe very much doubted, particularly now that the *Herald* had decided to announce their abduction. He quickly scanned the bottom of the column for the reporter’s name. *Donald Hurley.*

‘What the fuck, Don?’

‘You say something, Joseph?’ Mama called from the sewing room.

‘No, Mama.’

Hurley had crossed the line with this story. *The deal was to sit on this info until confirmed, you dick!*

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His jaw tensed at the lurid banner: FRIDAY FEATURE – THE JEWELLER’S NEXT VICTIMS.

You self-righteous prick! Cheap tabloid journalism at its fucking best. Don used to be better than this, but he had lost his way when the Jeweller reached out and made him a part of the story, his journalistic career riding on the killer’s coat-tails ever since.

Two more people have been abducted from the Sydney suburb of Rhodes. It’s significant as the site of three previous abductions – revealed by this newspaper as murders by the killer dubbed ‘the Jeweller’.

The previous victims were abducted approximately three weeks before they were found with their bodies in intricate poses. Each couple was a pair involved in an extramarital affair.

The first couple was discovered by pensioner Mr Ronald Jones two years ago.

‘I came across them at sun-up while walking my dog. They were dressed to the nines in clean, pressed clothes, side by side in a bus shelter. I even said hello. Felt like a ruddy fool when I realised they were dead.’

It is believed that the later murders were committed by the same killer. The Jeweller had informed the Herald of the bodies’ locations, in handwritten letters that were forwarded to Task Force Night Owl headed by Detective Inspector Delaney. Each letter was accompanied by the victims’ amputated ring fingers, which wore crude wedding bands fashioned out of fence wire.

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Night Owl operates from the Rhodes police station with the specific role of bringing the Jeweller to justice. DI Delaney stated recently that evidence is mounting, and an arrest is imminent. However, he encouraged the public to come forward with any information that could assist with the case.

Joe cast the newspaper aside, balled his fists together and pressed them firmly to his lips as he pondered Hurley's story. Aside from announcing there were two more *suspected* victims, he had only recapped the case to date, all of which John and Jane Public already knew. Lynette Saunders and Graham King were not the only missing people who partially fit the Jeweller's MO, but the fact that they were involved in an extramarital affair, like the others, put them on the short list. This was a fact known by Hurley, but kept out of the papers by agreement with the police. *Play by our rules, or lose our cooperation*, was Night Owl's arrangement with him.

In this case, Saunders and King were both from outside Rhodes, but possibly abducted from there, the final link Joe was currently investigating. At least Hurley hadn't publicised the tidbit of where they were from. *Any known intel we can keep from the Jeweller, the better*. He relaxed his grip and leaned back in the chair. *As things stand, the Jeweller seems to know more about us than we know about him*.

The kettle had boiled and Joe stood to take it off the flame. He looked over at Mama's calendar above the fridge and counted back the days, then glanced down at the two faces on the *Herald's* front page. They had been missing for a

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week now, and there was still a chance that they were alive, slim though it might be.

So, why reach out to the papers so early? Joe wondered. Once again, the task force was having to react to the Jeweller's action.

'Is our coffee ready?' Mama said as she entered the kitchen, then paused in front of the empty plunger, hands on hips. 'What have you been doing?'

'Work, Mama.'

'And what is that thing?' She was pointing at the answering machine.

'So you don't miss any more dress orders,' he said, still distracted by the newspaper. 'I'll set it up later.' Joe kissed her on the cheek. 'Sorry about the coffee, but I have to go into work.'

'Eat first,' she commanded. 'What is so important that you can't eat?'

He dashed out, through the hallway of memories. 'I'll call you tonight.'