

An Incident in a Ghost Town

Chapter One

The Golden Outback in Western Australia is largely deserted today, but in the mid-1800s, prospectors mined its rich veins of gold, copper, and lead.

Those boom days were years in the past on the morning when the weary, dirty prospector rode on horseback into the area's only ghost town. The place had once been home to gold hunters—fossickers, they called themselves. But once the gold was gone, the town had been given back to the surrounding desert, losing its name forever, and whatever shame or acclaim it may have known was forgotten.



The sun rose behind the arriving prospector, as if it was following him, and the awakening sky was blue and clear. There were seldom clouds here, and it was not, in fact, unusual for years to pass without rain. And on those rare occasions when the waters came, the dry, rock-hard ground could not absorb them. That, along with the fact that the town had been built in a gully, meant that it had seen a flash flood or two over the years.



The town's lone visitor, its sole occupant, was tired and hungry. He'd only recently—finally—accepted that he didn't exactly excel at finding gold. Months of failure had at last persuaded him that his friends had been right to dismiss his dreams. The area's riches had been carried off long ago, and the Golden Outback wasn't golden any more.

His stomach growled, his thirst was acute, his supplies were depleted, and the temperature was rising rapidly. Refusing to agonize over his situation, he dismounted his horse, led the animal into what had once been a general store, and napped in the hot and dusty shade.

Chapter Two

When he awoke, soaked in sweat, the sun was at its highest point in the sky. He realized, gradually, what had roused him from his slumber. It wasn't the oppressive heat that was baking the still air, nor was it his agonizing hunger or his unquenchable thirst.

No, it was something else entirely, something barely audible until he forced himself completely awake. Outside, in the Town Hall's tower, a large bell was ringing.



His skin, despite the heat, sprouted goosebumps. Bells, he realized, don't ring on their own. Someone, some *thing*, was ringing it. He tensed; the muscles in his stomach contracted. He knew he had an audience, that someone was watching him and toying with him. This was a ghost town, after all, so perhaps there really were ghosts hanging around.

He got to his feet and quickly left the abandoned store. His horse followed as far as the doorway and watched him run across the street, into the Town Hall. The building was small, and he quickly located the spiral staircase that led up to the tower. Despite his exhaustion, he bounded up the stairs, demanding to know who was there.

When he got to the top, he found himself face to face with no one.

Air brushed his cheek, softly at first, then more insistently. A strong, rain-scented wind was kicking up, ringing the bell in this place where wind came to die. As the sky darkened like something haunted, one fat raindrop, then another, fell from the heavens.

He looked down from the tower onto the town's only street and saw his horse, looking as surprised as the prospector felt.

Then, in the space of an instant, the cloudburst commenced. Within moments, the town violently flooded. Moments after that, just as abruptly, the deluge ended. The sky cleared, the waters left, and the street became merely damp.

His horse was gone.

Chapter Three

He understood that the brief, adverse weather had likely saved his life. If the wind had not lured him to the tower, the flash flood would almost certainly have gotten him, too.

Then, he noticed a large box on the wooden floor; it had apparently been left there and, like the rest of the town, forgotten.

He walked to it, opened its lid, and discovered that it was filled to the brim with gold nuggets. There was a note as well, torn, it seemed, from a larger manuscript. The handwriting looked at first like scribbles, but with some effort, he was able to make it out.

I toiled and dug,

And here's my gold,

My life was spent getting it

But now, I'm too old.

He let loose with a roaring whoop that nobody was around to hear; he'd found gold after all. If he could get it to Perth, the nearest city, he could cash it in.



He dragged the box down the steps, with no idea how he'd get it to the appraiser. As if in response, his horse returned. There was, of course, no way to ask it how it had escaped death. It was not weakened or frightened; if anything, it seemed invigorated by the day's brief excitement, with a newfound energy and stamina.

The prospector took his canteens from the horse's saddlebags and filled them with the rainwater that had puddled here and there. They would not be thirsty on their trip to Perth, but eating would have to wait, just one more day.

By mid-afternoon, the saddlebags were filled with the gold, the harsh sun had subtracted the water from the street, and the air, like the town itself, was again hot and dry.

At sunset, he mounted his horse and started toward his destination. He looked back, only once, at the ghost town made orange by the setting sun. It wasn't literally a ghost town; he knew there were such things as ghosts.

That's what he told himself, anyway.