

**PETER
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A Bitter Harvest

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*In memory of Marjorie,
whose idea it was to go to the
Barossa Valley in search of a
story*

Prologue

BROKEN HILL, NSW,

1886 The man stood listening in the dark as the sounds of anger grew and disturbed the night. They became wilder, spreading from the canvas saloon bar of Connolly's Hotel and beyond it, down Argent Street where miners lived in their shanty dwellings, past Stuart Lane and the lanterns held by the girls parading and plying for hire, reaching the edge of town and the stables behind the blacksmith's shop, where he knew he had only a few minutes to save his life.

He refused to panic. Taking precious moments to calm the horse as he fitted the saddle and tightened the girth, he then fastened the bulging saddlebags securely to the pommel. With infinite care he led the animal out of the shadows. He could hear the growing fury of the mob of men baying for blood - his blood - he could imagine them brandishing knives and rifles along with their share certificates, the worthless scrip he had sold them so successfully. The promoters he had used as a front were bound to lose their nerve and betray him to save themselves; it was all he could do to restrain himself from mounting the horse and galloping headlong into the night. But he had to remain

composed, stick to the plan. It would be madness to try to outride those men, or to give the police time to receive a telegraph message and be waiting for him. It was vital no-one witness his departure, but far more importantly, that nobody even suspect the direction he had taken.

As the distant crowd's wrath became a growing tumult, the man carefully tied hessian around each of the horse's hooves, and only then, keeping to the shadows and avoiding campfires, knowing there would be no tracks to follow, did he ride the horse quietly through the dusty streets named after the rich ores on which this barren place had grown and flourished. From Argent Street he turned into Chloride Row, down Zinc Street, Mercury, then Cobalt Road, until the gaunt skyline of the Silver City was behind him.

In the bar of Connolly's Hotel, passions flared and lamps flickered on the flimsy canvas walls, as one of the promoters tried to pacify the crowd.

'Listen to me,' he shouted, and for an instant they did. 'Your investments are safe. All stock securities are certified by the company and personally guaranteed by the manager himself.'

There was a moment of silent disbelief, more threatening than the shouts and hostility.

'So where is he?' someone asked. 'Where is the bastard?'

If the frightened promoters had been able to answer this, what followed might have been avoided. But they hesitated, and the men who had been swindled out of their hard won scraps of silver knew in that instant their savings were lost. They had been cleverly robbed, and while the missing manager was the prime object of their rage, these two men had most certainly played a role. If the Silver City Trust Company, as it had been so

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extravagantly advertised, was a sham, then this pair posing as its trustees had contributed to the fraud.

Someone in the crowd threw a brick. It cut the forehead of one promoter. Blood streamed into his eyes. Another missile aimed at his colleague smashed an oil lantern. Moments later flames were licking at the canvas walls. Violence exploded inside the tent, as the crowd panicked and tried to fight their way towards the exits. In the suffocating smoke, men were trampled on and women were pushed aside amid screams as the flames spread. Within ten minutes, Patrick Connolly's hotel was burnt to charred scraps, and more than a dozen miners were suffering from burns and serious injuries.

A mile to the south, the rider looked back to see the flames against the night sky, and wondered what had happened. He felt a trace of fear. He knew by dawn he must put at least thirty miles between himself and the town-after that they would never find him.