

Woodleigh Crater

Nora R. Hobbs



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Contents

Foreword.....	1
The Station.....	3
The Guest.....	11
The Crash.....	21
The Argument.....	33
Base Camp.....	41
Going Out.....	51
Camp Three.....	69
The Mongrels.....	81
The Pile.....	91
The Bunyip.....	99
The Escape.....	111
The Billabong.....	117
The Visitors.....	129
The War.....	143
Farwell.....	155
Getting Acquainted.....	175
Back to the Crater.....	189
The Eggs.....	207
The Search.....	215
The Chase.....	237

As nearly as possible, this story is written with Aussie accents in the dialog by spelling and punctuation. Sandy, however, is British, and his speech is accented appropriately and differentiated from the Aussie.

I hope you can feel the accents as you read and that these efforts add considerably to your enjoyment of the story.

Nora R. Hobbs

Foreword

A new multi-ring impact crater, the world's fourth largest at 75 miles (120 kilometers) across, has been found in western Australia. The impact crater, scientists believe, was caused by a 3-mile (5-kilometer) wide asteroid slamming into the area, causing a wave of extinction 200 million to 360 million years ago. Western Australia government geoscientist, Robert Iasky, and a colleague confirmed the crater's existence a few years ago, while researching the isolated regions mineral exploration potential. Drilling samples in April 1999 concluded the deformations were from a massive impact. The new crater has been named Woodleigh, in honor of the sheep station north of Perth, where it was found.

The huge crater lies mostly on private land, and is virtually imperceptible to the untrained eye amid the regions rolling hills and barren, rocky land. Geologic evidence of the crater can only be gained by analyzing rock samples lying 195 to 650 feet (60 to 200 meters) below ground for signs of metamorphism. A light impression of the crater may be seen when viewed from photos take from the space station. What's more, there's no direct evidence of the asteroid, which itself was pulverized as the crash's first victim.

What is most important to this story, however, is not what was obliterated by the impact – but what survived.

The Station

As far as he could see behind the shearing sheds was a sea of white fleece. It was shearing time at the Tilmann Station and from the back porch of the house used as a patio, he could see the flurry of activity around the pens and shearing sheds some distance away. The sun was bright and the day was hot with no breeze. Only the fans inside the house and in the sheds made activity possible. Shearing time brought in the shearers that traveled throughout Australia, moving from station to station.

A short walk from there to his left stood two more barns where a few cows and one bull were kept in large pens beside a hay barn. Next to that was a tall windmill that provided water for the stock, when the wind was

blowing. There was not enough rich grass to sustain cattle in Western Australia, so they had to remain in pens and are fed grain and hay imported from other places around the country. A few horses are stalled in the other barn, and in the same area, there was a chicken pen and a hog wallow where a sows and a boar rolled in a mud bath.

Now his eyes drifted to his right, past the shearing sheds and out to a stand of trees, where a second tall windmill stood, its blades unmoving. It would not pump water today, but there was a large wooden water tank about fifteen feet in diameter to provide water for the barracks and cook shack where there were two long wooden tables and some wooden chairs. Pipes from this well brought water to the house by a small pump in the basement. At times like this, where there was no wind, the cooking and eating were done outside. Under the trees were two long barracks for the shearers and a few small dwellings for the married with families.

Western Australia is a foreboding place, dry, hot and unforgiving. It takes one full acre of land to sustain one sheep. It is home to the striped whip snake, death adder and the brown tree snake, among other varieties of native animals. Only the hardiest of souls called this place home, but Quinn loved the isolation. It was far away from the masses of people that swarm the streets of Perth, Australia, with its noise and madness. If he had to live in a herd, he preferred it to be sheep rather than people. He had everything here, all the conveniences that they had in the big cities, without the confusion and uproar. Satellite communication allowed a telephone, when the orbit was right, and short wave provided a back up.

Beyond the stand of trees, a helicopter sat tethered to the ground on a helipad. On the edge of it was a shed where a large tank of fuel was stored. It was a two-hour flight to Perth for supplies. Beside that was a garage where a Jeep Liberty, two dune buggies and six four wheeled all terrain vehicles (*ATVs*) were maintained. This could all be

seen from the porch. The use of horses was largely abandoned for the ATVs, but Quinn kept some for pleasure riding.

“Mr. Tilmann,” Gladys, the Native housekeeper, approached him. Her dark eyes shined in a broad, warm, friendly face. Her hair curled all over her head and she kept it in place with a decorative haircloth. “You ‘ave a call from the Amer’can Embassy.” She held out a satellite phone to him. She spoke superb English and was a proficient housekeeper and cook. Quinn blinked at her and took the phone, handing her his glass. She took it and went back into the dark interior of the house.

“Quinn ‘ere,” he answered.

“Hello, Quinn. How are you?”

“I was jus’ fine up ‘til now, Mr. Ambassador.”

He heard a light laugh, “Okay, Quinn, I have a Mrs. Walker here in my office and she is trying to find her husband, Dr. Albert Walker. He is a geologist and he went out to Woodleigh Crater on an expedition.”

“Look, Martin,” Quinn called him by his first name, “I would love to ‘elp ya’, but its shearin’ time an’ I...”

“Quinn, there are some very important people that want him found.”

“Yeah, well... Uh, I can’t go on Woodleigh land without permission. We don’t get along very well, y’know.”

“I have made arrangements with Mrs. Woodleigh to give you access to the crater.”

“If ‘e finds out I’m out there, ‘e’ll ‘ave a hemorrhage an’ come lookin’ fer me. I don’t even wanna think about what’ll ‘appen then.”

“Come on, Quinn,” he returned. “He’s in Europe and not expected back for several months.”

“Well, ‘e’s not far ‘nough out o’ the country t’keep ‘im from callin’ me up an’ accusin’ me of stealin’ ‘is bloodie sheep. Yu’ll just ‘ave t’wait for ‘im t’do this.”

“Mrs. Walker doesn’t want to wait another two or three months to start looking for her husband. I need this favor.” Quinn frowned and shifted his weight. “I’m sending her out to talk to you. This is very important, Quinn.”

“Righto, send ‘er out, but I’m not promisin’ anythin’.”

“I’m calling in a card on this one, Quinn. Bye!”

Quinn listened to the buzz in his ear and wondered what he was getting into. At a desperate time, Martin had helped him out and he did owe him.

The stars twinkled down on the workers compound where yellow lights were shining from the barracks through the small open windows. Embers were glowing red from the campfire in the center of the barracks compound. Quinn made his way down through the trees. Nights in Australia range from cool to nearly cold, depending on the time of year even though the daytime temperatures are high. Women were cleaning up the camp from the evening meal and the children dashed about with excited giggles, chasing fireflies. The shearers sat around the fire smoking pipes and drinking from a cider jug that Quinn knew was not cider, but their own private brew.

Sheep have a smell all their own and it drifted on the night breeze to play in the nose, followed by the bleating of the large flock waiting to be sheared or those that had been already. From somewhere there came the distant howl of a dingo. He would probably loose a few sheep tonight.

“G’day, mates,” Quinn called as he entered the campfire light.

“Mr. Tilmann,” the head shearer and elder of the Sundowners camp called and waved him on over, “sit an’ ‘ave a sip’a.” He reached out to someone next to him and the jug was put in his hand as he turned, offering it to Quinn. Quinn took the jug and seated himself on one of the logs used for seating around the fireplace.

“The shearin’ went well t’day,” Quinn reported and took a sip of the brew in the jug. It bit the pallet and made

his mouth water. Then he handed it on to the man beside him. "Listen, Jock," Quinn turned to the chief shearer. "Somethin' 'as come up an' I'll be gone t'morr'a, so yer on yer own, 'less Sandy comes in from the outback. If 'e does, 'e'll be in charge."

"Not t'worrie, Mr. Tilmann," he pointed a thumb at himself, "Jock'll see t'the shearin' an' keep the blokes in line."

"Uh, 'ow long do ya' think the shearin' will take this year," Quinn questioned.

"A few weeks, maybe more," Jock returned and the other nodded and passed the jug on around.

"Righto," Quinn nodded and stood up. "If any problem comes up that ya' can't 'andle, go up t'the 'ouse an' tell Gladys. She'll try an' raise me on the radio. I'll be in the choppie." Jock nodded, taking a drink from the jug and Quinn went back to the house.

The house was a sprawling one-story structure made of rock and cedar brought all the way across from the mountains. In a large living room, there was a sofa that sat on each side of the big fireplace with a coffee table in between them. The floors were polished hardwood, and under the coffee table was a colorful woolen area rug, a handmade gift from Gladys' relatives.

On the opposite side of the room was a large wet bar that circled around on one end to attach to the wall. There was a shortwave radio sitting on a desk and the room smelled of cedar from the sanded cedar walls. There was an occasional table with a vase of flowers on it and a picture taken from the helicopter of the layout of the station hanging on the wall over it. On the other walls were large paintings, one of a boat with the setting sun behind it and the other of a grape harvest with workers gathering grapes from a trellis where they dangled just over their heads. From the ceiling of huge cedar beams hung two large fans

with the blades turning slowly. The room was warm, but lacked a woman's touch.

The back porch could be seen through two wide folding doors at the back of the room and there was a carved archway giving entrance to a wide hall that led to the bedrooms and other parts of the house. Another wide archway led into a good-sized dining room with a long oak table and twelve chairs that matched the carvings on the sides of the table. There was a china cabinet in there that held elegant gold trimmed dishes, a silver server and some tall stemmed wine glasses. Beyond that was the kitchen, gleaming with stainless steel appliances and a door down to the basement used as a storeroom, where there was a large walk in freezer and a well stocked wine rack.

Quinn went to his bedroom, a big room with nearly one whole wall open to the outdoors. It held a king-sized bed with huge wooden posts, a dresser and chest of drawers of dark wood. At the foot of the bed, there was a large cedar chest with an upholstered top, and a door that led into a master-sized modern bathroom with a step-down Roman tub and a separate shower.

Quinn took a shower and dried off. He swiped the mist away from the long vanity mirror to shave the day's growth of beard off of the face of the man in it. His opinion of himself was that he was not handsome, but had rugged good looks with a thin scar on his chin. His hair was thick dark brown and medium in length. He had a well-groomed mustache and he thought his hazel eyes with brown flecks in them gave him a hard and defiant look. His nose had a slight bend in it that was put there during a bar fight in his younger days. He was in his mid-thirties and quite tall, with defined upper body muscles.

He watched the man in the mirror flex his chest muscles, making the little gold nugget hanging around his neck from a thick gold chain rise and fall. This man had everything, but he still had nothing. No one but him to admire his looks, and that made the loneliness he kept

suppressed rise out of its chambers to taunt him. He let out a deep sigh and decided he was too set in his ways. He would probably always be alone. It was not a bad life and when his need grew too strong, he would go to Perth and find a woman. He hadn't done that in a long time, so maybe after the shearing he would take a few weeks walkabout in the big city... if he could stand it that long.