

Legendary Blue Diamond

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My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian and Australian slang. The full list of words and phrases are on the last page. Thanks for your understanding.

Other novels Mark Stewart has written

The Kendal chronicles (crime)
Fire games (publish America)
Heart of a spider is the second book in the series
I know your secret is third in the series

Romance

Don't tell my secret (series) romance adventure

Kiss on the bridge (series)
Kiss on the bridge two
Kiss on the bridge three

The perfect gift

Blood red rose (Vampire romance adventure)
Blood red rose two
Blood red rose three

Planet X91 the beginning (series)

In this series
Legendary Blue Diamond
Legendary Blue Diamond two

Legendary Blue diamond three

Legendary Blue Diamond

Mark Stewart

PROLOG

Australian summer: 2012 A.D.

HISTORIANS WHO have researched the legendary blue diamond say it originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who has skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who has skin the colour of the sun. Rumor has it the blue diamond couldn't have been any larger than a single carrot. There's lots whispers lately the deep blue coloured diamond has been reported to be in excess of nine carrots possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood dripping from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events though I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend started around the mid 1800's when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he sold it to a man in charge of the bank. He in turn made it into a ring for his wife. He described it as definitely a one off, stroke of luck, find. A businessman going by the name of Bobbi Forland invited the man to play a game of cards. Eventually the banker accused Forland of cheating him out of everything, including the blue diamond ring. He'd been shot for his accusation. The banker made it home, dying in the arms of his wife. What of the blue diamond ring you ask? Of late a possible theory has been circulating the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered, one can only guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

CHAPTER ONE

Australian summer: 1850 A.D.

FOR OVER a minute Jessica Hayes stared directly into her dead husband's eyes. The long handled shovel she held in her hands had been used for easier times. The hole she finished digging lay in the back corner of the cemetery, reserved for the peasants. Jessica pushed the shovel's blade into the clay to take a break, trying to make sense of the last seven hours. Her mind replayed the facts over and over on what actually happened, including the reason behind her husband's murder.

On Jessica's twentieth birthday she stood at the altar pledging her vows to the man she wanted to love forever. Charles unquestionably conveyed he loved her too. She didn't expect to bury him the day before her twenty-first birthday.

Jessica's supposed loving husband left her penniless due to a game of poker. Everything he worked towards, he lost on a pair of Jacks. Her husband accused the man sitting opposite him of cheating. He'd been shot in the stomach from under the table for his accusation. Dragging his half dead body out of the hotel he managed to mount his horse. In three minutes he made it to the front door of their mansion. Sitting on the marble based verandah, leaning against the solid wooden front door his futile attempts to call out to Jessica were inadequate.

Conjuring up enough will power to claw his way to a half standing position, he opened the front door. Closing the door behind him to shut out prying eyes he staggered towards the stairs. Ten feet from the door he gazed up at Jessica standing on the top stair glaring down at him through wide fear filled eyes. She watched his mouth open, his lips quivering. Jessica sprinted down. The moment her left foot touched the floor she ran towards him screaming at the top of her lungs. Jessica wrapped her arms about his waist to help prop him upright. Her arms couldn't hold his weight. They both crumpled to the slate tiles. Weeping uncontrollably, she studied her husband's face trying to understand the reason behind what occurred at the saloon.

The sickening answer hit hard.

Jessica's husband, a successful businessman, misused his power to gain even more money. At the height of his career he gambled on a win. Charles lost everything, including his life.

On his last gasp he mouthed the word sorry.

In the dead of night Charles died in Jessica's arms.

The rough edged man who won the card game, the same one who murdered Jessica's husband, pounded his fist seven times on the front door of the two storey mansion. The man's cold murderous expression told of his determination to take possession of what should be legally his. He brought four large ugly friends for endorsement.

Jessica placed her dead husband's head gently on the floor. Through wet swollen eyes she slowly reached for the solid brass door knob. She didn't get a chance to open the door before someone kicked it in. The violent entry saw the fine workmanship of the hand decorated china vase fall off the small entrance table. Jessica could do nothing to stop it from smashing. Hundreds of fine china pieces spewed across the floor.

"You will replace the vase," spat Jessica, pointing. "My dead husband gave it to me on our wedding day."

"I will never replace anything I choose to break," jeered the tall rough edged man wearing a three piece suit. "Here is something else for you to remember the moment."

The man pushed Jessica from his path, boldly marched to the base of the staircase, picking up an exact duplicate of the first vase from off another small French polished wooden table. The man lifted the vase high above his head.

Jessica screamed. "Surely you're not mean enough to smash another expensive item?"

In an act of non-cooperation the man hurled the two foot vase at the floor. The force saw fragments cover the entire area.

Through her grieving tears, Jessica focused on the man. Her entire body trembled from the intrusion. The man looked to be enjoying the moment, relishing in his power over a young widow.

"Get out of my mansion," yelled the man.

"This is my home, you get out."

"It is you who needs to get out. Boys come in. Chuck this trash out."

The four-men came strolling through the open doorway as if they owned the place. Their evil smirks looked callous. They acted excited at wanting to toss a defenseless woman out of the home she'd been living in.

"Girl, this is your last warning. Get out."

The businessman wearing the suit stepped forward, grabbing hold of Jessica's arm. She winced at the pain. In seconds welts surfaced. The man mouthed more hurtful words. Jessica couldn't hear what they were over her racing heartbeat throbbing noisily inside her ears.

"Drag the woman to the door," ordered the businessman glaring at the four men waiting for the next command. "After you have thrown out the rubbish, search the house. Inside an hour I want what I came for."

Each of the men took hold of a different limb and carried Jessica to the door. Before being tossed airborne, she spied the businessman throwing expensive paintings at the wall. Screaming for him to stop, he refused the request to cease destroying everything Jessica's husband gave to win her heart. He even tore in two her favorite painting of a horse in the middle of an Australian bush setting

In one massive throw Jessica landed in the middle of a shallow pond twenty feet from the front door.

Battered and bruised she crawled out.

Crumpling into a ball she listened to many precious items being smashed against the internal walls of the home she loved.

Standing her five foot seven inch frame to full height Jessica glared at the four men blocking the doorway. "Step aside or I'll force you," she snarled through quivering lips.

The steel murderous expression of the four men fell away, replaced by laughter.

Jessica stepped up to the biggest of the four men. Before he could react she jabbed the man in the ribs. A tight fist to the man's nose saw him stumbling backwards, blood pouring from his broken nose. Agile as a cat Jessica turned her attention to the next one. He and the other two men sprinted for the safety of the closest tree leaving the entrance unguarded.

Jessica stormed back into the house, staring at the intruder. The tall man faced the angry woman head on.

"What is the meaning of this invasion?" screamed Jessica, raising her fists at the man. "Answer me right now or you'll end up exactly the same as the man outside."

"This home is now mine. Leave before you get hurt."

"It is you who is about to be hurt. You have three seconds left to explain the reason for your hostility before I act."

The man seemed to hesitate.

Jessica used the pause to her advantage. She leaned sideways to pick up the fine English bowl sitting exactly in the middle of the Tasmanian oak buffet. She raised it above her head, yelling. "Talk fast or your head and this bowl will collide."

"Go ahead, throw it, I don't care."

Jessica hurled the object at the man. He easily ducked. The bowl smashed against the wall causing thousands crystal fragments fly about the room.

The tall man erupted in a belly laugh. The remaining three able bodied men who walked up behind Jessica waited for the signal. The moment the man nodded two of the men stepped forward, took hold of her arms, lifting Jessica off the floor, kicking and scratching. The tall man casually strolled across the room. He gave her a back hand across the face. To hammer the slap home he groped for Jessica's white shirt, ripping the material and popping the six solid gold buttons. They bounced across the floor in different directions.

"Hopefully the loss of the buttons will calm you down long enough to understand the power I have in this town."

The man signaled his men to apply a downwards pressure on Jessica's shoulders forcing her to sit on the floor.

"You horrid aggressive man; I see what your game is."

"Don't flatter yourself you intolerable wench. I'm married. I have no desire to have you or this mansion. My colleagues on the other hand mightn't agree on my ideas. They can't resist a pretty young female who only wears a man's white shirt to bed."

Jessica clutched the edges of her shirt to overlap the material. Staring up into the eyes of the man she spat. "If you have no interest in me or my home, what is it you want?"

"I'm here for the rare blue diamond ring. Why you're at it, hand over the magnificent solid silver colt .45's. They have a horse on the side etched in gold. They're the ones everybody wants to obtain. Once I have the items in my possession every man will look upon me in admiration. The power I'll have will be outstanding. They will grovel at my feet."

"I don't know what you're talking about?"

"My dear girl, you do know exactly what I'm talking about."

Wrapping her arms tighter across her chest, Jessica slowly shook her head. Already she felt as though she'd been violated by the men in the room.

"Maybe I should turn my back to allow my men to escort you to the closest bedroom. They seem somewhat interested in you. I'm positive a few minutes in the bedroom will help jog your memory."

Jessica stared at the man through narrowed slits. "What sort of man are you to even consider such a horrendous act?"

"I'm a man who always gets what he wants."

He clicked his fingers at the four men standing behind Jessica. Two stepped forward. Using Jessica's elbows they lifted her to her knees.

"What is your answer, the bedroom or the information?"

"How do you know about the blue diamond?" whispered Jessica bowing her head.

“Now we are getting somewhere. I’m amazed how easily a few rounds of whisky loosened your husband’s tongue. The ring my dear girl is worth more than this whole mansion. Hand it over.”

“If my husband were alive he’d never allow you or anyone else to waltz into my home claiming they owned it.”

“You’re quite right. You want proof; here it is.”

The man opened a pocket on the inside of his coat. He threw a bloodied sheet of paper under her nose. To torment Jessica further he threw the pair of losing cards on top of the hand written sheet. The cards landed face side up. Before spitting his words the man gave a sin filled snicker. “Prior to your husband accusing me of cheating which ultimately lead to his death, he signed the paper as credit for his final round of cards. Winner takes all. Your husband clutched a pair of Jack’s. I held a pair of Aces.”

Jessica wiped the tears from her face, trying to focus on the blood splattered words on the sheet of paper she held in her trembling hand.

“Correct me if I’m wrong. Are those words written in your husband’s handwriting?”

“Yes,” she croaked, hesitantly.

The businessman gathered a handful of Jessica’s wet long blonde hair. He pulled her head backwards forcing her to make eye contact. “Read the entire note out loud.”

He let go of her hair and pushed her head level to the paper.

Jessica cleared her throat. “I Charles Lincoln Hayes will relinquish all my assets and moneys including the pair of silver colt 45’s and the rare blue diamond ring to Mr. Bobbi Forland if I should lose the next hand of poker; effective immediately, signed Mr. Charles L Hayes this day Wednesday 19th January 1850 A.D.”

Dropping the sheet of paper, Jessica watched it float to the floor. The thought of being penniless hit hard in the pit of her stomach. She hugged her aching torso before vomiting.

Forland took a step closer. Hovering over Jessica he continued. “If you inform me exactly where the blue diamond ring is, I will guarantee your safety by personally escorting you off my premises.”

Jessica looked up. “What if I don’t?”

“You give me no choice. What you have endured up to this point in time is a mere thimble full of what I’m capable of doing. My men will happily escort you to the nearest bedroom. When they’re finished what’s left of you will be taken outside. You will be given a dunking in the shallow pond. I do believe the stagnant water is deep enough to drown in.”

“Go to hell.”

Forland clicked his fingers. Jessica was immediately pulled off her feet and dragged along the floor towards the stairs. The iron grip of the men felt impossible to break free from.

“Wait,” yelled Jessica, frantically.

“Do you have something important to tell me?” asked Forland.

“The ring is in a small private safe at the bank. I placed it there myself. In the morning go to the bank, show the clerk the note. He’ll hand you the ring and a large pile of twenty pound notes.”

“How do I know you’re not lying? A defenseless woman who is about to see the inside of a bedroom could say anything to postpone the act.”

Jessica rubbed her red swollen cheek. “I can understand how you’re thinking. I’m telling you the truth.”

Forland sighed heavily. “The moment the bank opens you will bring me the ring. If I attempt to visit the bank an employee might get suspicious.”

“What if I gave you the key? The room full of small private safe boxes is on the left after you have entered the bank. No one will look at you.”

“Are you certain of this?”

Jessica quickly nodded.

“What do you want in return?”

“To be able to walk out of this house, untouched,” Jessica whispered.

“The guns, where are they?”

“The same place as the ring.”

“Where’s the key?”

“Upstairs in my bedroom,” replied Jessica.

“If you’re trying to bluff me in any way you’ll end up lying dead next to your husband.”

“Why should I try to deceive you? At this point my life depends on being truthful.”

Jessica’s confident desperate words put a sly smirk on the man’s face. Looking at his men he rubbed his hands together.

“May I take five minutes to collect what belongs to me?”

Forland’s evil smirk instantly vanished. “What things?” he spat focusing on Jessica.

“Seeing how I’m wet through and you ripped open the shirt I’m wearing; a change of clothes. I have three pounds sitting in my draw. Can I have your permission to take the money?”

“I’ll give you one minute. Be warned, if you take a second longer or anything other than what you have asked for, I will pay someone to dig two graves.”

Jessica’s bare feet hardly made a noise as she sprinted across the room. She ran up the stairs to the second level. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. Entering her large bedroom she turned in quick circles. Panic wanted to take over her thoughts. Before her precious seconds ran out Jessica needed to find anything she could use for a weapon and grab some clothes.

Forland frowned at one of his lynch men. “Get after the woman. In exactly one minute drag her outside. Use any means possible. If you have to shoot her, so be it.”

When it came to collecting his winnings Jessica guessed Forland wasn’t a tolerant man. His ruthless character haunted her brain. Hearing footsteps trudging up the carpeted stairs, she froze. In seconds the man will be in her bedroom, gloating.

Jessica threw open the small cupboard situated behind the door. She spied a small white stringed bag. Reaching in, she swiped it off the bottom shelf. Not thinking of fashion she stuffed a few things to the bottom of the bag. Next, she sprinted to the French dresser sitting under the open window. For several moments she paused, her eyes bulged, her jaw fell open. Jessica wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. If she could get her hands on a gun she’d shoot Forland dead.

“Gun,” she whispered.

In desperation Jessica sprinted back to the cupboard. In her haste she didn’t see the solid silver colt .45’s or the gun belt and the solid silver buckle her uncle gave her on her fourteenth birthday. The same ones Forland wanted. She checked both guns for bullets. The chambers were empty.

“Charles must have placed the bullets downstairs in the locked gun’s cupboard for safety. Damn it,” she grumbled.

The guns and gun belt joined her clothes in the string bag. To disguise the theft she used her clothes to cover the weapons. In a race against time she searched for anything else she may need.

The blue diamond ring and the silver key to the cupboard were sitting on top of three pounds at the bottom of a gold edged bowl sitting on a side table next to the solid brass bed head. She snatched up the ring and the money burying them in the bag. Swiping out the key she held it tight in her left hand.

“What’s taking you so long,” growled a gruff voice. “Your time is up.”

Jessica spun around, facing the man taking up the doorway. “I have to change my clothes. There is no way I’m leaving this house dressed in my husband’s ripped shirt.”

The man pushed the door fully open. He stood grinning. “Get started.”

“Turn around. I’m not changing my clothes in front of you,” growled Jessica, dropping the string bag on the lace covered bed.

The man viewed her through narrowed slits. “Stay wet.”

Jessica frowned at the man watching her start to drag the wet shirt off her shoulders. “If you take one step closer I’ll kill you,” she spat. Swiping a nail file from off the side dresser she poked it at the man’s face.

He returned the favour by flashing his colt .45. His thread-bare leather gun holster proved the man used the weapon many times.

Jessica swallowed her embarrassment. She threw her wet shirt at the man and finished dressing in trousers and riding boots. The man grabbed her by the hair before she could finish buttoning the white shirt she’d slipped on. Jessica only just managed to snatch the white stringed bag from off the bed before being dragged downstairs. The man forced her to stand at attention directly in front of Forland. He eyed her suspiciously, his gaze stopping at the string bag Jessica held in her left hand.

“What about my horse?” she asked desperately trying to avert his attention away from the contents of the bag.

Forland glared directly at her. His three second pause caused Jessica to tremble. “Put the corpse on a saddled horse. We’ll watch the girl lead the beast away. The act will prove to the widow I am a man of my word.”

Jessica marched towards the front door, debris from once precious items crunched under her riding boots.

Forland clicked his fingers. “Mrs. Hayes, before you leave I’d like to have a moment.”

Jessica turned on the balls of her feet, facing the man square on. Her facial expression showed no emotion.

“Where’s the key?”

Jessica tossed the silver key she held tight in her left hand at Forland who caught it in mid-flight.

“Before you leave let me give you a last warning. If the blue diamond ring and the solid silver guns aren’t in the bank safe I’ll see to it you are hunted down.”

Jessica didn’t take her eyes off Forland as she back stepped through the front doorway. Two of the intruders finished wrapping Jessica’s dead husband in the thick rug and placed him on the back of a horse. Jessica grabbed hold of the reins. Starting her walk she pulled the horse along behind her.

The five men stood military style watching Jessica lead the horse up the small hill towards the cemetery. They watched till the darkness swallowed her image.

“Do you think she’s on the level?” asked one of the men, looking sideways at Forland.

“She knows the consequences if she lied. Search the house for money. In the morning we’ll visit the bank.”

Jessica stopped at the closed black cemetery gates. Looking over her shoulder she saw deep groves were embedded in the narrow dirt road. She knew they were caused by many wooden carts bringing bodies to the cemetery. The bend in the road obscured the town and her home. Long grass grew on the land which stretched beyond the few dozen headstones. She lifted the unlocked lever, pushed the gate open and started searching for a quiet corner. She didn’t appreciate the cemetery at the best of times. Eleven o’clock on a moonless night the place looked haunted. For a long time she stood at the gate searching the ground hoping not to see a ghost. To her left she spied a small shed. Several times in as many minutes Jessica thought she could see a pair of eyes watching her every move from the glass window on the side facing the tombstones.

“Don’t be stupid,” she told herself. “There’s nothing out here except maybe a fox or a rabbit.”

Managing to whistle up a hymn Jessica learnt from the local church, she walked towards the tiny shed. Looking through the small single window she saw a long handled shovel. Reaching for the doorknob she noticed the padlock. Side stepping back to the window Jessica slid inside after breaking the glass. Before returning to her horse she grabbed the old worn out shovel.

Jessica looked to her left. A light warm breeze teased the ends of her drying hair.

“Old friend, let’s walk to the rear of the cemetery.” She took hold of the reins, signaling for the horse to make a move.

Jessica finally stood in middle of the most desolate part of the land where the peasants were buried.

“This ought to be fun,” she mumbled sarcastically, pushing the shovel blade into the hardened clay. The blade struck a rock causing a spark to pierce the darkness, making the shovel bounce out of her hands. Un-deterred, Jessica struggled time and again to push the metal blade into the compacted dirt. At a depth of three inches, she stopped for a break.

“This ground feels mostly rock,” she complained to the horse.

Her four legged companion didn’t respond. It seemed more intent on eating the green grass.

Calculating the hours needed to dig a hole to a depth of six feet in her head, Jessica groaned.

Using her peripheral vision she picked out movement near the small shed. Looking through bulging eyes she watched the dark figure coming closer. A feeling of dread swept Jessica’s mind. A young female alone in the back corner of the cemetery might be too much for anyone. She didn’t have to study the area to know there was nowhere to hide. Standing square to the man Jessica lifted the shovel to shoulder height. The palms of her hands were sweating from gripping the long handle.

“Come no closer,” warned Jessica.

The figure made no reply.

Jessica’s knees started to tremble. To mask the fear surging through her veins a stone cold expression replaced the terrified look. She knew when she spoke again her voice needed to sound confident, convincing.

“What is it you want?”

The figure suddenly stopped. From the short distance between them, Jessica could tell the figure belonged to a man, tall in stature. The hat he wore concealed his eyes.

“I’m not thrilled at discovering a woman digging a grave at this late hour.”

The man’s deep voice didn’t sound friendly. Jessica sighed thankful it didn’t belong to Forland or one of his men.

“Stay where you are or feel the end of my shovel against your skull.”

Dressed in a black suit and matching coloured hat the tall thin man stepped closer, disobeying Jessica’s advice.

“What do you want?” asked Jessica; for the second time.

“I have been observing your struggles. I strolled over to offer you my help in digging the grave.”

“Thanks for the offer. I have no money.”

“Let me educate your mind on the world. A woman, especially a young, pretty looking girl, can get anything she wants from a man if the price is right.”

“I’m no whore,” spat Jessica.

“I’m certain you are not. Allow me to introduce myself. “I’m the gravedigger. At night I guard the graves of the dead.”

“Gravedigger isn’t a name.”

“You have no need to know my name, Miss.”

“If it’s the way you want it, I’m not revealing my name either.”

The man sighed. “I want adequate compensation for the broken window. There’s a storm on the horizon.”

“I’ve already explained I have no money.”

“There are other ways to pay for one’s transgressions,” whispered the man, grinning. “Before you throw the shovel at me, I’m in need of a rug. The one the body is wrapped in will help my office to look first-class.”

Jessica eyeballed the gravedigger. “I’ll give you the rug and a pound note for the broken window if you take my dead husband off my horse, placing him at the edge of the grave.”

“I thought you told me you have no money?”

“After I give you my pound note, my pockets will be empty,” Jessica lied.

The gravedigger pondered the deal. “I’m available to help dig the hole.”

“I’ve already explained to you the asking price is too high.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“If it’s your best offer, I accept the deal.”

The gravedigger stepped over to the horse. Casually he slung the body onto his shoulder. Stepping over to the shallow hole he gently placed the corpse wrapped in the rug on the ground. He straightened his coat before facing Jessica. His voice reeked of confidence.

“If at any point you want my help, I’ll be in my office. It has a broken window.”

The gravedigger tipped his hat, mumbling good luck.

Leaning on the shovel handle Jessica watched him walk down the hill towards the small wooden shed he called an office.

“I’m no one’s whore,” she yelled. Shaking her head she resumed her digging.

Jessica made little progress over the next hour. She didn’t realize the gravedigger had returned. For over two minutes he watched her struggles from over her shoulder. Slowly the man lifted a heavy pick to head height, tossing it near the hole. Jessica jumped from the sudden noise. She whirled around ready to swing the shovel.

“If you don’t want my help the least I can do is let you borrow a pick. After all you offered a full one pound note for the broken window. The pick is the change I owe you.”

“Thank you.” Jessica grabbed hold of the pick handle, raising her eyebrows at the weight. “This will do nicely.”

“Before you turn defensive at what I’m about to say, the pick is a boomerang. Do you understand the meaning?”

“Of course I do. It’s an Australian saying. I can use the pick, but before I leave this cemetery, I must return it to the shed.”

“Almost letter perfect,” announced the gravedigger. “I know how exhausted you’ll be after burying your husband so leave the pick on the ground.”

“Again I thank you.”

“Have you changed your mind about my proposal?”

“I’m fine.”

The man squatted at the edge of the hole, viewing the depth of the dig. “You do realize a few minutes of pleasure, the blisters which are forming on your hands will subside quickly. Blisters on a pretty girl’s hands spoil her appearance.”

Jessica stared the man down.

Lifting his hands into the air the gravedigger stood to full height. “I won’t bother you again. Leave the money and the pick on the rug.”

The man walked off mumbling.

For over two hours Jessica used the pick and the shovel. Blisters quickly formed and burst on both her hands. She welcomed the pain. It helped her get through the almost impossible task.

Examining her short marriage, Jessica convinced herself the love she felt for her dead husband must have been nothing more than a fake emotion. He only loved money and the power he could buy.

What her husband did fast ate at her spirit; playing tricks on her mind, making her see black shapes moving from one tombstone to the next. The wind blowing across the land seemed to laugh at her misfortune. Inaudible noises and the gravedigger's words filled Jessica's ears, haunting her mind. She started to wonder if the gravedigger's return made the noise after changing his mind about the amount she paid. Or did he want more than the pound note and the rug. For a long time Jessica searched the surrounds. Seeing nothing she eventually went back to her digging.

By the time Jessica reached the six foot mark every muscle in her body ached. Using the long handled shovel for a ladder, she climbed out.

Light footsteps came slowly, quietly. Jessica sensed unseen eyes were again observing her. They watched every move she made. The ink coloured sky easily disguised the eyes. She searched the nearby tombstones seeking out the intruder. She shuddered at the thought of being attacked. Could this be a nightmare or could she be slowly going insane. For a few seconds she couldn't depict which one could be worse.

Holding the long handled shovel in a death grip, Jessica squatted behind the closest tombstone waiting for the intruder to come closer. Thinking along the line the person might be Forland come to steal the ring a murderous expression swept her face. If her thought happened to be right he'd join her husband at the bottom of the hole.

Jessica prepared to pounce. She planned to spring to her feet, swinging the shovel at waist height.

The intruder stepped from behind the adjacent tombstone. Jessica's jaw fell open. She dropped the shovel. "What are you doing here, prowling around?"

The alleged gravedigger's tortoise coloured cat purred loudly. It raced up to start rubbing its head against Jessica's leg. She gave the cat a quick pat before shooing it away.

Jessica sat leaning against the tombstone near the hole, closing her eyes only for a few seconds.

The gravedigger's voice woke her. She leapt to her feet, raising her fists. She'd been caught napping. Right where she stood Jessica silently vowed it'll never happen again.

The man stepped up to the freshly dug grave. "I apologize for waking you. I came early to see how you were travelling. By the looks of things you've done a good job."

"Save your gratitude. I don't want it."

The man stooped, gathered up the rug and pick then held out his hand for the money. Jessica dropped the pound note in his hand before quickly backing away. The gravedigger dipped his hat before walking off, leaving Jessica to complete her burial.

Jessica rolled her husband's body into the grave. It landed face up. She snatched up the shovel. Using a strong thrust, she pushed the metal blade into the soft mound of clay. Jessica stood at the edge of the hole, staring down at her dead husband for the last time. She spat on his bloodied suit and commenced to fill in the hole. When the time came to cover his face Jessica tilted the shovel and looked away. The dirt made a dull thud when it came to a stop. In record time Jessica finished up, throwing the long handled shovel on top of the dirt. For a split second she contemplated saying something religious. The words failed to come.

She turned and walked away.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TALL slender, soft featured, blue eyed woman, known as Jessica Hayes, sat staring out of the train's window. In the small draw left of center of the overhead luggage compartment she placed the two fully loaded solid silver guns and the gun belt. She stored everything else she owned in the luggage rack; two dresses and a hat. The only other valuable item she carried happened to be the blue diamond ring on her finger. Thanks to Forland she knew the value of the rare blue diamond ring.

The screeching of the steam train's brakes brought Jessica out of her daydream. When the train stopped, stifling heat poured in through the open window. The door to Jessica's private booth slid open. A smiling young man in his late teens looked in.

“Sorry for the inconvenience Mrs. Hayes the train has stopped to take on water. It entered my mind you might want to stretch your legs. I’ll be more than happy to escort you off the train. I will also see to your safety throughout this slight delay.”

“Thank you Mr. Kepler, I’ll take you up on the offer. Your expertise on manners is outstanding. However, I want to correct one important fact. Somehow you have been misinformed over my name. I’m Miss Jessica Hayes.”

“I’ll certainly remember the fact,” blurted the young man. His pupils danced at discovering Jessica didn’t have a husband. He pushed his way through the narrow doorway before rudely inviting himself to sit shoulder to shoulder next to Jessica. “How good is this private compartment?” he started.

“Very, though I am wondering how I managed to score it seeing how I only paid for a seat at the rear of the train?”

“A few minutes prior to departure I learned the room hadn’t been booked for the trip. I took it upon myself to upgrade you from one of the worst seats on the train. A pretty woman like you shouldn’t have to put up with soot or smoke blowing in through the open window from the engine.”

“Tell me something, how close are we to Bendigo?”

“We’re only two hours out. All going well, we’ll arrive in the center of town at exactly 4pm,” reported Kepler. “Miss Jessica, I’ll be gone for only a few moments. I want to make sure the corridor to the closest exit is free of commuters. It’s part of my service.”

Jessica waited a full minute before he returned, blocking the doorway. Kepler, bowing slightly handed over a full glass of water. Taking the glass, Jessica gave a half hearted smile. She drank three quarters of the water before handing the glass back. Reaching for her hand Kepler escorted her into the corridor and led the way to the closest exit.

Jessica felt surprised the handsome young man did everything he could think of to see to her comforts even though he thought she may have been a married woman. She certainly didn’t want another man in her life. She only wanted to get back to the sheep station. One hour horse ride west of Bendigo found her at the back corner post belonging to the Rosedale.

Reaching the train’s exit door, Jessica lifted her hand to shade her eyes from the glare. She deduced the sun seemed extra hot for the time of year. She looked skywards, counting on one hand the number of clouds in the pale blue sky. Three birds brave enough to fly in the heat flew past the clearing on their quest for water.

Stepping from the train Jessica watched the hive of activity. The engineer and the fireman were busy at the task of taking on water for the rest of the trip while several dozen commuters were about to venture into the scrub for a look see.

Jessica swatted her hand at a countless number of flies buzzing around her face wanting to taste her sweat. She chuckled at her antics, wondering why she still couldn’t adapt to the flies even after growing up in Melbourne. Her parents migrated to Australia from England of their own free will. Jessica was conceived on the ship the same day her parents viewed the sunset on the evening of their seventh day. Her aunt and uncle were on the same ship. They agreed to take on the role of Jessica’s guardians after the death of her parents.

One rainy day they sat Jessica down and told her interesting information.

‘Before leaving England her uncle had secured a blacksmith’s job. Jessica didn’t know her natural mother; she died two weeks after giving birth. Her natural father soon followed from a broken heart, so her aunt and uncle inherited the house. Before Jessica’s birth her father had been an extremely successful banker. They lived in a large four roomed house not far from central Melbourne. Unlike most other houses in the neighbourhood with their weatherboard walls, where Jessica lived, solid red bricks were used for the external cladding. The outhouse, also made of bricks, featured a long drop which helped the small room to be stink proof. Even the flies didn’t smell the feces at the bottom of the hole.’

One day when her guardians went into town Jessica measured the depth of the ten inch round hole using a small rock tied to a ball of string just to curb her curiosity. The depth of the hole measured forty feet. Compared to other outhouses in the street theirs always smelt of a perfumed rose bush full of flowers. Her uncle continuously saw a brood of women gossiping about how rich he must have been.

Jessica’s aunt and uncle were never mean however they did expect she should earn her keep. For some reason they never wanted children of their own, but they spoiled Jessica rotten. By the time she turned ten they moved away from the city to the mountains where she learnt to shoot a rifle. One balmy morning at the ripe old age of fourteen, her uncle sat Jessica down to show her the sought after precious solid silver colt.45’s. On her eighteenth birthday Jessica would inherit the guns. In less than a minute the guns were re-

wrapped in a strip of blanket and placed back in the gun cabinet. He gave her a wink, locked the door and started to relay the story of the guns.

'The gun's silver belt buckle matched the hand made silver guns. A horse with a long mane rearing up on its hind legs on either side of the word 'COLT' had been engraved using gold. An old man at the end of his days gave her uncle the guns to say thank you for stopping to render assistance from a bite he received from a Tiger snake. In his last few minutes before he met his maker, the old man explained the story of the guns.

Before purchasing the hand made guns, the old man rode across the Australian dessert. He relayed a warning. Many people knew of the gun's existence. They were wanted items, particularly by bushrangers. They'd fetch a high price if they were ever found.'

Eventually bushrangers came looking for the guns. Jessica's uncle refused to divulge their location. The men murdered her aunt and shot her uncle. The moment he fired his last bullet Jessica's uncle leaned back against a tree. Blood poured from the hole in his chest. Jessica's uncle handed over the silver colt .45's and the gun belt. He placed his hand on her shoulder before telling her to run. Never look back.

Gripping the gun belt in both hands, Jessica escaped the clutches of the bushrangers by scurrying into the scrub to hide. She could hear them yelling, torturing her uncle in a hope he'd give up the secret to the where-a-bouts of the guns. He never did. He took the secret to his grave. To Jessica her uncle will always be a hero.

Frustrated, the bushrangers burnt the homestead which over looked the sea to the ground.

Jessica ran sobbing further into the bush. She stopped only when she tripped over a thin dead tree lying prone half buried in the dirt. She hid there for hours planning what to do. She'd go back to school to accomplish her uncle's wishes before returning to the Rosedale sheep station she inherited. The land was hers to do what she wanted. Sell or keep it. Jessica was only six the last time she'd seen the place. The Rosedale boasted a total of one thousand sheep. A man named Lightning Dawn helped to run the place.

On the horrible day, alone in the middle of the Australian scrub she made a solemn vow the guns were going to stay in her possession and handed down through generations. She owed her uncle at least that much.

CHAPTER THREE

GALLOPING HORSE hooves, the unmistakable crack of gunfire came from the tinder dry Australian bush. Jessica sat on a log in the shade, content in watching a mob of small grey kangaroos. They hopped deeper into the bush to get away from the noise. A koala bear woken from its sleep slowly climbed higher in the gum tree. A four foot brown snake slithered away, entering a dead hollow tree at the edge of the scrub, vanishing from sight. Jessica decided to return to the safety of the train.

A big man boasting a ten day old beard full of dust forced his grey mare to thunder out of the scrub. Two other men also on horseback were following. Each of the three men wore the same serious expression.

"Everyone step down from the train. Bring what you own. If you fail to heed my warning you will be shot," yelled the dusty bearded rider.

The man's deep voice and actions made him out to be evil to the bone. If anyone tried to resist, his life more than likely could be in serious jeopardy.

Three bullets fired into the air to plant fear in each of the train's commuters worked to perfection.

The remaining commuters who were still seated in the train scurried towards the closest door. The moment their feet touched the ground they were ushered to the middle of the third carriage and ordered to push their backs against the metal side.

The train driver and his assistant jumped down from the roof of the locomotive. They dived into the windowless cabin for their pistols.

The second rider galloped his horse to the front of the train. Jessica heard two shots in rapid succession over the constant hissing of steam from the single engine funnel. She felt certain both the engineer and the fireman were murdered.

The first rider started patrolling the train's entire length, menacingly turning his head to view Jessica on his return trip. The wide brimmed hat he wore kept his murderous eyes in the shade. Just for fun he fired three more bullets into the air. The noise made most of the women jump. They took to cowering behind the

men. Somewhere out of sight a baby started to cry. The second uninvited rider belonging to the clan boarded the train. Directly in front of Jessica the first bushranger sat on his horse slowly roving his gun back and forth. Every few seconds he'd point it at the face of a woman. After the third sweep of his gun the man focused his attention on Jessica. He seemed mesmerized by her blue eyes and blonde hair. To him she smelt rich, accustomed to the good life. Smacking his lips together he dismounted and walked over, pointing his gun under her nose. His evil smirk failed to put Jessica on edge. She stared back at him using a cold steel glare. He gave her a sarcastic nod before looking at the rest of the group. His deep dry husky growl belonged to a disconcerted man.

"My heartfelt thank you goes out to each one of you nice people for listening," growled the man boasting the dusty beard. "I certainly don't want the children see any one of you shot."

Spying a large dead tree lying on its side thirty feet from the train, Jessica proceeded to march across the cleared land.

"Where are you going?" barked Dusty Beard.

"It's hot. The log is in the shade," hissed Jessica half way to the tree.

Dusty Beard looked taken-a-back, watching her settle into a nook at one end of the large hollow log. Ivan Kepler, the young lad who did everything to butter Jessica up using his charm and good manners, walked over to sit next to her. The bushranger scrutinized his lack of discipline. The moment he turned his back Kepler raised a cupped hand to his mouth, whispering in Jessica's ear.

"There's a brown snake in the log you're sitting on."

"Thanks for saying. I might be able to use it. One bite will see the bushranger dead."

"Good plan if you're brave enough to retrieve the reptile from the log."

Jessica looked sideways at the lad through narrowed slits. "You're not scared of a snake are you?"

"No," he stammered. "I'm thinking more along the lines of wait to see what happens. I'm sure they'll leave quickly after they have robbed us."

"Your words are of little comfort. I want to keep what I own."

"Which brings me to what I actually came over to talk to you about; I took the liberty in hiding the magnificent silver colt .45's you own in a far more effective hiding place than in the small draw left of center in the overhead luggage compartment. I'd hate for the bushrangers to find the items."

"I thought where I placed them should be the perfect hiding place."

"In normal circumstances, you're right. To the untrained eye the small door is almost invisible. In my opinion these bushrangers have done this sort of thing plenty of times before. It will be the first place they'd look."

"So where did you hide them?" asked Jessica; doubt written across her face.

"Trust me, you can rest easy. Where you were sitting, behind your feet there's a small door in the kick board. It's used for a maintenance draw. It's full of railway spikes. I wrapped the guns in your clothes and put the lot in there. I'm positive the bushrangers won't find the guns."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness. Let's hope you're right."

"Me too," Kepler whispered, his Adam's apple bobbing sharply.

"You don't sound too confident."

"If by some chance they do discover your guns, here, take this one," he suggested handing her a long barreled pistol.

Jessica gave it a once over before shaking her head.

Grabbing the weapon back Kepler quickly placed it behind her. "Surely I don't have to spell out what I'm thinking?"

"I take it you haven't thought your plan through properly."

"What do you mean? If they find your guns, shooting the bushrangers will be your only option."

"You do realize your plan has lots of holes in it."

Kepler leaned closer to Jessica's ear. "What could go wrong? Aim the gun at the bushrangers and pull the trigger. It's easy."

"The gun you gave me is a dueling pistol."

"I'm not following what you mean?" questioned Kepler.

"The gun has only one bullet. There are three bushrangers."

Looking a little sheepish over his mistake, Kepler quickly apologized.

"Accepted," whispered Jessica. By confessing her marital status to Kepler the lad might be hoping to use the robbery to his advantage so he could get to know her on a more personal level. From the time they left Melbourne he didn't allow her even a single moment of rest before pushing his face in front of hers to ask if she needed anything.

“Maybe I could buy you a drink when we arrive in Bendigo?” whispered Kepler, turning his head to look directly at Jessica. “All part of the railroad service.”

“No thanks. I have a pressing engagement.”

Kepler stared at her through sad hazel eyes. She’d witnessed the look too many times before from men more persuasive than Ivan Kepler. Many have tried and failed to sneak into her married life and too often into her bed.

“I hope I didn’t come on too strong. I haven’t met many nice girls in my lifetime. Come to think of it none ever gave me the time of day,” confessed Kepler.

His grin started to soften his looks further. The expression showed off his gentle, soft, caring nature. In another time in a different set of circumstances Jessica might even have encouraged his advances.

“Thank you for the compliment. However, I’ve already stated there is a rather important errand I must complete. Before you add a comment, I need to accomplish what I’ve set out to do alone.”

One of the bushrangers sprinted up. He dismounted his horse directly in front of Jessica. Kepler quickly fell silent. The rider didn’t wait for the dust to settle before barking out his rage.

“What’s the talk?” he yelled.

The man’s strong Australian accent and colourful slang made him hard to understand.

“Nothing important,” Jessica mocked, lightly.

The man kept up his agitated stare. The moment Jessica faked a grin he looked away to focus on the robbery. Eventually he again bore his eyes into Jessica and Kepler.

“Line up next to the others,” he growled, looking directly at Jessica. “I want to see you push your back into the side of the train. If you move, not only will you be shot, your boyfriend’s blood will be splattered all over the side of the carriage.”

“I’m not her boyfriend,” whimpered Kepler.

For his angry comment he received a clip behind his left ear.

“Girl, take some advice from a man, find someone who is brave enough to stand up to anyone who threatens your life; someone other than the little weasel you call a boyfriend.”

Even though Jessica didn’t want to, she voluntarily cradled Kepler in her arms waiting for his pain to subside.

The man whipped up a cynical laugh. “If the kid ain’t your boyfriend, you sure are putting on a lousy act. Did you have a lover’s quarrel before the train stopped for water?”

“Why don’t you go back to where you came from,” hinted Jessica abruptly. Curling her fingers into tight fists she stood ready to take a swipe at the man’s nose.

“Get over to the train.”

Jessica’s face turned red, not from embarrassment, from frustration at not being able to do anything constructive to put a stop to the three bushrangers’ aggressive, thieving ways. She looked along the entire length of the train wondering why the men weren’t brave enough to stand up against the obnoxious criminals.

“I won’t tell you again. Get over to the train.”

The bushranger stepped behind Jessica, giving her a shove in the shoulder blade. Kepler received the same treatment when they walked past the man towards the carriage to join the rest of the group.

Two of the three bushrangers started to stroll along the line of innocent commuters holding their hats out. Money and jewellery were thrown into their upturned hats while the second bushranger busied himself ransacking the bags which were left on the train. Guns, ammunition, money, more jewellery were stuffed into a large white calico bag. He heaved the booty over his shoulder, stepped down from the train and made his way back to his mates, only to disappear into the first carriage to resume his looting.

The man Jessica nicknamed Dusty Beard stood directly in front of her. “Place your valuables in the hat.”

Jessica folded her arms blatantly defying the man’s orders.

“Barry, get over here, I’m looking at a stubborn woman.”

Another bushranger resembling dusty beard’s brother marched over. “Place your valuables in the hat.”

“I’m not handing over my possessions to you or anyone else.”

The man stepped to her path. Jessica scrunched her nose noting his last bath, at a guess, could have been at least two weeks ago, or longer. She spat in the man’s face. For the act she received a hard slap across the cheek.

“Strong man, hitting a woman; is it the best you can do?”

The man sidestepped to Kepler, pointing his gun at the lad's heart. Jessica watched him closely. The sparkle in his eyes showed he enjoyed every second of the power play. As for Kepler, fear swept away all thoughts from his mind forcing his body to tremble uncontrollably.

"You don't have the nerve to shoot an innocent lad who is unarmed and of no threat to you," growled Jessica.

"Don't test my patience girlie," he replied.

For her resistance Kepler received a tight fisted punch to the jaw. The lad crumpled to the ground and kicked under the train. Out of reach he coiled into a tight ball, sobbing. Dusty Beard turned his attention back to Jessica. He poked her in the stomach using the barrel of his revolver. The laugh he created can only be described as a hideous gargle of notes.

"Girl, I could shoot you where you stand. You have witnessed a small portion of my character. By the look of you I'd say you're not a stupid female. Believe me when I tell you I don't care about a human life. The only thing I want is money, guns and ammunition." He clicked his fingers. "Where are your bags?"

"I have none."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me or not."

"Explain to me why you're the only woman not wearing a dress?"

"My attire is my personal business. I don't have to justify my actions to you or anyone."

The bushranger lifted his hand to swipe Jessica's sarcastic smirk from her face when he stopped in midair. The second bushranger ransacking the first carriage leaned out of the window dangling a gun belt. "Dan, get a look at what I've found."

Dusty Beard slowly lowered his hand. Jessica watched his gaze zeroing in on the large silver buckle in the middle of the gun belt. The longer he stared the more excited his pupils pulsated. His lips quivered when he read the single word; 'COLT' out loud. The four letter word was hand etched in gold lettering on the rectangular shaped solid silver buckle. On either side of the word a horse with a long mane, rearing up on its back legs had also been etched in gold. He knew instantly the buckle was unique; one of its kind. The rumor of its existence had been rampant throughout the state of Victoria. Nobody he questioned knew of its exact where-a-bouts. Only a few admitted they'd actually seen it.

"Does this belong to you?" he growled at Jessica, thrusting the belt under her nose.

She remained stone faced.

"Don't make me ask a second time."

"I've never seen the object before in my life," insisted Jessica, in the calmest voice she could possibly muster.

"You girl, are a liar. If you think for one minute I will ever believe a single word you speak you are sadly mistaken. If you don't tell me truthfully I might shoot someone." He gave Kepler a heartless gawk.

"Dusty Beard, or should I call you Dan, I don't repeat the same answer," taunted Jessica.

"Hand over the silver colt .45's or you'll have an extra bullet sized hole in your nice new white shirt. Your boyfriend will follow you seconds later. I'll leave your bodies to be eaten by the foxes."

Dan aimed his gun at Kepler. Jessica moved to grab hold of it. Dan gave her another back hand across the cheek. For a few seconds she stood dazed.

"Thank you for revealing what I've been searching for is here."

"Dan, have I got something else for you," yelled the third bushranger. He lifted the objects through the window, waiting to see the excitement on his brother's face. "Our search is over. We've found them."

Dusty Beard sprinted over to the window. Grabbing hold of the guns, he studied them in great detail, twisting the weapons lovingly over and over in his hands. At any moment Jessica thought he'd kiss them. She watched him check the bullet chambers, unload the guns and gently replace each bullet. Oblivious to the number of commuters, Dan sat on the train's step studying the gold engravings on both the handles, comparing every square inch of the solid silver guns.

Eventually Dan stood, raising the guns into the air. "They're both mine," he yelled at the top of his lungs. "My brother has located the two pieces of engineering magnificence. He has found the missing silver colt .45's. At last I have found the twin guns." He kissed and stroked both weapons before sliding them gently home in their respective holsters. He dropped his own gun belt so he could clip Jessica's around his waist. "People, this is a great day. Seeing how I'm in a great mood I have decided to let you live."

The only outward hint Jessica gave over being robbed were the ends of her lips were curled slightly upwards. In seconds her smirk vanished. A cold marble expression covered her soft feminine looks. Her eyes darkened. The bushranger's antics didn't amuse her. Jessica exhaled her frustration. Every mannerism, every twitch; every gesture the bushrangers accidently made she forced her mind to memorize.

Dan glared at Jessica through murderous eyes. "Do you know a Bobbi Forland?"

"I've never heard of the name," she answered quickly.

Dan shoved his fist under Jessica's nose. "By my reckoning you're the woman I've been ordered to find."

"This Forland bloke has not only been telling you a lot of lies, he's sucked you in, making you look worse than a fool," taunted Jessica.

"You're too clever for your own good. I'm right aren't I? Where's the blue diamond?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Your father told the exact same words moments before he died when I asked him nicely where the colt .45's are."

"He wasn't my father."

"So I do have the right girl. Let me take a few seconds to explain what happened. The man who owned the guns, the one I murdered happened to be your uncle. I'll ask you again. Where's the blue diamond ring Forland wants? Before you answer incorrectly take onboard what I'm about to tell you. I've been hired by Forland to find the blue diamond. We made an easy deal. Give him the diamond ring; I get to keep the colt 45's. He said if I come across a woman going by the name of Jessica I have his permission to do what I like. He added, take what I want. He informed me this Jessica woman has the guns and the diamond in her possession. I believe the woman I've been searching for is you."

"You have the wrong woman. I don't like being a bearer of bad news, there's no such thing as a blue diamond."

"Do you expect me to believe what you say?"

"Yes, a blue diamond is too hard to come by," stated Jessica looking somewhat smug.

"What makes you so sure? What woman doesn't love to wear a diamond ring? Show me your hands."

Jessica pushed her hands further behind her, trying to stare the man down. Dan stepped forward.

"Have you ever heard the term, 'Chinese whispers?'" asked Jessica.

"No, what does the double talk mean?"

"Don't believe everything you hear."

Dan's face took on the shadows of a murderer who could never be remorseful for any evil act he accomplished. The man's eyes bore into Jessica. He nodded at his brother who marched up behind her. In one massive show of strength he wrapped his arms about her torso. Slowly he squeezed the air out of her lungs. The colour in Jessica's face changed from a nice shade of white to bright red in seconds. At first she attempted to kick him in the shins, trying to escape. In reality Jessica knew she couldn't match his strength. If he didn't loosen his grip, soon, she'd suffocate. In the dying seconds of her life she hoped her last trick worked.

She played dead in the bushranger's arms.

Dan stepped up to her, yanking her hands to the front. Through bulging eyes his jaw fell open at the size and the deep blue colour of the diamond. Twisting the ring from Jessica's finger, his hands trembled. The moment he claimed his prize he gave Jessica a swift back hand. Released from the vice like grip she drifted down to the dust. Watching him through blurred vision, Jessica saw him lift the ring towards the sun to study the trophy in great detail.

"Eureka, the blue diamond is now mine. This beauty has to be at least five carrots."

Jessica slowly stood, staggering a little from the after effects of the tourniquet hold. She waited for the exact moment where her delivery could be of the greatest use. Her chance came when Dan lowered his right shoulder a few inches. Jessica immediately reacted, lashing out using a swift kick to his head. Dan stood swaying for a few seconds. He dusted his hat glaring at his attacker. He stepped forward, punching her, cutting her bottom lip. Blood splattered onto his boot.

Using the back of her hand Jessica wiped the blood from off her cut lip. "You will never live long enough to do it again," she spat.

"Let me explain your future if you desire to keep resisting my commands." Dusty Beard pointed his gun at her. He pulled the trigger. The bullet whizzed past her ear, embedding in the carriage wall. "The next bullet will be implanted in you."

"Except for a minor detail we finally agree on something," coughed Jessica struggling to hear any noise from her left ear.

The bushranger pushed the ring deep into his pocket. "What's the minor detail?"

"The next time we cross paths the first bullet out of the gun I'm holding will kill you."

The bushranger laughed hideously. Walking off, he mumbled in his beard.

Though the guns and the ring were stolen from her grasp, Jessica knew exactly where they were. She vowed, soon both her silver colt .45's and her ring will be back where they belonged, on either side of her hips and the ring will be on her finger. Already she started to plan how to rob the three bushrangers of their lives.

Dan screamed at the other two. "Boys we've struck it rich today. Let's ride."

In seconds the trio rode off leaving a dust cloud in their wake. Jessica folded her arms. She stood watching the dust cloud settle. Behind her the women commuters were sobbing over the loss of their possessions. Each one felt helpless at being robbed at gunpoint by three bushrangers; everyone except Jessica.

CHAPTER FOUR

AFTER VIEWING the dead bodies of the train driver and his assistant, Jessica didn't sit around waiting to be rescued. She squared her shoulders to shake off the dying thoughts.

"Everyone, stay close to the train," urged Jessica. "When I reach Bendigo I'll raise the alarm." She started to walk off towards the front of the train.

"Where do you think you're going?" quizzed a man wearing a black business suit. "Those bushrangers might still be in the area. If they see any of us alone, in the dark, I'm sure they will love to have a bit of target practice. Girlie, you could end up as their dessert."

"I agree," echoed Ivan Kepler, crawling out from under the train. "We have to stay here. I'm sure the station master at Bendigo will be scooting off to the lawman when he realizes the train hasn't arrived on time."

Jessica walked back to the group. She looked Kepler in the eyes. "I hope they do come. I want what belongs to me back."

"Forget your goods," cried an older lady. The wrinkles on her face gave away the amount of stress she felt. She looked over her shoulder before sitting on the steps of the red carriage next to a petite middle aged woman. "Those men are long gone. So too are your guns, and the magnificent looking ring. I bet you will never see either again."

"I won't be too quick to make a bet on your statement. In any case I'm not waiting here," grunted Jessica. "You can stay if you want to. I'm leaving. Anyone or all of you are more than welcome to tag along."

"Please reconsider what you are going to do?" pleaded Kepler.

"I'm more than capable of walking the few hours to Bendigo."

Kepler placed his hand on Jessica's shoulder. She wiped it off.

"Please, the railway has rules."

"I don't care about the rules. Anyone who tries to stop me will see the ground close up," she snorted, raising her fist in the air.

"I'm hoping you'll decide to stay. I thought we were getting along just fine," hinted Kepler.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you. I have been trying to tell you there is 'no us' this entire trip."

"Please, I don't want you to go."

"I'll be fine. If any rail official tries to blame you for anything I'll tell them I chose of my own free will to walk into town. It's your job to stay here to look after the rest of the passengers."

Kepler and the commuters shook their heads. Jessica waved goodbye to the onlookers before starting to walk along the tracks. She felt more than confident of obtaining a horse the moment she arrived in the town. To pass the time she began to finalize her precise moves. Already her imagination could picture the station master looking puzzled at the breaking news on the delayed arrival of the train. Sounding exhausted, she'd complain bitterly. The railroad employee will offer compensation for her hardship. He'd give a polite smile before handing over enough money for a room at the local pub. Maybe even a free meal. Watched by the railroad man she'd enter the establishment full of drunken males, ask for a room, sneak away to borrow a horse and ride to the sheep station.

Satisfied her plan didn't have too many holes in it; Jessica checked the height of the sun. To arrive in the town before sunset her pace needed to be doubled.

The hot sun dived quickly towards the west. The train shrunk rapidly. The rail tracks stretching out before her seemed endless. Seeing a mirage of water pooled in the distance, Jessica kept focused on the illusion. For the last time she looked over her shoulder. The train vanished long ago. Seeing her long shadow, Jessica checked the position of the sun again. The trees already half covered the ball of light.

When Jessica finally viewed the train station the birds were frantically searching for a nice branch to sleep on for the night. From a distance the small shed looked rustic and abandoned. Walking faster, Jessica wiped more dust on her face.

A wiry built man stood leaning against a long wooden pole which held up the narrow verandah roof of the train station. The second he spotted Jessica, he started walking in large circles. When she got close enough he stopped. Cupping a hand around his mouth, he yelled for her to get off the tracks.

“Girlie are you stupid? The train is overdue. Get the hell off the tracks,” he called for the second time.

A full three minutes ticked off before Jessica actually listened. From the end of the train station she started her act. Placing her hands on her hips she glared at the weed of a man.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses. If you need to buy a ticket you’ll have to wait for tomorrow. The train departs for Melbourne at 9:30 in the morning.”

Jessica boldly walked up to the man. “Sir, I have some disturbing news. I’m a passenger on your delayed train. When we stopped for water three bushrangers came out of nowhere. They shot dead the engineer. The fireman is also dead. There are a lot of people waiting to be rescued back at the train. I decided to walk here to raise the alarm.”

“You’re joking?” questioned the man.

“Does my appearance relay to you I might be joking?”

The man raised his eyebrows as he studied Jessica’s appearance. She could only imagine what he must have seen. Hair a mess, her white shirt dirty and her black leather boots scuffed badly from what she’d endured.

“Sir, I’m exhausted, do you have any water?” Jessica wiped the sweat from her face smudging the dust across her brow.

“Yes, yes, of course, step this way. I’d just called it a night and got ready to go to the pub for a pre dinner drink when I spotted you walking along the tracks. I must add, before I heard your explanation I felt quite angry. I couldn’t understand why anyone wanted to walk on rail tracks. I’ll have it noted I’ve never in all my years of working, have I ever seen such a thing.”

The man held the door open to the ticket office. Jessica stepped inside. She felt positive if three people managed to squeeze into the room it would be a miracle. In one corner sat a large glass jug of water on a half round table. The only furniture in the room was a small safe under a bench behind the glass window. Jessica swiveled her head to the right. She found someone had thoughtfully placed a sharpened pencil under a clipboard full of blank papers on top of the safe.

Jessica stared at the man. Her disgusted look went straight over his head. She took the cup of water from the man’s hand, drinking it in one gulp. “I’m surprised you’re not alarmed over the lateness of the train.”

“I am concerned over its punctuality. Before I go home it did enter my mind to drop past the lawman’s house to tell him of my doubts.”

“How long before someone goes searching for the missing train?”

“Sunup, if the train doesn’t arrive tonight,” answered the man.

“You want those innocent people to spend an entire night on a train stranded in the bush while hiding from bushrangers?”

“I’m not going out there at night,” whimpered the man straightening his peak cap. “I’m more than certain the lawman won’t either.”

“I can’t believe you’d discount the seriousness of what I’ve just told you.”

“Each person I’ve met lately has an opinion over something. I believe those people will be right. In the morning I’ll personally retrieve the train.”

Jessica stood, slammed the empty cup down next to the jug of water and marched to the door. Before she left the small office she turned to face the man. “She’ll be right just doesn’t cut it,” she growled. “I’ll find a horse, hitch it to a wagon full of food and water then ride back to the train myself.”

Jessica stepped outside, slamming the door shut. Her feet caused a series of small dust clouds as she marched away from the station. In seconds the man shuffling after her started to wave his arms wildly in the air.

“Stop, please stop.”

Jessica looked over her shoulder, throwing her hands onto her hips. The man's face turned Ashen. His lips were starting to quiver.

"You're right, I'll ride out to the train shortly," he puffed. "Is there something I can do to make up for my lack of caring?"

Jessica smiled loosely at the man knowing he easily swallowed her act. "Do you think you could give me a small amount of money for a meal? Maybe even a bed for the night. I'm dog tired from the walk."

"I'm sure the local hotel across the street will be more than obliging on your request."

"Your idea sounds wonderful. There's only one problem, the bushrangers robbed me of everything I own. All I have is what I'm wearing."

"What if I reimbursed you three pennies for the train ride plus two more for your inconvenience?"

"If you make it twelve, I'll be more than satisfied over our business arrangement."

The wiry man's troubled expression cast a doubt on not only Jessica's plans; he looked to be growing suspicious of the whole brazen deal.

"I'm not sure I can rig the books for the amount of money," he moaned.

"What of my long exhaustive walk? Not forgetting everything I own is what you see."

The man rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "I suppose I could write the explanation; I spent the money on severance pay due to the robbery. I could write a sub note after the fact stating you were going to sue the railroad for everything they own. I alone persuaded you into taking twelve pennies for compensation due to your plight."

Jessica slapped the man on his boney shoulder. "You're a clever man. I knew you could think up something intelligent."

"Now we have almost come to a settlement, I will agree to your terms only if you allow me to cook you a nice meal. A kangaroo leg is hanging in the meat locker back at my place."

"Thanks for the offer. Maybe when I've replaced my dirty clothes and freshened up I'll let you buy me a meal at the local."

The man quickly responded to Jessica's newest part of the agreement. He stuck out his hand. She shook it to seal a gentleman's agreement.

"I'll go get your twelve pennies from the safe. I won't be a moment."

Jessica started jumping from excitement at her acting skills. The moment she saw his returning she fell silent as a lamb. The station master stepped up to Jessica, handing over the money.

"Thank you for your trouble," said Jessica. "Maybe you'd like to escort me towards the hotel?"

"It'll be my pleasure," replied the station master. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"You can ask. I'm not sure if I'll answer. It depends on the question."

"I'm wondering why you're dressed in a man's outfit? If the women in the town saw what you are wearing, I hate to think what they'd say."

"You're the second person to ask the same question today. I'm eager to return to my sheep station. I don't want to waste any time in changing my clothes."

"Which station are you referring to?"

"The Rosedale," answered Jessica truthfully.

"Are you telling me the Rosedale is yours?"

"Are you surprised?"

"Yes I am. The real owner of the Rosedale happened to be murdered a long time ago."

"Yes I know; he was my uncle. The Rosedale is mine. He left the sheep station to me in his will."

"Do you know an aborigine is in charge the place? Don't get me wrong I'm not a racist man. I've heard he's quite good."

"Yes I do. His name is Lightning Dawn."

"I apologize for testing you. Please understand I needed convincing you are the owner of the Rosedale. I've actually seen the aborigine man several times when he came into town for supplies."

"It's quite alright," said Jessica. "Any idea what his name means?"

The man threw up his hands. "Rule of thumb I live by; keep to myself."

Jessica bid him a good night by shaking his hand. Turning his back, the station master trotted towards the railway station where his horse stood tethered to a post. Jessica watched him mount the beast, give it a quick kick in the ribs and canter off along the train line.

Laughter and colourful language coming from inside the hotel by drunken men sent a signal to women who were in the immediate area to stay away. If they needed to walk past the pub they were always advised to cross the road.

Jessica marched to the closest horse trough, gently pushing the brown mare's snout out of the way. Water droplets fell onto the dust. Staring into the trough she waited for the water to settle before viewing her appearance. She looked worse than she imagined. Cupping her hands in the water she washed her face and arms and sprinkled water on her hair. Pushing her fingers through the knots, Jessica did her best to look presentable. Dusting down of her clothes and straightening her button up shirt came last. She winked at her reflection, sighed, painted a seductive smile on her face and walked over to the hotel's wooden bat winged doors. The moment she stepped into the cigar smoke filled hotel, the voices of the drunken men were at an unbearable roar. There were at least a dozen round tables scattered around the floor space. At each table there were six chairs. A bearded man occupied every seat in the place. Loitering at the bar the men were three deep. The ones at the back were trying to push their way to the front so the barman could refill their glasses.

Keeping an eye on the seated men, Jessica strolled over to the bar. Each time her boot left the wooden floor it felt sticky from slopped whisky. The crowded room fell quiet. Each man shuffled to one of the side walls creating a passage to the bar. The young male bar tender stopped pouring a long bearded gold prospector another drink to glue his gaze on Jessica. Stepping up to the bar an old man shoved a stool at her. Jessica flashed him a grin. He smiled back. His bad breath smelt worse than the pile of horse manure next to the water trough. Judging by the empty shot glasses in front of him Jessica could tell he already consumed several too many.

Leaning her elbows seductively on the solid wooden red gum counter, Jessica sensed a ruckus developing. In this particular town, women were banned from the hotel establishment. Most nights the local lawman looked in over the top of the wooden bat winged doors. If he ever found a woman inside he'd grab her by the scruff of the neck and escort her home. Drunken men and young sober women don't mix is what he says.

Upstairs however seemed to be a different story.

Fifty pairs of eyes bore into Jessica examining every square inch of her youth. Before the barman could take a step towards her, a young man pushed his chair back and stepped to Jessica's side.

"Is there something you need?" he asked. Giving her a wink he peeled his wide brimmed hat from his head. "You name it; I'll fulfill your every dream."

A stirring commotion from the rest of the male brood made the young lad's face turn bright red.

"A drink or two might feel good going down," replied Jessica. "My throat is drier than the Simpson desert."

The young man clicked his fingers at the barman, who raced over to pour whisky into a shot glass. Jessica downed the liquid in one gulp, slammed it on the bar and signaled for another.

"Hey mate you're gonna get lucky tonight," snickered a man at the back of the crowd. His gummy smile showed he'd been involved in quite a number of fights. Judging by the battle scars on his face they depicted he'd lost more than won.

"Shut up you old fool," shrieked the lad, handing Jessica a third glass full of whisky.

Jessica downed the drink before the fourth could be poured. She scanned the faces of the men drooling over her before focusing on the young man who bought the drinks. She winked seductively, took him by the hand and led him towards the stairs. Cheering and clapping didn't stop till they were upstairs out of sight.

The hallway boasted six rooms, three on each side. Jessica could hear a woman giggling as she walked past the first doorway. Outside the closed door of the second room she heard the unmistakable squeak of the bed. At the end of the hallway she abruptly stopped walking. Taking the man completely by surprise she pinned him against the wall. His futile struggles against Jessica's arm leaning heavily against his throat were weak at best.

"I know you're a decent man," she whispered. "I don't have too much time to explain. Have you seen three men? Two of the three are brothers? One of the three has a dusty beard. He goes by the name of Dan?"

"How important are these men?"

"The three are bushrangers," reported Jessica applying more pressure on his windpipe.

"None have come into town fitting the description," he croaked.

Jessica hesitated before letting the man loose. He instantly rubbed his throat.

"I believe you," she whispered. "I need a favour."

"Name it and it's yours."

"I'd like to borrow a horse."

"For how long?" he asked.

“Two months at the most. I’ll take good care of it.”

“There’s a spare horse in the blacksmith’s stable at the other end of town. You’ll find a man shoeing the horses. He’s my brother. His name’s Dave. You tell him Steve said it’s ok for you to borrow one.”

Jessica moved her weight from off the man. She flashed him a grin before starting to walk back down the hallway to the stairs.

The lad sprinted after her. Grabbing hold of her shoulder he blurted. “If you leave now those drunks will skin me alive. They expect me to do you.”

“I don’t want to see a handsome young fella skinned alive by a room full of drunken bums.” Jessica grabbed the young man around his waist, plastering a long gentle kiss on his lips. The man lapped up every second. Eventually she allowed him to come up for air. “I can tell you’ve never been kissed before.”

“How did you know?” whispered the lad.

“I’m a woman.”

Jessica wore a broadening grin, walking down the stairs. All eyes in the room were on her from the moment she appeared on the top stair to the second she reached the bat winged doors leading to the outside. Not one drunken male looked to be prepared to start the taunting. At the threshold to the outside Jessica faced the sea of strangers. Before disappearing into the night, she puffed out her breasts.

“The young man doesn’t beat around the bush. He’s the best I’ve ever known.”

Jessica left the disturbance in her wake. Walking past many shop fronts she finally came to the blacksmith’s stable. She found a tall, short cropped dark haired young man feeding the horses. He looked slightly older than the one she’d kissed at the hotel. The man wore blue jeans and a thin short sleeved shirt. His forearms, biceps and shoulders looked like they could easily lift four men off the ground.

Jessica lost sight of the man when the Clydesdale he stood next to, moved. To bide her time till he finished feeding the horse she glanced about the wooden barn. In the small furnace near the center of the stable, the embers still glowed. A metal bucket full of water sat on a red brick next to the Anvil. Jessica silently walked across the compacted ground to take a closer look. Sitting in the bucket of water were four horse shoes. The man she waited to talk to stepped from behind the large Clydesdale. In the light of the kerosene lantern hanging from a bent nail on the main pole supporting the roof he looked Jessica up and down. The small dancing flame inside the kerosene lantern highlighted Jessica’s shapely silhouette.

“Can I help you?”

Jessica squared herself to the man. “Steve gave me a message. He reckons it’ll okay for me to borrow a horse.”

“My brother can never resist a pretty woman.” He walked over, holding out his hand.

Jessica put out hers. The moment their skin touched for the handshake she could tell he’d seen a lot of horse shoeing. “I’m Jessica,” she blurted.

“I’m pleased to meet you. I’m Dave.”

“I thought you might be.”

“Where did you meet my brother? Or should I say how did you meet?”

“We met at the local not more than half an hour ago. He’s a perfect gentleman.”

“You were in the pub?”

“Yes.”

Dave meticulously studied Jessica from head to foot.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m checking for ripped clothing, bruises, welts on your arms. I don’t see any. I’m surprised you made it out of the place intact.”

“Why? Is it due to the fact I’m a woman?”

“Yes, an extremely beautiful one.”

“I hope you don’t mind me asking. Your accent, is it Irish?”

“Indeed. You’re not only pretty you are clever too.”

“Thanks for the compliment, now, how about the horse?”

The man beckoned Jessica to follow. He led her to the stall next to the Clydesdale. A fine looking mare twitched its ears forward when she saw the pair looking over the low gate.

“I re-shod the horse this morning,” said Dave.

“She’s a beauty.”

“Fast too. I gave her a run for a bit of exercise about three hours ago.” He looked directly into Jessica’s blue eyes. “Do you have any money, for the loan of the horse, I mean.”

“Can I give you what I gave your brother?”

The man rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "Knowing Steve he probably settled for a kiss. He's been complaining for months he's never kissed a woman. Two days ago he said he'd give anything for a kiss."

Jessica put her arm over his rock hard shoulder.

"You're the most beautiful woman in this town. Take no offence when I say I'd rather be paid some money."

"Okay."

When the young man finished saddling the horse Jessica took hold of the reins. She stretched her neck a few inches to kiss the man square on the lips. She slipped two pennies into his hand before mounting the horse. Flicking the reins against the horse's neck, they trotted off.

CHAPTER FIVE

WALKING FROM Bendigo to the Rosedale took twelve hours. If you knew the short cut, the journey could be cut to a two hour horse ride.

Even though it been a number of years, Jessica felt positive she knew the way. Her uncle took her on the back of his horse the same way at least a dozen times before they moved to the sea. The Rosedale was situated in the middle of the mountains; the homestead called 'The Glen' over looked the ocean.

The trail could easily deceive the rider at first. It snaked towards the east before double backing on itself in a westerly direction. If Jessica didn't wander away from the narrow trail, she'd eventually find herself at the Rosedale's back fence post. A lazy fifteen minute ride through the bottom paddock and she'd be at the homestead's verandah. Anyone could follow the trail during daylight hours. At night it tested the rider's endurance.

The short cut began next to the general store at the northern tip of the town. This time of year a medium sized bush covered in wattle flowers made the entrance to the track easy to spot. Jessica coaxed her horse to push through between the bush and the weatherboard wall of the store. She kept her gaze transfixed on the winding track as darkness started to settle upon the area. Small animal eyes watched her and the mare as they pushed deeper into the scrub. At one stage a young tree python scraped Jessica's shoulder. She felt sorry for the foot long youngster and placed it on the next over hanging tree branch.

At the river crossing Jessica dismounted. The moon shone over the canopy of trees illuminating the surface of the lazy flowing river. She gave the horse a reassuring pat on the neck before leading her slowly through the ankle deep water. Through her water proof knee high leather boots Jessica could feel the cold temperature of the water.

"I'm happy it isn't raining old girl," whispered Jessica.

The horse's ears swiveled, listening to the words of the rider.

"To attempt to cross a swollen river in a storm during the day is suicidal, definitely unimaginable at night." Jessica chuckled. "Fortunately there's no one else around. They might think I'm a little crazy talking to a horse."

At the far side of the river Jessica mounted. For half a minute she watched the brightening stars, weighing up the option to make camp for the night or keep moving. She clicked her tongue making the horse start walking again.

At seeing the corner fence post of the Rosedale, Jessica's heart pounded behind her rib cage. She pulled gently on the reins, signaling the horse to stop. For a full minute Jessica studied the broken fence lying on the ground. The shattered boards were beyond repair. The post looked to be the only thing worth saving.

"The reason why something trampled my fence inwards will have to wait," she whispered to the horse. She gave the mare a gently kick, making the horse start to trot.

The mare navigated her way through the wooden debris, never missing a foothold. When the outline of a house loomed out of the darkness, Jessica could smell smoke. A couple of dogs started to bark, making her presence known to the occupants inside the homestead someone is prowling around outside. Jessica pushed the horse through several sheep huddling in the dark. They made a small commotion which sent the dogs into a constant yap. She dismounted the mare at the foot of the verandah and tied the reins to the end post. Billowing smoke from the chimney rose above the roof of the homestead. The storm shutters were fully

closed for the evening. At the other end of the verandah Jessica heard the squeak of a door being opened. A small kerosene lantern slowly rose into the air.

“Who there?”

The man’s voice, including a rough Australian accent and broken English made him hard to understand.

“Show self or I shoot,” called the man.

Jessica heard a click coming from a gun. “Sir, there’s no need to shoot me, I’m only here for your help,” she called.

“Are ya’ alone?”

“Yes I am.”

“You sound female. Why are you walkin’ around the bush at night? Don’t you know there is bushrangers about?”

Jessica climbed the two stairs. Walking along the creaking verandah towards the light she saw the outline of a tall man place the lamp on a small round table before back stepping away.

“I’m Jessica Hayes,” she announced, coming to a stop next to the table. “I’m looking for the overseer of this sheep station. I’m wondering if you might know him. His name is Lightning Dawn?”

“I he. I am Lightning Dawn.”

The man’s broken English seemed to be worsening after each word he spoke. Jessica looked directly at the man’s face. “You’re so black.”

“You so white. You’re a woman. Dangerous to be out in night. Bushrangers many.”

Jessica decided to fill in any missing words the man failed to say for easy dialect. She gave the man an extra friendly smile and held out her hand in an attempt to add a sociable gesture.

The big man stepped forward, stretching out his hand. They pressed the flesh by way of a standard handshake. The moment he let go he pointed the gun at the ground.

“Thank you for at least understanding I’m not here to rob you.”

The man walked off, beckoning Jessica to follow.

They entered the home through the kitchen doorway. Jessica breathed in the smell of smoke. Memories of years gone immediately wafted back to her consciousness.

Her uncle and aunt used great care when they laid each solid hand cut brick which helped to make up the Rosedale. Corrugated iron covered the roof. The exposed wooden beams were cut from the trees in the paddocks. They were hoisted into place by their old faithful Clydesdale. The homestead boasted a total number of seven rooms. The narrow brick laundry had been extended so the outhouse could be brought inside. The hand dug long drop rarely smelt. The kitchen, the most used room in the place always felt warm from the wood oven. The smells lingered all day from the constant cooking and always put a smile on the faces of the weary workers.

“Miss Jessica is you okay?” asked Lightning Dawn, placing the lamp on the kitchen table.

“I’m fine thank you.”

“You look troubled.”

“Yes indeed I am Lightning Dawn.”

The man sat at the table. Clasp his hands together he looked up into Jessica’s eyes.

“Three bushrangers ambushed the train I’d been on.”

“Did two of them look almost the same?” asked Lightning Dawn.

“Yes they did. Two were brothers.”

“I know of the men. They are bad.”

“I’d have to agree. Please, don’t think I’m attacking you in any way; you’re aboriginal?”

“Yes, from the Mullum-Mullum tribe.”

A perplexed expression swept Jessica’s young face. “They congregate many days from this station. How come you’re here?”

“When I’d seen ten summers I said goodbye to my village to go walk-a-bout. I ended up here. Boss man he good man. A long time ago he left me in charge till he returned.”

“I hate to be bringing bad news. The man who owned this place is dead. He just happened to be my uncle. He took me in and slid into the role of being my father.”

Lightning Dawn slid off his chair and downed his knee, pulling the hat from his head. He gave a nice tender heartfelt prayer. Standing to full height, he bellowed solemnly. “You are the boss now. I’ll do everything you ask.”

Jessica patted the man on the shoulder. Her eyebrows instantly shot skywards the moment she felt his strong, rock hard, muscular shoulder. She saw the man grin. She smiled back.

Jessica sighed heavily at the tall strong handsome black man. Pulling out a chair she sat. "Lightening Dawn," she started.

"Yes, boss lady," he replied sitting back on the chair.

"The first thing I need you to agree on is extremely important."

The man looked completely baffled at the words Jessica used.

"I never want you to call me Boss lady again. My name is Jessica. It's easy to see you've run this place on your own for years. Even though I'm paying you for the overseer job, I want you to consider this station your home. I need you to look upon me as an equal owner of the Rosedale; not a boss."

Lightening nodded in excitement. "The workers left five years ago. I love the idea of being an equal partner."

"Next, I understand aborigines are great trackers. If I'm correct, I'm asking you to please help me track the three bushrangers down so we can obtain what they stole from me?"

"What did they take?"

"Two solid silver hand guns and a large blue diamond ring."

"It will be my pleasure to help," said Lightening.

"There's one more question I need to ask."

"I'll do my best to answer it."

"Why were you named Lightening Dawn?"

"Your question is easy to answer. I was born at the crack of dawn when the sky started lightening on a brand new day."

CHAPTER SIX

JESSICA AND Lightening Dawn walked to the stable. They quickly gave the horses they were going to use an extra meal of oats before walking back to the homestead. Entering the kitchen, they were greeted by two, young aborigine boys and a young aboriginal girl.

"Who are you three?" asked Jessica.

Lightening stepped up to introduce the boys. "The lad closest to you is fourteen-year-old Jarrah. Cobar is his twin brother. Gip is their ten-year-old sister."

"Hello," screeched each of the kids in turn.

"Hello to you," said Jessica.

"You hungry?" questioned Gip.

"Yes I am."

The three kids ushered Jessica to the table, forcing her to sit. They placed the left over evening meal, consisting of lamb stew on a couple of slices of the day's bread in front of her. The three kids sat on the floor watching Jessica eat. The moment she swallowed the last mouthful Gip grabbed Jessica's arm to get her attention.

"Will you be long?" asked Gip. Her eyes looked saddened at the news their new visitor wanted to leave so quick.

"How did you know Lightening Dawn and I are going somewhere?"

"We overheard you talking when you arrived," explained Jarrah.

"Hopefully we'll be back in a couple of days, three tops," Jessica answered.

A sullen look swept Gip's face when she saw Jessica walk to the gun cupboard. She watched her swipe a rifle and a gun belt from off the shelf. When she saw her clip the gun belt around her waist Gip didn't look happy. She watched while Jessica loaded the Smith and Wesson and groaned when she pushed it into the holster.

Lightening Dawn packed provisions in his swag. He walked over to the gun cupboard, picking out a rifle and a colt .45.

Jessica followed Lightening Dawn outside.

Gip followed them to the stable. She watched Jessica place the saddle on the horse's back and tighten the leather saddle strap around its girth.

"This my home," Gip blurted. "We family."

Jessica smiled at the young girl. Her black face caused her teeth to look extra white. She squatted to look the girl in the eyes. "Yes, we family." She ruffled her hair then mounted the mare. "See you soon."

Jessica saw Gip and the two boys give a quick wave. She waved back and gave her horse a slight kick.

Lightening and Jessica trotted off into the night.

"Will those boys be able to watch the sheep?" asked Jessica slowing her horse so they could walk side by side.

"Sure they will. They have helped me for the past ten months. They know what to do."

"Are they your brothers, or your siblings?"

"No not me. I don't have a woman in my life. I have the station. Those boys are from the Bunarong tribe. They reside near a Melbourne beach. They decided to go walk-a-bout."

"What about Gip, where does she fit into the equation?"

"From the second the boys said goodbye to their tribe, Gip followed them. For days they pestered her to go back. She insisted in walking alongside her brothers. She wanted to see what they saw and go where they went. Those three are inseparable."

Jessica shook her head at the thought of volunteering to leave the safety of a place. To leave and take no food or water sounded too daring a task especially at such a young age. She looked sideways at Lightening Dawn. His handsome features were an attraction she found hard to resist. Already the man impressed her by far exceeding how she imagined a real man should act. At her deepening thoughts she suddenly realized where they were taking her. Jessica's heart skipped a beat. Again she riveted the idea she didn't want a man in her life, particularly after what her dead husband put her through. She never wanted the love or companionship from a man again. She gave her future a reassuring nod. Live by yourself to have an uncomplicated life.

Jessica found herself viewing Lightening Dawn's back many times as they rode through the bush. It looked strong. "A good worker," she mumbled.

The scrub thickened causing the trail to narrow which helped disguise her lagging behind. When the bush thinned Lightening Dawn looked over his shoulder.

Jessica swallowed her emotions, edging her horse to slip into sync next to Lightening's horse. Eventually both horses and their riders burst through the scrub into town. The pub had long closed and the drunken men were home, leaving the main street deserted.

Jessica pointed to the rail tracks at the other end of town. They rode to the station, gave the train a quick once over before riding along the train line to where the bushrangers carried out their successful ambush. Jessica spied several empty suitcases littering the area; the only evidence to her story.

Lightening Dawn mirrored Jessica's lead and quickly dismounted. They walked to the exact place where the three men made a hasty retreat into the bush. Jessica marched over to the train line to stand where Dan the bushranger took the blue diamond ring from off her finger and taken possession of the guns.

Lightening slowly studied the rock hard dirt looking for footprints. He squatted where the scrub touched the clearing. Eventually he stood; his eyes sparkling. "Jessica, in my opinion you're correct. Three men on horseback entered the bush exactly where you said. Judging by the violent entry they didn't care to mask their escape. I believe they will be easy to follow. Please, take no offence, white man can't move through the bush without leaving a distinct trail."

"No offence taken. Lead on."

Lightening Dawn tightened his grip on the reins, forcing his horse to push into the scrub. Pointing at the dirt, he added. "One of the horse's hoof prints is lighter than the others. I believe one horse is almost lame. It will make the men travel more slowly."

"They seem to be heading for the town we came from."

Lightening shook his head. "If they keep going in the same direction they will travel south of the town away from the Rosedale station."

"Any ideas on where they might end up?"

"Hard to say at this early stage; if I were to guess, they'll end up in Melbourne."

"We should get moving," hinted Jessica. "I want to catch them sooner than later."

Lightening Dawn flicked the reins of his horse to make it start trotting in hot pursuit of the bushrangers. Every ten seconds he stooped to study the ground for evidence they were following the correct horse prints. He'd nod give a sharp flick of his reins so his horse knew to walk on.

Bringing up the rear, Jessica's fully loaded sidearm bumped comfortably against her thigh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FIRST streaks of light filtering through the trees signaled the start of a new day. The thin morning mist quickly evaporated. The two riders wearily emerged from the scrub. The small clearing they rode into looked to be the same size as the barn back at the Rosedale.

Jessica hadn't slept for over twenty-four hours. Her shoulders slumped, her eyelids were closing and her blonde hair easily lost its bounce from the unseasonal heavy dew from the previous night. She lifted her hand to signal a halt.

"Why have we stopped?" asked Lightning, moving his attention away from their surrounds.

Jessica looked his way. Her eyelids were shut tight. Her entire body started to tremble when she attempted to dismount. The moment her foot touched the ground she knew she succumbed to fatigue. Crumpling to the ground she coiled into a fetal position. The horse didn't seem too concerned over the human ball for she already busied herself munching the green grass.

"You sleep, I'll make breakfast," whispered Lightning Dawn, gently.

He walked briskly over to a clump of dried twigs, gathered an arm full before marching to the center of the clearing where he quickly constructed a makeshift camp. Rummaging through his swag, he pulled out a small metal tin. Lightning Dawn glanced at Jessica before running through the scrub towards the slow moving stream, empty tin in hand. In less than a minute he returned, holding the tin can full of water. The handful of dry leaves he grabbed from the ground, he placed in the readied fire. He struck a match. The dried twigs were quickly burning. A minimal amount of smoke wafted into the stagnant air. Lightning Dawn placed the old Billy tin full of water onto the fire before scurrying off into the bush for a second time. When he returned both his hands were full of black berries. He dropped the berries into the warming water inside the Billy. Next he dropped three coffee beans into a dented mug, poured in hot water and smelt the aroma. Using the second mug he repeated the procedure. Reaching into his swag he pulled out a wrapped cloth. Carefully un-wrapping the material he uncovered four chicken eggs. One by one he placed the eggs into the bubbling water. He walked over to Jessica. Squatting, he placed a coffee mug under her nose. She opened her eyes, groaning.

"When did you make the coffee?"

"Just finished," Lightning announced.

"How long did I sleep?" Jessica questioned, struggling to a sitting position.

"You've been asleep for about thirty minutes. The eggs are ready. So are the berries."

"Where did you get the berries?" Rubbing her eyes, Jessica swiped her hair from her face.

Lightning Dawn pointed to the slow moving stream. Jessica focused on a black berry bush growing out of the low bank. Flowers covered the dense bush. A ton of berries looked ready to be picked. Shaking off the tired feeling, Jessica broke out into a grin. She used both hands to reach out for the mug. Eagerly sipping the tar coloured brew, she sat watching Lightning sprint back to the small fire to rescue the breakfast.

Together they shelled the hard boiled eggs and ate the berries out of the tin of warm water. When Jessica finished the last drop of coffee, Lightning Dawn dropped three more coffee beans into her mug and refilled it. In minutes she felt refreshed.

After finishing the breakfast the camp fire embers were buried in dirt. In forty minutes they were back on their horses, following the trail left by the bushrangers.

"The three men don't seem too concerned about being tracked," Lightning informed, pointing to the trampled bush. "In fact they seem to be getting more careless."

"Maybe the bushrangers thought they made a fool proof escape." Jessica pointed to the sky. "Let's hope we catch up to them before the storm hits."

Lightning looked skywards. For a good minute he studied the clouds. "Three o'clock tomorrow afternoon the storm will be here."

"Are you sure about the accurate prediction?" questioned Jessica.

"I'm almost certain. For years I've been studying the wind and the clouds. I thought the knowledge I gain might help me snare a job protecting sheep or cattle on a station somewhere. One day I walked onto the Rosedale property. I've been there ever since."

Jessica carefully watched Lightning Dawn's dark eyes. Her thoughts were running wild. The man's magnetism reached out, gripping her spirit. A knot formed in her stomach. At first she tried to ignore the feeling. The knot didn't relent. If anything it grew tighter. She frowned. Surely it couldn't be love pangs. She

tried to force her mind into thinking of other things. She looked at the sky to study the clouds. Lightening's face was all she saw.

"This is a great trail we're following. We have to get moving if we want to catch the bushrangers today."

Jessica peeled her gaze from the sky. She caught Lightening Dawn looking at her through lustful eyes. To hide the fact he quickly turned his head away to study the ground. Jessica too looked somewhere else. She hoped by not looking at the man riding next to her the knot in the pit of her stomach might quickly fade and be no more than a distant memory in which she could have a quiet chuckle the next time she found herself alone. Before she knew it Jessica let her guard down. She stared at Lightening. Unblinking he stared back.

For the next two hours Lightening and Jessica chatted. He taught her about tracking and what to look for if she were ever hungry.

'Lightening Dawn you're the best teacher, full of bush wisdom and knowledge,' Jessica thought.

By the time they dismounted Jessica felt the utmost respect for the aboriginal man named Lightening Dawn. He was always quick to reassure unlike her dead husband who down graded her countless times. He forever ordered her back into line. Before she said, 'I do' at the altar, he'd been the perfect gentleman. She never once saw a sign he'd be power or money hungry.

To give the horses a well deserved break Jessica and Lightening started leading their horses through the bush. Even though walking felt painful Jessica welcomed the exercise. They skirted around several snakes basking in the mid-morning sun before picking up the trail again. Lightening even allowed her to take the lead some of the way. The speed in which his only pupil learnt impressed him.

"Go to the top of the class," he chuckled.

Jessica gently punched the man in the arm. He swept her off her feet and turned in circles. They laughed at each other over the one line statement. When they stopped, they chuckled at the sudden silence.

The hot, dry, humid morning made Jessica and Lightening sweat under their riding gear and wide brimmed hats.

By midday the sun started sapping their strength.

Lightening Dawn called a sudden halt. They'd broken through the scrub into a small clearing and stumbled upon the remains of a small camp fire. Lightening checked it for warmth. The embers were cold. The broken tips of the tree branches around the area looked fresh. A few small branches still oozed sap. Lightening gently touched the sticky substance in an attempt to ascertain the amount of hours since the branches were broken.

"The three men we've been tracking camped here no later than last night," he reported confidently.

"There must be water close by," whispered Jessica wiping the sweat from her brow. "First rule of survival, rest near water."

Lightening pointed at a slope in the land beyond the edge of the clearing. They climbed the small hill and looked through the scrub at the small water hole. Several stray cows were standing in the water, cooling their hooves.

"The bushrangers can certainly pick the perfect place to set up camp; middle of the bush, no one around for miles. This spot is safer than a bank."

"Care for a swim?"

"I'd love to. The only problem is I have nothing to change into," replied Jessica.

Lightening Dawn threw his shirt to the sun. The physique of the man shocked Jessica. Tall, strong, physically fit well defined shoulders and boasting a deep chest. Every muscle in his body seemed to stretch his shiny black skin to its limit. She was still trying to gain control of her thoughts when she saw him drop his pants and walk naked into the water.

Standing chest deep in water Lightening called. "Come in, cool down."

Jessica signaled to Lightening Dawn he should turn away to respect her modesty. After all they were business associates, not bed partners.

Lightening Dawn faced the opposite side of the water hole. The moment he heard faint splashing, he faced the naked woman. He watched her dive beneath the surface before coming up treading water at arm's length.

They swam, dived and played hide and seek in the water. The swim lasted five minutes before Jessica started to shiver from the cold.

"It's freezing in this water. Turn around while I walk out," she stammered.

Lightening faced the bushes at the far side of the water hole. When he heard light splashing he found it impossible to fight the temptation. He turned in time to see Jessica stepping from the water. The glare of

the sun highlighted each strand of her long blonde hair. Water dripping from the golden ends trickled down to the nook in her back. Jessica's hour glass figure excited Lightning. Jessica turned in time to see the man marching out of the water. He looked more than ready to have her.

"Lightning Dawn, I asked you to respect my privacy which includes keeping your head turned."

"You said we were an equal."

"Only in a business partnership," screamed Jessica.

Images of her being attacked in the middle of the Australian bush flashed into her thoughts. Hell, the man could do anything to her. Who'd ever know? After having his way he could cut her throat before heading back to the Rosedale. If anyone asked a question of him, who actually owned the sheep station, he could simply say, he inherited it.

"I need you to get back into the water."

Lightning didn't seem to understand Jessica's frantic words. He stood, towering over her. Looking directly into Jessica's eyes Lightning Dawn swept her in close. No light could be seen between them. Feeling his dominant strength Jessica appeared to be powerless to do anything. Swallowing her fear, she tried to keep control by thinking of a solution to her dilemma. The only people in screaming distance were the three bushrangers. She certainly didn't want them on the scene to quadruple her problem. One uncontrollable man full of testosterone was more than enough.

Jessica unsuccessfully tried to wriggle free of Lightning's powerful arms.

"I want you," he insisted in a strong deep masculine voice.

A sheep, when cornered by a pack of wild dogs, surrenders its life. Jessica started to seriously think the idea might be her only option. After all it worked against the bushranger. Maybe if she was lucky the act might work again. The longer she thought about it the stronger the notion grew. Allow him to have his way and pray he'd let her live. She'd lost out big time in getting her guns and the blue diamond ring back, putting her trust in a man she barely knew. For the mistake her memory will be the only way to ever see them or the Rosedale again. Tears fell from her eyes. Her life was the only thing left. That looked to be in serious jeopardy.

Jessica looked at the man through narrowed slits. 'We need to talk about what you're doing, is wrong!'

Her statement never left her mind.

She could feel Lightning's wild emotions the moment their lips welded. The hot fiery passion flowing through the man's body seemed overwhelming. Every one of his muscles tensed. She knew he already committed himself to have her. Slowly she pulled her lips away. Gathering every ounce of strength she could summon she managed to push him off.

The man back stepped.

Jessica stared directly into his eyes. His pupils were wide, dancing sporadically, staring back.

"We need to talk," she whispered, finally getting her thoughts into words.

Lightning Dawn turned his back, dressed and marched off into the scrub.

"Where are you going?"

The man didn't answer. He pushed aside the scrub and vanished.

Jessica dressed, picked her way through the bush, tracking the man. She found him sitting on the far side of the water hole staring up at the sky. She made her shadow hover over the man's face.

"Storm is building."

Jessica looked up at the sky. "You might be right," she said confirming his three words.

"What are you here for?"

"I want to talk to you," growled Jessica, firmly.

"No need to talk. White skin people talk too much."

"You don't talk enough."

"Sit; look at the sky and the bush."

Jessica sat. Her eyes followed his outstretched finger. He pointed at the sky, the trees and the surrounding area.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"I see exactly what you see, the Australian bush, wild life, and the sky."

"I don't see what you see. I feel the scrub, the trees, the sky and the animals. I am part of the bush."

"Is that how you can predict the weather?"

"Yes."

"Tell me something. Due to the fact you believe you feel the living bush and are part of the living surrounds; is it the reason why you're so good at tracking?"

“Yes.”
Jessica touched Lightning Dawn on the arm.
“I’m going walk-a-bout,” he sulked, standing.
“Right now?” she questioned.
“Yes.”
“You can’t leave me here in the middle of the bush.”
“Talk is over.”
“Before you go, I want to say something.”
“Talk finished.”
Jumping to her feet, Jessica pushed her hands onto her hips. “Don’t you turn your back on me, Mister. I have something to say. I expect you to have the decency to listen.”
Lightning Dawn faced her square on.
“Can we sit?”
“No, I’m more comfortable standing.”
“Why? Is it so you can walk off when you’ve heard enough?”
Lightning Dawn sat crossed legged and straight backed, looking up into Jessica’s eyes.
“Thank you,” she said, sitting. “First, I want to say you are an amazing masculine man. Second, when you were kissing me I felt something I have never felt in a man before. I know I didn’t have enough strength to fight you off. You felt me trying and let me go. I pegged you to be a rapist, a murderer or both. I was wrong.”
Lightning opened his mouth to talk. Jessica wagged her finger under his nose.
“I haven’t finished speaking,” she barked. “Your charisma draws me to you. One day in the future I can imagine being your wife. I must stress not yet. It’s too soon. My husband died not long ago. I alone dug his grave. I hate him for what he did. Can you understand it’s too soon? I can’t bring myself to make love to you. Maybe one day in the future I will. If the day comes I will decide, not you.”
Lightning Dawn walked off, giving Jessica a far-a-way look.
Tears fell from Jessica’s eyes. They flowed down over her cheeks. She angrily swiped them away using the back of her hand. Yelling, she blurted. “It’s too soon. Please don’t go.”
Lightning Dawn brushed aside the scrub. Only for a moment did she see him hesitate.
Jessica called after him. “Gip said we are a family. I thought maybe there could be a chance you and I might have a future. Not now.”
Lightning emerged from the scrub. He marched to where Jessica sat sobbing. Hovering over her he didn’t look happy. “I am what you white folk call, embarrassed. I expected to lay you down. I wanted to call you my woman.”
“You have a strange way of asking me to marry you.”
“Being my woman, to me is a great honor. You do understand the meaning of the word?”
“Explain to me what it means to you.”
“I will never do you wrong or allow anything or anyone to hurt you, or upset you. I will go so far as to say I’ll lay down my life to protect you.”
Jessica swallowed the lump in her throat. For the first time she didn’t know what to say.
“You refused. I go walk-a-bout.”
“How long before you return?”
“Never,” he quoted, marching into the bush.
“Please, don’t go, I need you,” cried Jessica.
If he heard or not, this time the man didn’t hesitate. Pushing through the scrub he disappeared.
Jessica cleared her throat. In one deep breath she screamed her words at the bush. “Lightning Dawn, if you go, don’t come back. I’ll find the bushrangers myself. When I’m done, Gip, her brothers and I will be a family. You will be a distant memory, exactly the same as my dead husband.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAN DAYTON, his brother Barry, their tag-along mate, Robert Masters were drinking at the local hotel ten miles from where they robbed the train. Dan busied himself admiring the blue diamond ring he stole from off

Jessica's finger. The other two were whipping up a disturbance. Verbal diarrhea volleyed between the bushrangers and a few patrons. The argument flowed faster than a river in a flood. The dozen or so miners who came for a quiet drink, either to celebrate their lucky gold find or to drown their sorrows on striking out looked angry enough to fight the bushrangers.

The tall bearded man behind the bar pouring whisky shots appeared to be disgusted at their drunken demeanor. He leaned forward, giving the three men a steel-eyed look. Under his breath, through clamped teeth he whispered. "You've downed your last drink in this establishment." He raised an eyebrow to help hammer the warning home. "Understand what I'm talkin' about?"

Staring the man in the eyes, Dan pushed the diamond ring deep into his pocket. Raising his fist he shoved it under his nose. "Bartender, another round for the three of us and make it snappy."

"You're upsetting the cliental," spat the barman. "It's time for you to move on. Go find a nice quiet corner somewhere out of town to sleep it off."

"You'll need a lot of mates to tell me what to do. I listen to no one, especially a barman in this two bit pub in this out of the way town," taunted Barry, slurring his words.

"I have a friend sitting on the top shelf under the bar begging to be used. After I've thrown the three of you out of this place I'll use my sawn off shot gun. If you open your eyes in the morning you'll be limping for a very long time."

Dan slid off the stool he'd been perched on, nodded at Masters and tugged at his brother's arm, pulling him to the side of the room out of ear shot. "Before you two get us into a fight, I think we should heed the barman's warning. We need to stay un-noticed. We've bought a few drinks so let's go finalize our plans in robbing the bank across the road."

"Brother, you're right we should be on our way." Barry waved his hand in the air. Yelling in a slurred voice he announced to the men in the room. "Thank you everyone for your entertaining hospitality. My brother has convinced me it's time to go. Nobody get up we'll find our own way out." Slamming money on the counter he snarled at the barman. "Six bottles of whisky will help us to be gone."

The moment the bottles were placed on the counter Barry swiped them up and led the way out of the building. When the outside air hit their faces the group of three stood swaying in the middle of the dirt road. Barry bowed at a few women who were hurrying past.

"I'm sure happy those lovely ladies weren't about to shoot," complained Masters. "The way they were glaring at us anyone would think they were our wives."

The three bushrangers stowed the bottles of whisky in their saddle bags. They were still chuckling when they rode their horses off into the night.

At the southern end of town the three riders discovered an undulating landscape covered in tall grass. They rode along a well worn narrow trail for five minutes before a larger hill loomed out of the dark. The men made camp on the crest.

"This is the life," snorted Dan, settling his head down on his saddle. "The stars are out, our saddle bags are full of money and jewellery from the train robbery and I have in my possession the rumored solid silver colt .45's we've been searching for."

"Not forgetting to mention the blue diamond," added Robert Masters.

Dan pulled the ring from his pocket. Lifting it to eye level, he started drooling over the stone.

"The ring must be worth a fortune," whispered Barry.

"You're not wrong brother." Dan kissed the ring before placing it back into his pocket.

"I've been thinking," snarled Masters. "Maybe we should keep the diamond ring Forland asked us to find. We could sell the stone, split the money three ways and head north to Sydney or Queensland. I've heard the weather is good up there. Countless ladies are looking for tough rugged men."

Dan sat bolt upright, staring at Masters. "What are you saying?"

"Forland hasn't a hope in finding us. We have enough loot from the train robbery to live a happy life."

Barry swiveled his head towards his brother. "Maybe he's right."

"No, I've planned to rob the bank. I'm not giving up a chance to be filthy rich. If you want out, go."

"What's this idea on the bank job?" Masters spat. "I thought we were good mates. You two have never said a word about robbing no bank. In my opinion it's a bad idea. Let's take what we have and count ourselves lucky."

"We are good mates," shrieked Dan.

"So why didn't you confide in me?"

"Up to last week the idea was only in the planning stage. I informed my brother a few days ago about the plan. He agreed it sounded great. The gold miners in this part of the country dig the gold out of the

ground. They bring it to the bank. They exchange the gold for crisp new pound notes. I know for a fact the money comes to the bank by train. It's no coincidence we're here at this time. Instead of another train robbery which nets us a good amount of money why don't we rob the bank which will give us a lot more?"

"When were you going to tell me the details?" jeered Masters.

"I just have," taunted Dan. "What do you think?"

"I reckon you're holding small amounts of information from me."

"Why would I?"

"You two are blood brothers. I'm the third man in this trio."

"Why should your statement alter my plans?"

"I have my own suspicions. I believe we need to vote on whether your idea is in the best interest of the gang. If something were to go wrong; I don't want to be in jail for the rest of my life or waiting to be hanged."

"If I'm not mistaken, I'm thinking you don't trust me," quizzed Dan.

"I don't."

"We've been best mates from the moment we could walk."

"I still don't understand why I've been kept in the dark?" questioned Masters, shaking his head in disgust at his so-called mates.

"I told you. Up until recently the plan has been sketchy. I didn't want to say anything till I knew every detail," explained Dan.

"How do you know the money will be on the train?" asked Masters.

"I know people in high places."

"What people?"

"Hold it right there Masters," snarled Barry. "He doesn't have to tell you. Hell he hasn't even told me."

"The whole plan sounds dirty," grumbled Masters.

Barry looked at his brother. "I have to admit holding any information from us might be disastrous. I think you should let us in on who you've been talking to?"

"Are you taking his side?"

"I'm not on anyone's side. If this bank job goes ahead I want to know I'm going to live."

"Trust me, nothing will go wrong," insisted Dan.

"I've heard those words too many times before from other men. They're six feet under," spat Masters. "To put my mind and your brother's at rest, why don't you tell us more details? What time is the money due to arrive?"

"Tomorrow morning at exactly ten o'clock," Dan explained. "The safe at the bank is full of gold. There will be only one lawman to escort the money from the train to the bank. We'll be waiting inside the building. A quick clean robbery will set us up for the rest of our lives. Masters, after the robbery you're more than welcome to disappear to do whatever you want."

"If I'm not mistaken isn't the law office close to the bank?" questioned Masters in a condescending voice. He smelt a trap and wanted to prove it. "If there is any noise the lawman will hear. Is it your grand idea, to go up against the law? Barry and I will be too busy shooting to realize you have stolen the money and the gold right from under our noses. You'll be gone, leaving us to die."

Barry gave his brother a dirty look.

Dan showed a sinister grin. "Don't worry about what Master's has just said, it is all lies."

Masters stood hovering over Dan. His hand swiftly pulled his gun from the holster. Menacingly he pointed it at Dan. "You should quickly explain yourself or the next bullet I shoot from my gun will bore a hole through your heart."

"You want more details; here they are. The all important high ranking police brass is due to arrive tomorrow afternoon. The lawman in charge of the new police station will be too busy cleaning and fussing over paper work to worry about the bank. I've already spoken to the man. He's admitted he's budding for a promotion. It's the reason why the robbery must be first thing tomorrow morning.

"You've spoken directly to a lawman?" spat Masters.

"Of course I have. He was quite chatty. He didn't know I pumped him for information. The man wants be remembered as being the best police officer in this part of the state."

"Impressive," spat Masters. "I wondered where you were for three weeks. Barry, what I want to know is why you didn't say where your brother went? I always thought we were a good gang."

"The way you said, 'were' doesn't give me any confidence."

"How do you think I feel? You could have at least confided in me."

Dan directed his gaze straight at Masters. "I didn't want anyone to know. If the law got even a smell of my idea they could easily change their routine at the last minute. Come on, don't be too upset. It's an easy robbery. While everyone else lives in a dream world hoping to strike it rich finding a large gold nugget, us three will be sitting in the sun on the beach living it up."

Masters stroked the stubble on his chin brooding over the idea before pushing his gun back into his holster. "Okay, I'm in. If the plan works and I'm not part of it I'll be kicking myself for the rest of my life."

Closing his eyes, Dan settled himself down for the night.

Masters, Dan and Barry fell asleep under the stars dreaming about how the next day might pan out and how to spend their share.

CHAPTER NINE

THE EMBERS from the camp fire which danced into the night sky were gone by morning. A warm breeze sprang up. Few clouds dotted the sky. Dan finished placing the saddle on his horse. He walked over to Masters, kicking him on the side of his boot. Before he opened an eye his hand reached for his gun, pulling it from his holster.

Barry sat bolt upright grinning at the man.

"It's time to head back to the town," snorted Dan.

"Don't you think you're a smidgeon early?" jeered Masters, looking slightly perplexed. He stood, housing his gun back into the holster.

"Don't worry, I want front row seats," said Dan. "Besides, from the moment we ride into town I want anyone who sees us to think nothing of our presence. I want to blend into the scenery. I definitely don't want anyone questioning why we're in town."

"What if we run into the hotel barman?" asked Barry.

"We'll bid him a very good morning before going on our way."

"In my opinion arriving in the town too early isn't the right thing to do," grumbled Masters.

Dan continued to ready himself for the short trip back into town. "You can stay here if you want to; I don't care."

Barry stood, copying his brother's movements. Under sufferance Masters placed his leather saddle on the back of his horse.

"If you don't panic we'll be rich before lunch," reassured Dan.

The three bushrangers slowly rode their horses towards the town, ambling along at a snail's pace. They stopped at the first building, craning their necks, looking for human traffic.

Seeing no one the three men dismounted outside the general store and tethered their horses to a verandah pole next the water trough. Dan checked the entire length of the tiny town. Satisfied they didn't arouse any suspicion he set out for the train station office. If the shoe box sized solid brick building sat any closer to the tracks the train might smash it to pieces. The dirt under Dan's feet felt rock hard from an unknown number of commuters who regularly boarded the train. He stepped up to the small ticket window to watch a rake thin man counting money. The large clock hanging from the wall still read the same time as the previous day.

Dan tapped on the glass window using his knuckles. Waiting for the man to look up he started drumming his fingers on the wooden wall.

Eventually Dan growled at the man for ignoring him. "What time is the train due to arrive?"

The man counting the money froze in mid count. He lifted his head, nodding at the clock. "Thirty five minutes."

Dan retraced his steps back to the lane. Standing next to Masters, he whispered. "The train's half an hour out."

"Forget the train, we want to rob the bank," spat Masters.

"Have you forgotten what I told you last night? The train brings the money for the miners."

"I thought you wanted to be inside the bank when the train arrives?"

"Correct."

"Let's start walking," hinted Barry.

“Not yet,” said Dan. “If we’re seen loitering about the bank someone will grow suspicious. A few months ago I visited this ugly fly blown town. I studied the antics of the payroll clerk at the bank. Every Tuesday he met the train, signed for the bags of money and escorted the one lonely lawman to the bank. A few minutes later they’d carry the gold to the train. The clerk puts the gold in the first carriage, locks the door, signs a form and returns to the bank. The whole operation takes no longer than fifteen minutes.”

Masters’ pupils sparkled at his own plans. If the Dayton brothers wanted to keep incidental secrets of the plan hidden from him, he’d resist the temptation to tell them of his plans which could ultimately lead them to their eventual demise. A sly smirk crossed his face. “When’s the best time to strike?”

“The moment the clerk leaves the bank, we’ll enter and wait for his return. We’ll pretend to be customers. This time of the day there won’t be anyone around to do banking business. The first person never arrives before eleven. When the clerk comes back carrying the money he’ll lock the bank’s front door and place a sign in the window; ‘Closed for twenty minutes.’ I’ve seen the whole process at least a dozen times in about the same number of banks all over the state.”

The three men walked their horses up the slight incline towards the bank, turned into a side street and tied the reins to a post opposite the stock feed store. A young lad no older than twelve dipped his hat at the strangers before running off towards the river carrying empty buckets.

“Where’s the exit route to get out of this two bit town?” queried Masters.

“We’ll leave this town via the large tree,” said Dan, pointing. “Five feet into the scrub there’s a trail leading to the river. We’ll head up stream by walking in the water. If anyone actually sees us leave the town they’ll have to decide whether to go up stream or down. If they assemble a posse to follow us they’ll have to split. They’ll search for an exit point on the river bank. When they don’t find one, they’ll soon give up. We’ll walk in the water for an hour before riding out. We’ll go inland by travelling west. In a couple of days the heat will be off and we’ll be home free.”

“If everything goes according to your plan,” spat Masters.

“I can’t see a problem,” jeered Barry.

“Me neither,” added Dan. “I’ve gone over the entire plan at least twenty times in my mind. It’s flawless.”

“I’ll go for a walk,” hinted Barry.

He casually entered the main street. A few feet from the lane he leaned against the wall of the general store, watching how the street still fared. To help look inconspicuous he lit a cigar.

Three young women dressed to impress in their long white dresses and a knitted shawl draped across each of their shoulders, didn’t give the man watching their every move eye contact as they went about their business of the day. A wagon being pulled by a single horse stopped outside the blacksmith’s stable directly across the street from the bank. Barry studied the lad sitting in the driver’s seat. The eleven-year-old sent the man watching him a friendly nod. He even gave the stranger a wave. The bushranger gave the kid a nod before blowing smoke into the air from his lit cigar. His right hand unintentionally slipped down and touched the butt of his gun. The lad vanished inside the shop to start a conversation with the Ferrier. Every few seconds he pointed at the horse. The lad left after they shook hands.

Barry decided to walk off towards the train line to appear to be waiting for the train to arrive. He pulled a round silver watch from his pocket, opened the lid to pretend to study the position of the hands. ‘9:59am.’ Two ladies scurried past him as the train whistled its arrival. Steam could be seen billowing through the scrub as the train slowed its approach to the station. Peeling himself from the wooden wall Barry quickly walked back to the narrow lane where Masters and his brother were waiting.

“How’s it all lookin’?” asked Dan.

“All is quiet on the main street,” he reported.

Dan whispered confidently. “Watch what is about to happen. If I’m correct the bank clerk will open the door. He’ll study the street before stepping outside into the sun. He will light a smoke before walking to the train station.”

The bank clerk did exactly what Dan described.

The three bushrangers waited for the train to arrive before walking to the bank. Inside the building a grey haired old woman and her balding husband were finishing their banking affairs.

“I thought you said nobody will be in here this early,” whispered Barry in his brother’s ear.

Dan walked up behind the frail old man, grabbing him by the collar. Before he could react Barry threw him through the air. The old man slammed against the wall, coming to rest on the floor. Before the old woman could scream Dan aimed his gun at her head and pulled the trigger. She died where she stood. Her husband quickly followed her to the pearly gates.

The young lad behind the teller window slowly raised his hands into the air. "Please, take what you see and leave."

Pointing his gun at the lad, Dan walked behind the counter, pushing him to the floor. He hovered menacingly over the young man, lifted his foot and pushed his boot into the man's neck. He looked over his shoulder at Masters and his brother. "Grab what you can. We'll wait for the bank clerk to bring the money." He again stared at the lad squirming under his boot. "Where's the key to the safe?"

"The bank clerk wears it around his neck," he croaked. The lad started to tremble uncontrollably. "Please, I don't want to die. My wife is expected to give birth either today or tomorrow. I came to open the bank so I could ask Mr. Davies for the rest of the week off."

"Who's Mr. Davies?"

"He's the bank clerk."

"You're full of useful information aren't you? Is there anyone else in the bank?"

"Yes, there's a young girl. She has permission from the local school to be here. She has to lead a debate on the positive side of banking. The main question she needs to find the answer to is how we guarantee your money is safe?"

Dan snorted. "I want you to bring the girl here to me."

"Please, she's only a child."

Dan pulled the man to his feet and pushed him into the wall. He raised his colt .45, level to the man's forehead. "I hope you're not stupid enough to challenge my orders?"

The lad's Adam's apple bobbed sharply when he swallowed. He started shaking his head violently. Not for a second did he take his eyes off the barrel of the gun.

"I didn't think so. Now go."

The young man hurried off into another room. A minute ticked off before he located the child. He opened the cupboard door, tugging on her arm.

"I'm not going out there," she whispered.

"It's okay. They want the payroll from the train. When they have the money bags, they'll go."

"I don't care. If they see me I will be shot dead."

The young man rolled his eyes, grabbed hold of the girl's wrist and dragged her scratching and kicking to where Dan stood impatiently waiting.

Dan studied her. A lustful grin swept his face. "How old are you?"

"I'll be thirteen next year."

Dan grabbed the girl by the arm and pushed her towards Barry. "Get rid of the rubbish. I don't want any evidence. I certainly don't want any witnesses."

"She might be a good hostage, if things go wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong. Do what I told you."

"I'm not too thrilled about killing a kid."

Dan scooted across the floor. Grabbing the girl by her shirt, he flung her against the wall. Standing next to the dead old man she trembled from head to feet. The lad was pushed into the wall next to the girl.

"If either of you make even the slightest noise, you'll be talkin' to the old man on the other side," spat Dan through a locked jaw. "Understand?"

The girl gave him a slow silent nod before slipping down the wall. She sat on the floor in a crumpled mess, staring up at the three bushrangers. Fear drove every word out her mind. The lad squatted next to her, watching.

Masters, loitering at the front window, gave a sharp whistle. "The clerk is on his way back. Dan you're right about the number of police officers. The lawman has no idea what sort of surprise I'll be giving him."

Dan nudged him in the ribs. "Before the visitors arrive, why don't you go find a room where the hostages will be permanent residents?"

A hostile expression creased Masters' brow. He grabbed both the girl and the lad by their shirt sleeves and hurriedly forced them into the back room. In the rough treatment the lad's crisp white shirt sleeve ripped. Masters slammed then locked the door.

The lad quietly walked across the room. Reaching out he tried to turn the doorknob. Disappointed, he stood facing the girl. "They've locked the door. The only thing we can do is sit tight."

The girl sat staring at the floor too afraid to speak.

The lad walked back across the room. Hovering over the girl, he whispered. "Did you hear me? Those men have locked us in."

The girl's stare slowly drifted upwards from the floor. Tears were streaming down her face. Her mouth opened. The lad managed to muffle her scream in time by using his hand.

"You have to stay quiet. If I take my hand away do you promise not to scream?"

She blinked rapidly while nodding slowly.

"Please, it's imperative you don't scream. If we make a noise they'll murder us both."

The young man eased his hand slightly away from the girl's mouth. Satisfied she wasn't going to scream he removed his hand completely.

"You do realize the moment one of those men opens the door we're dead," whispered the girl.

"We have to pray they'll be too busy escaping and forget all about us."

"They don't appear to be the type to forget something so important. Besides, we're in the same room as the safe."

The lad's eyes widened. "In the stress I forgot. The moment they obtain the key to the safe, they'll be in this room. We have to get out of here."

The girl quietly walked across the room to the door.

"What are you doing?" whispered the lad.

"Seeing how there's no window, the only way out of here is through the doorway. My sister and I used to lock ourselves in our parent's room trying to get each other into trouble."

"How will your childhood memories help us to unlock the door?"

"If the key is actually in the door lock, we're home and hosed. I'm Amelia by the way."

"I'm Tom Stephens."

"Pleased to officially meet you; now let's see to our escape."

The two pushed their ears against the door, listening for any noise.

"I heard nothing," whispered Tom.

"Same here," echoed Amelia. Squatting so she could look through the key hole she continued.

"Great news, the key is in the lock. The only thing we have to do is push the key out and catch it on a large piece of paper when it hits the floor. It will be an easy task dragging the paper under the door. If all goes to plan we'll have the key in our hand in seconds.

"There will be too much noise when the key hits the floor. Great idea though."

"Take your shirt off and slip it under the door. The material will dull the noise."

Tom placed his shirt on the floor, using his hands to iron the material flat. Pushing his tattered shirt under the door, he pulled a half pencil from his trouser back pocket. "I have it for emergencies only. If the pencil I use to write in the ledger breaks I don't want the customer to think I'm an amateur. I pull the pencil from my pocket and keep working."

"Impressive," said Amelia. "It's a shame you're married or I'm not five years older."

Tom's face flushed red as he handed over the pencil. Amelia inserted the sharpened end into the keyhole and gently pushed the end of the key.

"The hardest part of the trick is to push the key all the way out while keeping the lead tip of the pencil intact. If it breaks the pencil will be too large to fit in the keyhole. If it happens we'll have to sharpen the pencil."

"The task will take too long," whispered Tom. "Time is a luxury we don't have."

They heard a muffled thud on the floor. Tom and Amelia held their breath listening for heavy footsteps. Eventually Tom exhaled. Amelia again looked through the keyhole. Her shoulders slumped.

"All clear," she whispered on a sigh.

Tom dropped to all fours to look under the door to size up the key. "My shirt and the key are too thick to fit under the door."

Lying prone on the floor to assess the situation, Amelia pushed her mouse coloured hair behind her left ear to have an unrestricted view. "What we need is a piece of paper."

"There's a pile on the shelf inside cupboard. Don't move I'll be right back."

In seconds Tom dropped to all fours and slid a small sheet of white paper under his shirt. Amelia slowly worked the material out of the way. The moment the key dropped silently onto the sheet of paper she pulled the paper under the door.

Holding the key up, Amelia stood triumphantly.

Tom looked through the key hole at the bushrangers. They were too intent in staring out through the window waiting for their money to arrive than to be concerned over two hostages locked in a back room.

"All's clear," whispered Tom. Inserting the key into the lock he slowly twisted the key. The moment he heard a click his face distorted. He looked sideways at Amelia. "I have to open the door fast. If I don't there is always a loud squeak."

"It doesn't matter if you open the door fast or slow there's a real prospect the bushrangers will be alerted to our escape," whispered Amelia.

Tom rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "I'll open the door only wide enough for you to slip out."

"What about you?"

"Don't fret about me. I need you to slip outside using the side entrance and sprint to the new police station. The run shouldn't take you any more than a few seconds."

"I'm not leaving you here."

"Please, you have to. It's our only chance. You must convince the police officer to come."

"What if I can't?"

"You have to succeed. Amelia, my life depends on it."

She nodded, kissed the side of his cheek and dropped to all fours. Placing his foot in exactly the right spot so he could use it for a stop, Tom winked at Amelia. "Ready?"

"I'm ready."

"The moment the door hits my foot I want you to slither out. Make sure you're quiet. You might only have seconds before the robbers know what's going on."

"I pray you will stay safe," whispered Amelia.

Tom gripped the door knob. He counted to three before turning the knob and yanking. The door flew open. It came to a sudden stop against his foot. The squeak never happened.

In double quick time Amelia slithered out of the doorway towards the side entrance on all fours. She flashed Tom a blank look before vanishing.

"Dan," jeered Masters. "From where I'm standing I can see the bank clerk at the train talking to the lawman. They're getting ready to come here."

Barry joined his comrades behind the bank door. He looked out of the window at the main street. From their vantage point the bank clerk and the police officer could be easily seen unloading the last of the bags from the train. In total there were eight bags on the ground. The clerk gave the train driver a wave. Picking up the bags of money, the clerk read the inked inscription on sides; 'Property of the Victorian State Bank.' He waited for the lawman to clutch four bags before collecting the remaining four and leading the way back to the bank.

"We'll wait for the lawman to step into the bank," snickered Dan. "He'll be the only one carrying a gun. The bank clerk is small, wiry, he looks a little nervous. He won't be a problem."

The bushrangers scurried about the room looking for a hiding spot. One hugged the side wall waiting out the final few seconds. One hid behind the counter, while the third hid behind the door.

The four money bags the clerk carried were placed on the ground outside the bank door. He reached out, twisting the door handle. He used his foot to push the door open.

The clerk stepped across the threshold into the bank.

Masters shot the lawman in the head the moment he stepped into the bank. Dan hurled the bank clerk across the room. He fell against the wall, floating to the floor in a bundle of rags. The four bags of money he held fell on top of him.

Masters slammed the door shut before swinging his attention to the clerk. "Where's the key to the safe?"

The clerk didn't utter a word as he tossed the key at the bushranger.

"I told you he'd be no problem. Let's get the loot. In seven minutes I want to be gone," insisted Dan. He led the way to the safe. His brother came next. Masters brought up the rear.

A gunshot echoed throughout the room. Blood splattered the walls. Masters crumpled to the floor. He received a single bullet hole to the back of his head. Dan turned around, instinctively pointing his gun at the clerk. A single shot saw the man exhale his last breath. Dan showed no remorse as he slipped the colt .45 back into his holster. He glanced at Barry, shrugged his shoulders and stepped up to the closed safe room door.

After giving Amelia enough time to escape, Tom slithered out of the room undetected. Quietly he closed the door to the safe room. When the clerk fired his gun killing Masters Tom didn't have enough time to walk past the bushrangers so he could escape the same way Amelia did. He needed to decide quickly to either face the bushrangers head on or find a place to hide. Whichever decision he settled on he needed to act. Both questions made his future looked grim. His murder seemed inevitable. He couldn't bear the thought of never seeing his wife again or know she'd be a widow before her time or have to bring up their baby on her own. Tears formed in his eyes.

Tom made his choice.

If he chose correctly or not, he needed to make it work.

Tom stepped back into the safe room. Frantically searching the room for a hiding place his gaze fell upon the tall cupboard next to the safe. The cupboard gave him a slim ray of hope. Swiping the bundles of blank paper from off the cupboard's only shelf, he placed them on the floor. He quickly created three separate piles, stacking the paper to look as though they were supposed to be on the floor. He wriggled onto the shelf and started to close the door. He only just managed to pull the cupboard door shut when the remaining two bushrangers walked in.

Dan and Barry filed into the room. Their gaze lovingly fell upon the six foot cubed hunk of solid green painted metal. Scratches around the keyhole showed them the key scraped the surface many times from someone who might have been either tired or nervous. Dan glanced back at the clerk's corpse. Smirking, he spat. "The man will never be nervous again." He inserted the key into the lock. He heard a clunk when he turned the key. Twisting the door knob, he yanked the door open. "Brother, it is pay day."

"Let's grab the loot and get out of here," whispered Barry.

Together they swiped in excess of fifty stacks of pound notes. Each stack measured three inches thick and arranged in numerical order from the one pound note to twenty pounds from left to right on the safe shelves. The lower they got to the floor the larger the denomination of pound notes. The men emptied the safe, stuffing the money into the bags the police officer and the bank clerk carried to the bank. Dan groaned at the amount of effort he used to pick up four white calico bags from off the bottom shelf of the safe. He gave a low whistle as he checked the contents.

"Barry, there must be at least forty pounds of gold in these bags. We've struck it rich. This hoist will see us to the grave fifty years from now."

"What about Masters?"

"What about him?"

"Shouldn't we take his body?" questioned Barry.

"Leave him. We don't have time. Already we've been in this bank for ten minutes. Three minutes too long."

Dan and Barry made preparations to leave the bank. They grabbed all the bags and snuck out the side entrance to the bank. Barry tied two gold bags to his saddle then threw his saddle bag over the horse's neck. "How long do you reckon it'll take before the train driver raises the alarm?"

"Not long," replied Dan. He finished tying his gold bags to the saddle and heaved his frame onto the back of his horse. "Did you kill the female witness and the male teller Masters locked in the back room?"

Barry gave his brother an awkward stare. "No, did you?"

He shook his head. "We have to go back. If we don't, they'll give a detailed description of us."

"We can't go back. There's no time," whispered Barry.

"If we hurry we'll have enough time to sneak back into the bank to kill the two witnesses. We'll be on our way before the locals can alert the new cop."

Barry tapped his brother's shoulder. "I'll walk to the end of the lane to steal a glance."

Dan gave his brother a sharp nod. Waiting for his brother, he took hold of both horse's reins.

Barry walked quietly down the lane to the front of the bank. Squinting nervously in the sunshine he studied the main street. He couldn't see a soul. He looked down the hill at the locomotive. It looked colder than snow.

Switching his attention to the bank's door he casually sidestepped to the window. Looking through the glass window he saw the young girl talking to the lawman. She fidgeted while giving a full detailed description of the two bushrangers.

Barry quickly walked back to the lane. Out of sight of the main street he sprinted for his horse. Glancing nervously at his brother, he shook his head. They turned their horses at the same time and pushed their way into the scrub. They vanished in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER TEN

"I DON'T understand why the two bushrangers didn't murder you before they left the bank," mumbled the police officer. "It just doesn't add up."

"I'm glad they forgot," said Amelia.

"It's quite embarrassing, not hearing the robbery, seeing I'm budding for a promotion."

“After seeing the inside of the station for the first time I can see why you didn’t know.”

“I hope the big brass will understand.”

“I’m sure they will,” declared Amelia. “If you arrest the robbers your reputation won’t be tarnished.”

“It’s a bit late now. The bushrangers are gone.”

Amelia shook her head. “The longer you wait the harder it will be to catch them.”

“I can’t leave now. If the big boys arrive and find me gone, I might be overlooked for the promotion.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“They sent me a message yesterday saying I must be here. No exceptions. The moment they leave I’ll go find them. While I’m waiting, I’ll write a complete report on the robbery. Hopefully the big boys will be impressed by my thoroughness.” The lawman studied Amelia’s face willing her to agree with him. “By the way, I’m Police Officer Adam Stapleton.”

“Pleased to officially meet you,” said Amelia.

Stapleton looked a little sheepish, continuing his conversation. “I owe you an apology for not believing the story about a robbery in progress. I didn’t mean to give you a hard time. I’ve worked hard to have the station ready. I wanted today to be memorable. If the new police station works in this town, the government has hinted they might implement the idea to have a police station in every town in Victoria based on the new style.”

Amelia patted his shoulder. “I’m sure this day will be written in the history books. I’m certain the government will easily see the prototype station outshines the old style.”

“Hopefully you’re right.”

“Not hearing the gunshots could have happened to anyone,” suggested Amelia.

“Yes, I suppose you’re correct. To make amends of the fact I will stop at nothing to find the missing money and gold. I’m positive it won’t be too hard to trace.” Stapleton viewed the body of Masters. He shook his head. “There’s one for the books. What sort of men would leave their friend behind?”

“Cold blooded murderers,” snarled Tom, announcing his presence.

He’d come out of his hiding place and walked up behind Amelia. She turned, hugging him tight about his neck.

“I promise I’ll never tell a soul about what I’m about to do.” She kissed Tom square on the lips and grinned at his shocked reddening face. He quickly back stepped away from her sudden friendliness.

Stapleton walked across the room to shake Tom’s hand. “You did a brave thing; getting the girl out of the bank to raise the alarm. You might have been shot.”

“The thought never left my mind,” whimpered Tom.

Stapleton slapped him on the shoulder before walking over to the corner of the bank. Hovering over the old deceased couple, the clerk, the police officer and Masters, he stared directly at the five murdered victims in turn. He shook his head before scooting off to the washroom. He came back carrying small towels, placing one gently over each of the corpse’s heads.

“Covering the faces of the victims doesn’t help much, seeing how I witnessed the murders,” mentioned Amelia.

“I know. I feel it’s my duty,” said Stapleton.

“Thanks for your concern.”

“Now I’ve given you some time to settle your nerves after such a horrific experience, I need to ask you to think back to each of the robber’s descriptions.”

“I’ve already told you everything I know,” Amelia scolded.

“I’d like to commend you on the detailed descriptions of the two men you gave. Is there anything else you noticed? For example; did either of the men limp? Or did one of them have a scar on their face? Anything extra you can remember will be a bonus.”

“The taller man boasting a short beard used a silver colt .45. The horse with a long mane rearing up on its hind legs on either side of the handle was engraved in gold.”

“The gun sound rare. When I find the gun I’ll know I’ve found the right man.”

“I need to slightly correct my statement,” hinted Amelia.

Stapleton lifted his head, his pencil poised in the air.

“The bushranger carried two identical silver guns. They matched his gun belt.”

“The information you’ve just given is certainly worth investigating further. There’s been a report of a recent train robbery. Two guns and a gun belt fitting your description were stolen by three men. I know the name of the young lady who owns the guns. She relayed in detail the robbery to the train station employee. He passed the story onto me. He also added something about a rare blue diamond ring.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JESSICA EVENTUALLY swallowed her tears. She stood and turned her back on the place where Lightning Dawn entered the bush. Navigating her way back to the horses, she knew anything developing between her and Lightning was finished. Forcing a half hearted smile she told herself a nice man will come into her life in the not too distant future, winning her heart.

A noise deep in the scrub saw her squat behind a narrow tree. Her eyes bulged in their sockets at thinking the bushrangers might have discovered her. The argument between her and Lightning Dawn took precedence over the fact the outlaws could have been close enough to listen in.

Jessica's gun belt dangled off the side of her saddle under the tree where she left it. To reach the tree she'd have to walk across cleared ground. Jessica could feel her tears welling up again. She wanted to kick herself for being unprepared. Alone in the middle of the bush is not exactly what she thought might be a prosperous future.

A dried twig snapped. She swiveled her head to her left.

"Get a grip," Jessica heard herself whisper. "The only one who will help turn the table on this bad situation is going to be you. The chances of the bushrangers were even in cooe of the water hole would be remote at best."

Jessica studied the tall spindly tree she chose to crouch behind. She looked to her right and behind her. The closest tree which could hold her weight seemed in reach. She checked the area, noting no sign of life. Holding her breath she fell dead quiet. A butterfly floated past her eyes. She knew she needed to be quiet as the butterfly. Dry leaves carpeted the hard ground between her spindly tree and the one she could climb for refuge. Only ten feet of open ground separated her from the tree. If the bushrangers did make the noise she hoped they'd look through the scrub and not up. If they did, she hoped the leaves on the branches could provide at least some camouflage. For the second part of her plan she needed to find three large rocks the size of her hand. When she found them she could climb the tree. High above their heads she'd wait for the bushrangers to be directly underneath before dropping a rock on each of their heads. At the base of the tree Jessica decided to climb, she spied two of the three rocks.

Jessica rechecked the area for a sign of life, getting ready for her stealth move. Glancing about the bush she slid into the open. Slowly she walked across the leaf covered ground, careful not to make a noise. The moment her fingers touched the bark of the tree Jessica slipped behind the three foot round trunk, christening it her own. She squatted, swiped up two hand sized rocks from off the ground then searched for a third. When she picked up the rock she commenced to climb.

Her feet barely left the ground when a strong arm slithered about her waist. The man easily pulled her away from the tree. Jessica opened her mouth to scream. Her lips were instantly clamped shut by a large hand. Her wide round eyes stared into the face of her warden. The three rocks she held landed at her feet.

"I caught you by surprise," whispered the man in her ear.

His words bit into Jessica's spirit. "Is it a good or bad thing?" she managed to mumble.

The man who successfully emerged from the bush undetected easily surprised her. Jessica needed to improve her detection skills if she wanted to one day more proficient than him.

The man's strong arms lifted her off the ground. Jessica remained suspended in mid-air looking directly into the man's eyes.

"I guess I'll have to surrender."

Lightning Dawn looked directly at Jessica. "I want to apologize for leaving you. The moment I vanished into the bush to go walk-a-bout I realized I didn't want to go. My place is here, standing next to you. Where you go I will be. When I said before, it's a great honor to be known as your husband and you are my, what you call, 'wife,' I meant every word. I will protect you all the days of my life."

Lightning placed Jessica gently back onto terra firma.

"Do you know what you're up against?"

Lightning caressed the side of Jessica's cheek a few times, pushing the hair from her face. "Yes, I've been thinking of what people might say behind our backs. Their haughtiness and cruel constant ridicule will be endless. White man's words have never concerned me in the past, why start now?"

"What about your plans to go walk-a-bout?"

“I’m still going.”

Jessica pouted. Before she could strain against his strong arms, Lightning kissed her. The moment she came up for air he continued.

“I’ve decided when I go walk-a-bout I will ask you to come. We go walk-a-bout together. If Gip and her brothers are still living under our roof, they can come too.”

“I love the idea,” squealed Jessica.

To her Lightning Dawn spoke the exact words she longed to hear. She could no longer fight the love pangs growing out of control in the pit of her stomach. Jessica stared directly into Lightning’s eyes. Wrapping her arms about his shoulders she kissed him. Their embrace tightened, reaching an intensity which could only be topped by surrendering herself to the man.

Lightning Dawn felt her muscles relax. She felt like putty in his arms. He only needed to lay her on the ground. There’d be no struggle, no fight. She already surrendered.

Jessica could feel his masculinity taking over. She needed to act quickly if she wanted to stay in control of the situation. She fought the surrender feeling. Jessica wanted above anything to say. ‘Lightning Dawn, take me, I’m yours. Lay me down so you can have your way.’

Jessica managed to push him to arm’s length.

The man backed off, looking beyond hurt.

Jessica whispered lovingly. “Please, understand from my point of view what I desire. When a man and a woman get, ‘what we white people say, married,’ there is a wedding ceremony. In the ceremony they pledge their love for one another. After the dinner there is the wedding night. To me this part is an important memory. I must ask you to wait.”

“I know about the ceremony. I love you enough to understand it is a deep meaningful thing you desire.”

Jessica sobbed uncontrollably, snuggling into Lightning Dawn’s deep chest. “Thank you for being the man I thought you’d be. The words you’ve spoken have shown me you are a decent, kind, lovable human being.”

Lightning said confidently “I promise this wedding night you deserve will be memorable. I expect you to be able to look back on your night in decades to come and be able to say, your night was perfect. The man you said yes to, definitely lived up to your expectations.”

Jessica’s spirit leapt. She could hardly wait to find out how he planned to make their night unforgettable. Nothing mattered anymore except being next to Lightning Dawn. She looked sideways at the man. “I don’t care what people might say, I want you in my life.”

Lightning and Jessica mounted their horses. They were so close their legs were touching. Jessica felt a tingling sensation roving through her entire body. The butterflies fluttering in the pit of her stomach were rampant. She looked sideways at Lightning which instantly made the feeling stronger, warming her spirit. It resembled the warmth being emitted from a lantern on a cold winter’s night. Jessica smiled seductively at the man. She didn’t set out to find love. She certainly didn’t expect to find it in the middle of the bush or with a man who has the skin colour of the midnight hour. How she longed to feel him inside her. The more she thought about what might lay ahead, the more intense the sensation grew. Her thoughts started to change. They were subtle at first, but quickly escalated.

The union between a black man and a white woman will be nothing less than scandalous. Lightning Dawn and Jessica Hayes; their names will be on everyone’s lips if their secret was ever discovered. They’d be shunned, or at the very least definitely frowned upon. She didn’t even know how their relationship might work. The law, the church, even the people in the town would see to it they’d never be married.

Right at that exact moment Jessica decided whatever the controversy, she didn’t care. She never wanted to lose sight of Lightning Dawn.

Lightning happened to be thinking along the exact same lines. The warm fuzzy feeling he felt on the inside strengthened as he chewed over the problem for the umpteenth time. He looked at Jessica. “Are you okay?”

His deep masculine voice took Jessica by surprise. She never heard him use the serious tone before. The pitch gave away how he actually felt about her. She knew he loved her too. He already showed how much he cared about the ‘white woman’ as he put it. Her dead husband rarely cared about anything or anyone except himself. He was only interested in making money. He always complained he didn’t have enough. Lightning Dawn is a man of deep feelings. He already admitted he’s one with the Australian bush. Now he was looking into her eyes.

“I’m fine,” replied Jessica.

Lightening stopped both horses in the middle of a small clearing. "If the law is ever changed or stays the same, I don't care. If I have to come across as a common worker on the sheep station in front of anyone who stops for a meal or a chat; it's good enough for me. I want to be next to you for the rest of our lives. I want nothing more than to shower my love on you."

"Thank you for the kind words. I feel at long last a breath of fresh air has settled over me."

"You were the one thing missing from my life. I am now complete."

"How did you know I happened to be thinking along the same lines?" queried Jessica.

"I feel as though I've known you my entire life. I believe we fit perfectly together. There's a bush saying which has been passed down in the Mullum-Mullum tribe from one generation to the next. 'How does a mother bird know to come back to the same place to feed her young after flying off in search for food?'"

Jessica's eyebrows angled to a point trying to unravel the bush meaning.

"She knows. It's instinct. She does all she can to protect her babies from any danger. I will do the same."

"I love the fact," whispered Jessica on her vanishing breath. "You help me to feel we do belong together. The feeling seems to double every few minutes. I can't see it ever waning."

Lightening Dawn leaned sideways to pat her on the leg. "I too have the feeling. When we unite as one I know the elders in my tribe could easily reject me. I say to you I don't care."

Jessica felt shattered at his words. Aborigines never wanted to be disowned by their tribe. Staring at Lightening Dawn she realized how she felt could never be. She looked away. She didn't want him to see her tears. Lifting her trembling hand she made a move to angrily swipe her tears from her eyes. They kept coming. She knew she must let the man go.

Lightening dismounted. He walked over to Jessica's horse, lifted his hands so he could hook his fingers under her belt. A mighty lift saw Jessica slip off her horse. In seconds she was coiled tighter than a spring in his arms.

"Leave me alone," she growled.

"You don't mean what you said."

"I sure do Mister."

Lightening bent his head forward. When he whispered in her ear his breath felt warm. Jessica fought hard not to listen. When he kissed her square on the lips for such a long time her hardened heart melted. She pushed her arms about his neck to give him a hug.

"I never say anything I don't mean," whispered Lightening.

"What if you aren't welcomed back into the tribe?"

"If I can't talk my tribe around to my side of the rabbit fence; I have already made my decision to be by your side forever. Many summers have gone since the day I went walk-a-bout. I have never been back. I probably never will."

"It's a sad thought," whispered Jessica, almost breathless.

Lightening placed Jessica on her feet. He shook his head. "I made my bed, I will lay in it. I will never change my decision in wanting to leave my tribe, nor will I ever think I have made the wrong choice in taking you for my wife."

"I still think never seeing your friends or family again is a sad thing."

"You'll never see your family again."

"It's different. My entire family is dead."

Lightening Dawn placed his arm over her shoulder. The gap between them vanished. "Yes, you're right. I have everything I want here in the Australian outback. You Jessica Hayes are my family."

Jessica's face flushed red at his courteous words. She watched him search the surrounding bush. The moment he downed his left knee he looked up into her blue eyes.

"What are you up to?" Jessica stood shocked at asking the question she already knew the answer to. Her mind went into a tumble dive. She tried to slow her breathing to help in beating her excitement into submission. She failed miserably. Her heart pounded hard against her chest. The palms of her hands turned into a sticky mess. Tears filled her eyes. Before she could blink her cheeks were covered in water.

Lightening held both of Jessica's hands so she couldn't wipe her eyes dry. Come what may she needed to take what he was about to dish out head on.

He cleared his throat.

'Evidently he must be a nervous wreck, exactly the same as me,' thought Jessica.

Somewhere in a nearby tree a kookaburra laughed. The noise painted a nervous smile on Jessica's face.

“I believe I have to officially ask you, Jessica Hayes, to please consider the possibility of being my wife?”

Lightening’s voice definitely sounded serious. The look he gave her hammered the seriousness of the moment home. Jessica’s stomach churned into such a tight knot it strangled her lungs. Any slight hesitation might see the man walk out of her life forever. Before she could utter a reply, her head started to nod. “Yes,” she whispered. “A thousand times, yes.”

Lightening Dawn stood to full height. He elevated Jessica off the ground. He couldn’t wait to kiss his fiancé. The kookaburras and the kangaroos were the only witnesses to their passion. Jessica made up her mind the bond between them will surpass any trial and stand strong against the sands of time.

They walked over and sat on a dead tree, quietly contemplating what they vowed. Neither wanted to be the first to make a noise that might spoil the scene. Jessica’s heart started to pound against her rib cage for the second time from nerves. Although she never wanted a man in her life again, here she sat next to a man she’d fallen in love with. They were engaged. She pondered the ramifications of the last three words for a long time.

Lightening leaned sideways. “Thank you for agreeing to marry me. If at some point in the future you change your mind I will understand.”

“I’ll never change my mind. I don’t care what other people might say behind our backs, God brought us together for a reason. I’m going to make sure we stay together.”

Lightening glanced behind him. Reaching down, he picked the wild yellow flower growing near the dead tree and pushed it into Jessica’s hair. It sat in full bloom behind her left ear. “I have some news,” he added.

Jessica touched the flower, anchoring it further into her hair. She gave him a proud look.

“We are in walking distance to the camp of the bushrangers.”

“How can you tell?” questioned Jessica trying to look through the bush.

“I can smell the smoke from their camp fire. They are in the valley on the other side of the hill.”

Right at the precise moment Jessica didn’t care about the bushrangers or her belongings. The only thing she wanted was to sit next to Lightening Dawn to think of the future they were walking into. “Let’s forget about my belongings. I want to get back to the Rosedale.”

“We came this far, we’ll retrieve what is yours so we can start a new life together.”

Letting the bushrangers think they won and allow them to leave the state, never to be seen or heard of again, echoed throughout Jessica’s mind. At the end of the day she didn’t need the guns or the blue diamond ring to be happy. She only wanted to be held in Lightening’s arms. The idea of her stolen possessions seemed to have taken a back seat. Jessica gave Lightening Dawn a reassuring smile. She wanted the action to relay a message he is the most important thing in her life.

“I’m not sure if it’s such a good idea going for what the bushrangers stole from me.”

“Why not?” asked Lightening.

“I don’t want you to get shot. I’d rather lose my things than lose you.”

“I definitely don’t want to see you shot either. I understand the way you’re thinking. I believe if we don’t take back what belongs to you, the retreat might be a stumbling block between us in future years.” Lightening Dawn placed his arm around Jessica’s waist. “Everything will be fine. To make sure, I want you to stay here. I shouldn’t be more than ten minutes.”

Lightening Dawn’s genuine sincerity for her safety was the final hurdle Jessica searched for in a man. His words and actions had more than won over her heart.

Jessica pushed him to arm’s length. A determined expression replaced her soft feminine look. “We don’t want to lose each other so we’ll do this together. We’ll sneak in, grab the stuff then sneak out. If luck is on our side they’ll never know we were there. The quicker we are the sooner we can look upon our secure future. I don’t want to be the one to create a stumbling block.”

“If we did retreat to the safety of the Rosedale, what great story could we pass on to our children or our grandchildren?”

Both Jessica and Lightening pulled their guns out of their holster. Crawling through the dense scrub they snaked their way up the hill. On the crest they stopped to view the valley below. The camp fire Lightening could smell looked small. Through the fading light Jessica could see two figures. Both were sitting on opposite sides staring at the flames.

“It’s late afternoon,” reported Jessica, studying the sky. “If we wait for the rain to start the noise will mask our entrance.”

“I love how you think. The rain is definitely on the way,” Lightening informed pointing to the shrinking blue horizon. “Thunder might come too.”

“The two bushrangers seem to be settling down for the night,” whispered Jessica. “Once we grab our belongings there’s no way they’ll follow us in the dark.”

Lightening Dawn pointed to a thick tall tree a short distance from the fire. “The bushrangers’ saddles have been placed on the ground. They’re covered by large tree branches.”

“I commend them on their care,” jeered Jessica, sarcastically.

“Maybe they don’t want a wet arse,” Lightening chuckled.

Jessica beckoned Lightening to follow her back to their horses.

They snaked their way down the slope undetected. By the time they came off the hill the billowing black clouds were almost upon them.

“You were right about the rain,” said Jessica, seeing the first drop of water land about her feet. She pulled a small watch from her pocket to check the time. “It’s exactly 3p.m. One of these days you’ll have to teach me the secret on how to predict the weather.”

“It will be a pleasure. There’s only one thing still troubling me,” Lightening added.

“What?”

“I thought you told me three bushrangers held up the train?”

“There were three, yes. One rode a grey mare, the other two rode black stallions.”

“I counted only two figures sitting at the fire and three horses,” said Lightening.

Jessica’s eyes bulged. She pulled Lightening Dawn down behind a dead tree. She studied their surrounds. There were no clues they were actually being watched by the third bushranger. Lightening studied the scrub too. He wanted to be positive the missing man wasn’t about to shoot Jessica. His keen eye sight focused in on the many trees. The branches in easy reach of the ground were scrutinized. Every leaf and weed needed to be studied in the immediate area. Jessica looked back up the side of the low hill. Their tracks were the only evidence of any disturbance.

“There’s nothing to suggest the third bushranger is anywhere near us,” whispered Jessica.

“I too can’t find a single broken twig. He’s not in the trees or hiding on top of the hill. We have to keep a sharp eye out for the third. There’s no way of knowing when he might sneak up on us.”

“I think we should take another look at the two figures,” suggested Jessica. “They might give us a tell-tale sign if they’re actually waiting for him to arrive.”

Lightening Dawn led the way up the hill. Instead of leaping over a fallen tree trunk which lay across their path he helped Jessica crawl around it. On their return trip he’d rake the leaves to mask their retreat.

Reaching the crest of the hill, Jessica and Lightening looked down on the camp site from behind a small bush. For a long time they observed the two men eating a small meal totally oblivious to the fact they were being watched.

“There are definitely only two men,” whispered Lightening Dawn. He turned his attention away to study the bush on the other side of the hill.

“If those two are waiting for the third to arrive they don’t show any signs,” whispered Jessica.

“If the third bushranger is close I can’t see him.”

“When it’s dark we’ll sneak into their camp. Once we have the two men tied up I’ll persuade them to tell us where the third man is. Hopefully we won’t have to use force before they tell us. After we have the info, we’ll grab our possessions and leave.”

Lightening Dawn nodded, gave the camp a last look and followed Jessica back to their horses.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TO GET ready for their surprise ambush, Lightening Dawn cut six shorts lengths of rope from the one hanging on the side of his saddle. Jessica walked their horses to a luscious patch of green grass growing under a tree. The moment she returned she collected Lightening. Together they climbed to the halfway point on their side of the hill. They sat in silence, observing the sky changing from pale blue to billowing black clouds. At first they dotted the sky. In minutes they were joined by other rain clouds. The sky seemed to be alive. The few ribbons of sunlight filtering through the canopy of the trees suddenly vanished plunging the hill in a grey eerie light. Several drops of water fell about Jessica’s and Lightening Dawn’s feet. The wild flowers growing on the hill were closing for the evening.

Jessica pulled her wide brimmed hat further onto her head.

On the horizon lightning lit the sky. The first clap of thunder vibrated the ground. By four o'clock the rain started coming down in buckets. Thunder and lightning rolled together. Arcs of light flashed from one side of the sky to the other. The wind started to howl through the trees, bending the tall grass to a precarious angle.

"The storm looks bad," whispered Jessica. "Far worse than I hoped."

"I too have been taken by surprise at the fierceness of the storm," said Lightning Dawn. "The lack of birds is signaling the storm will turn far worse before it has blown itself out."

Jessica spoke confidently. "Maybe it's a blessing. If we accidentally make any noise we'll never be heard."

"True. Thanks to the storm, I'm sure if the third bushranger is guarding the camp he'd have abandoned his post by now."

Jessica and Lightning Dawn crawled through the scrub to the top of the hill. Water poured off their wide brimmed hats. Arcs of lightning lit the sky highlighting the two bushrangers and their dying fire in frequent bright flashes. Over the sound of the wind and the rain they could hear the men singing.

"I don't understand why the bushrangers seem extra jovial sitting under large leaves in the middle of a storm?" whispered Jessica.

"Judging by the empty whisky bottles littering the area I'd say they may be celebrating another robbery."

"It's a good sign," admitted Jessica. "The more they drink the easier it'll be."

The surrounding bush quickly darkened; the rain clouds were midnight black in colour. Jessica and Lightning Dawn watched the men start to stagger about trying to save the fire. Eventually the flames surrendered to the rain.

"It's time," hissed Jessica. Pulling her gun from the holster she cocked the trigger.

Lightning Dawn copied her. Before Jessica could take a step she felt a tug on her arm. She turned, facing the man.

"I'll do everything in my power to make certain of your safety. I want you to take extra care. Take no unnecessary risks. Keep in mind there is still no sign of the third bushranger."

"Thank you. Your words mean everything to me," admitted Jessica. "I think we should change our plans. If we can sneak past the bushrangers I think we should grab my stuff and get the hell out of there."

"It might be the best thing," agreed Lightning.

Together they slid down the muddy hill on their stomachs towards the camp. The two bushrangers were drunk and too covered from the rain to know visitors were standing only inches away. Their leafy roofs seemed quite effective. Their boots were the only part getting wet.

Lightning Dawn watched the bush while keeping his gun trained on the two lumps buried under the branches and leaves. Jessica didn't hesitate to walk across the water logged ground of their camp towards the horses, thankful they didn't make a noise. The saddle bags and the saddles were placed against the tree the horses were tied to.

The first bulging saddle bag strained against the leather straps which kept it closed. Jessica set to work on the knot. Every few seconds she froze, listening to the sound of rain water hitting the leaves of the trees, before resuming her work. She opened the leather flap. Looking inside, her eyes bulged at the contents. Jessica pulled the first white calico bag out, reading the inscription on the side; 'Property of the State Bank of Victoria.'

From where he stood, Lightning Dawn's impatience grew steadily. He glanced sideways wondering why Jessica was taking far too long. He saw her face break out into a grin. Looking his way; she beckoned him over.

Lightning Dawn quietly sidestepped over to the horses, being careful not to make any undue noise. Keeping the barrel of his gun riveted on the two sleeping bushrangers, he let Jessica show him the bag stuffed full of pound notes, ranging from one to twenty. Lightning muffled his high pitched whistle. Jessica placed the bag on the ground before moving on to the next. The contents of the next bag were the same as the first. Searching the last four bags her eyes bulged at seeing them stuffed full of gold nuggets. Jessica pulled the bags out, placing them on the ground next to the money bags. Diving her hand to the bottom of the first saddle bag her fingers wrapped themselves around a small object. She pulled it out. The gleam in her eyes told Lightning Dawn she discovered what they came to find. Jessica slipped the blue diamond ring on her finger, placed all eight calico bags back into the saddle bags then retrieved her gun belt and the two solid silver colt45's hanging from a saddle. Stone faced she dropped the gun belt she wore around her waist, replacing it with the other. Stooping, she picked up the old gun belt and placed the lot over the saddle.

Jessica started to chew on an idea which seemed to have the implications of a perfect frame up. Never to be concerned about money or the bushrangers ever coming after her possessions thrilled her to the bone. Severance pay, she decided. If you steal, you must pay back ten times. It is what the good book says. Whispering, she continued. "We'll go back to the first plan, only this time we'll take the saddles and the horses."

Lightening Dawn placed a saddle on the first horse. The moment he finished strapping a saddle to the other two horses he gathered up the reins.

They walked the horses quietly over to the first lump. His boots were soaked. Water dripped off the souls in a torrent. Staring at the two lumps trying to stay dry, Jessica hovered over them contemplating putting a bullet in their heads when she saw Lightening Dawn squatting. He slipped a short piece of rope around both the bushranger's ankles, tethering the two men together.

Neither bushranger stirred.

Above Jessica's head a lightning bolt arced across the sky. She kicked the first lump on the heel of his boot.

The lump didn't move.

Jessica froze thinking they walked into a trap. She frantically searched the scrub expecting the three bushrangers to be standing under a tree watching their every move.

Noting the rain had eased to drizzle, Jessica heard water dripping off everything. The thunder ceased. Lightning arcs were less frequent. In the wet semi darkness the trees resembled giants with grotesque arms reaching out to grab them. Jessica heard a slight groan. The first lump under the leaves, sat upright. She swung her attention back to his closed eyes, pointing the barrel of her gun directly at his face.

The bushranger opened an eye. He lay motionless staring at the end of the short metal tube.

Jessica spat through gritted teeth. "The next bullet I shoot from my gun has your name on it. I suggest you don't move."

Dan opened both eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm your worst nightmare," she chimed.

"I'll be the judge," spat Dan.

"I want you to lie on the ground, placing your hands behind your back," growled Jessica.

"If I won't, what will you do?"

Jessica pulled the trigger of her gun.

Dan fell back on the ground moaning. He kicked out. To his horror both his feet were tied to the second lump lying next to him.

Barry moaned, struggling to a sitting position. Staring at the two visitors he reached for his gun.

"Don't do it," warned Lightening Dawn.

"I don't want to see either of you twitch," blurted Jessica, sweeping the end of her gun between the two bushrangers.

"You shot me," groaned Dan.

"You'll live," spat Jessica. "It's only a flesh wound. Take note of my warning. The next time I shoot I'll put a bullet in both your heads. I've already dug one grave another two will be easy."

"Why did you shoot me?"

"You don't know the reason?"

"No, I've never seen you before in my life."

Jessica swiped her wide brimmed hat from her head. "Are you sure? Take a closer look."

"No, never have."

"Let me jog your memory. Do you remember our meeting at the train you robbed?"

"No. I must add we've never robbed a train."

"Do you remember stealing my guns or the blue diamond ring?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Where's the third bushranger?"

"Barry and I are alone. We're not bushrangers. We're gold prospectors. We arrived yesterday. We lived in hope to strike it lucky. There's a strong rumor moving across the land there's gold in the ground around these parts."

"I'm not here to debate the issue," hinted Jessica. Pointing her gun at Barry she asked her question again.

“We’re poor men. We left our families to strike it lucky. We don’t have much food left. You’re more than welcome to take it.”

Jessica studied the men’s faces. They were wet and looked a mess. Doubt flashed into her mind. She needed to be certain these were the two men who robbed her. She’d wait patiently for the bushrangers to use their unique mannerisms. The same ones they used when they robbed the train.

In the uncomfortable silence Lightning Dawn stood guard.

“You came up from Melbourne?” questioned Jessica.

“Yes,” blurted Barry.

“Explain why there are bags of gold in your saddle bags?”

Dan snorted. “We struck it rich over the last couple of months in Ballarat. When the veins of gold dried up we shifted our attention to here.”

“You sound convincing,” said Jessica.

“It’s the truth,” Barry replied.

In a bold move Jessica stepped closer to Dan so he could have a closer look at her gun belt. “Explain to me why the bags have the words, ‘property of the state bank of Victoria,’ stamped on the sides?”

“When we went to the bank we were given the white calico bags. We already converted some gold into pound notes. The bank clerk told me to come back in a couple of days.”

“Did he?”

“My brother speaks the truth,” insisted Barry. “Please believe us. I haven’t seen my wife in six months. I want to go home.”

“How did you come across my guns and the blue diamond?”

“I found them in the bush yesterday being guarded by a dead man.” Dan clicked his fingers at Jessica’s belt. “Give.”

“You’re acting skills almost convinced me,” scoffed Jessica. “Thank you for using the exact words you spoke when you robbed me of my guns and the blue diamond ring. I knew in time if I got you chatting you’d slip up. You did. I now know for certain you are two of the three who robbed me. Where’s the third man?”

“We have no idea what you’re talking about,” continued Barry.

“The third man is dead,” confessed Dan.

“Tell them nothing,” blurted Barry.

“Are you the law?” whispered Dan.

“For the question Lightning gave him a clip behind the ear followed by a jab to the jaw. “We aren’t the law,” he spat.

“Take anything you want,” sulked Dan calmly. Please, don’t shoot us.”

“Now we’re getting cooperation,” spat Jessica. “Doesn’t it make you feel warm inside?”

“Sure does,” taunted Dan. “The money and the gold are actually from our last bank job.”

“Brother I beg you, don’t tell them nothin’,” urged Barry.

“The money you stole from the bank, we’ll take every pound note for severance pay. I’ll give you a word of warning as my main man ties both of you up to the tree. If I ever see either of you again, especially if you come looking for the money you stole from the bank or my guns or my blue diamond, I’ll shoot you dead. Now, drop your gun belts and crawl over to the closest tree.” To hammer her warning home Jessica kicked both men in the ankles.

In no more than two minutes Jessica and Lightning Dawn bid the men goodbye. They rode off into the night, taking three spare horses, the gold, the money and the bushranger’s guns.

“They’ll come wanting their goods, not to mention the bags of gold, your guns and the blue diamond,” warned Lightning.

Jessica looked at him wearing a confident expression. “Let them come. I have a strong long handled shovel begging to be used.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“WHY DID you tell them to take everything?” spat Barry.

Dan strained against the rope which secured him to the tree. His confident facial expression vanished, replaced by a look of pure evil. Revenge seemed permanently impregnated into his mind and forever glued to his lips. He started to tremble from head to feet in rage. "I wanted to convince them we're a soft touch. I'm itching for a fight. When we escape from these ropes, we'll track them down. I can assure you, brother, we'll take back more than what they stole from us. I want their land, their money, their horses, cows, sheep, and anything else of value. I want it all. Mark my words once I have everything they own I want their lives. Brother, there is no way I'm having the gold, the money including the time I took in planning of the robbery to have the loot slip through our fingers. The money is going to see us through for the rest of our lives. The minute I set my gaze on the shiela from the train I knew she was trouble. Seeing how she came looking for a fight, I'm going to give it to her."

"I'm backing you all the way," roared Barry.

Dan leaned forward, straining his torso against the rope. He frantically darted his head from side to side scouring the area around the tree looking for something to cut through the rope. Sitting back against the tree exhausted, he spat. "The woman must think she's so clever in the way she cleared the bush around the tree. There's nothing I can use to cut the rope."

"Brother, revenge has clouded your eyes. If you look towards me the tree has a rough edge where a kangaroo must have broken off a low branch. The wood has dried, making the stub look sharp. If I could move I'd wriggle sideways. The black man tied the rope so tight around my waist I feel any sudden movement will saw me in half."

Dan spied the wooden outcrop only inches from his left wrist. He shuffled painfully slow towards it. A full minute ticked past before he could position the rope on the wooden stub. He looked up at Barry. His frown vanished. "We'll teach the woman a new meaning of clever the moment we find her."

He furiously set to work by jiggling up and down. The strands which made up the outer layer of the rope started to snap. Several times he stopped, completely exhausted. The moment his strength returned he again attacked the rope.

"By the looks of things you might be there quite a while," stated Barry assessing the work.

"I don't care how long it takes I have one goal in mind. I'm more than determined to reach it."

Forty-five minutes later, Dan finally sprung his arms free of the rope. For several minutes he leaned his back against the tree unable to move. Slowly blood flowed freely through the veins in his arms. The numbness in his hands diminished. Slowly standing he faced his brother, whispering through gritted teeth.

"I can smell our money. I'll have you free in a minute."

Grabbing a small rough rock at the edge of the un-cleared area, Dan marched back to his brother. In a few minutes he'd successfully scraped the rope away from his arms. "Barry, let's go. Remember, whatever the woman owns will soon be ours."

"Any ideas on where to start looking?" asked Barry uncoiling his aching muscles.

Dan pointed to the badly damaged scrub. "I'm guessing they rode north towards the river. At any rate five horses walking through the scrub will leave a rather large mess. I'm sure we'll come across someone sooner or later who has seen the woman and the black man travelling together."

Dan and Barry scurried up the hill. Even in the dark they found the trail easy to follow. By mid afternoon they came across a camp site in a small clearing. The bushrangers spied a man busying himself lighting a small fire between four piles of stones. Barry and Dan burst through the bush, bailing the man up.

"Have you seen a white woman and a black man travelling through here, five horses in tow?" asked Dan.

"Yes, I saw them at breakfast. They were looking for food. I needed a horse. We exchanged."

"Did they happen to say where they were going?" asked Barry.

"They said they were travelling north to a sheep station three hours west of Bendigo. You two look a- might tired. I'm about to make rabbit stew, you're more than welcome to stay. I have plenty."

"Thanks for the invite, we're starving," shrieked Barry.

Dan walked over to the grey mare. He patted the beast on the neck, pulled a Smith and Wesson from the old timer's saddle bag, stuffing it deep into his back pocket. "The animal is a mighty fine looking horse."

"Sure is," replied the old timer. "When I arrive in Bendigo I'll be selling her to the highest bidder. Should fetch me a few pounds I reckon."

Dan faked a grin at the old timer before walking over to join his brother squatting at the fire.

The two bushrangers created idle chit-chat. They told a few one line jokes and helped the old timer to prepare the meal. The three ate, devouring almost the entire meal. The old timer threw the left over scraps onto the fire then cracked open a whisky bottle.

Each man drank a third.

“We have to be going,” urged Dan, his words sounding slightly slurred.

“It’s getting late, do you want to stay till sun up?”

Dan stood. Hovering over the old man, he pulled the Smith and Wesson from his back pocket.

“I showed you friendship. I don’t deserve to be shot.”

“The rabbit tasted tuff,” mocked Barry, standing.

Dan aimed the gun at the man’s chest. He pulled the trigger. Wearing a sly grin he watched the old man crumble to the ground. “Barry, let’s ride.”

Both men mounted the old timer’s horse. The old man opened his dying eyes. At a snail’s pace he pulled a small gun from behind his back, aiming it the best he could at the closest man. On his last breath he pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JESSICA WATCHED the stars blinking out a dozen at a time. The temperature was dropping. Sitting on the back of her horse, she pulled the collar of her long coat up towards her ears and pulled down on her wide brimmed hat. Glancing at the rider next to her she whispered.

“I didn’t expect to be riding back to the station in the dark.”

Lightening Dawn looked across at her. He nodded reassuringly. “It’ll be okay. If we take it slow we’ll be fine. The only thing out here at night is the foxes.”

Jessica pointed at the darkening clouds. “Do you want to change your story?”

Lightening Dawn studied the sky. “Provided we get across the river before it swells, I’m positive we’ll be fine. If the weather holds it’ll be easy getting back to the Rosedale.”

The first rain drop from the second storm smacked against the bridge of Jessica’s nose. She wiped the water away before tilting her hat back so she could view the sky again. The stars were gone. The billowing black clouds were clearly visible against the dark sky. They were hanging so low to the ground they looked ready to burst.

The two pressed on, keeping to the narrow trail which led down to the river. In the distance lightning blanketed the horizon. The flashes of blue easily illuminated the scrub and the trees making the bush terrain look hostile. A fox darted across the trail. Before the four horses could sense the animal’s presence it ran off.

Heavy raindrops started to smack against the leather saddles. Jessica and Lightening Dawn pulled the two spare horses closer. The bush flattened slightly then quickly opened to a small plateau. Jessica stopped her horse and dismounted.

“We’ll take a rest stop. My horse feels tired.”

Lightening Dawn dismounted. He walked over, pushing his arm around her waist. He came in close to steal a kiss. She gently pushed him away. Their bravery netted them a small fortune. Jessica could think of nothing else except getting back to the Rosedale to hide the loot where nobody could find it.

“The gold and the money the bushrangers stole might be a problem,” hinted Lightening. “I’m sure the law will be searching by now.”

“Possibly,” replied Jessica, deep in thought. “The only people who actually know we have stolen the money and the gold are the bushrangers. If nobody else finds out, how could anyone ever trace the loot back to us?”

“It’s an interesting proposal. The only problem I can think of, what happens if the Forland bloke you’ve been talking about finds his way to the Rosedale?”

“Forland and the law will be busy searching for the bushrangers, not us. I’ll drop a false trail along the lines, I heard the bushrangers discussing plans to ride their horses to Sydney to bask in the sun, taking the blue diamond ring and the silver guns.”

“Speaking of the bushrangers, I’m sure they’re on their way,” Lightening added.

“I sure hope so. The trail we left should be easy to follow.”

“Not to mention the information you told the old timer.”

Jessica pursed her lips. “I hope the bushrangers didn’t murder him.”

“His chances are good.”

“You don’t sound too confident.”

“I’m not. Those men are ruthless. I’m sure they’ll stop at nothing to get their hands on the money.”

“When they come looking for their loot, they’ll be shot dead,” snarled Jessica.

“What if the law comes sniffing around? The loot will have to be in a great hiding place.”

“I know the perfect place. As for the bushrangers, they’ll take their knowledge of who has the money and the gold they stole to their graves.”

Lightening Dawn slowly placed his hands on Jessica’s hips. “I’m backing you all the way. We’re in this together.”

“Thank you, I’m positive everything will work out.”

Lightening bent his head to try again at stealing a kiss. His lips touched Jessica’s. In the middle of the clearing she wrapped her arms about his torso to make sure the kiss remained for a long time.

Eventually she loosened her grip. The act instantly broke the moment. Lightening looked a little perplexed at the move. He showed nothing except love towards her as he stood hearing the rest of her idea.

“I’ve been thinking on how to disperse the loot. If we were to spend the money wisely I believe nobody will ever suspect a thing.”

“What about the gold nuggets, they might arouse suspicion?”

“A few times a year we could go to the bank to exchange the nuggets for pound notes. The money could quite easily be recorded in our bank account. If the teller ever questions us over where we found the gold, we’ll simply say we’ve been gold prospecting on the Rosedale.”

Lightening Dawn grinned at the plan. A long passionate kiss sealed the idea. They scarcely noticed the rain starting to fall. They certainly missed the fact the animals left the area.

Bright lightning arcs forked across the sky piercing the blackness. A thunder clapped directly above their heads.

“We have to get going if we want to get across the river before it floods,” urged Lightening Dawn. For the first time his voice sounded overly concerned. “I feel we rested for too long. Crossing the river before it swelled might be a touch too late.”

Jessica nodded, mounted her horse, snatched up the reins of the spare mare and led the way to the river.

The scrub turned thick. When they finally came to a low hill the horses easily trotted up the side. They burst through the scrub and into a clearing on the crest of the final hill. A few more minutes ambling down the side of the hill would find them almost at the river.

At the bottom of the hill where the land flattened and the trees thinned, Lightening Dawn led the canter to the river’s edge. At the water he pulled back hard on the horse’s reins. Jessica brought her horse to an abrupt stop slightly in front.

Both riders looked dismayed.

They were beaten by the storm.

Looking upstream for an easier crossing, Jessica said slowly. “If I remember correctly, I think there is a creek running into this river. If it’s not swollen there will be dry land between the forks making it possible to get across.”

“What if the fork has gone?”

“We’ll have to either wait it out right here or our journey will take an extra week. If the bushrangers are hot on our trail and the rising river in front, staying here isn’t a favorable option. I wanted to be back on the sheep station, boxes of ammunition at the ready long before they tracked us down.”

“We don’t have time to debate,” added Lightening Dawn. He clicked his tongue to urge his horse to make a move.

Jessica glanced about the bush hoping not to see the bushrangers. She gave a gentle kick to her horse’s ribs making it start following the one in front.

Ten minutes of walking ankle deep in water saw Lightening Dawn push his hand into the air. When Jessica drew level he faced her. “There doesn’t seem to be a good place to get across. Are you sure there is a fork? Maybe we missed it in the half dark.”

“I’m pretty certain.”

Lightening Dawn looked skywards to study the billowing black clouds. “Every minute we delay our crossing of the river, the angrier the storm’s looking. It’s a shame we didn’t get across the river sooner.”

“I think the fork is on the bend further upstream,” said Jessica, trying to sound confident. “Hopefully the place will be there. The narrow strip of dry land between the forks is our lifesaver.”

“You’ve been gone for a number of years. If the creek has already burst its banks or has changed course for any reason the fork you’re talking about will be gone. We’ll be cut off.”

“Lightening Dawn, have some faith in the God you believe in.” Jessica placed her hand on his shoulder. “She’ll be right.”

“Where did you hear such a saying?”

“I overheard an elderly man on the train say it to his wife when we were being robbed by the bushrangers.”

“She’ll be right,” echoed Lightning Dawn, looking slightly mystified. “Those words have a sort of poetic ring to them. They might even stick in one’s mind for generations to come.”

“You could be right. Let’s keep moving. We’ll travel upstream for another ten minutes. If we haven’t found the fork by then we’ll have to decide what to do.”

Lightning Dawn led the way along the fast swelling river by following the low ridge. Several times their horses were up to their chest in water. The usual sedate river was quickly transformed into froth covered turbulent water. Debris from fallen trees littered the surface as they were being washed downstream towards the sea many hours from their location.

In only a few minutes darkness completely plunged the bush into darkness.

The bend Jessica remembered slowly came into view. She stood straight legged in the stirrups hoping for a clearer view. At exactly the right time, several lightning arcs lit the sky directly above their heads. For a few seconds at a time Jessica could plainly see the entire area. Though the grass covered land looked narrow there was no mistaking the strip of green between the creek and the river.

Jessica could feel her face drain of colour. She flopped back onto the saddle, closed her eyes, bowing her head.

“Are you okay?” asked Lightning.

Jessica slowly lifted her head. “Yes. I’m just relieved the fork is there. For the past few minutes I thought we might be in real trouble.”

Lightning Dawn reached over. He touched her leg to reassure her. “Take a few deep breaths. It’ll help you to relax.”

Jessica inhaled then slowly exhaled. She eventually sat bolt upright. “She’ll be right.”

“You and your saying,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

Jessica giggled too. “I’m fine, really. I’m just over tired.” Focusing on the river she said. “The depth of the water looks shallow at the bend.”

In silence the two riders trotted onwards. At the bend the trees thinned.

Lightning Dawn brought his horse to a halt so he could study the area at length. “I guess crossing here has to do. It’s now raining harder. We’re almost out of time. If we don’t hurry we won’t be able to get across.”

Jessica pulled a length of rope from off the side of her saddle. She gave one end to Lightning. Dragging one of the bushranger’s horses behind her, she dug her heels into the side of her mare, urging the beast to wade into the water. Slowly they pushed towards the middle of the swelling creek. The opposite bank looked to be no more than thirty feet away. Green grass greeted her mare’s hooves after it ploughed out of the water.

Jessica dismounted, allowing both horses to graze on the shrinking land. She marched to the nearest tree to tie one end of the rope around its girth. When she felt satisfied the knot looked tight she walked to the water’s edge. Slowly she waded back into the river towards Lightning. He entered the water dragging the spare horse behind him. Jessica mounted the spare horse in midstream. Together they ploughed through the swelling water to safety.

“So far so good,” Jessica yelled.

“Now for the dangerous part,” added Lightning. “Already the land we’re standing on has shrunk to the size of a train station.”

They stood at the water’s edge, both alarmed at the speed in which the water rose. If they didn’t hurry, in minutes the debris filled water might be above their knees.

Lightning Dawn, perched securely on his horse’s saddle, waded into the water. Jessica watched wide eyed as the gap between the horse’s stomach and the water quickly eroded. By the time they’d travelled to the middle of the stream Lightning’s boots were completely submerged. Dragging a horse behind him in fast flowing water which deepened by the second looked to be a slow exhaustive exercise. Not being hit by debris further complicated the crossing. At one point in the journey it looked as though both horses were swimming. Finally the group trotted up the opposite bank. Lightning dismounted. Jessica exhaled her fear. Forty feet of turbulent water now separated them both.

Lightning Dawn stood in ankle deep water lashing the rope to another sturdy gum tree. When he finished he beckoned Jessica to cross the river. For the first time in her life she felt fearful. Jessica frowned at the emotion. She’d never been frightened of anything in her life, so why now? Even when she scurried further into the bush to escape her uncle’s murderers, she remained calm, keeping fear at bay.

Staring at the man standing on the other side of the river she saw him giving her a reassuring wave. Jessica moved her attention to the water flowing over her feet. The revelation of being alone engulfed her mind. Old thoughts came to life.

‘The day after her fourteenth birthday a seventeen-year-old boy attending the same boarding school left her a note saying, ‘It’s imperative we meet. Come to my room at 10p.m.’

They were in the middle of kissing passionately on his bed when the trouble alarm sounded. Three knocks on the door signaled imminent danger. The headmaster of the school heard of the rendezvous. He was on his way up to the third floor. If Jessica or the boy were caught they’d have been expelled for sure. The school rules were; there will be no girls in the boy’s dormitory and vice-versa for the girls.

Jessica threw open the window and ran along the roof tiles, jumping the four foot gap to the other building and only just managed to dive into her best friend’s room in time. The headmistress smelt the same rat. She made a bee line for the girl’s dorm for a surprise inspection. She met Jessica in the corridor. The old woman looked down her nose at her. She looked uncertain about her explanation of suffering from stomach cramps. Jessica added she threw up in the down stairs laundry. Escorting her back to her room headmistress accepted the story. After the close encounter the boy made up a lousy excuse he never wanted to see her again.’

“Hang onto the rope when you ride your horse through the water,” called Lightning Dawn. “You’ll have to hurry. The rain is starting to fall even harder.”

Jessica threw off the negative thoughts of being alone to concentrate on the escape route. She slowly made the mare walk into the water, dragging the spare horse along using an extended rein.

‘Lightning’s right,’ thought Jessica. ‘The water level has risen extremely fast. Five minutes earlier could have made all the difference.’

Jessica urged her mare onwards. Several times they were forced to stop to allow debris from fallen trees to drift past. The whole time they were in the water Jessica reassured her mare by patting its neck and talking in its ear. Her horse was used to hard work, but as the seconds ticked off she grew skittish.

At the deepest part of the river Jessica’s horse started to swim. The current’s speed quickly doubled, sending more debris their way. Jessica pushed a large dead branch out of the way. Seconds later she needed to kick another away before it hit her horse in the head. The rope Lightning Dawn slung across the river at shoulder height tightened from the strain due to the fact both Jessica and her horse were starting to be swept parallel to the bank.

Four feet from the river bank Jessica felt her horse stumble slightly. They’d made it this far, surely her mare could summon up enough strength to walk up the bank. For a few dreaded seconds Jessica held her breath. She certainly didn’t want to be thrown back into the water by a frightened horse this close to safety. The beast’s front hooves bit into the soft water logged ground, heaving itself and Jessica up the bank. For a short time the horse stood holding its head low, exhausted from the effort. Jessica jumped from the saddle to help lighten the load. The spare horse bumped Jessica when it rushed for the grass. The moment Jessica’s mare started to walk up the bank she lost her footing in the soft mud forcing the beast to rear up. The horse neared vertical. Not going forward or backwards. The beast lifted its right rear hoof for a firmer hold. She brought it down hard onto Jessica’s foot. She screamed in agony; the horse whined loudly before sprinting off up the hill, only to be stopped by Lightning Dawn.

Jessica tumbled backwards, snapping the rope and landing head first in the water. Immediately a half submerged tree branch hit her in the back and shoulders before smacking her in the temple. She battled to stay conscious. If she lost the fight she knew drowning would be a foregone conclusion. She clawed at the ground in a desperate move to obtain some sort of grip. She could feel the fast flowing river easily devouring her.

Jessica felt as though she’d fallen victim to an inverted twister determined to suck the life out of her. She became disorientated from the tumble turns. She wanted no end to vomit. Closing her eyes to block out the dizzy feeling, she shuddered at the thought of floating through her own bile.

Slowly she mastered the feeling.

Jessica shot her arm upwards. In a blink of an eye she could feel the wind against her skin. She dug her heels into the ground and pushed against the current. Her head broke the surface. Before she could gulp any air the water sucked her back under, washing her further downstream. The moment Jessica opened her eyes she saw the rope. In a desperate effort she reached out to grab it, praying the end, still attached to a tree, could hold her weight. The cord eluded her fingers. Again and again she groped for the rope. The only thing her fingers felt was water. Jessica hoped by swimming sideways away from the safety of the bank where Lightning Dawn stood watching, she’d find the rope. The effort felt overwhelming. The moment she could feel her strength almost gone Jessica made one last ditched downward stroke, forcing her body through the

water. She'd almost given up hope when she spied the rope only inches from her face. Again Jessica reached out, only this time she managed to grab the line. Before she lost her grip on the rope she braced her feet against the ground in readiness to launch her body upwards. She broke surface, breathing in as much oxygen as she could.

Now she faced a new problem. She wasn't strong enough to hold on. When she let go the river started pushing her along the surface at breakneck speed.

The stinging cold zapped the rest of Jessica's strength.

She caught sight of Lightening Dawn's silhouette sprinting through the bush trying to catch up. He yelled at her and pointed at something further downstream.

"You're not fast enough to catch me," Jessica yelled back. Swiveling her head she saw what he pointed to.

An old tree lying horizontal just above the water line might be her last chance to live. If she could manage to cling onto the tree long enough, she felt confident Lightening Dawn would catch up and easily haul her from the water.

Facing downstream Jessica prepared to grab the tree. "I hope this works," she mumbled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAN HEARD the bang from a gun. He jumped from the horse to catch his brother before he fell off the back. He carried him to the foot of a giant gum tree and sat him on the ground. Glaring at the dead old man still holding his gun, Dan got behind his dead brother so he could rock him back and forth.

Eventually he leaned his brother gently against the tree. For a long time Dan stood staring at his dead brother's face. The morbid scene forever burned inside his mind. Dan tipped his hat at the corpse, mounted his horse and sprinted off into the bush, never once looking back. The death of his brother and Masters was too much for his mind, forcing him to go insane.

The noise made by the storm, the constant heavy rain dripping from the trees onto his head, echoed in Dan's mind. He blocked out every thought; except one; revenge. He wanted it. He could smell it. He could even taste it. Determination deeply furrowed his brow.

Unrelenting, Dan urged his horse onwards. Nothing would stop him from reaching his target. He wanted to get his money back and everything else the woman from the train stole from him, no matter what the cost. Above all he wanted to see the woman and the man accompanying her; dead. He'd sneak up on them, shooting them in the back. He'd leave their bodies to the wild life. Out in the Australian bush, miles from anywhere, nobody will ever stumble across their bodies. After leaving the state he'd never give them another thought.

Using the back of his hand, Dan swatted dozens of tree branches from his way. Etched in the tree trunks he could see the faces of the dead. He could hear their laughter, further tormenting his mind. Looking over his shoulder, he thought he saw the spirits of the dead lawman, the old man, Masters; even his brother chasing him. Behind them were over a dozen transparent images of the people he'd murdered over the years.

By the time Dan entered a small clearing his knuckles were skinned and bloodied. Through wild eyes he saw Jessica's face on every tree. Pulling his gun from his holster he yelled at her.

"I'll stop you laughing at me," he grumbled, firing a bullet at the closest tree.

Lightening Dawn's face replaced Jessica's image. Dan fired two more rounds at the tree. Satisfied the images were gone he picked up the trail once more and ploughed on through the scrub.

Over the sound of the wind, Dan heard the river. He forced his horse to stop so he could take his hat off. Rain drops from the overhead leaves immediately fell on his face. Each large cold drop stung his cheeks. A new wave of determination swept his mind.

Dan pressed on through the dark. He stopped at the river's edge. Turning his horse he forced it to trot upstream along the bank. Dan studied the river at length looking for a sign he'd closed the gap between him and the woman. In minutes he saw what he needed to find. Four horses, each one had a leather saddle on its back. A murderous grin stretched his mouth. He'd finally caught up to the black man and the woman. His hatred for her quadrupled every hour since she robbed him. His idea of revenge flowed faster than the river.

The wind easily masked Dan's arrival. After he dismounted he meticulously crept from tree to tree, making doubly sure his target didn't know he'd arrived. Staring through the scrub he focused on the narrow

fork of dry land. In minutes the two rivers were going to converge. When it happened the strip of land will be gone. He spotted the aborigine sprinting through the bush pointing at something further downstream.

Dan took a short cut through a thin part of the scrub, hiding behind a tree well in front of his intended target. Confidently he moved closer. Squatting behind a small bush full of yellow wattle looking for the reason behind the man's antics, Dan smirked openly when he saw Jessica's head bobbing in the water.

"The joy of a double murder, this ought to be sporting," spat Dan. "A moving target to add to my growing list of kills will be the best memory of all. Once the black man and the white woman are dead they will be swept away in the river, never to be seen again."

Dan pulled the gun from his holster, cocking it ready to fire. Looking down the gun sight he lined up Lightning Dawn's torso. "A single bullet will suffice," he whispered.

Totally unaware of a gun being pointed at him, Lightning Dawn felt determined to save Jessica or die trying. He'd set his sight on the tree lying across the river. He must be there when Jessica arrived. Any delay might see her drown.

Dan pulled the trigger of his gun. At the same time a thunder clap muffled the noise. Lightning Dawn felt a burning in his left side. He crumpled to the ground, knocking the air out of his lungs. A small stub of wild grass cushioned his fall. Clutching his side Lightning Dawn watched the green grass slowly change to red. For far too long he lay in the grass waiting for the pain to subside. Eventually he forced himself into a crawling position. Slowly he took tentative moves hoping the bushranger who fired the gun was patting himself on the back at the kill. Lightning looked ahead. He spied a tree which appeared to have a girth wider than a man. Being mindful not to disturb the bush, he crawled on all fours. The moment he vanished behind the tree he stood. Looking through the darkness trying to locate the gunman, Lightning glanced at the tree where he supposed to be waiting for Jessica to arrive. He didn't have another option. He must press on to save her. If he didn't make any noise he could finish the rescue and be back behind the tree before the gunman knew.

Jessica saw her hero vanish. Hand over hand she swam towards the bank in a desperate struggle to survive. Her only chance to grab the tree came quick. She must be ready. The water started to churn harder. She could feel her body being sucked under the surface long before she arrived at the fallen tree. If it were to happen, death will come knocking in only a few seconds. Only God knew where her body will be found.

Jessica lifted both hands into the air. Her fingers felt the stubble of a wet branch. She latched onto the jagged outcrop determined to succeed in living. Her right foot hit something. She pushed hard against it. The exercise propelled her upwards. Jessica groped for a second branch near the top half of the tree. Using her entire strength she launched her body completely out of the water.

Making full use of her four limbs Jessica clung to the tree. Trying to catch her breath, her right thigh came down hard on the small needle sharp branch which inevitably saved her life. Jessica screamed in agony. Looking down she saw blood trickling down her leg, onto the tree trunk and starting to drip into the river. Tears filled her eyes. She gritted her teeth before bravely pulling her thigh from off the branch. The act made her lose a firm footing. At the same time the water came up to her knees her vision blurred. Seconds before Jessica fainted from the pain in her thigh she reached out for what resembled a sturdy vine, quickly twisting it about her wrists a few times to prevent her from falling into the water. Lifting her left foot out of the water she managed to push her sturdy boot between two small branch stubs growing out of the side of the trunk.

In the few moments left before she blacked out Jessica prayed for a miracle.

Dan saw Lightning Dawn crumple at the edge of the river. He focused on the exact piece of ground where he'd lost sight of him. His confidence in successfully murdering the man grew stronger. He momentarily turned his head left to look downstream for the woman. Through the falling rain he couldn't see her, but he could taste the victory in his mouth. He sat on the ground; a proud look plastered over his face. He'd simply wait out the storm. When the water subsided he'd casually wade through the river for his stolen possessions, scoop up his loot and head north to Sydney. He'd be long gone before the law got wind of any misfortune which may have fallen upon his two victims. One dead body will be for Masters' death, the other one for his brother.

Lightning Dawn grimaced at the bullet hole in his side. He studied the wound at length and found an exit hole. Even though blood still trickled out of the wound it looked to be slowing. He breathed a sigh of relief. Staying out of sight he started searching for Jessica. Through the scrub he could see her clinging to the tree trunk. She looked to be asleep. How long she could stay in the position he didn't know. Giving himself only seconds to grab hold of her, he started for the tree. He needed to stay concealed. Somehow he must get Jessica back to firm ground before another bullet could be fired.

Half bent, Lightning ran along the river's edge, positive Jessica hadn't been shot; he just couldn't understand why she'd stopped moving. His heart pounded, forcing the organ to bang loud in his ears. Sweat broke out on his brow. He knew panic might soon overtake him. On the other side of the river a bushranger wanted to shoot them both dead. Ahead of him lay Jessica's unconscious body. Only God knew if she was still alive. He slithered over a fallen tree on his stomach. He didn't hesitate on running across a narrow clearing. Lightning Dawn didn't slow down even when he vomited from the pain in his side. He'd started badly in living up to the vow he promised Jessica.

Staring through the rain he could see Jessica slowly slipping back into the river. Upstream Lightning caught sight of an assortment of tree branches which were floating together to form one giant mass, directly at Jessica. He needed to move faster. He quickly scoured the bush. Seeing no sign of the bushranger, he took his chances. On all fours he rushed along the tree trunk to where Jessica lay. By the time he reached her she'd slipped to a precarious angle. In a move quick as his name he grabbed hold of Jessica's wrists, yanked her from the water, broke the thin vine which helped to save her life and started back to land long before the debris came close to the tree.

A gunshot echoed in the air.

The bullet embedded itself in the tree next to Lightning's foot. He didn't waste time searching the scrub for the bushranger. Being on the tree over the river made him an easy target.

A second bullet sent chip bark into the air, showering his face.

Lightning Dawn staggered over a clump of weeds which were wedged against the trunk. Jessica slipped slightly. He reached up to take hold of her shirt collar. Hearing her moan gave him a renewed zest. He made it off the tree and dug his heels into the softening muddy bank. A third and fourth bullet penetrated the water's edge. Stumbling in the soft mud, Lightning managed to hide Jessica behind a newly fallen gum tree. He closed his eyes, collapsing from exhaustion.

Dan watched, amused at the man's courageous effort to rescue the woman. He eased his second gun from his holster and counted off the six bullets. Having a bout of inspiration he nodded in satisfaction. "If I use three bullets to flush them out I'll have two bullets to murder both of them. It will leave me one bullet, just in case."

A bullet ricocheted off the tree Lightning and Jessica were hiding behind. Both opened their eyes at the same time. They were hugging when a second bullet tore away the bark above their heads.

"Lightning, thank you for rescuing me," whispered Jessica in his ear. Before he could utter a noise she leaned forward to give him a kiss.

A third bullet brought the reunion to an abrupt halt.

"I'm sorry for being late. It's time we left," hinted Lightning Dawn. "You start for the horses. I'm positive a couple of shots from my gun will cover your escape."

Jessica slid along the muddy ground on her stomach. Lightning aimed his gun, firing twice through the dark. A single return shot saw bark flying in all directions next to his shoulder. Keeping close to the ground, he followed Jessica's trail.

Working their way up the bank, skirting the small clearing, they kept to the scrub, being mindful not to disturb the tall grass. They didn't want to give away their exact location.

Lightning and Jessica rounded the far side of the small clearing, coming up behind their horses.

"I think we're at a safe enough distance to collect the horses. Hopefully we'll be able to leave before the bushranger can figure it out."

"If we make a clean getaway the shooter might lose the trail."

"You're right, we don't want to lose him," replied Lightning.

Jessica bit her bottom lip, deep in thought. "What about if we collect the horses and right before we enter the scrub I fire a couple of warning bullets in the shooter's direction?"

"It ought to keep him coming. You stay here, I'll collect the horses," Lightning insisted.

The rain changed to infrequent drops. A few stars were out. Lightning Dawn moved as if he were a part of the surrounding bush. He learnt the act at a young age. Every male hunter from his tribe needed to show they were more than capable of sneaking through the bush undetected by animals. By his ninth year he'd proven time and again he was the best. He easily gathered the horses, marching them back to where Jessica waited behind a clump of tall dried grass. Her excited expression saw him puff out his chest.

"You never cease to amaze me," she exclaimed.

Lightning Dawn gave her a wink as he handed over his gun.

Jessica cocked the trigger. "I'm ready."

The two escapees mounted their horses. Lightning rode into the bush. Jessica swiveled in the saddle. Pointing the barrel of the gun at a large tree where she thought the shooter might be hiding she took

careful aim at a knot in the trunk twelve feet from the ground and fired her gun twice. Using her reins to tap the horse's neck, the horse entered the scrub, hot on Lightning's trail.

They vanished before the shooter could fire another shot.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DAYLIGHT BROUGHT a few hours to plan ahead. Jessica knew the bushranger would never break off his onslaught. She looked forward to the finale. She needed to get back to the Rosedale pronto to prepare for his imminent arrival. She ripped small pieces off her shirt, tossing them every so often over her shoulder to help mark the trail. She certainly didn't want the man to stray off course.

The tail end of the storm quickly abated. The birds again filled the cloudy sky.

Jessica looked sideways at Lightning Dawn. His shoulders were drooped. His eyes were half closed. Sitting low in the saddle he looked exhausted. She stopped her horse, swung her leg over the side of the saddle, lowering herself gently to the ground. Lightning did the same.

"Are you okay?" she asked, ignoring the dull ache in her muscles.

"I'm alright."

"You've been hurt?" she questioned, seeing the blood on his shirt.

"What were those three words you said some hours ago?"

"She'll be right?"

Lightning flopped onto the ground. "Yes, I'll be right."

Jessica dropped to her knees. "Take your shirt off; I need to see for myself."

"We can't spare the time."

"I'm sure a few minutes delay won't make too much of a difference."

Lightning gently peeled the shirt from his back. Sweat beaded and, running down his shiny black skin turned Jessica's emotions on. She could feel the love inside her for the man starting to stir into a storm yet again. She looked forward to their wedding night. She craved after the idea. Reluctantly she forced the emotion to take a back seat.

Jessica focused on the congealed blood on Lightning's left side. Searching his back she found an exit wound. "You are one lucky man. Why didn't you say you were shot?"

Lightning shrugged, smiling at her concern. "I'm not one to complain. I knew I'd be okay. My first goal had to be saving you from falling off the tree into the river. I couldn't just stand by to watch you drown."

Jessica whispered lovingly. "Thank you again."

"Think no more of it." Lightning Dawn saw the blood stain on Jessica's riding pants. He studied her thigh and found a hole in her pants.

"The tree branch stabbed me," announced Jessica bravely.

"You my love are one lucky young lady."

Both chuckled at their good fortune. They gave each other a quick hug before mounting their horses.

"A couple of weeks rest will see us fit again," promised Jessica, giving her horse a gently kick to start it moving.

"I'll make sure you will rest," said Lightning trying to use a scolding tone. He couldn't keep the act up for long before breaking out into a broad grin.

Jessica lovingly slapped him on the leg then took the lead.

The back corner of the Rosedale came into view. A shake of the reins saw both horses start to canter, forcing the tag-a-longs to do the same. In less than a minute they made it to the corner post. They slowed the horses to a walk so they could navigate their way through the debris.

"I've been chopping wood to fix the fence," explained Lightning Dawn.

"Before I asked I kind of hoped someone might explain what happened."

"A few weeks back our neighbour Mr. Langston led his bull along the back fence for a feed in the scrub. A snake which he thought might be a yellow bellied black slithered across its path. The big old bull turned feral, plowing sideways into the fence. Langston knocked on the door of the homestead to tell me the bad news about the fence. I told him; no problem, I'd fix it. I don't think he takes too kindly to me."

"Do you know the reason?" asked Jessica.

"I corrected him on the alleged snake. I saw a Tiger snake coiled up in the sun near the back fence the previous day. I went on to explain a yellow bellied black is found mainly in Queensland, not Victoria."

"Langston can never be corrected over anything. I wish he'd sell. Right now is the perfect time to expand the size of the Rosedale." Jessica sighed. "Lightening, we'll fix the fence together. Thanks to the new found loot, I think we should put a gate in as well."

Lightening Dawn replied confidently. "Mr. Langston told me he is selling."

"The homestead is up for sale?" exclaimed Jessica, her eyes sparkling at the news.

"One thousand acres of prime beef country," added Lightening.

"If we were successful in purchasing his property, the Rosedale will be almost twice the size. I think we should visit our neighbour to make an offer he can't refuse. By knocking down the side fence both properties will be joined. The river will run on our land in its entirety. No more of his warning's about 'no fishing' on his alleged land. I'm positive our sheep won't mind the cows."

Lightening Dawn licked his lips at the thought of fresh fish most evenings for dinner. "I have a great recipe for fish stew," he announced.

"I can't wait to taste it," giggled Jessica.

A quick glance at the land beyond the river and the pair rode onwards in silence, each to their own thoughts.

Through slits Lightening Dawn looked at Jessica. He wanted to break the silence so he struck up a casual conversation. "I suppose we need another large shed. I'll see to it the moment the bushranger is dead."

Jessica studied the man's face. "You look too tired to do any work around the Rosedale for at least a week. Besides, don't we have something more important to consider?"

"Yes, we do. I have already planned the wedding ceremony, including your important wedding night."

"Can you let me in on your plans?"

"No," he replied rudely.

"You do realize it's our wedding night? Don't I have a say?"

Lightening Dawn gave his fiancé a loving grin. "I want our wedding night to be extra special. I'm asking you to help me keep it a secret? I think it will help build suspense. I'm sure the secret will cap off a great day."

"I'll trust you," said Jessica after careful consideration. She felt shocked at hearing the words. They seemed irrational, totally against everything she believed. Somewhere deep inside her mind she knew the man riding next to her was different in so many ways. Of course nobody is perfect. He probably did have a few bad habits she didn't know about and started pondering what they might be.

Lightening Dawn caught her sighing. "What were you thinking about, just now?"

"If you must know I'm wondering if you have any bad habits. As of late I haven't discovered any."

"I sleep under the window to feel the cool air at night. I stock pile enough wood in the summer for a roaring fire on cold winter nights."

"Is there anything else which could ruffle your feathers?"

Lightening Dawn leaned sideways, placing his hand on her shoulder. "If wanting to be around you is a bad habit I'd have to say I'm guilty."

Jessica shook her head, chuckling. She dug her heels into her horse's ribs. They took off in a canter. For the first time in her life she felt alive. She didn't have to look over her shoulder to know Lightening rode his horse hard to catch her. Jessica saw the chase as a game which would ultimately end in making love to the man then falling asleep in his arms.

Puffing from the quick sprint the two riders dismounted at the verandah of the Rosedale. When the saddles were off the horses the beasts wandered off to munch the green grass growing around the homestead.

In the late afternoon sun the homestead looked inviting. Jessica pushed the thought of their wedding night and a good sleep from her mind. If they wanted to sweep the bushranger from their life they needed to be ready. Business must come first before romance.

Jarrah and Cobar, the two young aboriginal boys opened the kitchen door. They stepped onto the verandah; their wide grins were a welcoming sight.

"You're here," yelled Jarrah, excited. "We have a meal cooking. Kangaroo stew."

"The food sounds too good to say no to." Jessica squatted for a hug. In seconds she was dragged into the kitchen. The aroma of a home cooked meal filled the small room. The single glass window overlooking the herb garden helped to make the aroma more delectable. Gip looked up from her cooking duties, beaming in delight.

"Food almost cooked."

Jessica raced over to hug the girl tight.

"We work hard for boss lady," she quipped.

Jessica knelt on the dusty floorboards. Volleying her gaze between Gip and the boys, she gently added. "I have some news. Lightening Dawn and I are engaged to be married."

"Family," yelled Gip.

"Exactly right," said Jessica. "We are now one big happy family. However, there is a minor change from the traditional family unit. I want you to have equal rights, which means you three kids have a share in the profits we make."

The three kids jumped for joy. A short aborigine dance quickly followed.

Jessica chuckled at their enthusiasm. The moment they stopped she added. "Thank you for cooking the dinner. There is one more thing I want you to understand. I don't want to see you kids sitting on the floor ever again when you eat."

"Our place is on the floor. Your place is at the table," Gip grizzled, her eyes wide.

Jessica stood, took Gip by the hand, escorting her to the table. She walked over to the cupboard, snatched five plates from off the middle shelf and returned to the table. "We'll all sit at the table to eat," Jessica insisted.

The kids rushed at her, throwing their arms around her waist. Lightening Dawn walked across the room to join in.

"Thank you," said Gip. "Being in a family is important to me and my brothers. We went walk-a-bout ages ago. We want to stay here."

Jessica started to cry. Gip wiped her eyes. Even the boys and Lightening looked to be on the verge of dropping a tear.

Gip suddenly straightened her back. "The dinner, it ready."

Jessica took hold of Gip's hand. She said slowly. "The dinner is ready."

"The dinner is ready," echoed Gip. "One day you teach me to talk good?"

"I will," giggled Jessica. "At the moment it's not important."

The wood fired oven seemed to be working over time. Steam from the Billy hanging over the open fire started billowing into the air. The dirty dishes were already washed and drying on the solid wooden sink. When Jessica finished drying the first dish she walked over to the wooden pantry to put the pot away. At the back of the first shelf, past the wire mesh which helped to keep out the flies in the long hot summer there were large bags of rice still open. The flour bags were lying on their side, leaving a white trail along the shelf. Jessica started to tidy up.

"Jessica, you sit," urged Gip, placing a mug of tea on the table.

Lightening Dawn sat next to Jessica. A mug of tea was pushed under his nose. Sitting at the table as a family for the first time found the kids giggling. The relaxed atmosphere helped soothe Jessica's aching muscles.

Ten minutes of sitting saw the meal consumed.

Lightening Dawn stood. "Jessica, you sit tight, I'll prepare for the new arrival."

Before she could answer he turned his back and walked towards the door.

A hard determined expression replaced Jessica's soft features. "We will prepare for the visitor together. Kids, no matter what happens I don't want you to leave the house. A bad man is on his way. Lightening Dawn and I will seal his fate."

Jessica forced her body to stand. For a few seconds she leaned on the table swaying. Eventually she forced her muscles to start moving. Before leaving the kitchen she scooped a handful of sugar cubes out of the sugar bowl. She caught up to Lightening Dawn standing at the edge of the verandah. He stepped behind her to kiss her neck. Jessica consumed his contact. Slipping his fingers under the collar of her shirt he started to gently massage her shoulders. Jessica closed her eyes, enjoying the moment.

"I know what you're thinking," she whispered.

"Do you?" He sounded alarmed.

"Yes. You want me back in the house. When the danger has past you will come for me."

"Impressive."

"I've been taught by a great teacher."

"Who is this teacher?"

Jessica faced Lightening. "You're the man."

"I never taught you to read minds."

"No you didn't. We seem to be completely in tune to one another."

"Interesting," said Lightening.

“There’s no big mystery.”

“How so?”

“Before I tell you the answer, I’ve come this far, I’m not backing off. We’ll put a dampener on the bushranger’s plans together.”

“Okay, I promise we’ll see this plan of yours to the end. Tell me your secret.”

“I’m a woman. I know these things.” Jessica grinned at his blank expression. Slipping her hand in his, they walked down the steps.

Before marching to the barn they walked over to the horses, showing them the sugar cubes in their hands. The four horses they rode to the homestead followed. Jessica led the way, carrying the sacks of stolen money. Lightening brought up the rear, carrying the bags of gold nuggets. Jessica opened the barn door. She fed the horses the sugar the moment they walked into the barn. The horses were shown the food buckets in the third and fourth stall. They didn’t have to be coaxed into eating.

Jessica walked into the first stall. The only occupants were a mother and a young timid mare. The mother’s ears swiveled forward. She snorted before stepping closer to her baby.

“It’s okay,” whispered Jessica, gently. “We mean you or your baby no harm. You can come back when I’m done showing Lightening Dawn the secret.”

She reached up to give the horse’s snout a scratch. Smelling the sugar cube Jessica placed in the palm of her hand the horse devoured it in seconds. The fowl nudged her hand for her share. Jessica led the pair to the second stall. When she stepped out Lightening Dawn closed the wooden gate.

“What’s so special about the first stall?” asked Lightening. “I’ve been in there too many times to count. I’ve only ever seen a normal stall.”

Jessica walked to the rear wall. “Years ago my uncle showed me his secret room. If luck is on our side the room will still be stocked.”

“I have no knowledge about a secret room?”

“Good. My uncle only confided in me about what’s under our feet. Not even his wife knew. I guess he lived for the moment when he could show off his secret. When he saw my surprised expression he just smiled. My uncle told me I looked exactly the same way you do now. The room will be the perfect hideout for our money, the gold and the guns.”

“Including the blue diamond,” added Lightening. “If anyone ever sees the ring they’ll put the missing information together. They might want to nose around, asking question.”

“You’re right. The ring will have to be buried alongside the gold nuggets and the money. If one day Forland comes knocking on the door asking about his precious blue diamond, I’ll tell him if he locates it I want it back. He’ll make a lousy colourful smart remark before leaving. We’ll never see him again. To obtain something from me, he first has to prove I have it.”

Using the side of her boot, Jessica scraped the thin layer of dirt and saw dust away from the corner of the stall. In the floorboards she uncovered a trap door. Using her fingers to scratch at the dirt, Jessica found a small rusting ring an inch in diameter. Four feet along the wall she again used her fingers to scratch at the hardened dirt. A second rusting ring came into focus. Jessica stood, swiping a five foot chain from a bent nail half buried in the wooden cross beam. She pushed the sturdy hook welded into the last link at each end through the first ring, repeating the procedure with the second. She back stepped, allowing the chain to run through her fingers to the middle. Lightening Dawn stepped to her side. Together they pulled on the chain. The trap door opened easily creating a cloud of dust.

Lightening looked down into the darkness. “I didn’t know this existed.”

“It’s the reason why this place is so perfect. The whole area down there has been covered by thick wooden planks. My uncle told me he spent years making it damp proof. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Jessica grabbed the money bags from the opposite corner. Lightening snatched up the gold bags. He copied Jessica and watched the bags drop into the abyss. Both descended slowly down the wooden vertical ladder attached to the wall of the hole.

Seven feet directly under the barn’s wall the hole opened to a room. Jessica lit a lantern she found hanging from the wall. The light picked out a room no larger than the kitchen of the Rosedale. A five door cupboard took up the height and the width of one of the walls.

Jessica walked over to the cupboard. Opening the first door she showed Lightening Dawn the contents.

There were at least a dozen knives. Each blade looked to be of various lengths. Four bows and a quiver full of arrows sat neatly on the third shelf. On the middle shelf more than three dozen guns lay in readiness to be used. Lightening opened the remaining doors only to discover boxes of ammunition.

“There has to be in excess of two hundred boxes of bullets!” Lightening Dawn exclaimed.

“At least,” echoed Jessica.

Lightening picked out a rifle off the shelf, un-wrapped it from the thick woolen cloth and started to study it at length. “This Winchester rifle has never been fired.”

“None of these have been used before,” reported Jessica. “My uncle placed his private collection in here for keepsake. This is his secret. He told me none of these weapons will ever be used. He’d been told if he didn’t use the guns they’d be worth more some-day. He wanted to sell the collection when he grew old. He called it an investment.”

Lightening Dawn nodded his approval. “These are worth a fortune.” The moment he placed the rifle back exactly how he found it he looked around the room at the walls and the wooden roof.

“If you look closely at the sides of the timber beams you can see they were hand split,” said Jessica.

Lightening slapped the wall closest to him using the palm of his hand. “What a solid wall.”

“My uncle built this room to stay intact for hundreds of years.”

“What a smart man.”

“My parents, my aunt and uncle would have approved of you marrying me. It’s a shame they’ll never know,” moaned Jessica, sadly.

Lightening gently took hold of Jessica’s hand, reeling her in. Looking into her eyes he stated. “I believe they know.”

She kissed him tenderly. “Thank you for the kind words.”

“Whether I’m correct or not we have to hope they know.”

“Yes, you’re right,” whispered Jessica. “Come on, we have some work to do.” She walked over to a side wall. “This is the long handled shovel I told the bushranger about.” She wore a smirk as she started digging a hole at the corner of the cupboard.

Lightening grabbed the shovel from out of her hands. “I’ll dig the hole. You rest.”

He dug straight down to a depth of three feet then placed the bags of money and gold in the hole.

“Before you fill in the hole I think we need to have some money for emergencies. We also need to buy a few things. Fencing material is on the top of the list.” She opened the money bag, swooping out a large handful of pound notes in different denominations. She folded them, stuffing the bundle in her pocket. Next she opened a bag of gold and pulled out a few large nuggets. “These beauties should manage to raise an eyebrow or two at the bank. I can’t wait to see the numbers in our account. In the next few days we’ll go see our dear neighbour to make an offer on his place.”

“After the bushranger has met his maker,” added Lightening.

Jessica pulled the blue diamond ring off her finger. Before handing the ring to Lightening she gave it a lasting look. He placed it in the money bag and dropped the bag into the hole. Slipping the gun belt from off her waist Jessica viewed the guns. She wrapped them lovingly in a woolen cloth before placing the guns in a wooden box. She then placed the whole lot into the hole then quickly filled it in.

After collecting at least ten boxes of ammunition, two rifles, a gun belt and guns for Jessica, they climbed out of the room. They replaced the trap door and covered it in dirt. The mare and her baby fowl were hustled back into the stall to help make everything look exactly the way it should be.

Lightening Dawn and Jessica climbed to the Barn’s loft to wait for the bushranger.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SUN sank slowly in the west. Jessica guessed the bushranger might make his move before the moon rose above the tops of the trees.

The trio in the house kept up a silent lookout. At the first sign of the bushranger they were to give an owl hoot.

Lightening Dawn checked his pocket watch. “It’s a little after six,” he whispered.

Jessica poked her head out from behind a hay bale at the other end of the loft. She nodded at him and went back to viewing the station. In the background the birds were starting to settle in the trees for the night. The sheep were in stealth mode, even the foxes seemed to be quiet.

Lightening Dawn walked across the loft’s floor to where Jessica sat staring out of the window. “Something’s wrong, it’s too quiet.”

"I'd have to agree. I've been thinking about Dan's approach. Once the bushranger sees the homestead I'm gambling he won't come from the back paddock, he'll come from the west. The trees are closer to the house which will give him a much superior cover."

"You might be right," said Lightning.

Both Jessica and Lightning Dawn walked to the opposite side of the loft to view the trees.

"If I were planning on a surprise attack I'd make it before the moon got much higher," whispered Lightning.

A few moments later Jessica and Lightning spied the dark shape of a man moving from tree to tree. He moved horizontal to the homestead. They watched him check the area before starting to close in. The distance from the barn to the tree line measured only seventy feet.

An owl hoot came from the house.

"This is it," whispered Jessica. Cocking her rifle she aimed it at the shape.

Through tired slits Lightning aimed his rifle at the tree line, commencing to study the scrub for a sign of life.

A fox moved at speed, darting off towards the sheep. The moon hovered just below the top of the trees illuminating less than a third of the paddock. A dark shape hugging a tree could vaguely be seen. The shape darted to the next tree.

"We'll wait for him to stop again before we shoot," whispered Jessica.

The full moon rose quickly. Dan changed his attack plan, deciding to run straight for the homestead. He couldn't risk waiting any longer. In a few minutes anyone inside the house will become a hostage. If the woman wasn't in the house he'd flush her out by shooting one of the hostages.

Dan dived for the next tree to hide behind its girth. Open ground lay between him and the house. He carefully checked the area. A thin trail of smoke from the kitchen fire wafted straight up. The entire homestead looked dark; tomb quiet.

The shadows from the trees created by the moon light looked to be on guard. They were tall thin shapes beckoning him to run across the open ground. Dan aimed his gun at the closest shadow. The object failed to move. Looking over his shoulder he saw the face of his dead brother. "Barry, the tree branch above you looks sturdy. I'm going to find the woman, grab her by the scruff of the neck and I'm going to hang her from it. I can't wait to hear her exhale the last breath. Brother, wait for me here. This won't take long."

Dan sprinted towards the house. At the halfway point he heard a bang. Hot pain shot through his chest just above his heart. A second shot saw him skidding along the ground, chin first. He groaned in agony, struggling to breathe. "Barry, come get me," he called.

His dead brother never showed.

Dan clutched his chest. A knowing look etched his face. To his right there were muffled noises. Eventually two figures sprinted across the ground towards him, hand guns pointing at his head. Using a shaky hand Dan lifted his gun at the shortest figure.

"Put the gun down, now," Jessica yelled.

"Do exactly what the young lady ordered," growled Lightning Dawn.

The barrel swayed between the two figures. When it stopped the gun pointed directly at Jessica.

"If your finger even flinches on the trigger it'll be the last thing you'll do on this side of life," growled Lightning Dawn. "In seconds you'll be explaining your actions to God. Now, do yourself a favour, put the gun on the ground."

"Barry, shoot the man. I'll shoot the woman," called Dan.

"Take a look around we're the only ones here," taunted Jessica.

Dan desperately searched the land for his brother. Finally he dropped his gun in the dirt and struggled to a sitting position, glaring at Jessica through dying eyes. "You're right. My brother is dead. I'm done for. Tell me, which one of you shot me in the chest?"

Jessica hovered over the man, staring into his eyes. "I shot you first. I told you at the train, nobody takes what is mine. I asked Lightning Dawn to help me track you down."

"Why did you steal the money and the gold?" coughed Dan.

"The money is severance pay. The gold is accumulated interest."

"You won't get away with it," spat Dan. Already his eyes were half closed.

"I reckon I will." Jessica swiveled her head to wink at Lightning.

Dan saw his opportunity to reach for the gun in his back pocket. In his last few dying seconds he managed to lift the gun into the air, cock the weapon and ease his finger onto the trigger.

Two shots rang out in the still of the night.

Dan closed his eyes, exhaling his last breath. A bullet fired from a rifle which happened to be leaning against the barn wall interrupted his aim.

Jessica glanced over her shoulder. Smoke still wafted into the air from the barrel of a Winchester rifle. Gip wore a cold murderous expression. The rifle she held in her hand slowly dropped to the ground. Jessica walked over to hug her tight.

"I did a bad thing," whispered Gip.

Jessica kissed the top of her head. She dropped to her knees so she could look directly into Gip's eyes. "Normally I'd have to agree. Tonight, you did a brave thing. Thank you for saving my life."

"We family," said Gip. "Family look after each other."

"We sure do," replied Jessica.

Lightening Dawn walked over to the bushranger to view the fatal gunshot wound. The bullet entered the man's heart. Picking up the rifle Gip used, he escorted Jessica and the girl back to the homestead.

"Before the law comes we'll finish up," stated Jessica. "I'm positive they'll visit eventually, wanting to nose around."

She handed Gip to her brothers and collected Lightening. Together they walked to the barn, going over the tail end of the plan. Lightening entered the first stall. While he grabbed the rope hanging off the wall, Jessica snatched the long handled shovel. In unison they marched across the paddock to where Dan's body lay on the ground. A fox coming to sniff at the corpse and the possibility of an easy meal darted off into the scrub before Jessica and Lightening came close.

"This is the last chance to change our minds on the exact place where the bushranger's grave will be located."

"I'm firm on the plan," stated Jessica.

"What if the law does come to visit?"

"The grave will be situated in the perfect place."

Lightening Dawn spoke confidently. "Let's do it."

He took hold of the shovel, spearing the ground next to Dan. It felt soft due to the rain and a welcome relief to Jessica as they shared the load. The depth of the hole was easy to measure. Lightening stood an even six foot. From the bottom of the hole he looked up at Jessica. He dug deeper than his head on instructions. Leaning the shovel against the side of the hole, Lightening used the long handle for a ladder to easily climb out. Together they kicked Dan into the hole. He came to a sudden stop. Face up.

Jessica looked down into the hole. His face showed no inkling of where his spirit might have gone; heaven or hell. "Mr. Dan, I warned you about stealing from me."

"Do you think we should say something religious?"

"No, the man doesn't deserve it" snarled Jessica looking sideways at Lightening. "The last time I filled in a grave I couldn't watch the dirt fall onto my husband's face."

"What about now?"

"This time I don't care." Jessica spat on Dan's face, stabbing the long handle shovel into the loose pile of dirt. Angrily she dumped the dirt on top of his eyes.

In ninety-five seconds the bushranger was completely covered. Jessica stabbed her shovel into the ground then took to studying the paddocks.

"Now for the remaining part of the plan," said Lightening.

Jessica snatched the long rope off the ground. She reached out to take Lightening Dawn by the hand. "It's time to go hunting."

The two walked about the property in the dark searching for their second victim. They walked past the first shearing shed. By the time they reached the bottom end of the paddock Lightening Dawn's pupils looked excited as Jessica's.

"I've been going over your plan in my mind. I can't find a fault. I think you have stumbled upon the perfect plot," said Lightening.

"Thanks for building my confidence," replied Jessica. "You always say the right words at the right time."

They walked around to the north side of the second shearing shed. In her mind Jessica could still see the shearers, hear their laughter; she could even smell their sweat. The Rosedale happened to be the first sheep station in the district to have the annual shearers walk onto the land. They'd come in their droves, regular as clockwork. The shearers stayed long enough to shear the entire flock of sheep before heading west to the next sheep station.

Jessica and Lightning climbed the sheep holding pen for a bird's eye view. In the moonlight, standing alone at the start of the scrub they found a ram. He looked sick. He stood motionless waiting for the inevitable. The long wool on his back looked to be falling out in clumps.

"The old ram over there. The one looking a bit motley fits our plans perfectly," sighed Jessica, pointing. "What do you think?"

"He does look half crippled. I'd say he's the perfect candidate." Lightning jumped the fence. He took to trotting over, rope in hand.

At first the ram rejected his intentions. Jessica climbed down, opened the small wooden gate and ran behind the ram to help steer him towards the pen. For a big man Lightning Dawn appeared to be light on his feet. He'd lassoed the old sheep before it could think about head butting his pursuer. Jessica and Lightning walked the sheep up the wooden ramp into the shearing shed. Due to the animal's condition, the old ram tired quickly. It gave little resistance to the massive tugs Lightning gave. In a couple of minutes they were back at the hole.

"Sorry old fella," quipped Jessica. "You have served this family greatly in the amount of wool you've obviously given over the years. There has to come a time when all living things come to an end. On the positive side you will be out of pain. Your sacrifice will be gratefully accepted by every member of the family. I promise I will never forget you."

Lightning placed the sheep right on the edge of the hole.

Jessica pulled her gun, shooting the ram between the eyes. Lightning twisted its horns, watching it fall on top of Dan.

"The plan is set," jeered Jessica.

"Yes," replied Lightning Dawn.

He finished filling the hole and placed the shovel back into the barn.

The two staggered across the undulating land to the homestead looking forward to a good night's sleep. In the days ahead they'd activate their plan to the grand finale of the perfect alibi.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"GOOD MORNING Madam. I trust you're well this morning?"

Jessica dismounted and gave her horse a quick pat on the neck before turning to look at the man. He sat in the shadows outside the general store. The man launched himself off the seat. Dropping his cigarette onto the wooden verandah, he used the heel of his black boot to crush the lit end. He stepped towards Lightning and Jessica.

Quickly reading the name tag pinned to his shirt, Jessica blurted. "Good morning Police Officer Jones. I apologize for not seeing you when we came out of the scrub and into the main street."

"It's quite alright. You've arrived in town before anyone else is awake."

"I like an early start. The Rosedale needs constant work."

"Yes I suppose a sheep station the size of the Rosedale does."

"You seem quite knowledgeable on the countryside around this area."

"I've been doing my homework."

Jessica faced Jones square on. "Now you know why I'm up early; I'm wondering what gets you up this time of the morning?"

The man snapped to attention. "This is a nice time of the day. Breathing in the pre-dawn air helps to clear my mind so I can discover clues to the case I'm working on."

"The fresh air doesn't seem to help in hiding how tired you look."

"I haven't been sleeping well at night," admitted Jones, watching Lightning check over the small narrow wagon they brought along.

"Maybe you think too much."

Jones squinted in the sunshine as it rose above the trees. "Tell me, what brings you into town?"

"Shopping," Jessica replied.

"The shops aren't due to open for a couple of hours." He eyed Jessica suspiciously. "May I ask who I'm talking to?"

"I'm surprised you don't know?"

"I like to put faces to names," grunted Jones abruptly.

"I'm Jessica Hayes." She held her hand out for a handshake.

Jones refused the request by placing both his hands behind his back. "Your name rings a bell. You're the woman who had the silver guns and a blue diamond ring stolen by bushrangers?"

"Yes. The man standing next to me, the one you've been eyeballing is Mr. Dawn."

"He's an aborigine?"

"You're observation is impeccable," said Jessica.

"I hate aborigines."

"I find them hard workers, also extremely knowledgeable of the Australian bush."

"I have found their culture primitive to say the least."

"On the contrary, I find them unique. There's a lot they can teach us white people."

Jones stared at Lightning Dawn. "I've heard they make good trackers. Rumor has it they can track a white man no matter where he goes."

"Police Officer Jones, you're new to the town?" asked Jessica, changing the subject.

"Yes, my predecessor, the last officer, quit three days after the bank robbery, though I did hear he'd been transferred to Sydney. Which one is correct I have yet to find out."

"I never heard the news of a bank robbery."

"I'm surprised. I read about it on the front page of the newspaper for over a week."

"I've been too busy to read anything of late. If you see the man, give him my regards."

"I hope never to meet the man."

"You sound callous."

"You could say I am. Let me put it this way, Officer Adam Stapleton pushed too hard to be in charge of my brand new police station. The moment he, shall I say, 'resigned,' I slipped into the job, got me a large pay increase to boot. One man's misfortune is another man's treasure. I've now raised the bar. I'm going after the Governor's job in Melbourne. I have been told by a reliable source if I crack the robbery, being second to the governor is in the bag."

"You come across as a man who stops at nothing to find the culprits?" quizzed Jessica.

"Your perception of me is exactly right. Every inch of land in Victoria will be searched. I will never give up."

"Good luck."

Jones cleared his throat as he stared directly at Jessica. "Mrs. Hayes, what did you say you were shopping for?"

"I didn't. If you must know, I'm here to buy fencing material and visit the bank."

Jones rubbed the hard bristles on his chin. "What else is on the shopping list?"

"Clothes, feed for the horses, food for the pantry," replied Jessica. "Do you have any news on my possessions? A full month has passed since the train robbery. I thought you might have dug something up."

"I'm at a dead end, so to speak. By the way, you can call me Mr. Jones."

Jessica frowned at the man. "I'd prefer to keep things between us strictly professional. I have to admit you do look handsome in your crisp new blue uniform. I can't see a wrinkle in it. By the way, for the record, I'm known as Miss. Jessica Hayes."

"It appears the information I have on you is out of date. It reads you are married."

"I know you'll correct the error double quick. By the way, the man you're still looking suspicious at is my overseer. He runs the Rosedale."

"Overseer you say?" Jones echoed.

"Yes, his full name is Lightning Dawn."

"Again the information I have is slightly out dated. Perhaps one day soon I can ride out to the Rosedale so we can correct any misleading details? At the same time I could let you know if I have news on your missing possessions."

"You've already mentioned you have no idea."

"True. I don't suppose you have seen any sign of the bushrangers? They seem to have fallen off the face of the earth."

Jessica deliberately chuckled. "I haven't seen the men. I guess the woman on the train was right. She did say I'd never see my guns again."

"Or your blue diamond ring," added Lightning in a deep voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Whitaker gave me a detailed account of the whole robbery scene. I'm wondering why you didn't mention anything about the blue diamond ring in your details of the robbery?" questioned Jones.

"Didn't I?"

“No you didn’t.”

“At the time it didn’t seem too important. I’m more concerned about getting my guns back.”

“It sounds to me the diamond ring is worth more than the guns.”

“It probably is. The fact remains my dead husband gave me the diamond ring. If it weren’t for his gambling debts he wouldn’t have been murdered.”

“Commiserations over your loss,” declared Jones.

Jessica gave a flippant wave of her hand. “I’ll never forgive him for leaving me penniless. I say good riddance to the ring. I’m hoping never to see it again so all ties to my husband can fade into history. It’s the reason why I’ve dropped the ‘Mrs.’ back to ‘Miss.’”

“Your explanation sounds believable. Our conversation is closed. Have a good day, Miss. Hayes. I’ll keep an ear out for news of your guns.”

“Police Officer Jones, you are more than welcome to visit me at the Rosedale any time. If you decide to come, try to make it after lunch. I’m sure there will be fresh damper being baked or on the table. If you’re lucky there might be scones in the oven.”

“I might keep you to your word.”

Jessica and Lightning watched the man walk along the street. For a brief few seconds he stopped to look into the bank’s window before walking on towards the police station.

“What a strange conversation,” stated Lightning Dawn.

“Yes, I’d have to agree I’m optimistic we aroused his suspicions.”

“You’re acting skills were superb.”

“Thank you. It does pain me to act like a boss towards you,” moaned Jessica.

“It has to be,” warned Lightning Dawn. “You must never forget.”

“I think we should quickly fill our shopping list and get back to the Rosedale. I have a strong feeling we’re going to receive a visitor in the not-too-distant future. After every square inch of the Rosedale has been scrutinized, I’m confident we’ll be able to have a normal life together. How are your plans coming along for our wedding?”

“Will tomorrow be soon enough?”

“I think I can spare the day. I only hope I can contain my excitement.” Jessica checked the street before grinning seductively.

“The way I’m feeling right now is the reason why we need to leave this town quickly before someone figures us out,” whispered Lightning Dawn. He wanted to sweep his fiancé off her feet so he could kiss her.

Jessica led the way to the lumber yard at the southern end of town. While waiting for the owner to arrive they window shopped. Jessica looked through a haberdashery shop window at the fine dresses. Lightning pretended to be waiting for the next command. The moment the owner of the lumber yard shoved the large gate open Jessica told him what she needed. The man scurried around collecting the fencing material. Jessica paid the man while Lightning Dawn piled the timber into the wagon. The moment he finished Jessica and Lightning slowly walked along the street towards the bank.

At 8:50am the new bank clerk arrived. The thin man looked slightly nervous. More than once Jessica caught him hitching his pants up as he walked along the street towards them.

“Good morning to both of you. I won’t be long.” He unlocked the door, stepped inside the building and closed the door. A few minutes later the door re-opened.

Jessica battered her eyelids at the man.

“Care to sit inside while I finish racing around getting things in order?”

“Yes, thank you,” Jessica replied.

Lightning Dawn held the door open for Jessica. She stepped across the threshold and walked to the wooden bench seat behind the door. Lightning stood at attention. At exactly nine o’clock they heard a shuffle of feet from behind the floor to ceiling wall. Somewhere a floor board creaked. The clerk slid a wooden shutter sideways and poked his face through the narrow gap. He discarded his hat to reveal a thin layer of brown hair. He looked over the top of his reading glasses wearing the same friendly expression as when he opened the door to the bank.

In unison Jessica and Lightning Dawn ventured over

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting; rules are rules. I can’t serve the first customer of the day before 9:00a.m. Now, Madam, how may I help you today?”

“I want to open an account please,” blurted Jessica.

“Certainly,” replied the man. Reaching under the bench top he pulled out a small blue book the size of a young girl’s diary. He looked at Jessica. “The book is a new idea. The explanation is simple. Due to the

robbery the powers of 'BE' have changed the way I must conduct my business. This book is called a bank book. There's no need to visit the bank to know how much money you have invested."

"Technology, when will it end?" Jessica remarked.

The man chuckled, lifting his pencil. "The bank will guarantee any losses if this place should ever be robbed again."

"You've put my mind at ease."

"Your name?" asked the clerk, looking directly into Jessica's eyes. "For the account to be opened I need a name."

"Can I have two names on the account?" asked Jessica.

The man pondered the question for a few brief moments before answering. "I believe there isn't a rule saying you can't."

"Jessica Hayes and Lightning Dawn," said Jessica trying to sound casual.

"Will I add a Miss or a Mrs to your name?"

"Definitely a Miss," sighed Jessica. "Lightning Dawn is my overseer; he'll have a Mr. in front of his name. He will have the authority to withdraw any funds he requests out of the account."

The clerk stopped writing the names. Looking up his expression gave away the fact he wasn't happy.

"Is there something wrong?"

The man pushed his reading glasses further onto his nose before finishing the names on the inside of the small blue book. When he'd finished he looked up, dropping his glasses on the bench. "I'm not one to pry into other people's affairs; I've noticed your overseer is aboriginal. I think giving the man authority over your finances isn't a wise move."

Jessica leaned closer to the gap in the wall. "Are your harsh words supposed to mean something important?"

"Seeing how I'm a bank employee I feel it's my obligation to mention my concern."

"You needn't worry yourself about how I conduct my banking affairs."

The clerk started to tremble. He lifted his left hand to flatten what little hair still grew on his head. "You're right it's none of my business. How much were you thinking of investing?"

Jessica plucked three gold nuggets out of her pocket. "I want to invest these," she stated, placing them on the counter.

The man's jaw fell open.

"Careful, Sir, there a lot of flies out today."

"Where did you find these beauties?"

"If you must hear an answer, Mr. Dawn and I were preparing to replace the back fence post on the Rosedale sheep farm when Mr. Dawn dug them out of the ground. How much are they worth?"

"I'll be able to answer your question after I weigh the nuggets. I'll only be a minute."

The clerk scooted into the back room to place the nuggets on the scales. He returned muttering under his breath. Looking at Jessica a nerve at the corner of his mouth twitched. "The total weight of the nuggets is thirty-six ounces. In total the bank owes you one hundred and fifty pounds. When I've written the numbers in the book you can go celebrate your find."

"Your news has made my day," announced Jessica.

"How many pound notes are you thinking of withdrawing so you can spend at the local dress shop?"

"None at the moment," replied Jessica "I'll have a good think about what I'll spend the money on. Besides, there might be more gold nuggets."

"Miss. Hayes I'd keep your find under wraps if you know what I mean. If you don't, you'll have a mob of people on your doorstep carrying shovels in a matter of days. Discovering gold anywhere near the Rosedale is news, big news."

"I'll heed your friendly warning."

"Before you leave it's amazing how news spreads," taunted the clerk sarcastically.

"I think I understand where you're coming from. Seeing how you have given incredible service this morning I think a tip could go a long way to help keep your tongue quiet. How much do you recommend?"

"Ten pounds will buy you peace of mind."

"Agreed," snarled Jessica.

The clerk busied himself writing the numbers in the book and filling out a withdrawal slip for the total amount of ten pounds. When he finished he stared at Jessica. "Thanks for banking here today. Have a nice day."

Jessica swiped the bank book from the man. She bid him a good day and followed Lightning Dawn outside.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE FOLLOWING morning Lightening Dawn woke early to finalize the wedding day plans. He finished trimming an arch in the side of the pepper bush tree. Twice daily for almost a month he watered the grass growing at the base of the tree. He raked and cut the soft luscious dark green grass by hand. Next he walked through the bush searching for flowers. Inside an hour he finished and trotted towards the barn, two wooden buckets full of an assortment of coloured flowers, one in each hand. One bucket of flowers will be used for the wedding ceremony, the other for the wedding night. Wanting the night to be perfect, he studied the sky, making sure the weather conditions were still favourable. At two o'clock he'd strategically place the flowers throughout the area around the arch to add colour.

Stepping onto the homestead verandah, he walked towards the kitchen door. Gip appeared, banning him from entering.

"You can't come in, Jessica is getting ready," she howled, shooing him away. "You'll see her at four o'clock."

Lightening Dawn back stepped off the verandah on his way to the barn. Four o'clock in the afternoon couldn't come soon enough. When they looked into each other's eyes to say their wedding vows they both understood no one except Gip and her brothers could witness the ceremony.

Gip closed the kitchen door and walked across the room to where Jessica sat painting her nails, red. "You're going to look beautiful."

"Thank you. I'm sure looking forward to the moment I become Mrs. Dawn and afterwards tasting the rabbit stew and the home grown vegetables your brothers are cooking."

"They can't cook good as me," Gip hinted. "They do alright."

Jessica smiled, ruffling her curly hair. "The three of you can cook very well."

Gip placed her hands on her hips. "There's no time for an English lesson, 4:00 o'clock will be here soon. You have to be ready."

At exactly 4:00 p.m. Jarrah, Cobar and Lightening Dawn were standing under the arch. Every few seconds Lightening looked at the house for Jessica before glancing at the flowers he'd placed around the area. He certainly didn't want them to start wilting.

Jessica stared out of the kitchen window. "Lightening looks a little nervous."

Gip stood on her toes. She shrugged.

"I'll explain it to you one day. Come on, I can't wait any longer."

Gip led the way out of the house. On the way down the stairs she started to hum her favourite tune. Halfway way to the pepper bush tree, Gip stopped to look over her shoulder at the back door of the homestead.

The back door squeaked open. Jessica came into view. Standing in the doorway her broad smile grew. Lightening Dawn looked directly her. His grin couldn't get any wider. He watched nervously as Jessica descended the three verandah steps. Gluing her gaze on her future husband she started walking. She held tight a bunch of white wild flowers Gip picked two hours earlier. Jessica wore her cream coloured dress, the one she wears to church the first Sunday in each month. Her long hair cascaded off her shoulders, curling at the ends. A pair of white pearl earrings dangled from her ear lobes.

"You look a splendor of beauty," Lightening hinted the moment his bride stepped next to him.

"Thank you," replied Jessica. "You look extra handsome in your black suit."

Lightening cradled his bride before escorting her under the pepper bush tree. "I want to apologize for the small number of guests."

"The number of guests is of no consequence. The only thing on my mind is marrying you."

Jarrah, Cobar and Gip stood in front of Lightening and Jessica. They wanted an unrestricted view of the soon-to-be married couple.

Lightening gently took hold of Jessica's hands and looked her in the eyes. "Jessica, even though I don't speak good English well, I want you to know I will love you all the days of my life. I am a blessed man to have such a beautiful woman at my side. Each year the birds and the animals pair off. They build a home in which to raise their young. I have found the special someone in you. We have a home and we have a family. I will protect you and look after you all my living days." Lightening Dawn lifted Jessica's left hand

to eye level. "Seeing how there's no gold ring due to the fact we must keep the union between us an absolute secret I have thought of something I hope you will approve of." He kissed Jessica's finger seven times exactly where the gold ring would sit. "Each kiss represents one day of the week. They are there to remind you in the years to come each day I will live up to what I have said today."

Jessica glanced at Gip. Tears were rolling down over her cheeks. She gave her a smile before facing Lightning Dawn. "I Jessica will love you, Lightning Dawn, all the days of my life. I know you will protect me, keep me from harm to the best of your ability." She bent her head to kiss the back of his hand. "My kiss seals what I have said to be true."

"Kiss, Kiss," chanted Gip.

Lightning and Jessica didn't disappoint the girl. They embraced then kissed for a long time. The three kids cheered. Even the kookaburras joined in laughing. A few kangaroos looked over, studying the noise wondering if they were in any kind of danger.

"It's dinner time," yelled Gip and her brothers.

Gip grabbed hold of Jessica's hand, pulling her back to the homestead.

The group devoured the rabbit stew in minutes. The freshly cooked scones and jam were completely eaten after they were placed on the table for dessert. Coffee came next then the dishes were cleaned.

Lightning Dawn stood, holding out his hand. Jessica reached up, taking it. Wearing a proud expression Lightning escorted her out onto the verandah. The stars were twinkling high above their heads. The full moon was just rising over the tree tops. The birds were settling for the night. A hint of a warm breeze blew across the land.

"What have you got planned?" asked Jessica, wrapping her arms around her husband's waist.

"Mrs. Dawn I have been working extra hard to give you a night you will never forget," hinted Lightning.

Jessica cuddled into his deep chest. "So far the day has been extra special. Even the weather has been perfect." She held out her hand. "Mr. Dawn, please take me to what you have in store for us tonight."

Lightning swept Jessica off her feet. He carried her down the three verandah steps, walking briskly towards the barn. He swung the door open using his free hand. Stepping over the threshold he pulled the door shut.

"The barn door didn't squeak!" exclaimed Jessica.

"I squeezed oil from a bale of sheep wool to oil the hinges."

"What a thoughtful thing to do." For more than a minute she stood staring at the far wall. "You've placed all the tools belonging to the Rosedale from largest on the left to the smallest on the right. You've certainly being busy. I'm impressed at how you've gone out of your way to make sure tonight is memorable."

Lightning couldn't contain his excitement. He carried Jessica to the ladder which led to the loft. The moment they were in the loft he closed the trap door.

Jessica looked about the clean dust free room. "I love the flowers you have placed everywhere."

"Thank you."

"The loft smells fresh," whispered Jessica.

"It should. I removed the old hay which has been stored up here for months so I could sweep the entire area."

Lightning Dawn walked across the floor. He lit a kerosene lantern which hung from a new straight nail on the main beam which supported the roof. A warm glow lit the room. A blanket covered the thick layer of new hay. Lightning Dawn opened the window. The warm breeze wafted in. The stars were countless; the moon full.

Lightning turned down the lantern to half. The narrow room quickly plunged into semi darkness. He stepped next to Jessica, placing his hands on her hips. "You seem nervous," he said on a sigh.

"I think you're nervous too."

Lightning hugged his bride. For a long time they stood in the middle of the loft kissing. The breeze lightly buffeted the ends of Jessica's hair. Eventually Lightning took hold of her hand to walk her to the window.

Jessica stood cradled in the man's arms looking at the landscape. She breathed in the air, taking in every second of the romantic night. "I'm sure I can smell the aroma of the rabbit stew," she whispered.

Lightning slowly turned her head so he could look lovingly into her eyes. "I hope you love the room for our wedding night?"

Jessica smiled. There would be no more talk tonight. For the first time in her life Jessica felt completely loved. Lightening Dawn had picked the perfect night. Any problems yet to come quickly faded out. She wanted to soak in the love they were about to share.

Lightening carried Jessica to the blanket in the hay. He peeled his shirt off. He lifted her wedding dress above her head. Jessica took hold of it, tossing it to the side.

Pushing skin against skin they kissed.

Everything about Lightening Dawn was large. Jessica rubbed her hands up and down his back. She could feel the tension in his muscles. Lifting her arms she took hold of his shoulders. Dropping to her knees she lay prone, dragging the man down on top of her. She knew it'll be nothing short of scandalous if anyone ever discovered they made love. She didn't care. She wanted the man. He excited her in a way she never felt before. Jessica couldn't think of the exact reason why they were drawn together. Whether it was the colour of his skin or the gentle words he always spoke or the dare to be different or even if it were the scandal which might develop if they stayed together. None of those questions needed to be answered. She couldn't wait to slip into a world of love.

Hour after hour the breeze fanned their naked silhouettes. Secretly Jessica prayed for a long night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE FIRST rays of sunlight in the morning after the wedding night, found Jessica and Lightening standing at the loft's window wrapped in a blanket. Lightening Dawn placed his arms around Jessica's waist. Morning glory looked perfect. Ribbons of orange stretched across the sky in a magnificent light show. A few white fluffy clouds were slowly drifting over the Rosedale. Jessica knew all too well the beautiful sunrise won't last long, replaced by black ink coloured clouds in the not too distant future. She lifted her hands up to hug Lightening's neck. He twisted her around to give his wife a kiss.

Lightening Dawn talked first. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," replied Jessica, exhaustion nipping at her heels. She barely felt the strength to keep her fingers interlocked behind his neck.

Lightening swept Jessica off her feet. The blanket they wrapped around their naked bodies fell onto the floor. One more round of love making was yet to come.

Both heard the horse hooves at the same time. Lightening Dawn quickly placed Jessica back on her feet. Together they scanned the land. They spied Jones from the newly opened police station emerging from the scrub on a black stallion. He steered his horse through several stray sheep before making a bee-line for the homestead's verandah. At the steps he momentarily paused searching for human life. He shrugged before dismounting. After tying his horse's reins to the verandah post, he climbed the stairs. Gip met him at the door.

"Where's the owner of the homestead?" he asked looking down his nose at the girl.

Gip curtsied and pointed to the barn.

Jones raised his hat to the girl before marching towards the barn.

Jessica gave Lightening Dawn a wink. "It's show time."

Both quickly dressed and climbed down the wooden ladder from the loft. The visitor met Jessica at the barn door.

"Good morning, Sir," greeted Jessica.

"Morn,' you're up early."

Jessica pushed her hands onto her hips, staring at the man. "You're kind of early for a visit yourself. Is this a social visit, or for business?"

"Business," stated Police Officer Jones.

"I see," snorted Jessica. "This sounds serious. If you came for a social visit I'd have asked Gip to make fresh scones."

"Who is Gip?"

"The young girl you met at the homestead."

"You need not trouble the girl. By the way, you saw me coming?"

"Yes, we were in the barn. I wanted to make sure Lightening Dawn knew exactly what needed to be done today."

Jones grunted. Cutting a glance over Jessica's shoulder, he studied the interior of the barn at length. "Are you searching for something in particular?" asked Jessica, trying to see what he might have been looking at.

"Girl, I'm on the trail of bushrangers. Nothing escapes my eyes."

"Care to have a closer inspection?" asked Jessica.

Jones grunted again, stepping through the doorway. "A place for everything," he recited.

"And everything in its place," taunted Jessica finishing the verse. She faked a smile the moment Jones flashed a suspicious look.

Keeping up his stare, he stepped outside.

"Seeing how you've come to the Rosedale, did you bring good news on my possessions?"

"No, I haven't any news yet," grunted Jones.

"Why have you come all this way?"

"Yesterday I stumbled upon what I think might be a fresh lead."

"It looks like you might be receiving a bonus in your pay. Maybe even the promotion you mentioned."

"I hope so, Miss Hayes. I want to poke around a bit. I've been told by the local Ferrier if I followed the narrow trail from town I'd end up here."

"It's good to see you have been correctly informed."

"You failed to mention you borrowed a horse from the man. He told me you kissed him to seal the deal."

Jessica waved a hand in the air. "I thought nothing of it. I needed to get to the Rosedale. Seeing how I'd been robbed and didn't have much money, I thought the negotiation deserved a kiss. I didn't know taking advantage of the man constituted a crime?"

"It doesn't."

"Police Officer Jones, I got what I wanted. I have since returned the horse. I've done nothing illegal. Did the young man tell you I paid him two shillings for the use of his horse?"

"No he didn't. When I see him again we'll have words."

"The next time I see the man I'll remember to apologize for my actions. I will pay him any money he thinks is still outstanding."

"I'm sure he'll thank you," snickered Jones, again poking his head inside the barn.

"Are you sure I can't show you around in more detail?" asked Jessica.

"On second thoughts I think it's a good idea," hissed Jones in a rather distasteful tone.

Jones followed Jessica into the barn. He walked next to her as she gave the guided tour.

"This is the ground floor of the barn. I asked Lightning Dawn to place all the tools belonging to the Rosedale on the far wall from largest on the left to the smallest on the right. A neat touch don't you think?"

Jones snorted at the neatness before pointing at the floor above his head. "What's in the loft?"

Jessica played it cool. She certainly didn't want the man to climb the ladder to have a look around. To her he wasn't stupid, he was trouble. "Hay for the sheep, maybe a few rats, a couple spiders, care to take a look?"

"It's quite okay. I see you have a few horses," quizzed Jones stepping into the first stall. He immediately studied the entire area from wall to wall.

Lightning Dawn descended the wooden ladder. Both he and Jessica watched the lawman's antics. In several places Jones pushed his shoulder against the wall. He even tapped a few times on the floor.

"I'm not sure what you're looking for," said Jessica. "If you shared your thoughts I might be able to help?"

"I keep the facts to myself. When I have solid evidence I'll make an arrest. Is there a reason why you have five horses?"

"We need them to round up the sheep," answered Lightning Dawn.

"How can you ride more than one horse at a time?"

"Gip and her brothers help me bring the sheep into the holding pens at shearing time."

"I see," snorted Jones, stepping out of the stall. "Miss Hayes, can we have a word in private?"

"Yes of course." Jessica swiveled her head so she could look at Lightning Dawn. "You can start by throwing the hay out of the loft window to feed the sheep."

He nodded before disappearing up the ladder to the loft.

"Miss Hayes, I have decided to confide in you my one positive lead."

"I thought you keep your ideas to yourself right up to the time of an arrest?"

"You're exactly right."

"I'm honored," said Jessica. "You can trust me to keep your secret safe."

Jones looked directly into her eyes before continuing. "I came across two dead men. I'm led to believe one of the men may have been involved in a bank robbery. I've been informed his name's Barry. I don't suppose you've seen anyone lurking about recently?"

"How recent?" Jessica asked.

"Three to four weeks."

"What makes you so sure he's still in the local area?"

"The trail started at the bank. There were three bushrangers involved in the robbery."

"Three?" questioned Jessica.

"An eyewitness gave a great description. Two of the three bank robbers were indeed brothers. They escaped into the scrub. The third bushranger died during the robbery. I alone have been following their trail. It led me to an old man who made a temporary camp in the bush. He died close to Barry. Miss Hayes, I found the bodies not far from here."

"I see."

"The eyewitness stated in her report one of the bushrangers carried two guns. Both were silver with a horse etched in gold into the side of the handle. I believe they are the same ones stolen from you."

"I hope you find the man," blurted Jessica. "If you do, please get my two-silver-colt .45's back. They belonged to my uncle."

"I will catch him," Jones assured confidently.

"I'm impressed," added Jessica. "Your enthusiasm is outstanding. I don't mean to place a seed of doubt in your mind when I tell you I really haven't seen anyone around here."

"I don't want to be too much trouble; may I speak to your overseer and your hired help?"

Jessica pushed two fingers into her mouth. The loud shrill of the whistle made Gip and her two brothers come running. Lightning Dawn climbed down the ladder from the loft. He hurriedly marched over.

Jones shook the hands of the three kids and only glared at Lightning Dawn before continuing his conversation. "I have been informed the three of you have been busy?"

The boys and Gip nodded.

Lightning Dawn said. "We have, though there's plenty of wood still to be chopped, not to mention the fence we have to fix."

"Yes I saw it when I arrived. I can tell by looking over the Rosedale you have been working hard. From the moment I rode through the sheep I've been wondering why there's a fresh mound in the middle of the paddock."

"A dead sheep," explained Jessica, calmly.

"It's a strange place to bury a sheep."

"He was too heavy to move and a bit on the nose."

"I think I might take a closer look if you don't mind?"

"Sure, go right ahead," said Jessica. Walking into the barn she snatched up the long handled shovel. Stepping outside into the sunlight she handed it over.

Jones marched across the land to examine the mound. He lifted the shovel into the air ready to thrust the blade into the dirt. Jessica saw him hesitate. He looked to be summing up if what she told him could actually be true.

Jessica strolled across the paddock. Lightning Dawn brought up the rear.

"Which one of you buried the sheep and how long ago?" asked Jones.

Lightning Dawn bucked up. "Two days ago. I woke at daybreak. I stepped out onto the verandah to view the station. I saw the sheep lying on the ground. I ran over and found he'd died a few hours earlier. I didn't want to wake Miss. Hayes. I fetched the long handled shovel and dug the hole. In fact the shovel I used is the one you're holding. Miss Hayes saw me digging. She came running over to investigate."

"I personally checked the sheep to make sure he was dead before Lightning Dawn pushed the old ram into the hole."

"Don't you think it strange helping your overseer to complete such a menial task?"

"Mr. Dawn didn't want to admit his shoulder felt stiff. I thought being his boss I'd give him a break by helping him fill in the hole. I can't see a problem over my idea?"

Jones eyed Jessica through slits. "You don't strike me to be much of a boss. Not tough enough for my liking. Tell me, did you consider taking the wool from the carcass before burying the animal?"

"I did," answered Jessica. "I decided against the idea. I didn't want to risk touching the wool in case it contained some sort of disease."

"I can't say for certain and I'm no expert on sheep, I'd imagine the wool to have been too precious to bury in the ground."

"In your opinion what should I have done?"

"Find someone who knew about these matters; maybe one of your neighbours?"

"Mr. Dawn is expert enough for me. Besides, the longer a dead sheep is lying on top of the ground the easier it is to infect the rest of my flock. I didn't want to take the chance."

Jones pushed the shovel's metal blade into the mound of dirt. He rolled his long sleeved shirt up to his elbows and scratched his head to get off the subject. There's nothing worse than an angry woman. "I hope you understand I have to do this? It's a police formality. All leads have to be assessed and acted upon, no matter how trivial."

Jessica pouted. Stepping back she lifted her hands into the air. "Police Officer Jones you're a brave man. I certainly don't want to smell the remains of a decomposing sheep."

Jones set to work attacking the mound of dirt. Jessica and Lightning watched on; amazed at his eagerness to follow any whiff of a lead.

"Do you always get your man?" asked Jessica.

"So far I have. I'm aiming for an unblemished record." Jones looked up from the dig. "No failures."

"Good for you," said Jessica.

The deeper the hole, the stronger the smell of rotting meat wafted out of the ground. The ram looked almost completely uncovered when Jones decided to pack it in. Holding his breath from the smell he quickly covered the green slimy animal in dirt. The smell lingered in the air long after he handed Lightning Dawn the shovel.

Jones remarked in an official voice. "I'm satisfied you run a profitable homestead. Everything is above board. However, there is one remaining question I'm compelled to ask. It is somewhat of a personal nature. If you don't want to answer I won't hold it against you."

"Ask away," said Jessica. "I've nothing to hide. If answering your questions helps to get my possessions back I'll be more than happy to help in any way I can."

Jones pointed to the pepper bush tree growing near the homestead. "I've noticed someone has cut an arch out. I'm curious in finding out why?"

"It's easy to explain," Lightning interrupted. "I cut the arch. Every time Miss. Hayes went to sit under the pepper bush tree for a rest she has to duck her head to enter. I thought it might be a good gesture if I cut the arch to make it easy for her."

"Won't the flies get in more easily?"

"They hate the smell of the pepper bush tree. They never venture in."

"Thank you for clearing up my question. I never knew. For an overseer it seems to me you're going out of your way to please your boss?"

"Miss. Hayes has been good to me. I repay her by doing what I can."

Jones walked to his horse. Before he mounted he looked over his shoulder. "Miss. Hayes, thank you for showing me around the Rosedale."

"If you locate the last remaining bushranger and find my guns I'd love to have them back," said Jessica.

"What about the blue diamond ring?"

"If you were to find it I'd say you definitely need to be considered in moving up the police ranks."

"Miss. Hayes, I will have you know I'll never stop searching. I'm still puzzled over why you didn't add the ring to the list of your stolen possessions? To me you seem to only focus on the guns."

"Police Officer Jones, I have already written the ring off. Of course there is always a slim chance you will unearth it. However, if you only find my guns, I will be indebted to you."

"A fair comment," said Jones.

"I can smell scones cooking. You are more than welcome to stay to sample Gip's cooking."

Jones shot his hands into the air. "Thanks for the invite. I have to be getting back to the station. I want to read over my notes about the robbery in case I've overlooked anything. Lately my thoughts are swaying towards the idea the bushranger known to us as Dan shot his brother and the third bushranger."

"Why would he shoot his brother?"

Jones gave Jessica a haunting stare. "How did you know they might have been brothers?"

"You mentioned it earlier."

"Did I?"

Jessica played his gambling hand. Her future as the Mrs. Dawn depended on the next few minutes. She looked directly into the eyes of the man. "Yes you did." She watched him raise his hand to rub the

stubble on his chin. He looked deep in thought. Possibly even searching through his mind bringing forth every word he spoke since they first met.

Jones grunted. "Yes you may be right. Before riding to either Sydney or the Adelaide hills, Dan might have decided to keep the entire loot for himself. He could've quite easily have shot his two accomplices and the old man. He certainly has a lot of gold and money. He may never be caught." Jones tipped his wide brimmed police hat at Jessica. "I will not bother you again unless I actually have the guns in my hand."

"Or the ring," added Jessica.

Jones lifted his body weight onto the saddle. For a fraction of a second Jessica saw him hesitate. She held her breath hoping he didn't want to re-dig the mound of dirt instead of riding off. In a polite gesture Jones dipped his hat at her for the second time, gave his horse a slight kick and rode off to find another clue.

"The visit went well," whispered Lightning, stepping forward to be next to Jessica. "For a moment I thought he might have us hanging at the end of a rope."

Jessica wore a widening grin. She watched the dust cloud created by the lawman's horse settle back to the ground before reaching to hold Lightning's hand. "I've just realized we have pulled off the perfect robbery. We left no evidence. We buried the only witness who could possibly tell anyone about us. The lawman dug a hole to find out if the object in the ground might be the bushranger. To his surprise he discovered a dead sheep. If he remotely suspected us, he doesn't anymore."

Lightning Dawn nodded. He let go of Jessica's hand only to place his arm around his wife's waist. He gave her a long sweet kiss.

"The only thing left to do is spend our fortune wisely. The most important fact is we have to make sure no one ever knows we are married."

"What of the ring?" Lightning asked.

"The story surrounding the legendary blue diamond can travel down our ancestry line for hundreds of years, beginning with the one forming in my womb."

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'Legendary Blue Diamond.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian and I have added Australian slang of the era. Below is a small list of words and phrases I have used. Thanks for your understanding.

Again thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Mark Stewart

Email: mark_stewart777@hotmail.com

1842 state bank of Victoria started

The word cooeee is an Australian word that is sometimes used in the bush. Mainly used for calling out for a lost person. The echo the word makes is easily heard.

Mullum-mullum is the name of an aborigine tribe. They resided inland not far from Melbourne.

Bunarong tribe is another aborigine tribe which lived near the coast.

She'll be right is an Australian saying meaning, don't worry your problem will work out.

Shiela is slang for a woman.

Hotels/pubs closed early at night and only men were allowed.

Bendigo is a town about a two hour drive from Melbourne. The Victorian gold rush started near the town.

Gonna is Australian slang for going to do something.

Colour is spelt this way in Australia.
Prised means to force something open.
Center is the middle of a circle and centre is a shopping complex.
In the 1970's Australia had changed the unit of measure from feet and inches to the metric system.
In the 1800's imperial measurement: feet and inches were used. Pounds shillings and pence was the currency.

Legendary blue diamond is set in Bendigo before the gold rush. The Australian bush around Bendigo and Ballarat was Bushranger country.

Aborigines are well known for being great trackers. Rumor has it they can track a person over a road.

Outhouse is an outside toilet and was usually located away from the house in a small four foot square building with a roof.

A long drop is a toilet that has a long vertical hole.

Walk-a-bout is when an aborigine decided to go off on his own to see what there was to see.

Billy is a tin can and is placed over the open fire to boil water.

Honor is to respect someone and the word honor is a judge.

Old timer is an old man

Favourable is spelt this way in Australia.

Cooee is when someone is within ear shot or can be heard by another.

Swagger is a person who shears sheep.

Yellow bellied black is a poisonous snake found in Queensland

Tiger snake is one of the most poisonous snakes on the planet.

A Pepper bush tree is a tree that has the shape of an umbrella. Flies stay away due to the smell. In the 1800's people sat under the pepper bush tree to get away from the flies.

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are: Kiss on the bridge. The perfect gift: A vampire romance is the blood red rose and the tainted rose will follow shortly.

Crime novels: Fire Games/ publish America. Heart of a spider and I know your secret.

Children: A Troglodyte knows and Luke's cubby house. Malcolm's cubby house is completely different/ publish America.

Smashwords has various short stories.

Don't Tell My Secret

How far will you go to keep a secret?

A mysterious woman enters author James Buxton's world at the same time he meets Mia. When the woman tells him she wants to write her last novel he jumps at the chance. Then she says he can have the royalties. She dictates, he types about Lilly who lives in the 1940's and her struggles to survive. Lilly and Suzie vow to take their unspeakable deed to the grave.

Synopsis: Kiss on the bridge. Adventure romance: Available Smashwords.

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story? Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Synopsis: The Perfect Gift. Adventure romance: Available Smashwords.

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way all men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, but neither wants to be first.

Through a series of adventures that stretch from the city, to a fast flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

Synopsis: Blood Red Rose. Vampire adventure romance: Available on Smashwords.

"You can't force me to drink that, I'm innocent," yelled Haleton. "Rose-a-lee what have you done?"
There was no reply.

William Haleton is a normal man looking for love and the good life then the council of four modifies his DNA and uses him as a guinea pig. They transform him into a vampire. Pleading his innocence falls on deaf ears.

Haleton is hungry for the next evil soul, but deep down he has a burning desire for the love of a girl. Her blood is sweet and hypnotic. Her genetic makeup is his perfect match.

Being transported again through time is not an option.

The clock is ticking.

Haleton will do anything to stay by Amber's side, but is it possible for her to love him? Can Craig Benyon, Amber's close friend, be trusted? After all he loves her as much as William Haleton.

If an antidote to the vampire's curse is found in time, will it be successful, or is everything Haleton going through part of the vampire curse?

Synopsis: Fire Games. Crime: First book in the series. Available only from publish America.

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he's known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What's her motive? Is she Patrick's accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick's fiery finale?

Synopsis: Heart of a spider. Crime: Second book in the series: available Smashwords.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal's life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn't believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal's family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

Synopsis: I know your secret. Crime: Third book in the series: available Smashwords.

Everyone has a secret. Some people take theirs to the grave. Some hold their desires inside for a lifetime. Some stew on their secret all their life, and then they get revenge.

I know your secret is a suspenseful crime novel. Melbourne homicide detective Alan James Kendal and his partner Detective Claire Ambroso have to locate a missing teenage girl. The case hots up when he is introduced to a medium. She seems to hold all the knowledge of the case except a few minor details. Why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell that had a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss?'