

LEGENDARY BLUE DIAMOND

PROLOG

Australian summer: 2012 AD

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 color of the night sky and a woman who has skin the color of the sun. Rumor has it the blue diamond couldn't have been any larger than a single carat. Lately, there has been whispers the deep blue colored diamond is reported to be more than nine carats 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 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 had 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 as a legend.

CHAPTER ONE

Australian summer: 1850 AD

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 had 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 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 willpower 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 around 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. Half standing, she 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 the 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 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 pounding 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 man grabbed one of Jessica's limbs and carried her 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. The intruder even tore her favorite painting of a horse in the middle of an Australian bush setting in half.

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 the man 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 marched 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 immediately, or you'll end up the same way 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 of crystal fragments to fly about the room.

The tall man erupted in a belly laugh. The remaining three men who had walked up behind Jessica waited for the signal. The moment the man nodded two of the men stepped forward, took hold of Jessica's arms, lifting her off the floor, kicking and scratching. The tall man casually walked across the room. He gave Jessica a backhand 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 which in turn forced 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 with 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. She stared up into the eyes of the man.

"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 at 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 tight across her chest, Jessica slowly shook her head. Already she felt as though the men in the room had attacked and violated her.

"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 glared 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 I want."

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 handwritten sheet. The cards landed face side up. Before spitting his words, the man gave a sin filled snicker.

"Before your husband accusing me of cheating which ultimately led 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 long wet 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 money 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 AD."

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 have finished, what's left of you will be taken outside. You will receive 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 belonging to 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 and 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 helped to paint 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?"

“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 as 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 the 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 dragging the wet shirt off her shoulders. “If you take one step closer I’ll kill you,” she growled. Swiping a nail file from off the side dresser she poked it at the man’s face.

He returned the favor by flashing his Colt .45. His threadbare leather gun holster proved the man had 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 and faced the man. 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 out of the house. 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 grooves embedded in the narrow dirt road. She knew wooden carts carrying dead bodies to the cemetery had made the tracks. 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. Sidestepping 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 the 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 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 stopped walking. From the short distance between them, Jessica could tell the figure belonged to a tall man. 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, happy, 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 colored 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 girl, can get anything she wants from a man if the price is right.”

“I’m no whore,” snarled 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, has been 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 still 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. Slowly the man lifted a heavy pick to head height, tossing it near the hole. Jessica jumped at 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 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 was aching. 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 colored 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 correct, 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 colored cat purred loudly. It ran 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. She closed her eyes for only 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 the 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 that 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 that 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 before departure, I learned the room was still vacant. 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 4:00pm,” 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 only needed to wait, a full minute before he returned, blocking the doorway. Kepler, bowing slightly handed over a full glass of water. Taking the glass in her left hand, 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 might be 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.

When Jessica reached the train’s exit door, she 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 the 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-room house not far from central Melbourne. Unlike most other houses in the neighborhood with their weatherboard walls, where Jessica lived, solid red bricks had been 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 had moved away from the city to the mountains where she had learned 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 handcrafted 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 thanks 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 handcrafted guns, the old man had ridden across the Australian desert. He relayed a warning. Many people knew of the gun's existence. They were wanted items, particularly by bushrangers. If the gun's location were found, they'd fetch a high price.'

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 hoping 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 overlooked 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 that 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.