

LEGENDARY BLUE DIAMOND  
TWO

Mark Stewart

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## LEGENDARY BLUE DIAMOND TWO

### CHAPTER ONE

Australian autumn 1850AD

THE BIG black man pulled away from his twenty-one-year-old wife. He stood next to the bed lustfully studying her white skin, long blonde hair, her womanly shape. For a long time, he watched her chest rise and fall. On a sigh, he slowly walked to the open window. The early autumn breeze wafting in over the Australian sheep station, aptly named, 'The Rosedale' cooled his naked body.

Jessica Hayes couldn't move. She felt exhausted. Making love to the man trying to satisfy his lust for her was an experience she needed to learn. The physique of Lightning Dawn looked magnificent. His skin, the colour of the ace of spades wrapped his tight buttocks, deep chest, and strong abs into one six foot four love machine. For a long time, she watched him standing side on to her, staring out of the window. Eventually, she tore her gaze away from her husband to glance at the sky.

'There's still three hours of darkness left,' she thought.

Looking around the barn's loft, she started to think back to their wedding night when they first made love. He was right she'd never forget their night. Her gaze fell upon the didgeridoo in the corner. Lightning played the hollow tree branch for her many times. She could still hear the deep whoa-whoa-whoa noise coming from the long pipe. Once in a while, when they enjoyed the evening air as a family he'd play it for her and fourteen-year-old Jarrah, his twin brother Cobar and their sister, ten-year-old Gip. The sound coming from the didgeridoo when air is blown through the tube sounded mystical, unique.

"Lightning Dawn, are you okay?" Jessica whispered, struggling to lift her weight onto her left elbow.

"There's something wrong."

Lightning Dawn's deep booming voice excited Jessica yet again. She patted the bed sheet next to her thigh. "Come back to bed. We haven't finished."

By the time Lightning walked from the window to the makeshift bed, he again looked ready for her. Jessica kissed his thick lips, his neck before slowly making her way down to his naval. Before she could get lower Lightning flipped her onto her back.

For a further half an hour they were locked in love.

At around three in the morning, the two lovers fell asleep. The loft which Lightning purposely made into a clean bedroom away from the three kids in the main house added to their privacy. Three blankets and a sheet helped to make the hay feel comfortable. Fresh cool air always blew through the small window. Nobody knew their secret. If folk in town ever found out Jessica and Lightning Dawn made love every night the scandal will drive them to another state. Jessica didn't want to be forced into selling the Rosedale over someone discovering they were anything more than boss and overseer. She wanted to stay at the Rosedale for the remainder of her life. Being secretly married to an aboriginal man

going by the name of Lightening Dawn from the Mullum-Mullum tribe felt like a great honour. He'd proven more than once to be a man who is strong, decent, and someone she could rely on in every sense of the word, yet when he came to her he remained gentle; quite the romantic. Behind closed doors, he revealed how much he loved her. Most nights she remembered their wedding ceremony they shared in front of the three kids and God, their only witnesses to the event. She never wanted to forget the words Lightening shared or the moment she realized she'd fallen in love.

They swam naked in a watering hole. He marched out of the water ready to make love to her. She didn't understand his meaning of the union. They argued in the middle of the Australian bush. He left her alone to go walk-a-bout. When an aborigine decides to go walk-a-bout they never came back. To Jessica's surprise in minutes, he'd returned to explain exactly what making love to her meant to him. She'd never forget his words or their discussion.

"I came to you expecting to lay you down. I wanted to call you my woman."

"You have a strange way of asking me to marry you?"

"Knowing you're my woman is a great honour to me. You do understand what I mean by the word honour?"

"Explain to me what it means to you?"

"I will never do you wrong or allow anything or anyone to hurt or upset you. I will go so far as to say I'll lay down my life to protect you. When you decide the time is right, our wedding night, as you call it, will be a night you will remember all your days."

After confronting the bushranger and to accidentally devise a perfect robbery, Jessica married Lightening under the arch he'd cut in the pepper bush tree. His lovemaking felt intense. Now, curled in his arms in the loft of the barn where they spent their wedding night, she felt safe.

The barn is perfect for its isolation. The small window on the east side of the barn overlooks one-third of the nine hundred acres and the one thousand sheep which makes up the Rosedale sheep station. Their closest neighbour lives in a mansion across the river five miles from the barn. On the map, the river was used for a permanent marker to separate the two properties. The single storey homestead, 'The Rosedale' lacked a lot of comforts their neighbour, Mr. Langston, across the other side of the river seemed to have. Mr. Langston built the two storey mansion himself. Every time he saw someone in the town he boasted he happened to own the largest property in the area. The Rosedale was marked on the map to be the second biggest. Jessica had never stepped a foot inside her neighbour's home and could only imagine what it might look like. Langston saw to it nobody ventured too close. Lightening and Jessica were warned many times not to cross the river. They owned sheep, their neighbour owned cattle. Langston explained to them every time they saw each other, cattle and sheep didn't mix.

Things were about to change.

Jessica and Lightening Dawn were going to visit Langston to offer him a good deal of money for his land and the cattle he'd owned for over thirty years. Jessica always remembered what he used to say to her when she was a child.

'If a woman is to come into my life she will knock on the front door.'

Recently Lightening Dawn overheard women talking in town about Langston wanting to live in a room in the middle of Ballarat to drink away his last few remaining years. He'd never married. The few women who came into his life quickly moved out. They all left him a shattered man. He described each one as a fox dressed in a lamb's woolen coat. They were cute cuddly things on the outside, cunning to the bone on the inside.

Thanks to their good fortune from the three greedy bushrangers who robbed the State bank of Victoria and Jessica of the magnificent solid silver colt 45's and her blue diamond ring, she and Lightening robbed the bushrangers of the lot. The last of the three men died in their paddock. It was Gip, the ten-year-old aborigine girl, who saved Jessica's life by shooting the bushranger dead. She had decided to follow her brothers when they went walk-a-bout. They left the Mullum-Mullum tribe the same way Lightening did, ending up working on the Rosedale. When Jessica arrived at the homestead the passion the three kids displayed for hard work took her by surprise. She quickly explained to the children they were free to do whatever they wanted. It was Gip's idea they should be a family.

Jessica and Lightening buried the bushranger they nicknamed Dusty Beard then placed a dead sheep in the hole on top of him. Even the law couldn't unearth the truth.

They'd pulled off the perfect robbery and murder.

It has been two months since Jessica and Lightening Dawn were secretly married under the pepper bush tree and came to each other in bed.

Jessica rolled off Lightning. "Melbourne isn't far by train. I'd like to go visit the ocean," she whispered. "I reckon we should take the boys and Gip."

"Yes, I'd like to see the ocean again too," replied Lightning.

"Maybe we could visit your tribe."

"I'm not too keen on seeing the Mullum-Mullum people."

"What about your mother, your father?"

"I guess it's something we should do," said Lightning changing his mind. "When I decided to go walk-a-bout years ago I knew I'd never see them again. Perhaps changing the term might be a good thing." He again marched across the wooden floor to the window. Leaning on the window frame he stared out over the land.

Jessica stepped up behind him, cuddling into the man's back. "What's wrong?"

"There's trouble on the way."

"I understand you believe you and the bush are one. In this instance are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been wrong?"

"Yes."

"How can you be so sure this time?"

"Listen to the wind in the trees."

Jessica stood motionless listening to the breeze, cooling her naked body. "I can't hear anything different."

"The trees are talking."

"What are they saying?"

"Visitors are coming. They are bad men," whispered Lightning. "They have murder in their hearts."

"You're scaring me."

"I will protect you."

"I know you can predict the weather, however, what you've just stated is hard to accept."

"At sunup on the third day they will be here," repeated Lightning.

"If you're right are they coming for the blue diamond?"

"Yes. They also want the solid silver colt 45's."

"What about the gold, the money? How did they know? I'm positive we haven't aroused any suspicion," whispered Jessica. A worried expression etched her forehead.

"We have covered our tracks perfectly," explained Lightning Dawn.

"I guess we'll have to finish buying our neighbour's house and wait for their arrival." Using the push-pull method Jessica helped Lightning to turn square to her. She pushed her body against his, giving a mischievous grin. "Seeing how we have three days to prepare for their arrival and the sun isn't up, I thought maybe we could make love one more time?"

Lightning swept her from the floor and easily carried her to the bed.

## CHAPTER TWO

A FEW minutes before sun up Jessica slipped out of bed to watch the stars blink out. Lightning felt her get out of bed. He dressed, walked over to the window, giving her a quick kiss on the neck.

"It's time for breakfast," he stated.

In less than half an hour Jessica and Lightning Dawn finished breakfast. He marched off to the barn. In no time, he returned, two horses in tow. They were saddled. A long rifle was pushed into each saddle pouch. The moment Jessica saw him approaching the verandah she faced Gip and her brothers.

"We'll be gone most of the day. I need the three of you to take care of the homestead. Jarrah, Cobar, Gip, there will be no arguing, you have your work to do. Don't forget the horses and the chickens need feeding. Once the chores are done I want you to relax, have some fun."

"We family," chirped Gip. She reached up to hug Jessica.

"Yes, we are," replied Jessica, pushing her fingers through the girl's thick black curls.

The boys watched her walk towards Lightning Dawn. After mounting their horse Jessica and Lightning waved at the kids, they gave their horse a slight kick and both horses trotted off in the direction of the river.

The two riders weaved their way through the sheep, glancing at the mound of dirt where Dusty beard lay under the old ram before they swung past the shearing shed. The moment the lazy flowing river came into view Lightning looked directly at Jessica.

"You seem quiet this morning."

"I've been thinking about what you said earlier. 'Trouble is on the way,'" replied Jessica.

"If Forland sends any more men to find the blue diamond, I'm more than confident they'll end up buried under a sheep next to the dead bushranger," advised Lightning Dawn.

"I have to admit the old ram did a great job hiding the bushranger's body. The police still have no idea we buried the man under the animal."

"I'm surprised the cop wanted to dig into the hole. The old ram certainly smelt bad."

"I'm happy he wanted to stop. Seeing the slime on the carcass of the ram almost made me vomit," croaked Jessica. "The whole story will be passed on to our child. I'm sure he or she growing in my womb will be astounded over the tale of the Legendary blue diamond," mentioned Jessica.

"It'll be the generations to follow us who will find it hard to keep the secret."

"I'm hoping they won't have to fight anyone to protect it," blurted Jessica. "The moment the trouble you've spoken of has gone I pray it's the end of the nightmare."

The horses came to the crest of the bank. Jessica led the way down the slight slope to the barely moving water. She picked a place to enter, urging her horse to cross to the other side.

When the two horses bounded up the opposite bank Lightning pulled back on the reins. Instinctively his horse stopped. Lightning Dawn swiveled in the saddle to look for Jessica. She had guided her horse around till it faced the river.

"What's wrong?" asked Lightning.

"At the moment life is perfect. I don't want to see it change."

"Yes life is good," echoed Lightning. "The land the Rosedale was chosen to be built on years ago is perfect for sheep grazing. The river which floods occasionally helps the land to live. When it flows slowly the sheep drink from the low banks. The wildlife flock to the water's edge, even Gip, Jarrah, and Cobar know they can swim in safety. The river is a lifeline to the bush."

"Are you trying to say you don't want to purchase the Langston property?"

"Of course, I do. I think it's a wise move. At three hundred pounds, it's a bargain," advised Lightning on a chuckle. "My personal opinion is it'll be good to see the back of Langston. He hates me."

"I don't know why," moaned Jessica.

"He doesn't like the colour of my skin or the fact I'm an aborigine."

"I reckon you are unique in every way."

"I hope it's not a biased opinion."

Jessica rejoined Lightning. Leaning sideways she slapped him gently on the leg. "It sure is. Being black shouldn't make any difference. If anything I'm jealous of your dark colour. If I stay in the sun too long I burn."

"I've noticed," replied Lightning.

Both Jessica and Lightning chuckled at the sight of her red skin. Lightning shook his head knowing when her skin turned red he couldn't make love to her.

"I need you to understand even if we didn't know each other I believe aborigines are an amazing race of people. Your knowledge of the Australian bush is terrific. White folk has a lot to learn from you."

"I hope you never change," mentioned Lightning.

Jessica gave him a kiss. "I will love you for eternity. There is nothing to dislike in you. If there is a positive side to the bushranger, I'm thrilled he stole the gold and the money from the bank. He made it possible for us to buy the one thousand lovely acres of prime cattle ground separated by a river."

"Yes, it will help cement our prosperous future."

Jessica led the way deeper into the bush. The scrub under foot looked dry. The giant gum trees dotting the landscape kept a lot of the scrub in the shade. A few kangaroos bounded away from the riders and a couple of kookaburras took flight. A few minutes ride from the river they could see a small piece of cleared land. Right in the middle they spied Langston's mansion.

"Maybe we should move into the house before the weather turns bad," mentioned Jessica.

“It’s a good idea. Hopefully, Langston will agree to move out sooner than later.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” commented Jessica. She shook the reins making her horse start to trot.

The two riders made their way through the remaining scrub and the giant gum trees. The land around the homestead had been left as scrub except the area directly in front of the verandah. The ground underfoot felt hard due to the low rainfall. Gum leaves littered the area. If a fire were to break out the homestead could burn to the ground in minutes. Keeping the area clear around the Rosedale was an ever ending chore. Fortunately, the job was made easier when everyone pitched in to help.

Jessica studied the land and the trees from the river to the mansion in greater detail. She pointed to a couple of brown snakes coiled up in the sun at the foot of a large tree. Lightening changed the direction their horses were walking so they’d stay clear of the sleeping reptiles. Jessica grinned at seeing several koalas sleeping in the forks of a few large gum trees close to the home. A third kookaburra laughed before taking flight which disturbed a set of five red kangaroos resting in the shade near the edge of the scrub. A seven foot tall red coloured male kangaroo decided to stand. He viewed the riders closely, decided it might be time to move closer to the river and bounded away. In a giant leap, he’d crossed the river, waiting for the females to catch up.

Jessica sat on her horse staring at the sight of the two-storey Langston homestead. She marveled at the solid brick construction. Wooden slats covered the pitched roof, unlike the Rosedale which boasted a rusty tin roof. A narrow wooden verandah encircled the house. Windows on the second storey were open so the fresh air which blew across the land could enter and cool the entire house. A light billow of smoke wafted out of the chimney bringing an aroma of freshly baked bread. Jessica heard the distant moo of the cows. She guessed Mr. Langston will be watching over his two hundred head of cattle from a window on the East side of the home and more than likely knew visitors had arrived. He always boasted he could see riders coming from the moment they crossed the river.

Jessica and Lightening dismounted, tying their horses to the verandah post. Before they could knock, a side door opened outwards. Langston stepped onto the verandah carrying a rifle.

Jessica greeted her closest neighbour using a hearty call.

“Good morning, Mr. Langston.”

“Morn,’ he replied. “What do you want?”

The tone in his voice sounded agitated. The man stood straight---backed, wearing black trousers and a long sleeved checkered shirt. His unfriendly stare bore into Jessica. She should have realized something might be wrong. However, she wanted to take men at their word. At the end of the day they were neighbours.

Jessica stepped onto the verandah, giving a casual wave while she walked towards the man.

“Lightening Dawn and I have come to inform you we are heading into town. We’re swinging by the bank to withdraw the three hundred pounds you want for this place.”

Lightening stepped onto the verandah to follow Jessica. He thought it only fitting he’d shake the man’s hand.

“Tell the black man to get off my verandah,” Langston warned, pointing his rifle directly at Lightening.

Jessica stepped in front of the man, blocking his view. Langston hesitantly tilted his rifle down at Jessica’s feet.

“I’ve changed my mind about,” he growled

“I thought we came to an agreement, three hundred pounds for the house, the land, and the cows?”

“The price is too low,” Langston snarled. “To buy this place you’ll have to offer me more.”

“What about our agreement?” Jessica probed. She pushed his hands onto her hips and glared at Langston.

Stepping next to Jessica, Lightening ignored Langston’s aggressive mood. “What is your asking price now?”

“One thousand pounds,” blurted Langston.

“More than three times what we originally agreed on,” snarled Jessica.

“Agree to what I want or get off my land.”

“How do I know you won’t change your mind again?”

“I give you my word.”

“Your word doesn’t seem to hold true.”

“I won’t change my mind again if you cough up the amount I just said.”

“What’s the reason behind your sudden change of heart over my first offer?”

“It’s my house I can do what I want.”

“Give me a moment to consult my overseer,” spat Jessica.

“Take all the time you need. I’m here for the rest of the day.” Langston stepped over to a chair. He sat staring at Jessica.

She collected Lightning. Together they walked back to their horses. The moment they stepped off the verandah she spoke in whispers.

“What do you make of this whole thing?”

“If I were to guess I’d say someone’s been talking to him about how much he’s selling this place for,” whispered Lightning.

“You might be right. I smell a rat. We have the money to buy this land. I’m also thinking Forland might be trying to change Langston’s mind.”

“He could be,” whispered Lightning. “We have to tread carefully. We don’t want Langston or Forland to suspect our secret.”

“What’s your answer?” called Langston.

“I have a solution” whispered Jessica in Lightning’s ear. “Come on, if Forland is in the background we’re about to discover how good he really is.”

Jessica and Lightning walked side by side along the verandah. Their boots scraped the wooden boards every few steps. Langston stood. He looked more than interested in hearing what they were about to say.

“I’m going to make you an offer I think you’ll have a hard time saying no to,” hinted Jessica. She stopped seven feet directly in front of Langston.

“I told you before I don’t want the black man on my verandah.” Langston spat at the wooden boards close to Lightning’s feet before cocking his rifle.

“Before I say my offer I want you to put the rifle down.”

“I carry it for protection, nothing more.”

“Your safety is sound.”

“What if the black man jumps me?”

“You have my word he won’t. Mr. Langston, my word holds true,” spat Jessica.

Langston rubbed the stubble on his chin. Glaring at Lightning he back stepped towards the kitchen door to place the rifle inside the home.

“Any hint of danger from the black man, I’ll be running back for my rifle to shoot him dead.”

Lightning Dawn stood his ground staring the man down.

“I don’t like the way he looks at me.”

“Maybe if you were more of a gentleman you might feel differently towards my overseer.”

Keeping up his stare on Lightning Dawn, Langston growled through a locked jaw.

“Girlie, I’m too old to change my views on black men. I’ll let you in on a little secret why I hate them.”

“I don’t care to hear what you have to say.”

Langston switched his attention to Jessica. “You’d change your mind if I told you.”

“Mr. Langston I’m willing to offer one hundred pounds more than the asking price.”

“You’ll give me one thousand one hundred pounds?”

“I’m positive the amount is more than adequate to see you through to the end of your days.”

“It’s a most generous offer. Have you the money?”

“I can get my hands on the cash.”

“How?” he asked.

“The question here is will you accept my offer?”

Langston rubbed the stubble on his chin again. Jessica watched him start to sway back and forth chewing over the offer. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat from his head, wiping the sweat from his balding head.

“The extra money will help buy you more fine whiskey,” mentioned Jessica, hoping the idea will drop him over the edge.

“I’d be a fool if I didn’t agree on the deal,” said Langston. “When can I have my money?”

“By nightfall,” replied Jessica. “There are a couple of clauses in our agreement I’d like you to consider.”

“I don’t like the sound of where this is heading.”

“You’ve changed your mind once; I don’t want to hear you have again.”

“Is it the only thing you’re concerned about?”

“There are two more, first of which I want to see you shake Lightning’s hand. The second is somewhat harder.”

“For you or me?” barked Langston.

Jessica ignored the man’s attitude. The few times their paths had crossed when she was a child always made her begin to tremble. Langston’s abrupt attitude didn’t scare her anymore.

“The only things I will allow you to take when you leave are your clothes and a horse. Once I have handed the money over I want you off the land in minutes.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“If you don’t agree to my terms Lightning Dawn and I will walk away from the idea I have of owning this place. You have ten seconds to decide.”

“I don’t need the time. I’ll have a saddle on a horse the moment you hand over the money. Keep my clothes. They’ll make good fuel for the fire. Before we seal the deal there is something I want. I have many wooden boxes full of my personal stuff. I need about an hour to retrieve them and place them in my wagon. Once I’ve done it you can hand me the money and I’ll leave.”

“It seems only fair,” reported Jessica, wondering what he might have in the boxes. She decided the contents might be guns and ammunition.

Jessica and Lightning stepped up to Langston, shaking his hand, sealing the deal. The elderly man broke out into a wide grin.

“So the deal is settled?” asked Jessica.

“Yes, the deal is done.”

Jessica ushered Lightning along the verandah. They mounted their horses at the same time, quickly riding off towards the river. Out of earshot, away from Langston’s prying eyes, Jessica slowed her horse to a walk. Lightning drew level. Leaning in they kissed to celebrate the agreement.

“Interesting deal,” said Lightning.

“I did hope you’d approve. The smirk Langston couldn’t hide has given him away. If he’s been talking to Forland he’ll be busting to talk to him again.”

Lightning swiveled in his saddle to study the bush, expecting someone to be watching. “I can’t see Forland watching us, however, you never know.”

“I think we should be diligent from now till we hand Langston the money. If Forland is around and knows about the deal the money will be a great temptation.”

“If he’s ruthless as you have stated, he might even try to steal the money from Langston.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the man,” cautioned Jessica.

The two riders crossed the river, trotting back to the barn at the Rosedale. They were met by Gip, Jarrah, and Cobar who came running out of the homestead.

”Back so soon?” questioned Gip sprinting up. “What’s wrong?”

Jessica dismounted. She squatted so she could look at the boys and Gip eye to eye.

“Kids, we are family. We have to watch out for each other.”

“Just like when I shot the bushranger dead?” questioned Gip.

“Yes. Lightning and I will be heading into town in about twenty minutes. If someone comes asking where we are, tell them we’ll be back soon. Suggest to them they can wait in the shade of the big gum tree at the end of the house. To show some hospitality you can even offer them a drink or something to eat. Make sure your guard is never down.”

The kids nodded vigorously.

Jessica stood. “If something should happen which you don’t think is good, grab the rifle from the gun case. You know how to use it.”

Lightning Dawn entered the barn. He started to move the mare and her baby out of the first stall and into the second. After walking back into the first stall he swiped the four-foot chain hanging from off the wall. He squatted, pushed the saw dust away from the trap door in the floor and clipped the ends of the chain to two rings which were screwed into the trap door at opposite sides. He looked up, waiting for Jessica to arrive. The moment she entered the stall he pulled the small solid square door open, revealing a secret room about ten feet below the floor. Jessica hesitated only long enough to look out the small window at the undulating hills of the Rosedale. She searched the surrounds for anyone who might be watching. Seeing no one she stepped onto the ladder which was bolted to the wall. She quickly climbed down into the dark. Lightning descended after her.

The temperature inside the ten foot squared room felt cooler than the interior of the barn. Lightning swiped a kerosene lantern off the ground and prepared to light it. In seconds, the flame

showed where Jessica went. She'd stepped up to the wall opposite the ladder. Using her fingers she started digging at the hardened ground.

Lightening moved the lantern about the small area. No matter how many times he saw the room he felt astounded it actually existed. Facing the gun's cupboard he noted it looked none the worse for wear seeing how it had been built against the wall years ago. Jessica's Uncle dug the room and laid two-inch thick red gum sleepers on the walls and the ceiling. They still looked almost the same as when they were first laid.

Lightening squatted next to Jessica. The light from the lantern revealed what she'd been scratching in the dirt for. About two inches under the ground she unearthed a wooden container the size of a bread box. Jessica placed it next to her before digging a little deeper. Her fingers unearthed a white calico bag. Printed on the side of the bag in big black letters were the words;

'Property of the State bank of Victoria.'

She opened the bag, pulling out three large gold nuggets. The second time she pushed her hand into the bag she grabbed a handful of pound notes. Each one was a different denomination. She counted out one hundred pounds then handed the gold and the money to Lightening. She again fished for something small at the bottom of the bag. When Jessica's fingers gripped it she didn't have to look to know its identity. She folded the money bag in half, placing it back in the hole. She covered the material in a thin layer of dirt. Jessica leaned sideways, picked up the wooden box and carried it to the narrow table in front of the gun's cupboard. Before opening the lid of the box she held up a small round ball of green cloth. Placing it gently on the table she opened the lid of the box and looked inside. A small piece of green cloth the same colour as the material she held in her hand was carefully wrapped around an object. She reached into the box. Picking up the item Jessica gently placed it on the table.

Lightening stepped to Jessica's left side, placing the lantern on the table. He fidgeted in the half dark waiting to see the contents of the cloth one more time.

Before unwrapping the cloth Jessica checked the gun's cupboard to make sure each gun and the ammunition hadn't been touched. Focusing on the old cloth which she carefully unraveled, Jessica lifted one of the two hand-made solid silver colt 45's to eye level. Lightening and Jessica studied the guns for any obvious wear.

"The gold engraving on the handle of a horse rearing up on its hind legs and a long mane still looks beautiful," whispered Jessica.

"They are indeed the work of a craftsman; a priceless piece of history."

Jessica ran her fingers over the silver belt buckle on the gun belt. "The gold etchings are still perfect even after all these years."

She placed the gun belt back on the table, lifting the second silver colt 45. She studied it carefully before placing it gently next to the first. Finally, Jessica reached for a small piece of material and carefully unwrapped it. The object seemed to shrink the more material she unraveled. Jessica looked up at Lightening, giving him a wink. The material fell away revealing the last remaining priceless artifact. Lifting the blue diamond ring, Jessica slipped it on her left index finger. Using her right index finger Jessica polished the surface of the deep blue diamond and felt the perfect squared edges. Eventually, she sighed, pulled the ring over her knuckle, handing it to Lightening who placed it back on the cloth. In silence he re-wrapped it. He wrapped the guns up tight in the material, placing the lot in the box and back in the hole. In a couple of minutes, the ground looked exactly how it was before Jessica started to dig.

"Maybe one day it'll be safe enough for you to wear the guns on your hips and the ring on your finger."

Jessica slowly shook her head. "I don't think so. The guns are sought after items. Men want to possess them. My Uncle was murdered for the knowledge of their existence. He took the secret of their where-a-bouts to his grave. I owe him much. As of late, enough blood has been spilt over the guns and the ring. They must never again see the light of day. If someone was ever to discover this exact location I believe they will murder whoever stands in their way just so they can own the guns and the blue diamond ring."

Jessica lifted her hands to hide her watery eyes. Lightening stepped over. Using a gentle touch he wiped the tears from off her cheeks.

"Jessica, you have lived up to the promise of keeping everything a secret. Your Uncle would have been proud."

"Thanks to you my job in keeping the secret has been made slightly easier. It will be completed when I exhale my last breath. Then it will be my child's turn."

Jessica placed her hand on Lightning's rock hard shoulder. He wrapped his arms around his wife's back to bring her in closer. In the light of the lantern, in the secret room, away from prying eyes they kissed; both thinking about the night to come when they could make love once again.

### CHAPTER THREE

THOUSANDS OF people were flooding Bendigo on the back of the gold rush rumour. Men came in their droves from every part of the globe to search for the elusive yellow metal. Some left their families behind while others brought them along. The Australian gold rush looked to be in full swing. Whisky was in great demand. Many fights broke out over the shortage. The men were growing frustrated at the slow progress they made in being able to dig the rocky ground. Stealing and pilfering from the miners quickly escalated.

Jessica and Lightning were following the narrow trail into Bendigo. The short cut between the Rosedale and the town still seemed to be a secret. The scrub growing right up to the edge of the trail hadn't been disturbed. At the medium sized bush growing next to the general store, Jessica urged her horse to push through the gap. Lightning Dawn trailed by no more than three seconds.

The sun looked to be close to the highest point in the sky. People were walking along the main street, making it look full. They were either, standing in the middle of the dirt road talking, walking across it or riding horses attached to wagons. Jessica looked over her shoulder at the door to the general store. The queue to get inside appeared to be at least twenty people deep. Each man who walked out of the store carried a variety of tools ranging from picks and shovels to tin pans which helped them to find the gold flakes buried amongst the pebbles in the river. A keen expression looked to be etched on every miner's face.

Down the hill, about two hundred and fifty feet from where Jessica and Lightning Dawn emerged from the bush the rail tracks glistened in the sunshine. The train and its two carriages were being unloaded and loaded simultaneously. Smoke still billowed from the train's single smokestack. The train driver disembarked. Jessica spied him marching towards the water tower. Soon he'd be pouring water into the train's engine and helping to load wood and coal for the remainder of the trip to Melbourne. The small box size office where commuters could buy a train ticket seemed to have shrunk in the light of day since Jessica first visited it two months before. The rake-thin man wearing his peak cap looked busy selling tickets to the twenty people still queuing at the window. Jessica moved her attention to the near new police station situated adjacent to the bank. The local police officer stepped out into the street. He wore a satisfactory expression on his face over his ability to keep the peace in the town most of the time. He pulled a cigar and a match from his top pocket. Scraping the match on the heel of his shiny black boot he lit the end of his thick cigar.

Jessica steered her horse towards the bank. Lightning Dawn filed in behind her. His acting skills were perfect. Fifty feet from the door of the bank a postal worker ran out of his shop waving his arms wildly in the air to get their attention. In his rush his peak cap fell from his head, landing on the road. If Jessica didn't pull back on the leather reins her horse might have crushed it into the dirt.

"Are you Miss Jessica Hayes?" he asked, squinting in the sunlight.

Before she could reply the man reached out to take hold of her stirrup.

"I am," replied Jessica. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mr. Tippett, the postal worker. If a message comes in over the wire I write it down before delivering the message. May I have a word?"

Jessica dismounted, looking down on the skinny little man.

"A message came over the wire a week ago. It has been deemed urgent. I'm supposed to give it to the police officer. I know I shouldn't, but I made a copy."

"I'm not a priest so you don't have to confess to me you kept a copy of the message."

"The message involves you," whispered Tippett, growing more nervous the longer he stood in the sunshine.

"Why does anyone want to send a message about me?"

The man looked over his shoulder at the police officer, noting he'd turned his back the moment a young woman who went out of her way to talk to him called out. Seeing nobody glancing his way, Tippett cleverly handed over the note by shaking Jessica's hand. She read it out loud to Lightning.

"Watch out for a black man and a long blond haired woman who has fair skin. She came out on a boat from England when she was seven. The black man's name is Lightning Dawn due to the fact he had been born when the sky lightened at dawn. They are believed to have in their possession my blue diamond ring and my two missing solid silver colt 45's, signed Mr. Bobbi Forland."

The postal worker began to tremble. "I thought you might've wanted to know? I've seen your friendly face around town a couple of times. I hope you're not in trouble. I know of this Forland bloke. He hasn't a decent bone in his body. I'd either consider moving to a place he can't find you or if you have what he wants, to keep the peace, give the man what he's owed."

"Thanks for taking the time in showing me the message," said Jessica. Her voice sounded calm. She even flashed the man a smile. She felt determined Mr. Tippett will never discover she wanted to shoot Forland dead.

Mr. Tippett didn't prolong his visit a moment longer than he needed to. Glancing up and back down the street he rushed back to the post office, shutting the door before the police officer could see him run off. Jessica and Lightning sent each other a bewildered look.

"Interesting message," she whispered. "It looks as though Forland is on his way."

"Yes. We'll have to keep a low profile in case he sees us before we see him."

"At least we have time to prepare."

"I'll give some credit to the man he's relentless in wanting what he thinks is his," jeered Lightning.

"The blue diamond and the silver guns are mine. They were given to me. He has no right in wanting or even thinking they belong to him. I told him already before he threw me out of my home the next time we meet I'll shoot him dead."

"The only thing we have to do is make his death look like an accident," suggested Lightning Dawn.

Jessica nodded. "I'm sure there'll be a way. Let's walk to the bank, finish our business so we can leave."

They tied their horses to a sturdy pole next to the water trough outside the bank. Jessica and Lightning were about to enter the building when a shout caused them to turn around. They spied the police officer marching towards them still puffing on his cigar. He looked to be of average height. His wrinkle free dark blue uniform appeared to be immaculate. The vest he wore over his shirt boasted a badge which someone took the liberty of sowing on the front. A Smith and Wesson nestled securely in a worn light brown gun holster. It barely moved when he walked.

"Police Officer Jones it's a pleasure to see you again," called Jessica before the man finished walking across the street.

"Miss Hayes this is the second time our paths have crossed this year," he replied patting her horse on the nose.

"Is there any news on my missing silver colt 45's?"

"I've nothing to report. They seemed to have vanished from off the face of the Earth. So too has your blue diamond ring."

"It's a pity. I did hope to one day see them again. I want to say a generous thank you for trying to locate them."

"It's my job."

"Yes of course it is," blurted Jessica. "I won't be too upset if you decided to consider the investigation closed."

Jones eyed Jessica suspiciously. "Why should I stop searching?"

"The case must be taking up a lot of your time. I'm certain you have more important things to consider."

"Yes, I do have urgent matters coming up. I have already stated I'll never stop searching."

"I admire your determination. Is there a special reason for calling out to get my attention?"

"About a week ago Mr. Tippett handed me a rather disturbing message. A Mr. Forland asked me to notify him if I've seen a woman who has pale skin and a black man walking around town together. The message informed me the woman's name is Jessica Hayes."

"How does this concern me?"

"Forland is arriving in town either today or tomorrow."

"I still don't see how this concerns me?"

"After sending a message I've seen you, I received a reply asking me to explain why I haven't found the solid silver colt 45's he claims are his. The same ones you have stated are yours. The message goes on to say he believes you stole them from him. If you'd care to go over some facts again, I'd love to hear them."

Jessica rolled her eyes. She glanced at Lightning Dawn before focusing her attention back on Jones.

"Forland allegedly won a poker game against my husband who signed and dated a note which read, whoever won the next poker hand will own the mansion I happened to be living in at the time and everything in it."

"So you admit stealing the guns?"

"If you want to see it from Forland's view, yes I did."

"How about you tell me your side of the story, Miss Hayes?"

"I inherited the guns from my Uncle. My husband gave me the blue diamond ring. I believe Forland has no right in saying the items belong to him."

"Is there proof the items were given to you?"

"Not really. My husband gave the ring to me for a present. The guns were given to me just before my Uncle was murdered."

"To clear this whole mess up I need to talk to your husband," mentioned Jones. "Where can I find him?"

Jessica lost her warm friendly expression. Staring directly into Jones' eyes she blurted.

"Forland murdered him. After kicking my front door open he literally had me thrown out of my home. I took my dead husband's body on the back of a horse to the cemetery. I dug the hole, placed him in it and filled the grave in. If you want verification, ask the gravedigger. He offered to help in exchange for a quick favour. I told him I'm no whore. I'm positive he'll remember the night in question due to the fact I broke his window so I could borrow a long handle shovel. Before you ask, I paid the man for the window. To further add facts on the subject, bushrangers stole the guns and the blue diamond ring from me. The way I see it, Forland's argument should be directed at them. They were the ones who double-crossed him. I have nothing except the Rosedale."

"Thanks for saying your view of events. At this time, I'd have to agree. I've already documented I found no evidence contrary to what you have been saying. The moment Mr. Forland steps off the train I will inform him of my findings. Good day Miss Hayes."

"Good day Police Officer Jones. Good luck explaining my side of the story to Forland. The man strikes me to be somewhat set in his ways about wanting what he thinks is his."

Jessica looked sideways at Lightning, who in turn watched Jones start to walk off. Before they could get to the bank, Constable Jones trotted back. He said in an abrupt voice.

"Miss Hayes, before you go can I ask you to state your business in town today?"

"Aren't you being slightly nosy?" she spat.

"It's my duty to know what goes on in this town. Please answer my question."

"I'm here to do some banking and shopping for supplies."

"I see you rode into town on horseback and not in a horse-drawn carriage. Is there a reason?"

"Can't I come into town on horseback?"

"Yes of course. Seeing how you've stated you are going shopping for supplies I thought you'd have needed a wagon?"

"I came for material. I want to make curtains for Gip, the young aboriginal girl who works at the Rosedale. She's been such a great help around the homestead lately I thought curtains over her bedroom window might be a nice treat."

"What about the boys?"

"They've been great too. Money is a bit tight. I have already explained to them they will be next on the list."

Jessica faked a smile. She watched Jones tip his hat at her before walking off in the direction of the train station.

Jessica collected Lightning. Together they walked to the bank.

The interior of the small wooden building looked about four times the size of the train station. Ten feet from the door a wall had been built. The door led to the inner office and the safe room. A small window in front of the counter was purposely built into the wall about chest height so the bank clerk could complete any transactions. The wooden floor creaked as Jessica walked across the room. She

stood behind a middle aged woman, waiting for her to complete her banking transaction. In a couple of minutes, she bid the teller a good day, glanced sideways at Jessica before marching out of the bank. The moment the young clerk looked Jessica's way she gave him a polite smile before stepping up to the window. She noted the man's calm approach to business. He looked about twenty-five. A short crop of sandy coloured hair hugged his scalp. His English accent depicted he had arrived from London recently. He looked quite handsome in his black suit and tie, though his smile seemed faked.

"Good morning, may I help you?" asked the man.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal and a deposit," directed Jessica, politely. "The usual clerk isn't here today?" she questioned.

"He's having a few days off to be by his wife and baby's side. I've been told the baby is a bit sick. I've also been informed it's nothing too harsh. The clerk thought it only right he should be home giving her support."

"Please send him my regards."

"I will."

Jessica watched the man's eyebrows shoot skywards when she handed over the gold nuggets.

"I'll deposit the nuggets and withdraw a thousand pounds, please."

The man flashed Jessica a bewildered expression.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked, leaning forward.

"No nothing. It's very unusual for someone to withdraw such a large amount. I'm not sure if you're aware this particular bank has been robbed recently?"

"I'm sure lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place," reassured Jessica.

"Bushrangers are plentiful around these parts this time of year," insisted the man. "I don't want to hear of a pretty young lady such as you being robbed at gunpoint."

"Thanks for your concern. Don't worry about me. If I'm bailed up by a bushranger insisting he wants my money, I'll shoot him dead."

"I don't mean to say anything offensive; you don't come across to be the violent type."

Jessica reached down, pulling her Smith and Wesson from out of the gun belt. She pointed it directly at the clerk's mouth. The young man froze in fear. Jessica smiled before replacing the gun.

"I'll do what I have to. Looks can be deceiving."

"I've always been a sucker for a good looking young lady."

"Aren't all men?"

"I guess so." The clerk gave a half-hearted chuckle before swiping the gold nuggets off the bench top.

"Before you weigh the gold I don't suppose you've heard the name; Bobbi Forland?"

"I can't say I have."

"Are you positive? I've heard he might be arriving by train today."

The clerk swallowed before discreetly checking the street directly outside the bank window and the railway station.

"I'll be right back after weighing the gold and counting out a thousand pounds for your withdrawal."

"I'll have my bank book ready by the time you return," said Jessica.

After the man walked into the back office and shut the door Jessica turned to face Lightning.

"Forland must have a powerful reputation. His name seems to have a few people on edge in this town and he hasn't even arrived yet."

"Yes, I've noticed. Surely the man can't be that powerful?"

"Forland is nothing more than a ruthless murderer who hides behind the law. Somehow he accomplishes his dirty deeds in such a way nobody suspects him of any wrongdoing. He doesn't care about anyone. He only wants the power money brings. I wouldn't be surprised if Jones is afraid of the man."

Lightning Dawn wasn't afraid of anything, but watching Jessica's face turn cold un-nerved him. Jessica only ever spoke about Forland in detail once. He heard enough to understand why she wanted the man dead. Loving Jessica unconditionally might be the only way he could help her to bury what Forland did.

"I'll never forget the night Forland kicked in the front door to the mansion I lived in. He did it right after my husband died. Forland shot him in the stomach from under the table. I didn't know he held a handwritten note from Charles saying if he lost the next round of poker he'd relinquish what he owned, including the mansion, the blue diamond ring, and the solid silver guns. Forland ordered his four-man

lynch mob to throw me out. If I didn't agree to hand over the ring, he threatened to set the men on me. Seeing how I only wore one of Charles' shirts at the time, Forland groped for the front of the shirt, popping the solid gold buttons. I'm sure the four men loved what they saw. My only two choices were to either give him the ring and the guns hoping he'd let me live or steal the objects from under his nose. To make the story sound believable I actually bluffed him by saying I kept the ring at the bank in a safe. I tossed him the silver key to the bedside table pretending it will open the safe." Jessica flashed a grin. "It felt good knowing I conned him. I did warn Forland the next time I saw him I'd shoot him dead."

"Wanting to have power over people is not a good way to enjoy life," whispered Lightning. "There's always someone eager to topple the one above. The only thing I crave out of life is to have my arms wrapped around a woman. At the end of my days, I want to look back on my life and say I enjoyed the journey."

Jessica stepped over to the large window to study the street outside. She noted a few miners were walking towards the local hotel. They didn't look happy. The foot traffic seemed a little thinner than usual even at the local blacksmith's shop close to the general store.

The door to the back room opened. Jessica walked across the floor to meet the clerk at the teller window. The man lifted the bundle of twenty-pound notes he held in his hand, placing them under Jessica's nose.

"I'll count them in front of you," he whispered.

"It's okay, I trust you counted correctly."

"I must follow the bank's rules. I know you'd never say I made a mistake and come back to complain in an hour's time. However, let me say this; many people do the very thing I just said."

"I'd be upset if you got into trouble for breaking a rule."

"The gold came in at three hundred, twelve pounds, six shillings," reported the man.

Displaying a poker face, Jessica stared at him, handing over her bank book, watching the proceedings. She saw the man scribble the numbers into the book and deduct the thousand pounds. He turned the small black book around so Jessica could view the numbers.

"You have a balance of five thousand pounds even," explained the bank clerk on a sigh.

"I'll trust you'll keep the amount quiet," warned Jessica sternly.

"Of course, I will. Banking details are strictly confidential. Under no circumstances am I allowed to divulge what someone has in their account."

"What if someone offered to give you two thousand pounds for the information?"

"No way, not me," insisted the man holding up his hands. "I keep my knowledge of a person's affairs inside my mind."

"What if someone pointed a gun at your head?"

"I'd tell them the bank has rules I can't break. If they shoot me dead they'd never be able to find out the information."

Jessica watched the man count the money in front of her. When he finished she bundled the notes and the bank book into her pockets. Before leaving the bank she glared at the man.

"Money has a way of making people talk."

She turned her back and collected Lightning. Together they stepped out into the sunshine, shutting the door behind them. Jessica could feel the bank clerk's eyes boring into her back as she started to walk towards her horse.

"I think we definitely need to be extra careful," cautioned Lightning.

"I'd have to agree," replied Jessica.

"Do you think the bank clerk will talk if Forland offers him money?" asked Lightning, curious at knowing what Jessica thought.

"It's a certainty. The only difference, Forland will extract the information by telling the young man he won't be shot dead."

"What do you think will happen once he has obtained the information?" asked Lightning.

"Forland will murder him."

## CHAPTER FOUR

The morning of the third day

THE SOUND of galloping horses woke Jessica from a deep sleep. Lightning Dawn had already peeled her naked body from off his and dressed. He stood at the window looking out across the undulating land. He saw a few kangaroos hop away. They too knew horses were approaching.

"The trouble I told you about has arrived," Lightning whispered the moment he saw Jessica opening her eyes.

He watched his wife slip out of bed and dress in her white shirt and blue pants. Lightning moved away from the window to step next to Jessica. The wooden floorboards creaked under his weight. He swiped Jessica's black riding boots from off the floor, handing them over. He waited for her to stand before swiping her gun belt from off the bent rusty nail near the window. Jessica buckled the belt together, walking to the door.

Lightning Dawn led the way out of the bedroom towards the kitchen. Jessica stopped him from being first into the room.

"I'll greet the riders," she insisted.

"I should be the first out of the house," said Lightning.

"Everyone knows you're the overseer of the Rosedale. An overseer is supposed to sleep in the barn, not in my bed. We don't want to arouse suspicion. You were spot on about staying here at the Rosedale one more night. If one of the visitors is Forland we don't want him to know we purchased Langston's property last night."

"Yes, you're right," whispered Lightning Dawn. "Defense is best."

Jessica craned her neck to kiss the man. "Besides, all the gold and the pound notes we have stashed away, I certainly don't want to spoil our future."

"Doubling the size of the Rosedale property feels fantastic. When our uninvited guests leave we can move in."

"Hello inside the house."

The caller's voice sounded flat. Even though Jessica couldn't see the man she already summed him up. He stood at the closed kitchen door wearing a stone cold expression. He arrived on business which he intended to see through to the end. He wanted it all his way. There'd be no deferring or deviation on what he came to get.

Jessica pulled open the kitchen door. Instantly she began to study the faces of the ten riders glaring at her. She eventually focused on the closest visitor.

"Police Officer Jones I'm surprised you've returned so soon after the last visit. I thought you might've come a little later in the morning. Gip hasn't started cooking her scones yet."

"Good morning Jessica Hayes. I'm here on business." Jones dismounted and stood next to his horse.

"What about the remainder of the posse?" She stepped onto the verandah, pulling the door closed behind her.

"We're all here on official business. Before I begin our friendly chat, I must ask, why are you wearing a gun belt?"

"This is a sheep station. Anything could go wrong in a day. For example, I might have to rescue a lamb from a yellow bellied black snake. There's been a few around lately. If you're bitten by one of those or a brown snake you'll be dead before help arrives."

"You needn't lecture me, Mrs. Hayes. I am well versed on the Australian bush. Where's your overseer; we need to have a talk?"

"He's done nothing wrong."

"I'm not suggesting he has."

"It sounds like you are to me," blurted Jessica.

"Where is the man?" argued Jones.

"He's inside having breakfast," answered Jessica calmly.

Laughter erupted from the men sitting high on their saddles behind Jones. Half of the men needed a shave. Flies were buzzing around the faces of the other half, depicting they needed a thorough wash.

"Is eating all he's doing?" questioned Jones.

"What more is there?"

"You're a married woman, have a guess."

"My husband died. Have you forgotten I go by the name of Miss. Jessica Hayes, or have you lost your manners? You can add memory loss to the list," added Jessica.

“Neither.”

“We have been through this before,” spat Jessica trying unsuccessfully to keep her temper in check.

“Yes we have,” chuckled Jones sarcastically. “More of late I have been informed of a different set of circumstances than what you believe is your view about the incident over the death of your husband.”

“Knowing I actually remember the truth; hearing your version of events might be quite amusing.”

“Miss. Hayes, there are a few discrepancies in your story,” reported Jones.

“Such as?” quizzed Jessica.

“Maybe I can be of some benefit here,” bellowed a voice at the back of the riders.

A man wearing a business suit pushed his horse through the group. At the verandah, he remained seated on his horse looking down on Jessica. He refrained from dipping his hat or reaching out his hand. Instead, he looked to be gloating.

“Jessica Hayes, I don’t think you’ll have any trouble remembering me?”

Jessica stood glaring up at the man. Though she loathed the sight of him she did accept the fact he presented himself immaculately. She slowly moved her hand towards the Smith and Wesson touching her leg.

Jones quickly pulled his gun from his holster, pointing it at Jessica.

“I’d change my mind about lifting the gun.”

Lightening Dawn kicked the kitchen door open and stepped onto the verandah holding a rifle firmly in his hands.

“Tell the black man to put the rifle down,” hollered Jones.

“You first,” barked Lightening. “Be warned, if your hand flinches I’ll blow it off.”

Jessica turned her back on Jones. “Lightening, it will be okay. Put the rifle back inside the house. I’m certain no one will be shot. Am I correct Mr. Jones?”

Instead of listening to instructions Lightening placed the rifle against the vertical verandah post before stepping sideways.

“If someone reaches for a gun I’ll be able to get my rifle and shoot him dead. I will add I’m a crack shot.”

Jones placed his gun back into his holster, before walking his horse to the verandah where he tied the reins to the long wooden post. He straightened his uniform before facing Jessica square on.

“Our visit today will be business only. Any hostility between any of us should be swept to the side.”

Jessica pointed to the man sitting high in the saddle ten feet behind Jones.

“Forland murdered my husband. I vowed the next time I saw him I’d do the same to him. Seeing how you have indicated there will be no hostilities here today I’m only just willing to hear what he has to say. Let me be the first to give a warning. Tomorrow is another day.”

“It’s good to know you still remember me, Mrs. Hayes.”

“It’s Miss. Hayes, Forland. State the exact meaning of your visit then get the hell off my land.”

“The first time we met I thought you were a rather rude woman. I see your manners haven’t improved.”

“Why are you here?”

“I believe you know exactly why I’m here?” growled Forland, spitting into the dirt.

“I hope you’re not implying my overseer or I know anything about why you are here?” snarled Jessica, glaring at Forland.

“I thought Lightening Dawn might like to clear his name by explaining what exactly he’s been doing these past few days?” questioned Jones.

Forland pointed his finger directly at Jessica, completely disrupting the interruption. “Inform the woman why I’m here,” he bellowed.

“I know why you’re here,” spat Jessica. “The next time you want to address me, use my name.”

“I’ll talk any way I want to.”

Lightening Dawn stepped closer so he could be slightly in front of Jessica. His fingers were curled into tight fists.

“Order the black man to move back,” yelled Jones.

“No,” replied Jessica. “I will not comply with your demands.”

Jones tried to act more relaxed. He certainly didn’t want any trouble. If the tension of the meeting escalated he knew the morning will end in total disaster. Nobody will walk away a winner.

“Miss. Hayes, I’m certain we can have a peaceful conversation,” said Jones.

“We can when Forland isn’t here.”

“This two-bit conversation isn’t getting me any closer to obtaining what is legally mine,” growled Forland. “Hayes, explain to everyone why I’m here.”

“You want my blue diamond ring and the solid silver colt 45’s.”

“Correct in every detail. Have you forgotten what I told you when you sprinted upstairs to pack a few incidental things the night your husband died?”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“I told you if you crossed me by keeping the ring I’d hunt you down.”

“I smuggled the ring and the guns right from under your nose. They belong to me. You have no right to demand I hand them over.”

“I have every right.”

For a few uneasy seconds, silence filled the air. Slowly Forland shifted his attention from Jessica to Jones.

“Constable, there’s your proof. The woman did steal what is rightfully mine. I want you to arrest her. I want to see her hanging from a solid tree.”

“Forland, you’re too late. Three bushrangers robbed the train I was on. They stole the ring and the guns. I never saw them or my belongings again.”

Forland reached for his gun. “Jones, seeing how you won’t arrest her I’ll take the law into my own hands.”

“Put the gun away,” snarled Jones, pulling his weapon out of his holster a full three seconds faster. Lightning Dawn swept Jessica behind him.

“I demand you find what belongs to me,” insisted Forland.

“I’ve already told you I have spoken to Miss. Hayes. Everything around here is on the level.”

“I don’t care what you think. She has the diamond ring and the guns. If they aren’t on this rundown wretched sheep station, she knows exactly where they are.”

“Forland, this is the last warning, keep your mouth closed. If you don’t I’ll permanently shut it,” spat Jessica.

Seeing how Lightning Dawn temporarily distracted Forland, Jessica quietly pulled the gun from her holster and hid it behind her back. She must make Forland’s death look as though she was only defending herself.

“Everyone calm down,” yelled Jones. “This meeting is starting to get out of control.”

“Tell the bulldog to stop whining. I’ve lost more than he has,” barked Jessica.

“Please, Miss. Hayes, I won’t ask you again to remain calm,” spat Jones more urgently.

“Get off my land the lot of you.”

“We have yet to discuss why I’m here,” rebuked Jones.

“I have no intention of hearing the reason why you’re here.”

Forland dismounted, marching up behind Jones.

Jessica roamed her stare between Forland and Jones, waiting for the right moment where she could shoot Forland.

“I’ve been informed you’ve been banking gold nuggets,” quizzed Forland.

“Who did you have to kill to get the information?”

“How I obtain my information doesn’t concern you.”

Jones whipped around, glaring at Forland. “If I find out you were behind the death of the bank clerk, I’ll find a sturdy tree to hang you myself.”

“I’m a businessman, I don’t murder people,” insisted Forland.

“I’d have to agree,” spat Jessica through clenched teeth.

Everyone including Forland wore the same expression on their faces. Each one of the hostile visitors focused their attention on Jessica, surprised at her statement. She lifted her finger, pointing it directly at the man she hates.

“He pays others to do his dirty work.”

Jones’ face went bright red. He moved his stare between Jessica and Forland.

“I’ve heard enough. Forland place your gun on the ground. Miss. Hayes, I want you to do the same.”

“No. Forland might have a gun hidden under his coat. I don’t trust the man. If you knew him you’d never trust him either.”

A light smirk broke through Forland's hardened expression. Staring at Jessica he undid his gun belt, placing it on the verandah deck. He backed away, pushing his hands into the air.

"Now you," said Jones, calmly.

Jessica shook her head. "There's no way I'm going to stand here unarmed. I give you my word I won't shoot Forland providing he keeps his hands where I can see them. If he makes a sudden move I'll shoot the man."

"Jones it doesn't seem fair. I've listened to what you've asked. The woman should be made to listen too. What if she shoots? She did threaten my life the moment she saw me."

"I'm asking you again place your gun on the ground," insisted Jones.

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Miss Hayes, please."

"How can you trust a woman who despises me?"

"Unlike you Forland, I keep my word," spat Jessica.

"Mr. Forland to you, Wench."

He began shuffling his feet. Jessica counted his steps. The moment Forland stopped walking will be his undoing. She crouched slightly, lifting her gun level to Forland. A slight sidestep remained in Forland's life. She saw Forland reaching for the gun he housed in his coat pocket.

Lightening Dawn reached behind his back for his Smith and Wesson that remained hidden from view. He needed to shoot everyone if he wanted to see Jessica live.

Jessica saw a shadow moving behind her. Using her peripheral vision she also saw Lightening Dawn getting ready to shoot.

There will be few survivors.

"Seeing how you aren't true to your word I'm forced to break mine," mentioned Forland.

Jessica felt a gun being pushed into her shoulder blade. She never thought someone could literally walk around from the other side of the house undetected, sneak along the verandah and be close enough to shove a gun in her back.

"Be wise and drop the gun," instructed the voice.

The tone of the man's voice relayed to Jessica she'd been beaten. Lightening turned, facing the man. He had been too focused on the group of men in front of him to realize there was a man slowly walking up behind him.

"Tell the black man to back off," growled the voice, shoving the gun a little harder into Jessica's back.

"Lightening it'll okay." Jessica placed her gun back into the holster and quickly unclipped the buckle. She felt the gun belt fall to her feet. Raising her hands she turned to face the man. "I recognize you. How's your nose after I broke it?"

The man failed to see the humour in her voice. "Now you know who I am, I believe you'll settle."

Jones stepped in front of Forland. "I'm asking for the last time, act like a sheep when it's about to be shorn. If I hear one more smart remark I'll ride off this land. Be warned I will never return. The blue diamond you are so desperate to find will never be found. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Very."

Jones nodded at the man pushing his gun into Jessica's back. He slowly walked away to the nearest verandah post, housing his gun.

Jones sighed heavily. His backup plan worked to perfection.

"Now things have settled a little. We can get back to why we have ridden out here to the Rosedale."

"First, ask her about how much money she's banked and withdrawn today?" Forland questioned.

Jones swiveled slightly to stand side on. He gave Forland a stern look before focusing on Jessica.

"I'd like you to answer the question about the gold nuggets you've been banking of late?"

Jones sent Forland a quick glance to make sure his lips were closed. When he appeared to be satisfied he returned his gaze to Jessica. He saw her push her hands onto her hips. He didn't seem to flinch at seeing her puff out her breasts.

"Even though it's none of your business, my overseer and I have been panning for gold in the river. We've struck it lucky several times."

"Where exactly in the river did you strike it lucky?" asked Jones.

Stepping forward, Lightening Dawn lifted his fists into the air. "Miss Hayes has answered your question. Now leave."

Jessica looked at Lightening before glancing at the man leaning against the verandah pole ten feet directly behind him.

"Mr. Dawn, it's okay. Relax." Jessica changed her stare back to Jones. "Constable, this is private land. If I say exactly where we found the gold you'll be camping on the Rosedale amongst a thousand desperate men hoping to discover more gold nuggets. If they find any they lawfully belong to me. So to answer your question I'm going to say no comment. I believe there's no law insisting I answer."

"I for one won't stand for it," yelled Lightening Dawn, raising his fists higher.

Jessica signaled for him again to relax.

"These are bad men. It's time for them to go," spat Lightening.

"Forland or these men have no intention of outstaying their welcome. I must add no one here wants to trespass on your land. You don't have to say where you found the gold. Your answer sounds legitimate to me. This whole area is in the grips of a gold rush," moaned Jones. "If I may move on to other important issues of the day; Miss Hayes, can you explain the where-a-bouts of your overseer in the past few days?"

"I've just explained we've been panning for gold."

"What about at night?"

"Mr. Jones, my overseer and I work on the Rosedale all day, every day. By nightfall, we are exhausted. We have dinner then call it a night."

"Where does he sleep?"

"In the barn," she jeered.

"Tell us why you gave him permission to have breakfast in the kitchen?" yelled Forland.

"How I treat my workers is my business. Let me inform you of something, Mister. The first time we met I knew you didn't have manners. Be advised you still don't. If a hired gun wasn't watching me, waiting for a golden opportunity to shoot, I'd break my promise just to put a bullet in your heart. I'd personally dig a deep hole and kick you in it. Before dropping the dirt onto your face I'd spit on your grave. You didn't have the right to violently throw me out of my house the first time. Be warned, it won't happen again."

"I showed you the note containing the wager for the card game. You told me the words were written by your husband. The letter is a legal document which gave me every right to throw you out. I asked you to leave. You refused."

"So you employed four big ugly men to throw me out."

"Exactly, now where's my diamond ring?"

"Ask the bushrangers, they stole it from me. I have nothing except this land." Jessica turned her attention to Jones. "Is this why you're here? Forland came to you telling an exaggerated tale expecting you to hang me or my overseer for something he knows nothing about?"

Forland glared at Lightening. "Jones, I order you to arrest him. We'll string him up at the closest tree. I'll make sure he confesses everything before he draws his last breath."

"I will personally see to it if anyone else gets off his horse, he'll lose the use of his legs. Do I make myself clear?" growled Jessica.

"There will be no hanging," advised Jones.

"Good to hear," spat Jessica, sounding even more aggravated. "There will be a shoot out if you thought otherwise. There is no way I'm handing Lightening Dawn over to you or anybody." Gambling the man behind her leaning against the verandah post won't shoot, she marched up to Forland, shoving her fist in his face. "Do I make myself clear?"

Being preoccupied Jessica missed noticing Forland's fox-like grin. In seconds, it vanished. Jessica, Jones, and Lightening Dawn easily fell into Forland's well-planned trap. Everything worked out exactly the way he wanted it. To put a lid on the growing tension, Forland quickly changed his tune.

"Of course, you make yourself perfectly clear. I apologize for being so rude. Despair has overpowered me at knowing I've been swindled by three lousy bushrangers. I might never actually get to hold the elusive guns."

Jessica didn't have an answer to his soft honey smooth-spoken words. She slowly back stepped, alarmed by his sudden change of heart.

Jones followed Jessica to the verandah. "Now things are starting to cool off, may I talk to you in private?"

Turning to look directly at Jones Jessica replied.

"Yes, on one condition. Forland and the man on the verandah must get on their horses and ride a short distance from the homestead."

“You heard. Do it,” bellowed Jones glaring at Forland then at the man on the verandah.

The man on the verandah skirted around Lightning Dawn walking towards his horse. Jessica followed Jones. Forland stopped himself from sprinting at Jessica and giving her a slap across the back of her head. It could wait. Soon he’d be the one in charge. Jessica Hayes will learn exactly what is meant by the term ‘having power over people.’ He envisioned her begging for mercy kneeling his feet. She’d quickly learn he never showed mercy over anything.

Jessica walked along the verandah, refolding her arms as she walked. Jones led the way to the other end so they would be out of earshot of everyone. He took off his wide-brimmed hat. Using the back of his sleeve he wiped his brow.

“Miss Hayes, I have a favour to ask.”

“I’m surprised you have the gall to ask anything after the heated conversation we just finished. It might be over for you. My blood is still boiling.”

“Yes, the tension did feel quite high.”

“I’d never call a near shootout and a possible death of everyone too frivolous. It’s not something I’d be too happy about reading in a police report,” hinted Jessica.

“Please, take it easy. I understand where you’re coming from. If I knew things were so bad between you and Forland I’d have insisted he stay away.”

“What were you thinking? I told you the story of what happened. Didn’t you believe me?”

“I did.”

“What changed? Did Forland come seeping into the police station saying, please help me, I’ve been hard done by?”

Jones looked ready to chuckle. Seeing Jessica’s deadly serious expression he quickly shook the feeling away.

“Something along those lines, it really doesn’t matter,” he admitted.

“It matters to me. Forland knows I’ve vowed to put a bullet in his head the next time we met. At this moment in time, he’s still alive. Australia isn’t big enough for the two of us. He’s going to have to leave.”

“Miss Hayes, Forland came to me saying a different story about the events which led up to your husband’s death and what happened afterwards. I have no way of unearthing the truth about what happened. It’s his word against yours.”

“I think you should leave. I’m only thinking about one thing at the moment. It certainly doesn’t involve feeding anyone scones.”

“I must insist you tell me?”

“I’m thinking about feeding Forland a meal of lead.”

Jones sighed. Lifting his hat, he placed it square on his head before straightening to full height.

“Miss Hayes, I can officially charge you. Obstructing a lawman in trying to fulfill his duties will see you in jail for a few months. I’d rather talk to you friend to friend.”

Jessica eyeballed the man. She saw him drop his hat onto the top edge of the railing, making sure it remained balanced before looking up, smiling.

“I can understand your reluctance to help. Forland or the missing possessions isn’t the reason why I’m asking you for help. I need to add Forland seems to have come around to the idea he has been swindled by the bushrangers. I can see no blame towards you.”

Jessica slowly uncoiled her arms, taking on a more relaxed stance.

“Listening to what you have to say doesn’t automatically mean I’ll help.”

“Thanks for at least listening.” Jones cleared his throat. His facial expression changed to a serious look. “Miss Hayes, there’s been a kidnapping. A child has gone missing. Forland opened the door to the police station at the same time I heard the news of the missing child. I’m asking you for help. Lightning Dawn is a black tracker is he not?”

“Yes, he’s the best.”

“I’m certain the government will pay handsomely if you could find the missing child. He’s four-years-old.”

“When did the parents last see him?”

“Two nights ago,” reported Jones. “They waited for about an hour before checking to make sure he’d fallen asleep. William and Corice Snowe are new to the area. They have no friends or family in Australia. They came knocking on my door last night around six. The child’s mother is extremely worried. I called for the doctor to help calm her. I know this morning hasn’t started too good. Will you be able to convince Mr. Dawn to help?”

"I'll let you know after my overseer and I have discussed the kidnapping. It'll be his decision whether to help."

"I'll be waiting on his answer."

"How do you know for certain the lad has been kidnapped? Maybe he's just wandered off."

"The way Corice and William explained everything I have assumed the worst."

"Did they say why they waited so long before asking for help?"

"William thought the same way you do. He thinks the lad has just walked away from their house. Apparently he searched the scrub all yesterday."

Jones swiped his hat from the railing, placing it on his head. Failing to give Lightning Dawn any eye contact, he stepped from the verandah. Jessica marched to where Lightning stood.

"We can talk while we're walking away from Jones and Forland," whispered Jessica in Lightning's ear.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Jones came visiting today to find out if you could help find a missing child."

"Yes, not a problem."

"What troubles me is the fact Jones said Forland turned up at the same time the child's parents walked into the police station."

"It's either a coincidence or deliberate. Knowing what you've told me of Forland and what I've seen of the man today, I'd say deliberate. If I can add more fuel to the fire, I spied a smirk on Forland's face. It happened just before he changed his attitude over the guns and the blue diamond ring. It happened so quick if you weren't watching it could have been easily missed," said Lightning.

"I reckon he's definitely hiding something. If we can locate the child and if we discover Forland is behind the boy's disappearance we might be able to find a way to sweep Forland out of our lives for good. What do you think?" asked Jessica.

Lightning Dawn nodded. "I'm in."

"Let's go tell Jones the good news. I'll have to be careful not to sound too eager."

"Good idea. We don't want him to grow suspicious of our secret," hissed Lightning.

Boasting a poker face Lightning Dawn and Jessica Hayes walked up to Jones.

"What's the verdict?" he asked, studying their faces as they approached.

"Before I say my answer I'd like to discuss exactly what happened when Forland entered the police station?" quizzed Jessica.

"Sure, I've nothing to hide," stated Jones.

"Do you believe it could've been a coincidence Forland turning up at the same time the parents of the missing child did?"

"Yes, sheer coincidence. Mr. Forland heard everything and insisted I stay to comfort the parents while he sprinted off to get the doctor. Before I could explain I should be the one to go he'd already gone. In a matter of minutes he returned."

"Bringing the doctor?" interrupted Jessica, finishing his sentence.

"Yes."

"In your opinion could he have planned to be in the station at the same time as the parents?"

"I'm not sure what you're thinking of. To accomplish something which seems so coincidental more than likely will be too hard to plan. I certainly couldn't accomplish it. He actually made a point of explaining he arrived on the train from Melbourne. I know this to be true, he showed me his ticket."

"Yes, I guess it might be too hard to plan," mumbled Jessica. "Why did he show you his train ticket? Don't you think it's a bit strange?"

"Miss, Hayes, Mr. Forland is a businessman, not a kidnapper. I hope you aren't implying anything sinister?"

Jessica stared at Jones. In the hesitation, she looked deep in thought.

"Perhaps you're right. Forgive me. I'm still slightly on edge over the heated argument Forland and I had a few minutes ago."

"Understandable," said Jones.

"Could you give me just one more minute to change Mr. Dawn's mind?"

"Certainly, take your time."

Jessica left Jones leaning on the wooden railing and collected Lightning Dawn. Together they walked to the other end of the verandah.

"We have a problem. In my opinion, I believe the argument between Forland and I was faked, especially after what you saw. He changed his tune too easily. Forland has Jones bluffed into thinking

to plan the timing of everything is too hard. He's a poker player from way back. I could easily pull off the same stunt. Hell, a kid could do it. Kidnap the child, watch from a hotel window and the moment the parents are seen walking into the police station sprint over and volunteer to help. I can almost guarantee Jones forgot to check the date on the train ticket."

"Even if he flashed Jones the ticket he could have easily bought it in Melbourne," said Lightning Dawn.

"The only concrete idea I know is Forland wants our blue diamond ring and the solid silver guns. He's so obsessed with obtaining the items he'll stop at nothing to get his hands on them."

Lightning Dawn lowered his voice to a whisper. "The trouble the wind warned me about has arrived. Forland is a snake. We need to be very careful of him."

Jessica nodded slowly. "I've an idea. Let's play along for the time being to see where we end up. Have the boys and Gip saddle the horses. We'll be riding in about ten minutes. I'll go inform Jones of what we've decided."

Lightning grabbed Jessica by the arm, preventing her from walking off.

"I want you to be extra careful. Don't ever turn your back on Forland. I've heard rumours over the years about a powerful man. He gets what he wants. If Forland is the man, he's dangerous?"

"I'll be careful. Don't worry I know exactly how Forland thinks."

Lightning Dawn walked back into the house, returning in less than a minute. The two aborigine boys and their sister Gip followed him out. The boys ran towards the barn while Gip loitered around Jessica.

"Can I count on your overseer to help?" asked Jones watching Jessica walk towards him.

"He'll give one hundred percent of his ability in tracking the lad."

"Thanks," said Jones. Grabbing hold of the saddle he mounted.

"There is one thing he's asked," demanded Jessica.

"What?"

"He wants Forland and his posse to stay out of the way."

"Is there a legitimate reason behind his request?"

"He has taken a dislike to the man."

"What about you?"

Jessica snorted. "Forland knows how I feel about him."

"Miss Hayes this is a police investigation. If you can't control yourself I will ban you from joining in on the rescue."

"I'll act in accordance with the law."

"Good to hear. So I don't expect any trouble from you?"

"Rest assured Mr. Jones I will tame my emotions."

"Off the record, what happens if you can't?"

Jessica's blue eyes turned murderous cold. She squared her shoulders. "I'll shoot Forland dead."

Jones massaged his temples. He was in a bind. He needed Jessica Hayes' permission so he could even start to ask the black man to help track down the boy. If he said no, the child might never be found. Already the clock has been ticking for far too long. It will be a miracle if the child is found alive. Somehow he needed to think of a way to keep Forland far enough away so Lightning Dawn could locate the boy.

"Is there anything else?" asked Jones.

"Not at the moment. If something crops up I'll be sure to let you know."

Jones and Jessica heard horse hooves walking towards them. They looked up at the same time. Jessica swept Gip behind her out of harm's way.

Forland brought his horse to a stop. Jessica heard the familiar squeak of the leather saddle when he dismounted. Standing square to Jessica, he focused on Jones.

"Why have you employed the kids?"

"We family," bellowed Gip, glaring at the man.

Again Jessica swept the young girl behind her.

"What does she mean?" spat Forland, switching his attention to Jessica.

"The kids were here when I arrived. I told them they could stay. Gip thinks we make a good family."

Forland looked down his nose at Jessica. "It's a little odd, don't you think?"

"On the contrary, Gip is happy to be living here. She decided to go walk-a-bout in the bush. To me, it sounds suicidal. I'm more than happy to have her stay at the Rosedale."

Forland grunted. "Mind if I take a look around?" He didn't wait for a reply before marching towards the barn at double quick time.

"Yes, I do. However go ahead, knock yourself out. If you break or steal anything I'll tan your hide. I have a stock whip at easy reach."

"Miss. Hayes, please, the tension is bordering on trouble again. Don't antagonize the man. Once the child has been found, you'll never see Forland again."

"Are you sure?" Jessica watched Forland closing in on the barn. She yelled at him before he stepped inside. "Let me know if you find the blue diamond ring. I'd love to see it again."

"If this makes you feel any better, I apologize for the man's behavior," quipped Jones.

"It's not your fault. He's power hungry and loves to show it off," reported Jessica. "Now tell me all the information you know about the missing child?"

"His home is an hour's ride from here. Mr. William Snow and his lovely wife Corice are the child's parents. They were living in Melbourne for about a week before they made the trip here to the goldfields. When the ship docked Mr. Snowe started to purchase supplies, which included buying a small piece of land, a license to dig for gold, a few shovels a couple of picks, bric-a-brac, a horse, and cart. They've been living on their land for the past ten weeks."

"We'll start at their house," advised Jessica. She looked over towards the Barn. Gip's brothers, Jarrah, and Cobar were leading two horses towards them. "Gip I want you back in the house." Jessica walked her to the kitchen door. Inside the house she squatted, looking Gip eye to eye. "I want you to be a brave girl. I need the three of you to watch over the Rosedale while Lightening and I aren't here. If you see anyone sneaking around who you don't know especially Forland or any of the riders here today you have my permission to shoot them."

"Just like last time?" Gip asked.

"Exactly like last time. Don't forget it's our little secret. Never mention it to anyone."

Gip nodded vigorously. "I'll stand guard."

Out of the corner of her eye, Jessica saw the door opening. She stood looking at Lightening.

"It's time to go."

Lightening walked over to Gip, gave her a pat on the head, spoke a few aboriginal words to her before walking to the gun's cupboard. He snatched a couple of rifles and a box of bullets and clipped his gun belt around his waist.

"We won't be long," advised Jessica, looking at Gip. "Remember what I said."

Jessica stepped outside. Seeing the boys on the verandah she picked her gun belt up off the verandah floor, clipping it around her waist. She hugged both boys, whispering in their ears what she told Gip. She stood, walked over to her horse, took hold of the saddle and mounted. She watched Jones mount his horse and begin to ride off towards the river. Before Jessica followed Jones she saw movement near the barn. She waited for Forland to get to his horse before yelling.

"We're going. Are you coming or do you want to continue your search?"

"You have either covered your tracks to perfection, or the story you have told about the bushrangers is correct," he yelled back.

Waiting for Forland to ride over, Jessica continued her taunt.

"There are no tracks to cover. I suggest you take a train to Sydney."

"Why?"

"The bushrangers didn't know I overheard their plans. They were to go to Sydney, sell the ring, living it up, drinking and being entertained by the whores using your money."

"Why didn't you travel to Sydney to track them down?" asked Forland.

"It's like what you said when you kicked me out of my home after my husband died. I'm nothing more than a helpless female."

Jessica clicked her tongue, giving her horse a gentle kick to make it start trotting after Jones.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE SNOWES decided to build their temporary home completely out of tin and close to the edge of the river. Too close for Jessica's liking. When the river flooded they'd be up to their knees in water. The

scrub around the immediate area looked to have been cleared by hand. A horse and a few chickens were in separate pens near a pile of wood stacked against a tree under a lean-to. The narrow tin roof barely covered the dry wood. A sudden downpour might render the wood useless. The Snowes needed to learn a lot if they were to survive in the Australian bush.

The group emerged from the almost dry river one at a time. Jones led the way up the bank, followed by Jessica, Lightning Dawn, and Forland. The remainder of the party lagged behind by a few minutes.

The moment Jessica saw the small dwelling she fell in love with it. Next to the small house a pile of mud bricks was drying in the middle of another cleared section of land.

Jessica leaned closer to Lightning. "It looks as though Mr. Snowe has been busy making mud bricks. They look about ready to be used."

"Yes, another couple of thousand and he'll have a nice mud brick home to move into."

"I'll have to mention he should build his mud brick home slightly more inland from the river."

Lightning was still nodding when a thin woman of average height and a stocky built man stepped outside to greet the riders. The woman wore a large wide brimmed hat and a modest dress draped from her shoulders which swept the ground every so often. Long black boots were on her feet. She looked to be a typical English woman. The man, on the other hand, didn't fit the appearance of a miner. He looked well shaven, wore dark brown pants and a white shirt. The short dark hair on his head stayed neat. He wore long black boots which looked brand new.

"Hello there," called the man.

"G'day," bellowed Jessica.

Jones gave his horse a gentle kick. He shot forward from the group, waving a courteous greeting at the man. When the riders dismounted the stocky man shook each of their hands.

"Thanks for coming. This is my wife Corice, I'm William Snowe. We haven't been in Australia long. We decided to leave England for a new life. We hoped to strike it rich."

"Every person new to the area feels the same," mentioned Jones.

"Yes, I suppose they do."

"Our son has gone missing," wailed Corice. "Please, I'm begging you all for help."

Forland decided not to shake William Snowe's hand, instead, he stepped forward glaring at the man.

"If my son was kidnapped I'd be out searching for him. What I see here is maybe you don't care that he's gone."

"It's not true," argued William. "I'd do anything to get him back, alive."

"Interesting," mumbled Forland.

"I saw you in the police station. You strike me as a man who doesn't care about anything."

"I care about building my wealth. It increases my power."

Corice stepped over to Forland. "To settle this debate my husband loves his son dearly. He has just got back now to give me a report on what progress he's made."

William sunk to his knees, sobbing. Corice stepped over and placed her arm across his shoulders.

"I've searched all night. So far I've failed to discover a lead," mentioned William.

"It is why we're here," stated Jones. "I have it on good authority the black man known to everyone around here as Lightning Dawn can find your son."

Snowe slowly stood, eyeballing Lightning Dawn.

"I don't understand how a black man can help. How can he understand anything?"

"He understands more than you'll ever know," reported Jessica, smoothly. "Mr. Dawn is my overseer. He is the best black tracker in Australia. He's the only one who can locate your son."

"I have never seen such a black man," interrupted Corice. "One can only wonder is everything black as his face?"

"Enough," bellowed William, glaring at his wife.

"I'm only thinking aloud."

"If he can find our son God sent him to us."

"Yes, if you could help, please, I'd be more than grateful," added Corice.

"Show me where you last saw the boy," instructed Lightning.

"Follow me," said Corice. "I do apologize for our tiny dwelling. William has made plans to start our home in a few more days. I made the bricks while he dug for gold."

"Have you discovered any gold?" questioned Forland, sarcastically.

“Don’t answer his question,” advised Jessica. “At the first whiff of a possible gold strike, he’ll buy the land from under you hoping to cash in on your husband’s hard work.” She kicked a loose clump of clay at Forland.

“Miss Hayes, do I have to remind you I’m a businessman?”

“I know what kind of man you are. Take my advice and stay out of my way. Don’t forget the warning I gave you back at the home you kicked me out of.”

“Refresh my memory. What warning are you referring to?”

“You’re trying to make me the bad person in front of William and Corice. Stay out of my face.”

“You didn’t answer my question?” stated Forland, calmly.

“The next bullet from my gun has your name on it,” shrieked Jessica.

“Don’t start another confrontation,” bellowed Jones. “Remember the reason why we are here?”

William and Corice swapped glances.

“I have yet to find any gold,” confessed William Snowe.

“Pity,” mumbled Forland.

William and Corice led the way into the house. Four people in the same room felt claustrophobic. The tiny room still felt warm from the open fire which boasted a hot ember glow from the previous meal. A two-seat table in the middle of the room doubled as a preparation bench. A meat locker next to a single door cupboard sat against the wall opposite the fireplace.

Jessica nodded at the practicality of the place. “You have a tidy dwelling.”

“I do pride myself on a neat home no matter what the size,” answered Corice. She stepped to the only window, sliding the paper thin curtain to the side. Sunlight poured through the gap. William’s and my room is behind, the material covered doorway to your right. Daniel’s room is straight ahead.”

Jessica walked across the room and parted the same type of thin material which covered the doorway to the second room. The space, six foot by four feet, boasted a short single bed under a material covered window. The hard dirt underfoot throughout the small house looked well swept.

“The bed looks as though it hasn’t been slept in,” stated Jessica.

“I made it this morning,” chirped Corice. Seeing Jessica’s furious expression she quickly blurted. “Did I do something wrong?”

Jessica placed her hands on the buckle of her gun belt. “I hope it’s the only thing you’ve done to hamper the trail left by the kidnappers?”

“Tell me something, since when has it been making a bed or sweeping loose dirt from the floor a criminal offence?”

“It isn’t. The fact is; you’ve made the trail harder to follow.”

“I don’t see how?”

“You could have swept away vital clues.”

To muffle her sobs, Corice used two hands to hide her face.

“I didn’t know a simple thing like cleaning the house could have sealed the fate of our son. If anything has happened to him, how can I ever forgive myself? I hate this place. I hate the Australian bush. I hate the flies in the hot weather and I loathe being away from people.”

When she slowly took her hands from off her face she saw her husband staring at her from the doorway. He looked shattered at discovering how she really felt about coming to Australia. Constable Jones stood behind William witnessing the distressed woman. Forland decided to move away. He busied himself by loitering around the vegetable garden.

“I want us to go back to England the first chance we get,” whispered Corice staring back at her husband. “I know your private medical practice didn’t make a lot of money. William, we were managing. We made a mistake in coming here. If we reopen the practice and work hard I believe it will do us well. Besides, I miss my garden. I used to grow the best red tulips in the summer. The fresh apples from the back corner plus the red strawberries always grew in abundance. William, you do remember the strawberries? Every time you ate one you never forgot to mention how they tasted.”

William stepped to Corice’s side, rubbing her arms. “Everything will be okay. These fine people will help find Daniel. Give this place another twelve months. You have to give this land a chance.”

“I have and I hate it here. Australia has taken Daniel.”

“If I may make a suggestion?” complained Jessica, interrupting. “Australia didn’t take your son. Please, allow Lightning Dawn to find Daniel. He’ll help you to trust this beautiful land so you too can call Australia home.”

William gave Corice a gentle loving rub of her shoulders. He lifted his hand to wipe the blonde hair from her face before kissing the top of her forehead.

"It'll be okay. Daniel will be found alive. Once we get him back the kidnappers will be in jail. We will be a family." He again kissed her forehead. He even managed to get her to give a rough smile.

Corice nodded hesitantly. She stepped to the side opening the way for Lightning Dawn to enter the room. He promptly set to work, locating the trail. He squatted at the doorway to study the room's floor. At the side of the bed, he pointed to a faint imprint in the dirt missed by Corice.

"How old is Daniel?" asked Jessica, hoping to uncover more information. If nothing else, talking might help to settle Corice's nerves.

William placed his hands on Corice's trembling shoulders.

"It's okay, darling, I'll answer the questions." Switching his attention to Jessica, he said. "He's four in twelve days."

"I'll make a mental note to say happy birthday when he's found. Can you describe him?"

"He's got blonde hair and blue eyes the same as his mum. He has lots of freckles on his nose. When we put him to bed he wore long sleeved blue pajamas."

"Who put him to bed?"

"I did," advised William. "Corice was tidying up the kitchen, getting things ready for breakfast."

Lightning Dawn walked over to the bed. For a long time, he studied it and the material hanging over the window. Finally, he parted the curtain. He gave the tin wall a quick glance over before jumping through the window.

Jessica looked over her shoulder at William before following.

Four feet from the window Jessica caught up to Lightning Dawn, squatting to study the ground. Checking to make sure Corice couldn't hear she stooped to whisper in Lightning's ear.

"Do you reckon you'll be able to find the boy?"

"It's a tall order seeing how there aren't many clues. I'll do my best. There's a small amount of blood on the edge of the tin which makes up the bottom of the window. I believe someone leaned in through the window when the boy was asleep. The bloke might have placed his hand over Daniel's mouth to stop him from screaming. He could've easily pulled the lad through the window. The blood might have come from the boy's wrist or hand when he was being scraped across the tin."

"Could the person who kidnapped Daniel be Corice?"

"Not likely. The lad should have been too heavy for her to accomplish such a feat. The bloke needed to have one hand on the child's mouth. The other needed to drag him up off the bed and through the window. Therefore, the kidnapper must have been a man."

"What about William Snowe?"

"I don't think so. He loves the child too much to want him dead. Besides, whoever kidnapped Daniel obviously doesn't want money."

"How do you know this?"

"The Snowes haven't heard anything about a ransom. Looking at this place I'm sure the Snowes don't have enough money to even buy the lad back."

"Could Daniel have jumped out the window on his own so he could go walk-a-bout?"

Lightning chuckled at Jessica's sense of humour. "Aborigines are the only ones who go walk-a-bout in the bush. Besides, a four-year-old boy just doesn't wander off too far. Alone in the dark, I'm sure William should have found him by now." He lowered his voice to an almost inaudible whisper. "This whole missing child thing doesn't add up."

"I certainly don't know what to make of it," whispered Jessica.

Lightning pointed at the tin wall directly under the window.

"The reason why I know he didn't go exploring on his own, there are boot prints directly below his window. There's one more thing. There's blood on the top edge of the window and also on the wall outside. It tells me someone has cut himself dragging the child out of the window. If Daniel happened to be alone there should be a blood trail leading away from the home. Seeing how there isn't any the person must have stopped the blood flow."

"Your observations are impeccable," gushed Jessica. "Anything else you want to add?"

"The boy has been taken by someone on horseback." Lightning pointed to horse prints near the wall. "The hooves go directly into the scrub."

Jessica glanced about the clearing. She spied Forland looking at the cut wood.

"What are your thoughts if I said Forland might be the person behind the disappearance?"

"I reckon you might be correct. Everything adds up. There's no ransom message. Forland came on a horse and he wears long sleeves. If he didn't kidnap the boy he ordered someone else to do it."

"I'll go inform Corice what you've found so far."

Jessica walked to the kitchen door. She gave Forland a dirty look before entering the home. "Corice, can I speak to you in private?"

The woman nodded. She shut the door and sat at the table opposite Jessica.

"By the look on your face, I can tell you have important news. Please tell me the news is good," sobbed Corice.

"What I know is a good start to finding Daniel."

Jessica walked to the kitchen window to look outside.

"What are you up to?"

"I want to make certain nobody can hear us talk."

"What's wrong?" asked Corice.

Jessica sat back at the table, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Daniel has definitely been kidnapped. Do you have any known enemies?"

Corice looked slightly relaxed at the news. Jessica picked up on her acting skills the moment she saw her. She was beginning to believe the idea the making of the bed; the sweeping of the floor was done deliberately so as to hide the trail.

"William and I have no enemies. Are you sure he's been taken?"

"Yes, I'm positive. Lightening Dawn is never wrong. If I can be blunt, you don't seem too upset over your missing son. Why?"

Corice's blank look cemented the fact she held a secret.

"He's not my son. He's William's. Don't think ill of me, I don't want any harm to come to the boy. It's just; he loves the boy more than me." Tears began rolling down her cheeks. Claspng her fingers together she started to turn her thumbs in circles. Slowly she lifted her gaze to look Jessica in the eyes. "I need you to keep a massive secret."

"What we talk about will not leave this room. When I say something, I see it's done."

Corice dried her eyes. "Back in England, I'd been William's mistress. If we stayed there I believe we could have succeeded in seeing in a great future. He told me he talked to his wife about coming to Australia. She refused in a fit of rage. I saw my chance to have William for myself. He promised me if I left everything behind in England and move to Australia we'd make a great family. In a few years, he hoped to discover enough gold so we could have a great big home near the beach. I started to dream of sunset walks along the golden sands of Sydney and shopping for curtains to hang in our mansion. It sounded like a proposal I couldn't turn down. I quickly agreed. Now he's pushed me aside."

"From the moment I saw you I could tell you're not happy living in Australia."

"That's an understatement. When the boy is found I'm going back to England. Alone."

"You'd leave your husband?"

"In a heartbeat, besides, we never married. I've asked him why. He has explained he couldn't. He married the mother of his child. I discovered my mistake too late. He loves her more than me."

"It's never too late to discover happiness," hinted Jessica. "Something obviously brought you two together."

"The words you speak sound sincere." Corice looked at the door to the home. "Maybe one day a man will come into my life and love me the way William used to." She gave a wry grin. "He'll have to cross my path in England, not in Australia. Once I leave this place, there's no coming back."

"Any solid plans you have laid down for your future have a way of changing."

"Seeing how I've revealed my deepest secret to a stranger. Tell me something, what's the story on you and the black man?"

"There's no story," whispered Jessica, too quickly.

"Yes, there is. I can tell."

"How?" asked Jessica.

"I've been a mistress to other married men. The way he looks at you tells me there's more to the two of you than boss lady or an overseer."

"There's nothing else to tell."

"Have it your way. I'm not sure if you know or not. When a woman is pregnant she wears a certain glow."

Jessica stood to leave.

"Before you go, I'd love you to answer a personal question."

Jessica reached for the doorknob. Before turning it she faced Corice.

"Is the aboriginal man black all over? I've heard everything about them is extra big."

Jessica's lips parted into a seductive smile. The inexperienced person could have mistaken it for a plain sympathetic expression. Only a woman could understand the look. To cement the grin home Jessica whispered.

"They're not only black all over, whatever size you're thinking of, double it. At least you'll be close."

## CHAPTER SIX

JESSICA PLACED the cream coloured wide brimmed hat on her head before closing the door behind her. Leaving Corice to her wild erotic thoughts Jessica walked over to her horse. She quickly mounted. Giving it a gentle kick in the ribs, they started off towards Lightening. He looked to be waiting patiently for her at the edge of the scrub.

"William Snowe decided to scan the river upstream from the house," advised Lightening when Jessica drew level to him.

Jessica glanced to where Lightening pointed, catching a glimpse of him through the trees. She saw him jump from his horse to check on a fox hole about two hundred yards from his shack.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes of course," whispered Jessica. "How's the trail looking?"

"Good."

"Lead the way," said Jessica.

Lightening walked his horse the short distance back towards the house. Jessica brought up the rear. They were at the window to Daniel's bedroom before Jessica spied Corice watching their every move. She faked a smile at the woman. Corice quickly ducked back into the small house to hide.

Lightening pointed at two sets of hoof prints in the dirt near the window. Jessica followed his finger to where the scrub met the clearing. The trail showed two distinct horse tracks leading away from the house. One set of hoof marks appeared heavier than the other. Jessica followed Lightening back to the scrub. Back to where countless dead trees and thick underbrush covered the ground.

They walked into the scrub where the leaves and the underbrush appeared to be the most damaged. Losing sight of the house and before Jones or Forland caught onto where they were going Jessica put her hand on Lightening's shoulder to get his attention.

"We need to have a talk," she whispered.

Lightening stood straight-backed, facing his wife. "I thought something might be on your mind."

"Thanks for keeping the thought a secret."

"I knew in time you'd say."

Jessica searched the scrub looking for a sign of life. A kangaroo feeding close by looked up to watch the two uninvited humans. Jessica craned her neck, giving Lightening a long passionate kiss.

"Very nice," whispered Lightening Dawn eventually.

"I've missed your touch today."

"I have to admit watching that we're not caught is annoying. I'm looking forward to the time when we can move into our new home so we can live in privacy."

Jessica nodded as she looked around the area again.

"What is it you want to talk about?"

"Corice knows we are more than friends."

"How?" asked Lightening, frowning. "I've tried to make sure nobody knows."

"She told me the way you look at me has given up our secret."

"Don't worry. One thing is to think she knows the other is to prove it. There's no evidence."

"She knows I'm pregnant."

"How is that possible? Nobody except you and I know of the fact."

"She's a woman. She says when a woman is pregnant they have a certain glow."

"It'll be okay. Will she keep the secret?"

"Yes, I'm sure she will."

"Good. If she doesn't have proof nobody will believe her."

“True. When my time comes I’ll stay away from town. I’m sure nobody will suspect anything. They’ll be too busy digging for gold to notice. However the arrival of Forland in the area makes me feel uneasy.”

“If we watch ourselves and our conversation stays formal he’ll never find out.”

Jessica cuddled into his deep chest. Lightning reassured her by wrapping his strong muscular arms around her shoulders. He even gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head.

“We have to keep moving if we want to follow the trail in the daylight. If luck is on our side we might even be able to lose Forland and Jones.”

Jessica reluctantly took hold of the reins of both their horses, following Lightning deeper into the scrub. They didn’t travel far before they came to the shallow stream. Lightning squatted at the water’s edge to study the river bed. A couple of minutes ticked off before he decided which direction the riders went. He stood before talking.

“The horses we’re following entered the water here. They walked to the middle before heading downstream. They changed direction and went upstream.”

Jessica saw Lightning start to scratch his head and recheck his decision.

“You seem a little uncertain?” quizzed Jessica.

“It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. The trail is exactly as I said.” Scratching his head again, Lightning showed Jessica the trail.

“Why do you question what seems right?”

“The trail seems too easy to follow. Either the kidnapers were too careless to cover their tracks or they want us to follow their trail. The only time a rider wants to hide from a posse he enters the water. White man can’t trace horses in the water. Whoever kidnapped Daniel knew I’d be summoned to hunt them.”

“If you’re right not many people know aborigines are good trackers.”

Lightning looked into Jessica’s eyes. “Forland must know.”

“The facts behind Forland being the kidnapper seem to be growing stronger.”

“Forland is up to something alright. Are you sure about the trail?”

Lightning grinned at his amateur pupil. “These rocks near the edge of the water haven’t been moved.” He waded into the ankle deep water, pointing to more rocks. Jessica walked into the water. Standing next to her teacher, she allowed Lightning to explain.

“If you look closely at the stones embedded in the river bed you can plainly see the ones downstream haven’t been trodden on. If you study the stones upstream you’ll see some have been dislodged. If you look at the one directly in front of you, it’s been disturbed. If you mark out the distance a horse will step you’ll find another rock has been buried slightly more than the others. Those rocks are the horse’s left hooves.”

“I can trace the right-hand side hooves. You’re right. The horses have left a distinct trail.”

“Yes, there are actually three horses. One has a heavier weight. The other two have an average weight. In short terms, one horse is carrying the kidnapper and Daniel. The other two horses have two separate riders.”

“Accomplices,” whispered Jessica.

“Yes.”

“It’s time to go find the child.”

Lightning Dawn placed one foot in the stirrup ready to mount his horse when a rogue gust of wind came through the trees knocking Jessica’s hat from her head. It landed in the water. Almost immediately it started to float downstream.

Lightning jogged over, plucking it from the ankle deep water. He looked at the trees before glancing at Jessica.

“What’s wrong?”

Lightning walked over, handing her hat back. “The wind has spoken.”

“What did it say?”

“The child we are tracking isn’t far. He’s connected to you in some way.”

“Why me, I don’t know him or his parents? You heard what they said. They came out from England a short time ago.”

“You came from England, so did the Snowe’s.”

“I happened to be conceived on board the ship a week out from England,” corrected Jessica.

“The wind can be misinterpreted. This time, I don’t think so.”

“I guess we’ll find out sooner or later,” whispered Jessica.

“I hope you don’t know them?”  
“I hope you’re not hinting at anything bad?”  
Lightening Dawn slowly shook his head. “It might be a simple case of your parents might have known the Snowes’ parents.”  
Jessica shrugged. “Is there anything else?”  
“Yes, the wind wants us to stay away.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

TWENTY MINUTES of walking the horses through the water saw the tracks veer out of the water and head inland. The bush seemed a lot drier the further they entered. The soft soil quickly hardened and cracked.

“I can smell smoke,” whispered Jessica.

“Hopefully, it’s not a bush fire.”

The pair carefully walked their horses to a small clearing fifty feet further on. They dropped the reins knowing full well the horses will be happy grazing on the green grass till they returned. Lightening slipped through the bush, followed by Jessica. Twenty feet deeper into the scrub they came across a two-room mud brick cottage. Two windows opened outwards, boasting a good view of the scrub. A short chimney poked through the tightly compacted hay on the roof. Around the entire house, someone had built a narrow verandah.

“There’s your smoke,” whispered Lightening pointing to the chimney.

“Do you think Daniel is inside?”

“I’m almost certain.”

“At a guess the house could belong to a miner,” hinted Jessica thoughtfully. “I’m hoping if he is not home he’s still alive somewhere and hasn’t a clue about what’s going on at his house.”

“Let’s hope,” replied Lightening.

“Shall we take a look?”

“Stay here, I’ll go take a look,” remarked Lightening Dawn.

He went to move off when Jessica grabbed him on the shoulder. “In case something bad happens I want you to know I’m positive I don’t know the child or his parents.”

Lightening Dawn leaned in, kissing Jessica. “I know.” He pulled her hat over her eyes. He winked before closing in on the house. At the last tree before the narrow clearing, he stopped to survey the area. Even though smoke wafted in a thin line up from the top of the chimney he sensed nobody was inside. Right or wrong he knew of only one way to find out.

After re-checking the area again Lightening quickly walked across the clearing. He squatted behind the verandah post eyeing the windows. They were dirty, making seeing anyone who might be watching from inside hard to see. He studied the verandah’s wooden slats. Directly in front of his feet the boards looked firm. His gaze followed the grain in each of the thin boards searching for a spot where the wood might creak which in turn will warn the occupants inside the house someone is prowling around.

Three feet from where he stood Lightening spied a nail head sticking up. He couldn’t be sure if it was done deliberately or not till he spied another nail’s head sitting up. The third nail directly in line behind the other two cemented the fact someone deliberately set an alarm. Lightening tentatively placed his full weight on the narrow verandah. Slowly he began sidestepping towards the cottage wall where he found more solid slats. He inched his way to the window, making it before a board creaked.

In the scrub, Jessica exhaled the moment he reached the window. Feeling something climbing her leg and guessing what it might be she slowly moved her head till she could see it. Finding a young tiger snake slowly climbing her boot, its tongue flicking the air every few seconds, Jessica knew even though it was a baby, if it bit her, she’d die and so too will her baby. Slowly she lifted her right arm. When her hand looked level to her head she froze, waiting for the snake to climb higher before bringing her hand down in a wide arc behind the snake’s head. In slow motion, she brought her hand up towards its head. She opened her fingers at the last second, wrapping her hand around its throat, while the snake’s tail coiled around her arm. Lifting it up Jessica stared at its small black eyes. They seemed to watch her

every move waiting for the time it could strike. Pulling her knife from inside her boot Jessica didn't hesitate in cutting its head off. Tossing the corpse into the scrub she looked for more. All she saw was a single leaf fall from a tree. Placing the head of the snake on a twig, she used the heel of her boot to crush it. Deciding the falling leaf might be a message she kept to the scrub and skirted the cottage to the other side, where she hid behind a fallen tree.

Easing his gun from the holster, Lightning prepared to look through the glass window. He heard a click coming from behind him. Slowly Lightning replaced his gun back into his holster and raised his hands.

"Excellent decision," growled a deep voice.

Almost immediately three men stepped around the side of the house. Each held a gun pointing at Lightning.

"Very carefully drop your gun belt," bellowed the unshaven man standing directly behind Lightning. "If you're thinking you might be successful in jumping me, I'd seriously reconsider the idea."

Lightning slowly dropped his left hand to begin to unclip his gun belt, allowing it to fall onto the wooden slats under his feet.

"Kick it off the verandah." The voice sounded more hostile by the second.

Lightning Dawn booted the gun belt away. Through a calculated guess and a stroke of good luck, it teetered at the verandah's edge.

"Where's the woman?" spat the unshaven man.

"What woman?"

For his smart remark Lightning received a clip behind the ear. He deliberately dropped to his knees so when he stood he could turn around and face his aggressor.

A big man wearing a suit stepped out of the cottage onto the verandah. He chuckled astutely at how his plan worked to perfection.

"Look at what has paid us a visit."

"So you are the kidnapper?" questioned Lightning.

"You have no manners. When you address me I insist you start by saying Mr. Forland. Do I make myself clear?"

"I'll talk to you any way I see fit," argued Lightning.

Forland pushed his hand into his inside coat pocket, extracting a fat cigar. He lit the end and tossed the lit match away from the house.

"I'm wondering how I knew you'd be thinking along those lines? It makes no difference to me. I'm only here for one purpose."

"And the reason is?"

"You know why I'm here."

"I have no idea," replied Lightning.

Forland glared wildly at Lightning Dawn. Eventually, he pointed his cigar at him. He said with a sigh. "Have you ever played a game of poker?"

"Never," he blurted.

"I'm surprised. You play a good bluff hand. I can't tell if you actually know the reason why I'm here or not. I'm thinking Hayes mightn't have even told you. If that's the case, I feel sorry for you. I'd tell you she's a trouble maker, but somehow I believe you'd never listen."

"I'd ask my question again, however, I believe you'd ignore me."

Forland sighed heavily, faced the scrub and called through a cupped hand. "Jessica Hayes, if you don't want to see a bullet enter this man's ear I suggest you come out of where ever you're hiding. Allow me to refresh your memory. You've dug one grave possibly even more. If you don't want to start another grave you better show yourself right now." He lifted his gun, pointing it directly at Lightning's head. "I'll give you to the count of five."

Jessica guessed right about the falling leaf. She snuck up behind the four men, pushing her gun into the shoulder blade of the one at the back.

"Drop your guns or I'll shoot this one," spat Jessica.

Forland whirled around, facing Jessica. "You came out of your hiding place before I started counting. I must say I'm a little disappointed. I wanted to find out exactly how far I needed to go before you showed your face. Don't get me wrong, I'd have shot the black man. You know exactly how ruthless I can be."

"Back away and nobody gets shot," insisted Jessica.

"I don't care for the man you're holding prisoner. Time seems to have dulled your memory. Allow me to refresh it."

Forland lifted his gun. In one swift unremorseful move, he aimed it directly at the man Jessica held at gunpoint and pulled the trigger. Wide-eyed Jessica started to walk backwards, watching the man crumple to the verandah. Slowly refocusing on Forland she found he'd already pointed his gun directly at her.

"You killed a man in cold blood."

"Don't look so shocked. I'm here on business. The moment I have my blue diamond ring and the solid silver guns I intend to leave this wretched town. Now be a dear, drop your gun or I'll shoot someone else. Maybe the next bullet will be buried in the black man," spat Forland.

Jessica hesitated only long enough to think of no other option. She threw her gun into the dirt.

"Now I have your complete attention, I think it's time for a talk."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"My dear girl we have lots to discuss."

"About what?" Jessica barked.

"Woman you're not stupid. Hand over my blue diamond ring. While you're at it give me the solid silver colt 45's."

"Don't you have them?" asked Jessica, sounding innocent.

"If I did I wouldn't be here."

"The bushrangers you hired stole the ring from me and the colt 45's. They went bush towards Sydney town."

"I must commend you on telling a good story."

"It's the truth."

"Fortunately, I did plan on this happening. Jessica Hayes, you have completely underestimated me. Have you forgotten how good I play a round of poker?"

"I know you cheat."

"Are you quite sure? Before saying another word let me remind you the last person who accused me of cheating, died."

"You shot my husband from under the table. Or have you forgotten?"

"I took offence to being called a cheat. I pleaded self-defense. I saw him reach for his gun. It's not my fault I'm quick on the draw."

"You're almost a good a liar as you are a cheat," growled Jessica. "My husband didn't carry a gun."

Forland sent one of his men a sharp nod. The man marched into the house. When he returned he held Daniel by the collar in a death grip.

"If I didn't want something I'd give you a chance to put your arm around the lad to comfort him. I'm not willing to show any sign of weakness."

"At least I know you kidnapped the lad," shrieked Jessica. "Let him go."

Forland faced Jessica square on. "No. You have something of mine. I want to trade. Bring me the diamond and the solid silver guns and I'll give you the boy."

"You can't keep your word on anything."

"Come now, Jessica Hayes. I'm a businessman. We're doing a business deal."

"You're nothing more than a common murderer and a crook."

"Name calling won't get you the boy. I'll give you two minutes to tell me where my diamond is or I'll have my men start pumping bullets into the black man."

"You'd kill an overseer?"

"I have a strong feeling he's more than an overseer. I believe he shares your bed at night."

"You bastard," spat Jessica.

"You have one minute left to tell me where my diamond is."

"I've already stated the bushrangers stole it. Ask them."

"The three hired guns I drafted into working for me are dead. Or at least two are. I'm only guessing here; I reckon you know where the last one is buried."

Lightening Dawn winked at Jessica. She caught the signal and lunged for Forland. He lost his balance, stumbling backwards, pulling the trigger of his gun. The bullet lodged into the roof of the cottage. The gunman who brought Daniel outside swiped the lad from his feet and sprinted back inside the cottage, slamming the door behind him. Lightening Dawn swiveled on his toes, jabbing the man who held a gun to his back in the ribs. He heard a bone crack. The man groaned. He doubled over

before hitting the verandah face first. Jessica jumped from the verandah, tumble rolled over the dirt, picking up her gun at the same time. Lightening Dawn dived off the verandah also snatching up his gun. He managed to pull the trigger making Forland dive for cover behind a water barrel. Jessica aimed her gun at the same water barrel, pulling the trigger three times to give Lightening a few more seconds. Water from the full barrel poured over the veranda. Lightening pulled the trigger of his gun three more times at the door to the cottage. He grabbed hold of Jessica. Sprinting into the bush they dived behind a fallen tree for cover.

Jessica's chest heaved from the split second timing. They had gambled big and won.

"At least we know where the child is," she puffed.

"Come on we have to retreat so we can plan a second rescue attempt," hinted Lightening. "Forland won't stop now."

"You're right. He'll keep the boy alive, gambling we'll have a change of heart, exchanging the diamond and guns for Daniel."

"I'm not sure how you feel about an exchange. I vote against the idea."

"I vote no too," whispered Jessica. "I reckon Forland feels the same. We have to get back to Corice and William to tell them the news. Then we have to find Jones."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

JESSICA AND Lightening sprinted away from the cottage and through the scrub on horseback. Before they reached the home of Corice and William Snowe they stumbled upon Jones. He was at the top of the low ridge, four feet from the water line. He'd seen them coming and cut across the river.

"Where have you been?" yelled Jessica, forcing her horse to come to an abrupt halt.

"I've been searching for clues. I have also been looking for you two. Where did you go?"

"Why didn't you follow us?"

"I thought I discovered a vital clue and went to investigate. When I found it to be false I'd already lost you."

"How convenient," Jessica spat.

"Are you implying something?"

"Nothing I can prove. Where's the remainder of the posse?"

"I've sent them back to talk to Corice and William to tell them of what little progress we've made. Were you successful in finding the lad?" asked Jones.

"Yes, we were," boasted Lightening. "We nearly received a bullet in our heads too."

"I'll add Forland murdered the man I was pointing my gun at," growled Jessica.

"I apologize for not being there," blurted Jones. "I'm pleased you managed to escape."

"If we hurry we'll be able to get back in time to rescue Daniel," Jessica advised.

"It all depends on how far away this place is," replied Jones. "Daylight is fading."

"We should hurry," hinted Jessica.

Jones followed Lightening and Jessica as their horses thundered through the scrub. Dry twigs and leaves were flown into the air in their wake. A twenty-minute canter and a slow quiet walk for a few minutes saw the trio arrive back at the cottage where they found Daniel. A large gum tree gave the perfect cover as they studied the area.

"Are you certain this is the correct place?" whispered Jones.

Jessica looked sideways at the man. "Positive."

"The reason I asked; the place doesn't look too secure."

"Don't be fooled by the lack of security."

"Did you actually find any evidence Daniel is here or are you making up a story?"

"We saw him. One of the kidnappers brought him outside," stated Lightening.

"Are you sure?"

"You sound slightly skeptical," warned Jessica, eyeballing Jones. "Maybe you know something we don't?"

"Like what?" Jones asked.

"Maybe Daniel isn't here. It's possible Forland has taken him somewhere else."

"Your hatred for the man has clouded your mind," said Jones.

"We'll see," barked Jessica.

"I'm not going to debate anything. Time will unravel any secrets anyone is holding."

"The only way to know if Daniel is still here is to search the cottage," advised Lightening.

"Right," snorted Jones.

He led the way by walking quietly the last twenty feet to the edge of the clearing. Crouching behind two wide gum trees the trio studied the cottage. Shade already shrouded most of the scrub. Even though it was still mid afternoon twilight came quickly to this part of the bush.

"The area seems quiet," whispered Lightening.

"Too quiet," replied Jessica. "Forland and his men are either waiting to ambush us or they've run from the area."

"Please stop mentioning Forland's name he's not behind the kidnapping," growled Jones. He readied himself to step from behind the tree when he stopped to stare at Jessica. "Didn't you report one of Forland's men was murdered?"

"Yes," replied Jessica.

"I can't see a body or any sign of blood."

"They could have washed the evidence away using the water from the holed water barrel," announced Lightening.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, the water barrel doesn't have a hole," mocked Jones.

"Maybe it's been turned around," explained Jessica.

"You seem to have an answer to everything," quipped Jones.

"There's only one way to find out if the water barrel is the same one I shot at, someone has to go take a look." Jessica raised her eyebrows at Jones.

"Before I enter the cottage I'll have a look. The quicker I prove you're wrong about Forland the smoother this case will flow."

Jones successfully made it to the verandah before crouching at the foot of the water barrel. Seeing and hearing nothing he gave the side of the barrel a quick push to feel if it might be empty.

It didn't move.

Jones looked around the circumference of the barrel. His eyes almost popped at seeing bullet holes in the side closest to the cottage wall. He checked the cottage again before quietly removing the lid. Looking into the barrel he almost gagged on his own vomit. The body of the man Forland shot was stuffed into the barrel. Jones replaced the lid, pulled his gun from the holster and slowly sidestepped to the window and looked through the glass. Satisfied nobody lay in wait he moved onwards to the door leading into the kitchen. He reached out, wrapping his hand around the doorknob, twisting it slowly.

The door opened inwards.

Jones slipped inside the cottage, closing the door behind him. He quickly moved through the cottage. He certainly knew the place would be vacant. When he again stepped onto the verandah he beckoned Jessica and Lightening over. They marched across the clearing watching the scrub, making sure nobody was pointing a gun at them. Standing at the verandah Jones put their fears to rest.

"Nobody is home. The water barrel has a couple of holes and a dead body inside."

"Now do you believe me?" snarled Jessica.

"It certainly looks like Forland is behind the kidnapping of Daniel. If he's not he has a lot of explaining to do when I find him. If he is guilty he's one clever man."

"I'd like to search the cottage," mentioned Lightening, stepping to the door.

"There's no need," grumbled Jones.

"In case there's a clue."

"The place is clean."

Jessica eyeballed the Constable suspiciously. "I think Lightening has a valid point about searching the interior of the cottage."

"Go ahead. I'll be waiting at the steps after you've finished wasting your time."

Jessica watched Jones walk away from the door to the end of the cottage where he started to role a cigarette. When they were out of earshot she faced Lightening.

"What do you make of his attitude?"

"His secret might be larger than ours. Come on, we'll take a look inside."

Before Jessica followed Lightening into the cottage she again glared at Jones. She felt uneasy over the man's attitude. He seemed too relaxed, leaning against a wooden vertical post, not a care in the world.

Jessica caught up to Lightning searching the kitchen. Making no noise they stepped to the closed door to one of the rooms. Lightning pointed his gun out in front of him. Jessica turned the door knob in slow motion. She pushed her back against the wall waiting to see through the narrow gap. The door opened slightly. She scanned the room. When she nodded at Lightning he kicked open the door. Jessica sprinted for and squatted behind a large chair. Lightning pointed his gun, sweeping the entire room. Jessica slowly walked to the closed door on her left. Lightning marched across the room to stand by her side.

Again they repeated their performance.

Nothing else except a single bed was in the room. Jessica slowly walked to the window side of the room. On the other side of the bed, she saw only floorboards. She signaled to Lightning they needed to look under the bed. He moved back to the doorway before slowly squatting. Jessica took hold of the blanket at the corner. Using a firm grip she readied herself to drag it off the bed, into the other room. Lightning pointed his gun at the floor next to the bed.

Jessica gave a sharp nod as she sprinted out of the room, dragging the blanket behind her.

Lightning quickly searched for a body before standing.

"Jessica, nobody is hiding in this room."

She stepped back to the doorway, sliding her gun into the holster. "Jones is right. There's nobody home."

Stepping outside Lightning and Jessica found Jones still casually leaning against a verandah post. He straightened the moment they began walking towards him.

"What's the verdict?"

"You were right," gushed Jessica.

"I told you."

"I'm a stubborn woman. I trust no one, especially you."

"Harsh words," whined Jones, crushing out his lit cigarette.

"They may be. At least I'm alive to say them."

"Miss Hayes there's been something I've wanted to say about his whole kidnapping case. The moment Forland stepped off the train he marched up the hill to my police station. He'd done his homework. He greeted me by shaking my hand. Before I knew what he wanted he made his way to the gun's cupboard. He started babbling on about my collection of exquisite guns. The way he acted I thought he'd fallen in love. His knowledge of the weapons and how and when they were manufactured sounded amazing. He went on to tell me the story of the blue diamond ring and the solid silver guns. The man convinced me to split the booty. I get the guns; he'd have the blue diamond ring."

"You sold out," growled Jessica, moving her hand onto her gun.

"Don't pull the gun from the holster, I haven't finished. Forland gave his word nobody will get hurt. He'd kidnap the lad for a couple of days, making a few threats. When you cave in everybody will be a winner. Forland thinks I'm on his side. I needed to think quickly. I decided I might be able to finalize two cases at the same time. I'm budding for promotion. If I pull off the ruse about being on his side the promotion is in the bag. Miss Hayes, believe whatever you like. I'm not interested in the missing silver colt 45's or the blue diamond ring. I want closure on the case so I'm promoted. I've already told you I'd do anything to get what I want."

"So you're after Forland for kidnapping?"

"Yes. It's too much of a coincidence, Corice and William stepping into my police station at the same time as Forland. If I can arrest the man for kidnapping, I'll certainly have the governor's favour. Naturally if I uncover the stolen bank money I might even be offered a job as the next governor of Victoria."

"What's the chance of hanging Forland for the murder of my husband?"

"He's already confessed he shot him in self-defense."

"Do you believe him?"

"If I can't discover any proof my hands are tied."

"So he gets away with murder yet again?"

Jones shrugged. "There's no way of proving if your story is correct. It's his word against yours. I apologize I can't do anything more."

Jessica took her hand off her Smith and Wesson. She stared directly into Jones' eyes.

"I don't have the guns or the ring."

"I believe you."

"Do you really?"

“Yes. I believe the bushranger who stole the money from the bank, your guns, and the ring has gone either to Sydney or Adelaide. When I get back to town I’ll send both states a telegram requesting they be on the lookout for the man.”

Jessica still felt reserved over Jones’ attitude. She glanced at Lightning before again focusing on Jones.

“I think we should get back to Corice and William. I’m sure they’ll be wondering how we’re going.”

“Good idea,” said Jones. Stepping off the verandah, he walked towards his horse.

Jessica marched through the scrub, following Jones. Lightning brought up the rear. Their horses were exactly where they’d left them. Jessica and Lightning mounted their horse simultaneously.

The three trotted through the scrub in silence, following their trail back to William and Corice’s cottage. Unlike Jones, Jessica and Lightning kept an eye out for Forland and his men.

When smoke from the small chimney came into view Jones made his horse start to trot ahead.

“Don’t underestimate Forland,” whispered Jessica to Lightning after slowing her horse to a walk. “He’s a dangerous man. I’d rather go up against the bushranger we killed again than have to face Forland in a gun fight.”

“He does strike me to be a man who loves people fearing him.”

“Yes, he certainly takes pleasure in the power of money.”

Corice opened the door when she spied the riders. William Snowe greeted them at the edge of the clearing. The four men who came to help search for Daniel stepped from the shadows of the home.

“Greeting’s,” called Jones, dismounting. He shook Williams’ hand before walking over to Corice.

“Do you have any more news?” she asked. Her relaxed expression went un-noticed.

“Jessica and Lightning followed the track left by the kidnapper. There was a shoot out and only just managed to escape. I’d gone off on a tangent following a fake trail. We met up at the river then went back to the cottage to rescue Daniel. When we arrived the kidnappers were gone. One thing is certain, Forland is the kidnapper. He’s holding Daniel for ransom.”

“William and I have heard nothing about Forland wanting money,” Corice squealed.

“We have nothing in the bank,” added William. “I’ve spent every pound I’d saved in buying this piece of land and the few possessions you see. I have yet to discover one gold nugget. Tell me how I’m going to pay to get my son back?”

“Offer him the land,” remarked Corice.

“Forland doesn’t want your money or the land. He wants what he believes Jessica has,” insisted Jones.

“Whatever he wants I suggest you give it to him,” hinted William Snowe, glaring at Jessica.

“What he wants I don’t have. The only thing we can do tonight is wait and see if Forland shows his ugly face.”

Jones looked at the four men who had volunteered their help. “Even though I don’t know your names I have to say thanks for coming out today. I’m hoping you will stay for the night to guard Mr. and Mrs. Snowe in case Forland turns up here.”

“Sure we can,” echoed the men in turn. “If we see Forland, we’ll have him hog tied before he can put a finger on his gun. In the morning, we’ll ride to the Rosedale to tell you the news.”

“Thanks, fellas.” Jones switched his attention back to Jessica. “I suggest the three of us get back to the Rosedale for tonight. I’ll guard the sheep station. If Forland turns up I’ll arrest him for kidnapping. In the morning, we’ll round up his men then reunite Daniel and his parents. Case closed.”

Corice walked over, hugging Jones. She kissed him on the cheek before stepping back.

“Thanks for organizing Daniel’s safe return.”

“This isn’t over yet. Be advised it soon will be,” stated Jones, confidently.

By the time Jessica, Lightning Dawn and Jones were at the back fence of the Rosedale the sun had slipped from view. Jessica climbed down from her saddle. She stretched and started to walk, leading her horse.

“It’s been a long eventful day,” she whimpered.

Lightning dismounted. “It feels good to stretch my legs.”

Jessica patted her horse. “It won’t be long before you’ll have a big meal of oats.” She stuck her nose in the air, breathing in the inviting smells. “Gip and the boys have been busy cooking. Constable Jones, you’re more than welcome to stay for dinner. I’m sure there’s a spare rug to sleep on. The loft is clean enough to sleep in. Lightning Dawn has made the room quite comfortable.”

“Thanks for the offer. I have to decline. I won’t stay in the same place as a black man.”

“Mr. Dawn won’t bite,” snarled Jessica.

“A light meal sounds too good to pass up. Afterwards, I’ll make a fire. Before you protest further I’ll be standing guard in case Forland comes snooping around.”

“I must be dog tired,” replied Jessica. “I’d forgotten. Can I entice you in staying warm in the sheep shearing shed?”

“Don’t be too concerned, I’ll be fine,” insisted Jones.

“What if Forland does turn up during the night?”

“I’m the law. I’m sure he’s not stupid to cause a ruckus.”

The trio again mounted their horses and trotted towards the homestead. At the closest point to the barn, they dismounted. Jessica handed the reins of the horses to Lightning Dawn. He took hold of Jones’ horse and walked the three horses into the barn. He gave them a bucket of oats each and fresh water, dropped their saddles onto the hay, gave each a quick rub down before heading for the kitchen. He stepped inside in time to see food being dished up.

“You’re just in time to eat,” blurted Jessica, looking up.

She sat at the head of the table. Jones sat opposite her, the boys on the left. Gip ushered Lightning next to Jessica then she sat on the other side of the table. They said grace over the food before tucking into the meal of home grown vegetables and one-inch thick kangaroo steaks Lightning had cut up the previous day when a Roo came too close to the sheep dogs. They bailed it up and attacked. Lightning put the kangaroo out of its misery.

Using a slice of bread Jones wiped his plate clean. The second mug of coffee helped to wash the meal down. He stood, looking at the kids.

“Gip, and you boys, thanks for the lovely meal. I must start walking for the back paddock to await Forland’s arrival. That is if he decides to come and make trouble.” Jones switched his attention to Jessica. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’m happy you enjoyed the meal. Knowing you’re on guard duty will help me to sleep well. Goodnight Constable Jones,” said Jessica.

The man walked out onto the verandah. He breathed in the fresh air before marching towards the paddock. Jessica stood at the window watching him walk off. Lightning came up behind her, nibbling at her earlobe.

“You’re thinking something?” Lightning whispered.

“Yes, I am. This whole mess seems to be centered on the blue diamond ring and the silver guns. I’m not convinced the whole kidnapping story isn’t a ruse to get me to confess I have them. I’m also wondering if William and Corice are in on it too.”

“Surely not?” questioned Lightning. The Snowe’s seem like nice people.”

“Truth is stranger than fiction.” Jessica twisted around, placing her arms around Lightning’s neck. “You did a great job today.”

Before he could say you did too, Jessica pushed her lips against his. Gip and the boys stopped cleaning the dishes and watched. Gip turned to her brothers and talked to them in aboriginal dialect. Jessica could only guess what she said.

Lightning swept Jessica off her feet, turning her in slow circles.

“Kids leave the dishes, I’ll do them in the morning,” advised Jessica, focusing on Lightning’s face.

He sent Jessica a mischievous look before carrying her out of the room.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Surely you know?”

Jessica nodded, allowing him to carry her to the barn.

## CHAPTER NINE

AT THREE minutes to midnight, Jessica woke in a cold sweat. Reaching out for Lightning, she felt only material. She opened her eyes wondering why she couldn’t feel his naked body leaning into hers.

Jessica rolled off the blanket, looking around the semi-transparent room. The full moon cast light straight onto the makeshift bed where they made love before falling asleep. Spying Lightning looking

out of the window, she walked up behind him, slipping her arm around his waist. She shook her head at feeling his hard manhood.

“Don’t you ever have enough?”

Lightening’s reply came on a whispered chuckle. “No.”

“What are you looking at?”

“Jones’ small camp fire at the corner of the back paddock,” whispered Lightening.

Jessica stared at the campfire. “Jones must be awake. The fire seems quite large. I’m not sure what you think it means. I can’t see a problem. Jones is on guard duty.”

“Shouldn’t he be sitting amongst the scrub in the dark? If Forland is to visit he’ll know exactly where he is.”

Jessica walked back to where Lightening dropped her clothes. She quickly dressed.

“You’re right. The story Jones told us about pretending to be on Forland’s side might be slightly exaggerated. I’ll go wake the kids. You get the horses out of here. Lightening, watch your back.”

He stepped away from the window, grabbing Jessica on the shoulder, spinning her around to face him. He gave her a seductive kiss.

“Make sure you stay safe too.”

Lightening started to dress when Jessica descended the ladder from the loft. Quietly she waited at the base for Lightening. In seconds, he stood at her side. They parted and went to work.

Forland and two of his men watched the antics of the Constable from the other side of the river. They waited patiently for the moon to slip behind a dark cloud before they made their move.

“Boys, you know what to do. I don’t want to hear any noise,” whispered Forland.

The two men nodded before slowly walking through the ankle deep water towards the Rosedale homestead. Forland walked across the river making a bee-line for Jones. He carried a white hessian bag the same size which is used to store rice. In the bottom of the bag, a lump could be seen. He checked to make sure his knife was still in his boot before walking slowly from tree to tree. Jones remained in his view the whole time. Forland took extra care where he stepped. Thirty feet from Jones he crouched behind a thick tall gum tree, listening to the sound of the crackling wood on the fire. A kangaroo hopped close to the fire. It sniffed the air before bounding out of sight. Forland’s smirk started small. However, it quickly widened. Jones had made a grave mistake.

He’d fallen asleep.

Forland moved closer. The bush camouflaged his presence. At the edge of the scrub, Forland quietly stepped onto the cleared grass covered paddock. Ten feet from Jones he stood watching the sleeping man. Making no noise Forland walked around Jones to his feet, placing the white hessian bag he carried on the ground before giving the Constable’s feet a quick kick.

Jones sat bolt upright, glaring at Forland. “It’s about time you turned up.”

“You were supposed to be on guard. What if Hayes or the black man came walking over and found you asleep?”

Jones pushed his hands through his hair, reaching for his hat. “If you were here sooner I wouldn’t have fallen asleep.”

“Fortunately, I woke you, not them,” growled Forland.

“I don’t like the tone in your voice. You told me no one will get hurt.”

“Things have changed,” advised Forland.

“What things?”

“For one thing, I want to change the percentage of money, we agreed upon.”

“I thought we used a gentleman’s handshake to agree on you’ll keep the blue diamond and I’ll own the guns?”

“We did,” said Forland. “I’ve decided I want more.”

“How much more are we talking about?” Jones questioned.

“Before I answer, I believe you’ve been taking me for a ride.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Forland pulled his gun from inside his coat, pointing it at Jones. “The terms to our new agreement are easy to understand. I want the whole lot.”

Jones started to scramble to his feet.

“Stay sitting,” urged Forland.

“Why are you taking everything and I get nothing?”

“Now you’re thinking correctly.”

“I won’t agree.”

"The way I see it, you don't have a choice."

"The only way you'll get away with the idea is if you kill me."

Forland started to chuckle. "You are a smart man."

"If you shoot me the next lawman who takes my place will see the note on my desk. He'll track you down. He'll hang you from the nearest tree."

"I thought you might say something along those lines. Seeing how you have an endless line of lawmen on your side and I have only myself, you have persuaded me to back down and honour our agreement we made earlier. However, if you'll give me permission I'd like to add a sub-clause."

"I'm listening," stammered Jones.

"I'll still agree with you having the silver guns and the blue diamond ring will belong to me. However, I've been thinking the diamond is worth much more than the guns. To rectify this problem I'd like to pay extra."

"You want to pay me more?"

"Yes, I think it's only fair."

"Now you mention it I suppose you're right. My question is; we really don't know how much more the diamond ring is worth. You might have seen it; I haven't. You might be paying me too much. If we wait till the items are valued by an expert you might be able to save some money."

Forland casually waved his hand through the air. "I'm a gambling man. You can either take the cash right now or I'll stick to our original agreement."

"How much are you offering and when will I get paid?"

"I'll pay you tonight. I have a bag full of money," advised Forland pointing at the white bag.

Jones smirked a little. His plan to have Forland in jail for the rest of his life just took a giant step closer. Bribing an officer of the law was a good start. He glanced at his gun hanging from the tree not more than ten feet away. He felt more than confident about grabbing it. The only thing Forland needed to do is be distracted by something and look away. His peripheral vision picked out a rock the size of his hand at his fingertips. Slowly he bent sideways to retrieve it. If Forland looked away for two seconds he'd be able to win the stalemate by throwing the rock at the scrub.

Forland grabbed the white hessian bag, throwing it at Jones. "Take it. Go back to town."

"What if I don't want to? I don't trust you anymore."

Forland pushed his hand into another coat pocket, pulling out a large pile of twenty-pound notes, dropping the bundle onto the bag and pushed the gun back in his shoulder holster.

"The money and the contents of the bag are for you. All you have to do is saddle your horse and leave this place."

"What are you going to do when I've left the area?" questioned Jones.

"After you've gone I'm going to find my blue diamond and my guns."

"How?" questioned Jones. "You don't know where they are?"

"The way I conduct my affairs is none of your business. I believe the contents of the bag will more than supplement your time and effort. Just in case you might be thinking it's not enough, here, have a tip." He pulled a further bundle of twenty-pound notes from another pocket of his coat, dropping it onto the hessian bag.

"Aren't you worried I might have the better deal?"

"I've already stated I'm a gambling man. I believe the cards in my hand are winners. I also believe the diamond ring I will soon hold in my hand is worth a fortune. Just owning it is rewarding enough."

Forland finally saw a grin creep across Jones' face. He placed the two large bundles of pound notes in his hat before reaching for the bag. He untied the top, upending the contents onto his lap. He immediately froze. Not from fear, through necessity. The two three-foot brown snakes Forland came across coiled up in the mid afternoon sun lifted their heads at the same time, hissing. Jones eyeballed both. He could grab one of the snakes. He thought two might stretch his luck to breaking point. One bite from either snake, he'd be dead in a few minutes.

Forland slowly backed away. He didn't want either snake to be distracted.

Jones stared at Forland knowing it'll take a miracle to live through this. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Forland squat, waiting for the inevitable; death from a snake bite. Jones needed to think of a way of removing the snakes from his legs. He sat completely still willing the snakes to slither off into the dark. He bravely decided to try moving closer to the fire, praying the snakes might take to slithering into the scrub.

Sweat quickly broke out on his forehead from the stress. He knew if he accomplished the act Forland might shoot him. He'd be gambling Forland won't risk it and decide to try his hand at escaping. He'd arrest the man and see him hang for attempted murder.

Using locked elbows Jones smoothly levitated his legs a few inches off the grass. His face could feel the warmth of the fire. He must get closer. So close he might even get slightly burnt. By then he hoped the snakes might decide on a colder location. Inch by slow painful inch Jones closed in on the fire. Both snakes still held their heads in the air, looking to be preparing to strike.

Jones' wrists started to feel the strain from his weight. He could also feel Forland's stare boring into him. He dared not peel his gaze from the eyes of the snakes.

He must have moved closer to the fire by at least a foot and a half when the first snake dropped its head. It didn't move it just lay there on his lap, its tongue moving at speed in and out of its mouth.

Yet another inch closer to the fire forced Jones to feel uncomfortable from the heat. The damn fire he decided to increase not more than ten minutes before Forland announced his untimely arrival. He started to question his idea about what he decided to do. The heat started to sting his face. His arm under his long sleeved shirt started to feel burnt. Jones feared the material could catch fire at any moment. He so wanted to grab both snakes behind the head and toss them into the fire. He'd feel no remorse watching them cook.

Forland started to snigger. Jones estimated another few inches and he'd be two feet from the fire. Seeing Forland move Jones gulped, scrutinizing what he might be up to. He watched Forland walk over to a log, picking it up and lift it above his head.

"I'm impressed in seeing how calm you are when facing certain death, Jones. However, I've grown bored watching. I thought I might speed up the process."

"I beg you don't do anything to alarm the snakes."

Forland couldn't control his sinister laugh. When the noise finally abated he tossed the log high into the air, making it land in the middle of the fire.

Jones turned his head away. Embers rained down on him and the snakes. The loud crackling noise the log created made them lift their heads again.

Jones picked up his sliding pace towards the fire, braving the painful embers. He reached the eighteen-inch mark from the edge of the fire before they struck. Both snakes bit hard into his arms. Jones' yell pierced the quiet of the night. Forland watched both snakes bite Jones a second time before pulling his knife from his boot. He casually stepped up to Jones, reached down, picking up the first snake cutting its head off. He casually tossed the carcass into the fire. He reached out to grab the second reptile when it struck Jones on the thigh. It immediately lifted its head ready to strike again. Forland's forehead sweep appeared to be deadly accurate. The snake's head flew through the air into the fire while its body slumped to the ground next to Jones. Forland booted the carcass into the fire.

Jones' body started to tremble. Seeing him trying to slide across the grass towards his gun belt, Forland pulled him back.

"I can't allow you to reach your gun," taunted Forland calmly.

"Why did you do it?" stammered Jones, glaring at his attacker.

"I have already stated I want the whole lot. When you're unconscious I'll take my money back too. You won't need it where you're going."

"So you are a murderer," whispered Jones.

"Now you know the truth what are you going to do about it? Already your arms are paralyzed. Your legs will soon follow. In about two minutes you'll be dead. For the record, I didn't kill you. The snakes did. The way I see it the snakes must have come from the scrub to warm themselves near the fire. You fell asleep. When you woke you surprised the snakes. They, in turn, bit you. I happened to be stepping through the scrub, saw the snakes and ran over to help. Sorry, I arrived a bit late."

"So you did cheat Jessica Hayes' husband out of his house and his life."

"Of course, I did. He owned the blue diamond. I wanted it. He insisted he'd never sell it so I won everything he owned in a game of cards. He should have been watching when I palmed his cards from the bottom of the pile."

"I told you the next lawman will hunt you down."

"There'll be no witnesses left alive to say what happened," jeered Forland. "In a few minutes the house Jessica Hayes lives in will catch fire. She will wake the kids and get them outside first. By the time she flees the fire the barn will be engulfed in flames. She'll run to save her precious black lover. I will step from the shadows taking the kids hostage. I will explain to Hayes she can have the kids back and the other brat belonging to Corice when I have what belongs to me."

“So you want to exchange the lives of the kids for the blue diamond?”

“Don’t forget my guns.”

“What if she refuses?”

“I’ll shoot one kid every twelve hours.”

“The moment the law finds you they’ll shoot you dead.”

“Nobody will know. When I’m holding the diamond and my silver guns I will murder the three kids, William and Corice Snowe, Lightening Dawn and the aboriginal kids. I will have great pleasure in knowing Jessica Hayes will have witnessed every one of those deaths. She’ll beg me to shoot her. When I decide I’ve heard enough of her pathetic pleas, I’ll force her to dig a big hole. I’ll watch her place the bodies in the hole before joining them. The only thing I’ll have to do is drop dirt over the corpses.”

“You’ll be caught long before you have a chance to start your murderous rampage.”

“Who’s going to stop me? You can barely walk. By my reckoning, you have no more than a minute left.”

Forland stood. He walked over to Jones’ gun, pulling it from the holster. Unloading the gun, he walked back to Jones, placing it in his hand. Staring into the man’s hate-filled eyes he chuckled, gave a flippant wave of his hand before running off towards the homestead.

The Constable tried to stand. He only just started when his knees buckled forcing him to crumple to the ground face first. His body started to convulse. Knowing he didn’t have long to live, Jones began scratching an ‘F’ in the small dry patch of dirt next to his hand. Blackness closed in around his eyes. On his dying breath, he hoped someone will discover the letter.

Flames erupted from inside the barn and the house at the same time. Standing in the dark watching the scene unfold, Forland heard Jessica screaming for the boys to wake up. He heard glass breaking. In a matter of seconds, the flames were intense. Smoke billowed into the still night sky. The only room which didn’t catch fire was where the kids were. Forland skirted around to the back of the house where he found Jessica holding out her arms waiting to haul the kids through the window. The moment they were outside Forland saw Jessica point away from the house. She turned her back on the kids, sprinting across the grassland straight for the barn. What she saw made her sob. She didn’t care about the house; the barn had caught fire. The dry hay stored in the loft was ablaze. Flames were shooting out of the loft and the ground floor windows proving the whole interior of the barn was engulfed.

Jessica sprinted up to the smoldering barn door, throwing it open. Looking for Lightening through the smoke and flames, she needed to shield her face from the heat. Flames were licking the floor of the loft exactly where the trap door remained closed. There’s no way she could even attempt to get close to the trap door. If Lightening happened to be trapped in the loft he’d be dead already. Jessica forced herself not to cry over the thought. Stepping into the barn she focused on the first stall where the mare and her baby were. Both horses were whining. The mare reared up on her hind legs trying to break out through the wooden gate. Jessica yanked it open. Almost immediately the mare sprinted for the outside. The baby followed in her mother’s footsteps. Jessica spied a wave of flames rushing at her, fanned by the air from the open barn door. She quickly turned her back on the flames and set herself to sprint out of the barn after the mare. She didn’t have to look to know the barn might implode in a matter of seconds. She heard the timbers creak and groan over the roar of the fire. Her exposed arms and face already felt burnt. She feared if she didn’t get outside quickly her clothes might ignite. Already she caught a whiff of smoldering material.

A figure of a man stood in the doorway. Before Jessica could take another step towards him he sprinted into the barn sweeping her into his arms. Before the fireball engulfed them he stepped over the threshold and into the outside air. Instinctively he changed direction away from the door. Jessica watched the wave of fire roar after them. The flames shot out through the door at least ten feet, devouring the evening air. Holding Jessica safe in his arms the figure ran to the horse trough, dropping her in it and showering his clothes in the water.

Jessica surfaced coughing and gasping for air. She reached up, wrapping her arms around Lightening’s neck, giving him a kiss.

“I like seeing a couple hug and kiss,” growled a deep voice from behind them.

Jessica and Lightening retaliated by jumping to their feet. Jessica raised her clenched fists. Lightening reached for his gun. Both froze the moment they saw Forland’s grinning face. The gun he held firmly in his right hand was pointing directly at Lightening’s chest.

“I don’t care who keeps you warm at night Mrs. Dawn, though if there were any witnesses other than myself or my men you’d have a lot of explaining to do.”

“So now you know,” barked Jessica. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” jeered Forland shaking his head.

“What do you want?”

“For my silence, I don’t want a thing.”

“I don’t believe you,” snarled Jessica, folding her arms.

“Maybe we can come to an arrangement?” hinted Forland.

“Spill your idea.”

“The first thing I want is for both of you to drop your gun belts onto the ground. The second thing I want you to do is to walk away from the barn. I don’t want one of you to catch fire especially after kerosene is accidently thrown on the black man. Take it from me hearing someone scream as they burn to death isn’t a nice sound,” taunted Forland sarcastically.

Jessica and Lightning saw no other option, except to do exactly what Forland commanded. Both dropped their gun belts and walked away from the burning barn.

“How far do you want us to walk?” bellowed Lightning.

“You’re now far enough,” said Forland.

Jessica glanced back at the barn, quickly estimating the distance to be about thirty feet. “What now?”

“Take a look behind me. You’ll see my men are holding four kids hostage. The one you saw earlier at the cottage is the fourth.”

Jessica talked over Forland, drowning his words. “Let them go. They’re children. They can’t hurt you.”

“Jessica Hayes another outburst from you, I’ll have to shoot one of the brats. Bring me what I came here for. If I don’t get what I want in twelve hours I will shoot one of the kids. Every twelve hours another will die. When I run out of kids I’ll shoot the black man. When he’s dead I will hunt you down and slowly cut you into little pieces.”

“I have no idea what you want?” Jessica lied.

“Don’t make me out to be a fool,” blurted Forland. “You know perfectly well what I want.”

Jessica shrugged her shoulders.

“After this is finished it will be a pleasure to see you beg for mercy.”

“So even if I give you the diamond and the guns you’ll murder everyone anyway?”

“I’ve already stated on numerous occasions I’m a businessman,” barked Forland. “I’m hoping we might be able to come to some agreement.”

“Spit it out,” jeered Lightning Dawn.

“Give me my blue diamond ring.”

“I’ve told you where the diamond is,” advised Jessica.

“I don’t believe a single word you spoke. You’ve been keeping the secret about you and the black man sharing the same bed. I’m positive no one knows you have the blue diamond ring. You’re good Jessica Hayes, very good. There is one important thing you keep forgetting. I’m a champion at bluffing. You made a mistake kissing your overseer.” Forland glanced over his shoulder. “Men, mount up. We’ll be waiting for them at the cottage.” He swapped his stares back to Jessica. “Bring my diamond and the guns.”

“Tell me something,” urged Jessica, brusquely. “Did you cheat in the card game you and my husband played before murdering him in cold blood?”

Before mounting his horse Forland snorted. His cold heartless eyes bore into her spirit.

“What do you think?”

## CHAPTER TEN

AFTER FORLAND made sure his men had taken the kids and he’d ridden off into the dark, Jessica and Lightning switched their attention to the burning house.

“If we don’t put the fire out, in minutes the homestead will be gone. The flames are shooting out of the kitchen window. The roof and the verandah are engulfed!” screamed Jessica.

“Forget the homestead,” yelled Lightning over the noise of the fire. “Saving the surrounding land from ember attack is the only thing we can do. If the grass catches fire the horses I got out of the barn will run for miles. It’ll take days to find them. We need the horses to help us catch Forland.”

Jessica gave him a cold calculated stare. She snarled through clamped teeth.

“The moment we get the kids back I’m going to put a bullet in Forland’s heart.”

“You and me both,” spat Lightning. “I’m going to personally escort you to make sure Forland and his men don’t leave this area alive.”

Jessica pushed her head against Lightning’s chest. He rubbed her bare arms trying to reassure her. In silence, they watched the barn and the homestead burn to ground level.

Eventually, Jessica whispered. “Thanks for saving the horses.”

“I’m upset I ran out of time to save more things.”

“I’m wondering why Jones didn’t try to stop Forland. His campfire is still alight. Surely he saw the Rosedale on fire?” sobbed Jessica switching her gaze from one fire to the next.

“He’s either asleep or dead,” jeered Lightning. He pushed Jessica to arm’s length. His whole body tensed. “We have to stop the fire igniting the ammunition in the secret room.”

Before Jessica started to move, Lightning darted off towards the shearing shed. Jessica’s face looked strained from the sudden workload. In the chaos, she’d forgotten about the ammunition. She had succumbed to the fact the Rosedale and the barn will never be rebuilt. One thing positive about the fire, Forland didn’t know they already purchased the homestead across the river. She could hardly wait to move in.

Lightning handed Jessica two of the five wooden buckets he swiped off the wall of the long narrow shearing shed wall. Both ran for the water trough, filling the buckets with water and sprinting towards the barn. Jessica glanced up at the Rosedale in time to see the tin roof collapse. The verandah posts weren’t far behind. Floating embers landed on the grass causing spot fires. Fortunately, the breeze had abated so the grass fire moved slowly in their direction. For now, it could wait.

Jessica turned her attention to the barn. Three-foot flames were devouring the doorframe. Ten feet from the door Jessica could feel the heat. She watched Lightning sprint through the doorway, throw two buckets of water in the direction of the trap door before running back for another two buckets. Jessica placed the full buckets of water near the main door before swiping up the empty ones and running back to the water trough. When the water was almost gone Jessica used the hand pump to fill the buckets while Lightning sprinted back and forth from the barn.

By the time she’d filled two buckets Lightning returned. He swiped the full ones off the ground, glanced at Jessica before sprinting back to the barn.

The noise of the loft falling to the ground forced Jessica from her pumping duties. Lightning Dawn never wavered in his attempt to put out the fire. He didn’t know how close the fire was to the ammunition so he kept up his firefighting struggle. The only thing he concentrated on was the fact the bullets were yet to explode.

He must succeed in stopping the explosion for Jessica’s sake. The guns and the blue diamond ring were the only materialistic things she wanted.

He needed to win at any cost.

For an hour, Jessica pumped the water into the buckets. Each time Lightning came for the full ones he felt determined to catch up. When he needed to wait for the next bucket of water he knew he could rest, not before. His whole body screamed for a rest. He pushed through the pain barrier driving his body onwards. Jessica did the same. When the grass fire came close to the barn threatening to join in on the carnage, Lightning made a small detour, stopping its advances. Satisfied the small grass fire was out he went back to attacking the fire in the barn.

Slowly the fire started to die down. Eventually, they saw more smoke than flames. Finally, Jessica could pump no more. Lightning looked at the empty buckets under the pump. He’d finally caught up to Jessica. They both crumpled to the ground totally exhausted. He certainly couldn’t carry any more water buckets.

Lightning slowly turned his head to view the Rosedale. Its wooden structure was burnt to the ground. Nothing remained except the smoke which hovered above the ground in the still night sky.

Jessica closed her eyes, lying on the grass, her chest heaving. Lightning sat watching for any spot fires he might have missed. He felt thankful he saw no flames. Their efforts had kept the ammunition safe.

Slowly Jessica lifted herself to a sitting position to view what remained of the barn. It resembled a burnt pile of tin. Slowly she stood on trembling legs. Lightening got to his feet, holding her steady. Together they slowly walked over to take a closer look at the smoldering rubble.

"I think the guns and the blue diamond ring remained safe," whispered Lightening.

"I hope so."

"When the area has cooled we'll take a look."

"I don't want to wait. Besides we have to get the rifles and the ammunition to go hunt Forland and his men. There's no way I'm handing the diamond over. There's one thing in our favour. He'll want us to stay alive. We have what he wants. He knows if we die the location of the blue diamond will never be known. It will be our winning card and Forland's demise."

"I'll pull the tin away so we can get to the trap door," insisted Lightening.

Jessica grabbed him on the arm. "I think we should try to leave the rubble exactly how it fell. It'll make it even harder for Forland to guess the hiding place. We'll snake our way through the rubble, climb down the ladder to take a look."

Walking over to what remained of the barn Jessica knew the only evidence of their wedding night in the hay will be in their memories. Thinking of their night painted a smile on her face.

Lightening walked up behind her slipping his arms around her waist. He leaned close to her ear whispering. "What are you thinking about?"

"Our wedding night," she sighed.

"Even though the barn's gone I want you to never forget our night."

"I promise I never will."

"I can still feel you."

"Same here," replied Jessica, lifting her arms to grope at his shoulders. "Come on, we have to get the rifles. When this is over we can start new memories in our brand new homestead."

The tin roof resembled a scattered stack of playing cards. Jessica and Lightening studied the rubble looking for an entry point. A few minutes into the search Lightening grabbed the end of a charred piece of timber, pulling it from under the tin. He used two water buckets to build a post and drove the charred wood under the tin. He lifted one end, creating a gap under the mass of metal. Jessica crawled into the gap, placing another bucket further in before Lightening could slip between the gaps. Crawling in, he lifted the tin using his back. Jessica slipped in, placing the other end of the wood onto the inner bucket.

"I love the tunnel," hinted Jessica.

"Stay in the fresh air. I'll uncover the trap door. Here's hoping the items are undamaged."

"I'm sure they'll still be safe buried in the dirt."

"When you're satisfied they're intact I'll bury them exactly where I found them."

Jessica kissed her husband. "I'm glad Mr. Langston sold us his house. If we waited any longer I'm sure he'd have changed his mind again about the asking price. The mansion is one hundred times more practical than the Rosedale."

"Yes, it is good."

Jessica started to sob.

"What's this?" Lightening asked wiping her tears away.

"We've been so wrapped up in trying to stop the fire and save the blue diamond, the solid silver guns, the rifles and the ammunition I feel guilty about not thinking about Gip and the boys. I haven't even started to contemplate Corice's child. What sort of mother will I be?"

Lightening took hold of her shoulders. "You will be a great mother to our children. I too have been preoccupied with fighting the fire. We have to get priorities right. The kids will be safe. Forland wants them alive so he can trade. Even though he's a monster, I can't believe he'd hurt innocent kids. You'll see. Soon this will be over. Forland will be dead. The kids will be safe."

"I hear what you're saying. I sure want to believe it."

"Don't worry. She'll be right."

Jessica didn't feel like smiling. "Since you brought up the idea about the diamond again, I've been thinking about handing over the guns and the diamond. They've brought me nothing except heartache and problems."

"They're nothing we can't handle," hinted Lightening.

"Having the kids back is more important."

"If we were to trade the diamond and the guns for the kids I believe one day in the future you'll look at me saying maybe we could have done more than give in to a murderer."

Jessica pouted. She dropped her gaze to her feet.

"I suppose you're right. Either way, Forland won't want us to live. If he gets the diamond he'll be forever watching his back waiting for the day we'll sneak into his home and steal the diamond back."

"Exactly," stated Lightning. "Dry your eyes. We have work to do. See this from the kids' point of view. I'm sure they'll be disappointed if they know we caved into Forland's demands."

Jessica's slow nods quickly sped up.

"Besides, we stole the guns and the diamond together once, you've actually stolen it twice, I'm sure we can do it again," instructed Lightning. "I'm confident of success."

"Okay, let's do this," barked Jessica. "Let's go get our kids back."

Lightning crawled into the tunnel. He dug around the dirt to find the trap door. Jessica handed him a wooden bucket which he placed next to the trap door. Using the metal ring he yanked the thick wooden door up, managing to push his foot into the gap. Using the bucket for a more secure leverage, Lightning Dawn pulled the trap door up higher. The gap he created now looked wide enough to crawl through. He quickly used the bucket for a wedge to stop the wooden door from closing. Leaning into the blackness he spied the wooden ladder untouched by the fire.

"Good news. I think the secret room is intact," reported Lightning Dawn the second he crawled back outside into the fresh air. "When the smoke clears a bit more I'm going to descend the ladder for a look. I'd prefer you to stay out here."

Jessica put her hand on his shoulder. "How about we do it together?"

In sufferance, Lightning saw no other option. He must agree.

Lightning and Jessica sat on the grass waiting for the last of the smoke to clear. As they waited they started to plan how they might get the kids back. They waited ten minutes before climbing down the ladder into the secret room.

Lightning Dawn lit the kerosene lantern.

They walked over to the gun's cupboard. Jessica studied the outside frame. The floor to ceiling cupboard looked unscathed. Slowly she opened the first door. A small amount of smoke wafted into the air. The second it hit the thick timbers above their heads the smoke dispersed. Jessica squealed in delight.

"The boxes of ammunition and the guns are undamaged."

In less than a minute the weapons were leaning against the wall next to the ladder. Boxes of ammunition were collected and piled next to the rifles.

Jessica watched Lightning dig at the ground in the corner near the gun's cupboard. She waited patiently for him to unearth the wooden box, place the box on the narrow table, unwrapping the material. Seeing the blue diamond ring and the silver guns again painted a smile on Jessica's face. Checking the money bags she discovered not one gold nugget or a pound note had been scorched.

When they finally crawled from the secret room the gun's cupboard was empty. The silver guns, the blue diamond ring, and the money bags were buried in the dirt once again.

Lightning replaced the trap door, dismantled the tunnel and stood next to Jessica breathing in the fresh air.

"The guns, the diamond ring, the money and the gold nuggets are safe. Even if someone accidentally discovers the room we left no sign of their existence," said Lightning.

He studied the land searching for Forland or his men who might have been watching their every move.

"Have you seen anyone?" whispered Jessica.

"No, I haven't even seen a kangaroo or a rabbit."

They carried the dozen rifles and handguns over to where the horses were busy eating the grass. Jessica sat waiting while Lightning sprinted back for the boxes of ammunition.

"What happened to the saddles?" asked Jessica, turning in circles.

Lightning pointed to a small depression in the landscape. Jessica walked over. Even in the dark Lightning could see her smile. He walked to Jessica's side, placing his arm over her shoulder.

"I threw the reins, tools and grain bags at the large divot in the ground. I managed to get the saddles out through the bottom window. At the last second, I dived out through the window to escape the fire. I quickly dragged the saddles over and threw them on top of everything. I sprinted back to the barn door where I found you."

Jessica gave him a reminiscent look. A loving feeling swamped her mind making her body ache for Lightning's passion. Once again he'd proven to be her hero. The previous night felt wonderful. Keeping their relationship a secret seemed to heighten the thrill of their lovemaking. She didn't have to ask Lightning if he felt it too, she could tell by the way he held her at night.

“Seven large bags is a mean feat,” said Jessica, shelving her erotic thoughts.

“I thought we might be able to use some of the bags to hide the guns. I know we’ve agreed to go hunt Forland, however at the time I threw the bags out of the loft window I’d already made up my mind if you didn’t want to go get him I’d go on my own. There’s no way I want to see him owning the silver guns or the blue diamond. You’ve gone through too much to lose them now.”

“Amen,” added Jessica. “You have gone through a lot too. If I didn’t make my way to the Rosedale seeking your help this might be just another ordinary day for the both of us.”

“A day on my own,” responded Lightening Dawn quickly.

He took hold of Jessica, reeling her in. To seal his words he gave her a massive kiss. Jessica could feel him already wanting to make love again. She felt excited at the prospect. Tapping the palms of her hands against his chest, a giggle slipped.

“I know what we both want. First, we have work to do. It’s time to go hunting. There will be plenty of time for love making when the job’s done and we’re back home,” whispered Jessica, breathless.

“In our new home,” added Lightening.

The two hunters loaded the rifles and guns and clipped their gun belts around their waists. A serious expression swept Jessica’s face, looking up at Lightening.

“My Uncle lost his life in a gun battle for the simple reason he ran out of bullets.” She glanced at the ammunition boxes still unopened. “This is one gun fight we’re going to win. Looking at the amount of boxes of bullets we have left it’s a safe bet by sunset tonight Forland and his men will be dead.” She packed the remaining boxes of bullets into their one and only saddle bag, managing to clip the leather flap closed. “What we need is something else to help carry our excess.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t save anything else.”

“You did enough.” Jessica picked up her saddle. Before walking over to her horse she glanced about the farm. “I have a sneak feeling Constable Jones might actually be dead.”

The horses were saddled and the bags of guns tied to the saddles. Jessica and Lightening mounted their horses at the same time. He looked sideways at Jessica.

“I’m confident Forland won’t shoot us before we get to the cottage. Even though he’s a known murderer, he’s not stupid. He’ll think we won’t have the ring or the guns on us in case we’re double crossed. By my reckoning, he will think we’ve stashed the treasure close by.”

“I think the moment we cross to the other side of the river we should be extra careful. There’s one good thing, we know the scrub around here; Forland doesn’t.”

“Surprise is on our side,” stated Jessica. “Let’s ride.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

JESSICA POINTED at the long narrow tin shearing shed. A holding pen which could house one hundred sheep at a time butted up against the east wall. A wooden gate could be opened, allowing a single sheep at a time to be collected and dragged through the doorway to the shearer. Once the wool had been taken off the sheep the animal was pushed through the small shoot in the wall. It’ll taste freedom and sprint away to eat the grass.

Jessica could still smell the sweat from the men. They’d come on horseback. Stay till the sheep were done, collect their pay, and move on to the next sheep station. The last, few years their numbers dwindled dramatically due to the gold rush. Lightening was forced to shear most of the sheep himself. After their baby is born she’d line up next to Lightening holding the shearing clippers in her hand. She could already picture his inflexibility of her wanting to learn the craft and of course he’d tell her off in a gentle way. They’d wrestle in the dirt which will probably lead to making love.

Both riders dismounted their horse at the main door of the shearing shed.

Lightening stepped next to Jessica. “What’s up?”

“I thought we should stop here to see what else we might be able to use.”

“Good idea.” Lightening pulled open the rustic door. “It’s good to see Forland didn’t have enough time to burn the shearing shed.”

“Maybe he thought the blue diamond might be hidden somewhere inside.”

“It could explain the reason why.”

Lightening lit an old Kerosene lantern he swiped from the bent nail in the wall. Using its light Jessica gave the place a quick once-over. Rusty chains and hardened leather straps left over from the last lot of shearers were the only things remaining.

“There’s nothing we can use in this place except for the short length of frayed rope hanging from the rafter above your head,” mentioned Lightening.

Jessica looked up. Spying the rope, she yanked on the end. She received a shower of dust for her troubles.

“The rope might come in handy,” she coughed, waving the dust away.

Lightening wound the rope into a tight coil and led the way out of the shearing shed. Before Jessica could mount her horse he swept her off her feet, carrying her over to the sheep pen.

“Put me down, we don’t have time for games.”

Lightening stood her next to the water trough. He took up an empty bucket, filling it to the brim.

“There’s dirt and soot on your face. I thought you might like to have a quick wash before we take off into the scrub?”

Jessica cupped her hands under the water. Several splashes later, she saw her reflection giving an approving nod.

“I can see your pale face again,” mentioned Lightening. Placing the bucket on the ground, he cleaned his hair, face and arms before trotting over to his horse and mounted.

Jessica followed, kicking a ripped shirt across the floor. She glanced at Lightening. Her pupils sparkled in the shine of the kerosene lantern.

“The six-foot length of rope and the rag I just kicked will be perfect for what we need. Lightening, I need you to rip the shirt in half.”

He dismounted and walked over. In one clean yank, Lightening ripped the shirt in two pieces.

“We need some of the rifles wrapped in one-half of the shirt. I’ll wrap the handguns in the other side. We’ll tie the rope at the top of each half a shirt so the weapons can be slung over each side of the saddle. Using your tracking skills I believe we’ll be able to sneak up on Forland, taking him completely by surprise.”

“Won’t Forland be expecting us at the cottage? I’m sure he’ll be on guard.”

“I’m gambling he’ll be waiting to ambush us in the scrub,” warned Jessica.

“How sure are you?”

“I’m not. I believe I know enough about Forland to make a calculated guess. You might be able to understand the wind. I understand how Forland’s mind works. He’s a vindictive murderer. The only thing he wants is the diamond and the guns. He doesn’t care who he kills to obtain them. Hopefully, you’ll be able to tell if the tracks left by the horses are slowing so we won’t walk into a trap.”

Jessica and Lightening finished their preparations in less than five minutes. A determined look spread across Jessica’s face from the moment she mounted her horse.

“We have to get going. The moon has started to sink in the sky,” hinted Lightening, pointing.

“Any ideas on where Forland and his men might have entered the scrub?” asked Jessica, studying the ground in the dark.

“If I were to guess I think we should start at the camp site Jones made. I reckon by what you’ve told me about Forland, they’ve clashed. The story he confessed about pretending to be on Forland’s side might have been a lie.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” snorted Jessica.

“Money has a strange way of changing people,” hinted Lightening Dawn.

“What about you?” Jessica quizzed. “We have enough gold and money in our grasp to know the generations who follow us will never want for anything.”

“I have no need for white man’s money. I have everything. The Australian bush, a new home which is across the river, three kids to watch grow up and the most precious thing I have is you. Knowing you’re the mother of our unborn baby boy keeps a smile on my face.”

“What if our baby is a girl?”

“It makes no difference to me.”

Before leaning sideways to give Lightening Dawn a kiss, Jessica grinned. Rubbing her growing stomach she added. “At least I’m not showing yet.”

“It might be hard to explain,” hinted Lightening Dawn, thoughtfully. He gave his horse a couple of firm kicks to make it trot towards Jones’ camp fire.

Few sheep scattered at hearing the horses. A kangaroo hopped away. A fox loitering around ran off to hide. Approaching the fire both Lightening and Jessica slowed their horse to a walk. At a good distance, they dismounted. Both cocked their rifles ready to shoot.

"We'll get closer by walking next to the horses. If nothing else they'll provide us some cover," whispered Lightening.

The two walked slowly towards the dying embers of the fire, staring into the scrub. While Lightening concerned himself about being jumped by Forland's men, Jessica felt confident Forland or his men wouldn't be seen the Rosedale side of the river.

Closing in on the fire they saw the figure of a man lying face down. He looked to be no more than three feet from the center of the fire. Jessica changed direction to be closer to Lightening. Gluing her gaze on the lump on the ground, she whispered.

"I believe we're safe. I just don't like this."

"I think we should stop here to assess the situation."

"Agreed," whispered Jessica.

They squatted and studied the entire area. Nothing moved. Nothing seemed out of place. Even the breeze was gone.

"If we use the horses for cover we'll be able to get close enough to see if the lump is Jones or one of Forland's men," whispered Jessica.

Lightening Dawn nodded. "The lump next to the fire hasn't moved since we first saw it. I've searched the scrub close to the fire. I can't detect any movement."

"I've got an idea."

Jessica pushed her hand close to the hind leg of her horse, picking up a small rock half the size of her hand. She winked at Lightening. In an underarm lob she tossed the rock high into the air. Waiting for the rock to land made her feel uneasy.

The rock came crashing down in the exact middle of the fire, blasting embers into the air. Jessica and Lightening stared at the figure waiting for it to jump to its feet.

It didn't move.

"I think the figure on the ground might be Jones," said Lightening. "You stay here, I'll take a look."

Jessica touched him on the shoulder. "I'll watch your back."

Lightening handed Jessica his rifle and pulled his revolver out of his holster. Using his horse for cover he slowly walked towards the man on the ground. When he reached what remained of the fire, he again searched the area. Still seeing nothing unusual, he focused on the man on the ground. Stepping up to the figure, Lightening gave it a kick on the foot. He squatted, cocking his revolver close to the man's ear, expecting him to jump up or say something.

He still didn't move.

Lightening checked for a pulse. He shook his head at discovering the man died facing the fire. Looking back at Jessica he waved her over. The moment he knew she started to walk his way he refocused on the figure. Grief gripped his spirit over Jones' death.

Jessica stood next to Lightening. She felt the same as he did. She sighed.

"I guess we should say a quick prayer."

"It might have to wait. I'm not positive this area is safe."

Both looked again at the scrub, scrutinizing every bush and tree. Still seeing nothing unusual Jessica turned to face Jones.

"God I ask you to accept this man into your house. To me, he was a good man. Amen."

Lightening nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied a pattern in the dirt. He squatted, dragging Jessica down.

"Take a look at this."

She looked to where his finger pointed. "F," she whispered.

"F" for Forland?" questioned Lightening. "Jones must have been trying to draw his name in the dirt when he died, hoping someone will see and understand it."

Jessica flipped the body over. Lightening studied the clothing.

"He didn't die of a bullet wound," reported Jessica.

"No, too easy to see he'd been murdered. Maybe they fought and Forland broke his neck," suggested Jessica.

"Snake bites," blurted Lightening Dawn confidently, taking a closer look at Jones' legs, hands and arms. "There are lots small holes in his clothes."

“Multiple snake bites.”

Lightening walked over to the fire, studying the cooling embers. In the middle of the campfire he found what he began searching for; a headless snake. Reaching in, he picked it up. “This one is a tiger snake.”

Jessica pointed to another carcass on the other side of the embers. “It looks like a brown snake.”

“Jones would have died in a few minutes,” advised Lightening.

“If nothing else I’m glad he died quick,” whispered Jessica. “It’s unusual for a snake to bite someone four times.”

“Even rarer to come so close to a fire,” added Lightening.

“I’m wondering if Forland found a brown snake and a tiger snake, snuck up on Jones and threw them towards him. It could account for the multiple puncture wounds.”

“Horrible way to die,” jeered Lightening.

“I reckon Forland might have enjoyed watching Jones die,” snarled Jessica.

“He’s a horrid man. At least we know who killed him and how. We have to be extra careful here on in. If Forland can do such a heartless thing to a lawman, I’d hate to think what else he’s capable of doing just to get his hands on the blue diamond.”

“I think it’s time to finish our hunting,” hinted Jessica.

Lightening nodded. Jessica collected the horses and kicked dirt onto the embers. Lightening began to study the area around the fire. When he discovered the trail left by Forland he slowly walked over to the scrub. “This is where Forland came through the bush. He certainly watched Jones for a time.”

The two riders walked into the scrub, dragging the horses behind them. Almost immediately what meager amount of light came from the moon vanished. The dark scrub felt claustrophobic. Jessica spied a few animal eyes watching them. When she looked directly at the animals they quickly vanished.

“The trail seems easy to follow,” stated Jessica, walking single file behind Lightening’s horse. Several times she got too close and was swatted in the face by its tail.

“Yes, too easy,” whispered Lightening. “If the trail doesn’t deviate it’ll come to the new Rosedale. I hope Langston hasn’t been shot.”

The two hunters came to the river. Jessica felt relieved at seeing the surface of the water shining in the moonlight. Venturing into the ankle deep water a few nerves twitched in her back when she remembered if it Lightening Dawn didn’t save her she’d have drowned the last time the river swelled from the storm.

On Langston’s side of the river, they stopped in the middle of a small clearing. Making sure the horses were busy eating they left them. Carrying two rifles each and two revolvers and enough bullets to make their pockets bulge and gun belts feeling heavy, Lightening Dawn and Jessica walked away from the river bank. One hundred feet from Langston’s homestead they crouched behind a fallen tree to watch.

“The homestead looks dark and quiet,” whispered Lightening. “Maybe Langston has already left.”

“He should have. He did agree on the deal.”

“I reckon if Forland got to him he might be dead.”

The two watched the home and the grounds for a few more minutes. Jessica noted Langston kept the area around the house free of long grass and leaves. Jessica could still hear his raspy voice.

‘Keep the area around the house clear in the case of a bushfire. If one happened to start you must have a place to hide. Underground is the best place.’

He boasted he’d found the safest spot. No amount of questioning ever shed light on where he built the refuge. Well before her thirteenth birthday she decided he’d been playing her for a sucker.

Jessica felt the temperature start to fall. She glanced up at the sky. “It’ll be daylight soon. If we want to search the house I suggest we go now, while it’s still too dark to see us.”

In a squat run, Lightening Dawn led the charge towards the house. They just made it to the verandah at the rear corner of the homestead when the figure of a man opened the kitchen door and stepped onto the verandah. He stretched before settling himself down by leaning on the verandah post rolling a cigarette. He seemed oblivious to the fact his every move was being studied.

The average size man wore a miner’s shirt and trousers. His boots were short. His revolver looked unclean and worn. The man puffed smoke into the air acting totally relaxed at being on the verandah.

“He’s not Langston,” whispered Lightening. “He doesn’t smoke.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m almost certain. He told me a couple of years ago he detests the tobacco smell. He claims the smell drives the Kangaroos away.”

A second man joined the first on the verandah. He too wore a gun holster strapped to his leg.

“Any sign of the black man or the woman?” asked the second man.

“No. I reckon they’re so scared they’re doin’ exactly what Forland wants? When he’s got his hands on the blue diamond there’s nothin’ gonna stop him from shoot’n the woman.” He gave a sharp chuckle. “Provided she makes it to Forland alive?”

The man’s rough Australian accent sounded hard to understand even for Jessica. She looked sideways at Lightning listening to the remainder of their conversation.

“Yair, I reckon you might be right, mate.”

“Forland is a clever man, leaving us here waitin’ for the woman and the black man to come by. I reckon they’ll come ridin’ past in the next hour or so. We’ll bump them off and deliver the diamond ring ourselves.”

“Yair we might get a bonus for doin’ his dirty work.”

“Maybe he’ll let us have the solid silver colt 45’s.”

“You reckon?”

“Hope so.”

The moment their conversation ended Jessica’s heart skipped a beat. Lightning grabbed her by the arm so he could guide her behind the wall of the woodshed.

The moment the men started talking again Jessica beckoned Lightning to follow her back to the scrub. Directly behind the house the scrub closed to within thirty feet of the home. They quietly pushed the leaves apart and hid behind a fallen tree.

Lightning whispered in Jessica’s ear. “This hiding place is going to have to do.”

“We need to move more to the right for a clearer shot.” She pointed at the next tree. “The gum tree is four feet around the girth. It’ll be perfect.”

Keeping a close watch on the men, Lightning moved silently through the bush, stopping on the right side of the tree. He lifted his rifle to eye level, guarding Jessica. In seconds, she hugged the left-hand side of the tree. She cocked her rifle, lifting hers to eye level.

“I’ll shoot the one on the right,” whispered Lightning.

“Okay,” replied Jessica.

“When you’re ready,” mentioned Lightning.

Jessica inhaled then held her breath. She relaxed her shoulders and tightened every muscle in her arms and back. She slowly applied more pressure to the trigger. The rifle felt glued to the side of the tree trunk. The men were talking and smoking their cigarettes. One of the men lifted his head to blow smoke into the still air. The other started to count on his fingers, summing up his share of the money Forland will give him for handing over the blue diamond and the silver guns.

Jessica moved her foot slightly to get more comfortable.

A twig snapped.

The two men standing on the verandah froze, pulling their guns from the holsters. They squared themselves to the scrub, searching for what made the noise.

“On three,” whispered Lightning.

“We don’t have the time. Shoot.”

The two men on the verandah heard two rifle shots. They looked at each other before crumpling to the verandah.

Jessica and Lightning Dawn watched the two dead men for well over a minute. Jessica expected to see Forland at the upstairs window trying to locate exactly where the shots were fired from.

The homestead remained dark and tomb quiet. The curtains covering the windows remained untouched.

Searching the scrub to the left, right and behind them, Jessica didn’t see Forland or his other two men anywhere. She felt confident they were at another location, waiting for the two dead men to drag their bodies to him. Jessica faced Lightning.

“The only way to be certain Forland isn’t hiding inside is to go search the interior of the house.”

“Let’s hope for a good outcome. Stay here I’ll go take a look.”

“I think we should go together,” hinted Jessica.

“I’m not risking your life.”

“What if we split up? I’ll go for the rear of the house, you go to the front. If we hear a shot or a click we’ll be able to dive back behind the wood shed. It’s the closest object to the house.”

Lightening reluctantly agreed. He knew he didn't stand a chance of talking Jessica out of the thought once she made up her mind. He placed his rifle against the tree. Jessica copied. Both set themselves to run holding their handguns at the ready.

"Okay, let's go," whispered Lightening.

They made a move. The small tree at the edge of the clearing was their first stop. They searched each window on the upper floor before focusing on the windows on the ground floor. Neither Jessica nor Lightening could detect any movement at the windows. The clearing and the scrub remained deserted. Lightening pointed to the left-hand side of the wood shed. They ran across the narrow clearing. Undetected they easily made it to the wood shed. Again they listened and watched the house. While Jessica squatted at the rear wall, Lightening quickly made his way to the verandah. For the first time, he felt helpless. If someone fired a shot at Jessica he wouldn't know if she'd been wounded or killed.

Lightening quietly stepped onto the verandah. For a few seconds, he stared at the dead men. Pointing his gun at them he slowly walked towards the first window. Even though he'd studied the verandah boards under his feet looking for a loose one, a board creaked. He froze, fearing the worst. The first window couldn't have been any more than four feet from where he stood. Glancing at the window then at the door Lightening needed to see any movement and still have enough time to get out of the way before a shot could be fired.

The only noise came from a kookaburra sitting on a branch high up in a gum tree.

Lightening relaxed slightly at hearing the bird's laugh. If there were no birds in the immediate area he'd know someone other than he and Jessica were around. The laugh of the kookaburra meant he should be safe. Any danger it felt will see the bird take flight.

Lightening Dawn walked to the first window, looking through the glass. The room still appeared to be in semi-darkness. Under different circumstances, it seemed warm and inviting. A chair near the open fire had been set up in a way so the person could sit directly in front to feel maximum warmth. A small table sat next to the chair. An empty glass was placed in the exact middle of the round table.

Lightening moved on towards the closed door. He hovered over the men they shot before squatting to make sure they were dead. Both were shot in the heart. Lightening swiped their guns, placing one in his holster the other in his belt. He reached out opening the door to the homestead. Viewing the inside of the kitchen he saw nobody. He entered and shut the door. A quick search of the walk in cupboard revealed nobody lay in wait to ambush him. Lightening walked from room to room making a thorough search.

The he came to the stairs.

Slowly Lightening climbed the spiral staircase, his gun at the ready. Halfway up the stairs he stopped to listen. The whole house seemed to be graveyard quiet. Glancing at the wooden boards under his feet, the question how Langston could build such expensive stairs floated into his thoughts. He climbed another two steps before listening again. On each step, he stopped for a couple of seconds to listen till he reached the top.

Lightening spied three doors. Finding the first two rooms empty he made his way to the third room. The closed door looked solid. He pushed his ear against the wooden surface, listening for noises. Hearing nothing he felt a little frustrated.

'It might be a good thing,' he thought.

Reaching for the doorknob, Lightening stepped to the side as he turned it. The doorknob rotated in silence. In one firm push, he opened the door and back stepped away expecting to hear bullets being fired from a gun. When he decided it might be safe to have a look he stepped back to the door and glanced inside the room.

He saw a large bed. A three-foot square mirror hung on the wall opposite the bed giving Lightening Dawn the perfect view of the whole room. The mirror showed him the gruesome scene. Lightening lowered his gun and entered the room. He marched across the floor to the shattered glass window and pushed his head out into the fresh air.

Jessica felt nervous. For over seven minutes she waited to hear a gunshot. At the rear of the house, she snuck along the verandah to the window. She looked into the empty room. The door to the remainder of the house was closed.

"Jessica, up here," called Lightening.

She jumped. Her feet started to tingle at the fright. She looked up at the second level. Lightening stuck his arms out the window so he could start to wave at Jessica to come. She quickly retraced her steps to the other side of the house and stepped onto the verandah. She didn't stop to view the dead

men. She wanted to get inside the house just in case Forland lay in wait for her to be flushed out of the scrub. She closed and locked the door. Sidestepping to the kitchen window she watched for any sign of Forland.

The scrub and the clearing were still void of movement. The whole area seemed ghostly quiet. Satisfied Forland wasn't watching Jessica turned from the window. The room looked reasonably large. A rectangle shaped table had been placed in the middle. Four chairs were pushed neatly underneath; one chair for each side of the table. The wooden sink under the window looked new. The wood fired oven sat in a slight alcove in the wall closest to the sink. In the middle of the wall directly opposite the window, Jessica spied a swinging door. Before she could react, it swung open. She jumped. Lifting her gun she aimed it at the man standing in the doorway holding open the door. Goosebumps erupted on her arms. Sweat broke out at her hairline on her forehead.

"You need to take a look up stairs," insisted Lightning Dawn.

Jessica slipped her Smith and Wesson into the holster, exhaling heavily. Before she could respond the man walked across the room. He reached out to hold her hand.

"Lightening you scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry."

"I could've shot you."

"I'm glad you didn't."

"From now on I think we should stick together. I don't want to lose our baby due to being shocked out of my mind."

Lightening kissed Jessica's forehead. "Okay, it's a deal."

"What do you want me to see upstairs?"

"You'll see," said Lightning, leading Jessica by the hand.

Not one step on the staircase made a creaking noise which surprised Jessica. The dark red balustrade felt smooth, well polished in eucalyptus oil. At the top of the stairs, they came to a narrow passage. Lightning walked past the first two rooms, stopping outside the third. Jessica knew the moment she saw inside the room it had been used for the main bedroom. A four post bed sat in the middle of the room. A square oak coloured table was off to one side. The light weight curtain hanging over the window slowly moved. Jessica started to walk over. Lightning gently tugged on her shoulder. She gave him a puzzled look.

Instantly she saw the reason.

"It's okay," she reported.

Lightening held her hand to reassure. Together they walked across the floor to the shattered window. The walls were peppered by bullets. Mr. Langston struggled to lean awkwardly against the wall next to the bed. The moment Jessica saw the man's face he looked up. Blood oozed from his mouth and his eyes.

"Jessica Hayes," he croaked.

"Mr. Langston, I'll go get a doctor."

"Forget it. I'm surprised I've lasted this long."

"If you won't allow me to get the doctor I'll do my best to help you."

Langston shook his head. "There's not a lot you can do. Death has come. The black shape I saw coming through the wall a while ago must have been at least seven feet tall. Its evil black eye sockets stared at me. I can tell you I have never been more scared in my life. When I saw this thing come at me goose bumps erupted on my arms. The creature's top half looked more solid than the bottom half. It floated on air. It craned its neck to have a closer look. I didn't have the energy to try to swipe it away. The four words it spoke will haunt me for all eternity. 'I will return soon.' When it ascended through the roof and vanished I prayed to the man upstairs for the first time in my life."

Jessica shook her head. She reached out, pulling the blanket off the bed, placing it over the shivering man. Lightning helped her to prop Langston upright.

"Thanks for your thoughtfulness in my last moments." He glanced up at Lightning Dawn. "You and I haven't seen eye to eye since the day you walked onto the Rosedale. I still don't like you. However, I can tell you'll look after Jessica."

Lightening stood his ground watching the man take his last breaths.

"Jessica Hayes, when I'm gone I want you to do something for me. Under the bed in the floor at the exact center of the room, there's a short wooden panel. Push on the end closest to me. The end of floorboard will lift. What you'll find is self-explanatory. The two men on the balcony are dead. They tried to sneak in through the window. They ate shotgun pellets from my antique gun. My biggest

mistake was to climb through the window onto the balcony to see if they were alive. I planned to kick them off the balcony. The second man wasn't quite dead. He shot me twice before I could pull my gun and shoot him dead. The moment I felt the first bullet I knew I'll be dead soon. I managed to climb back through the window to where I am now. At least I'll die in my bedroom. Funny thing, the window to the balcony, I always thought I'd put a door in. It doesn't matter now."

Jessica walked quickly across the room, snatching up the large bowl of water before returning. She pulled the sheet off the bed, dabbing it into the water. She reached over, wiping Langston's forehead.

"Always wanting to help someone, Eh?"

Jessica patted Langston's arm. "Guilty as charged."

Langston looked directly ahead, past Jessica and Lightning, his eyes protruding from their sockets.

"The death angel has returned. It looks as though I'm out of time."

Jessica looked over her shoulder to where she thought he might be looking. She saw nothing.

Langston's voice sounded no stronger than a weak whisper.

"I'm not sure what's going on, the dark figure has gone. In its place, I see a bright light. There's another figure. He's dressed in white. He's holding out his hand waiting for me to come."

Jessica's sympathetic expression wrinkled her brow. She saw Langston close his eyes. As his body went limp he exhaled his last breath. She stood, looking at Lightning.

"He was a good man," he stated.

"I really couldn't have asked for a nicer neighbour. His only fault, he didn't want anyone catching fish on his side of the river. When we return we'll see to it he gets a proper burial."

"I'll wrap Langston in the blanket and carry him downstairs," whispered Lightning.

"Thanks. I'm sure he'd like the attention even though he always said don't bother. When you come back we'll take a look under the bed."

Lightning finished up and returned in a couple of minutes. He found Jessica trying to move the bed.

"Stop," he scolded. "I'm not having the mother of my child moving such heavy objects."

Lightning pulled the bed away from the middle the room as Jessica searched for the short floorboard Langston mentioned.

"I see it," called Jessica. She squatted, pushing on the end. The short one foot long and six-inch wide board popped up. She pulled it away to reveal a hole in the floor.

"My turn," mentioned Lightning.

He pushed his hand into the space. Almost immediately he felt material. He yanked it out of the hole. After placing it on the bed he unraveled it.

Jessica swiped up ten bundles of twenty-pound notes. Lightning let out a low whistle before returning to the cavity in the floor to fish around the space between the floors for more material. He pulled out a further five bundles. Jessica un-wrapped the material and found more than fifty gold nuggets.

"What a sneaky old man. He's been accumulating gold nuggets and money for years," reported Lightning.

"I always wondered how he could afford to buy the materials to build such a luxurious house," added Jessica. "Now I know."

"I've never seen him panning for gold in the river," stated Lightning.

"He must have been digging it out of the ground. I bet if we search this place we might find a mine. He did say the contents of the floor cavity are self-explanatory."

"It's possible," replied Lightning. "No wonder he always sat at the window watching his land. The cows must've been used to stop anyone from thinking he'd discovered gold."

Jessica scooped the money and the gold nuggets back into the bags, placing them back in the hole in the floor.

"When we move in we'll find a more suitable place for the money. First, thing we have to do is rescue the kids."

Jessica and Lightning put the bed back exactly how they found it. Lightning threw the two bushrangers off the balcony and led Jessica out of the house via the back door. They snuck across the cleared land, making it back to the horses, incident free.

Jessica checked the time remaining. "We have nine hours before Forland carries out his threat to kill one of the kids. How long will it take to get to the cottage?"

"Half an hour by horseback."

“We’ll have to walk most of the way. So if we arrive inside an hour we’ll have plenty of time to plan what we can do.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

JESSICA AND Lightening had ridden their horse for fifteen minutes before dismounting.

“From here on in we have to walk,” whispered Jessica.

“We also have to keep a look out for the two remaining men and Forland.”

“Yes, the man himself,” spat Jessica. She unclipped her Smith and Wesson, pulling it from the holster ready for the final gun fight.

By mid-morning Jessica and Lightening were crouching behind a thick part of the scrub staring at the cottage. A light mist hovered amongst the trees. No light came from inside the two-storey house.

“I can feel eyes searching for us,” whispered Jessica.

“I can too. There aren’t any kookaburras in the trees either.”

Jessica gave him a blank look.

“If the kookaburras remain silent they sense danger. The only animals I’ve seen are a couple of koala bears sleeping in the forks of a tree.”

“I’ll remember the fact for future reference.”

Lightening pointed to where the scrub grew right up to the side wall of the house. “I’ll use the scrub for cover and go take a look.”

Jessica reached out in time to stop him. “I don’t want you to go. I’m sure Forland will have a gun trained on the scrub from one of the two rooms in the cottage. We have to think of another way.”

Lightening Dawn looked at the sky. “We have to do something soon. It won’t be long before the sun will have evaporated the mist.”

Jessica hesitantly nodded. Refocusing on the house she tried to think up a suitable plan.

“Forland’s picked the perfect place in which to wait. The only spot to hide seems to be right where we are.”

“The odds certainly aren’t in our favour. The only thing I can think of is when we see someone, shoot him,” whispered Lightening, shrugging his shoulders.

“Maybe we should call out to Forland? He’ll come to the window when he sees me stepping from behind the tree. I’m gambling I won’t be shot. When you see someone, shoot him. I’ll dive for cover. At least if one man is dead the odds will be more even.”

Lightening shook his head at the idea. “The cost of the gamble is too high.”

“Forland wants his diamond. I’ll tell him to come out of the house if he wants it. It’ll be your job to shoot him.”

Lightening looked shocked at the proposal.

“If you have another plan let’s hear it?” whispered Jessica.

Before she heard an answer Jessica spied movement in the loft. A short figure walked to the window, lifting it slowly. She heard no noise. Jessica tapped Lightening on the shoulder, pointing at the upstairs window. A second person appeared, followed by a third person, much smaller than the other two. Lightening and Jessica were intrigued at what the three figures were doing. They saw the tallest figure climb bravely onto a branch which bent under his weight. The tip scraped the house. Slowly he made his way towards the trunk of the mighty red gum by holding onto the branch above his head. What looked like a thin rope made from tightly woven lengths of short pieces of hay trailed behind him? The moment he reached the main trunk he turned to face the window. He lifted his hand, beckoning the others to follow.

The second figure, shorter than the first, holding onto the thin twine climbed out of the window and commenced to copy the first escape artist. When he got to the tree he too faced the window. After handing over the twine, the first one walked back to the house, climbing back through the window. The third escape artist clambered out of the window, dashing to the tree trunk. Immediately the figure started climbing down. The fourth tiny figure was picked up. Clinging to the neck of the first they started for the tree trunk. Though the branch sagged, threatening to break, they made it to the main tree trunk. In silence, the three figures slowly descended to the ground.

Jessica whispered in Lightning's ear. "We have to make our way over to the tree. We'll hug the scrub."

Lightning Dawn led the way. Jessica kept the house in her sight hoping the three men inside didn't know what was going on outside. The moment they made it to the tree one of the figures ran towards Jessica, her black face showing off her white teeth.

"Gip, Jarrah and Cobar you got away," whispered Jessica, ruffling their hair. "You were all brave kids. If I'd known what you were up to I have insisted you don't do it."

"I'm happy you didn't know," whispered Jarrah.

"Climbing through the window and down the tree was easy," boasted Cobar.

"We told the little white boy if he wanted to see his mum again he needed to be brave and very quiet," whispered Gip.

Jessica picked Daniel up, kissing his forehead. "You were brave."

"I want to go home," cried Daniel, tears forming in his eyes.

Jessica wiped them away then put her finger to his lips.

"You will and soon."

Lightning reached out for Daniel. "Come, it's time to go."

The group gave the house an extra wide arc before walking quietly through the scrub towards the horses. When they finally made it the sun started to evaporate the mist.

"We don't have much time," whispered Lightning. "Forland and his men will soon discover the children are missing. They'll work out how they escaped and come searching."

"We'd better get back to Langston's house," said Jessica.

"I've been thinking maybe the place should have a name," hinted Lightning.

"What do you suggest?"

"The New Rosedale might be good."

"The name grows on you," added Gip.

They blazed a trail through the scrub directly for the New Rosedale. They burst through the bush, stopping at the verandah. The group entered the kitchen in double quick time. After a careful search of the downstairs rooms, they ran upstairs to look out of the balcony window in preparation for the three remaining men to arrive.

Lightning, Jessica, the boys, and Gip checked the rifles weren't damaged before placing two in each room. The boys took a room each watching for a sign the men were hiding somewhere close. Daniel sat on the floor next to the bed. He took to pouting and folded his arms. One good thing, he remained quiet.

"While we wait for the final showdown I'll sprint downstairs to see if there's any food, water, and guns," advised Jessica.

Lightning watched her walk out of the room before staring back at the bush.

Downstairs in a small room where the floor looked a little dirty Jessica found a bed. The room felt cramped the moment she entered. It didn't have a window making the area quite dark. Dropping to her knees she looked under the single bed. She found a wooden box. After pulling it out she opened the lid. A man's dark red checkered shirt covered the contents. Jessica pulled the material away, staring gob smacked at the contents. Ammunition and two revolvers were inside. Grinning, she again looked under the bed. She frowned at what she thought she found. Jessica stood. Using her knees, she pushed the bed to the other side of the room.

"What have we here?" she whispered.

Lightning stood at the doorway to the room.

"I grew concerned when I couldn't hear you walking around the house. I came to investigate. I found eggs in the pantry and plenty of biscuits." He stopped his report. His voice sounded angry. "You didn't move another bed?"

"Yes, I did. Don't be too upset. I used my knees to move it. Lightning, take a look at the floor."

He sighed and walked into the room, studying the floorboards. In the exact center of the room, he spied a trap door.

"This looks familiar," he said.

Jessica helped him pull up the solid wooden door. They both stared down into the dark. On one side of the three foot squared opening a ladder was bolted against the wall. Lightning ran off to the kitchen, bringing back a lantern. He lit it. Using the rope they brought from the shearing shed at the original Rosedale he tied one end to the handle of the lantern and lowered it into the cavity.

Twelve feet down the lantern sat level at the bottom.

Lightening and Jessica quickly climbed down the ladder. They stood looking at a tunnel which seemed to go on forever. Dirt fell away from the wall when Jessica touched the side.

"Look at what's just happened," she exclaimed, scraping more dirt away from the walls. "I reckon there's a gold vein running along this entire tunnel. How deep it goes I can only imagine."

"Langston must have been digging this tunnel for over thirty years," stated Lightening. "No wonder I never saw him."

"Now we know where he got his money from to buy the materials to build this luxurious homestead," blurted Jessica.

"We might be able to use this tunnel to escape if things go bad," suggested Lightening.

"We don't know if it goes anywhere," reasoned Jessica.

"It must lead to somewhere I can feel a draft."

"Now you've mentioned it, I can too. It feels quite strong."

The two climbed out of the hole, closed the trap door, replacing the bed. On their way back upstairs they again marveled at the interior of the house.

Jessica stopped on the top stair. Lightening looked over his shoulder at her.

"This place is ours. We have bought a house which sits on a vein of gold."

"The only thing standing in our way is Forland," added Lightening.

She gave him a heartless glare. "Not for much longer."

They heard Gip whistle. Jessica and Lightening sprinted upstairs and into the main bedroom.

"I saw a man," whispered Gip, pointing at the closest tree.

Jessica pulled her away from the window. Lightening stared at the tree in question.

"I don't see anyone," he said.

"Me neither," reported Jessica.

"I did see him."

Jessica looked directly at Gip. "I believe you."

"I want you in the other room watching from a different angle," insisted Lightening. Glancing out the window he saw a moving shadow. "Forland and his men have arrived."

Jessica saw one of the men crouching half-heartedly behind a tree. She lifted her rifle, took careful aim, pulling the trigger. The man fell to the ground. Forland shot at the window. The wood close to where Jessica stood splintered, showering the room. Jessica and Lightening moved to the next room where Gip stood guard. The girl heard them coming and fired a single bullet. Almost immediately a couple of shots were returned.

Jessica pushed her back against the wall next to the window. She waited for silence before shooting a bullet at the exact place she hoped Forland might be hiding. Bark erupted off the tree and into his eyes.

Forland's booming voice came from the scrub.

"Jessica Hayes, give me what I want. When I have the diamond in my possession I'll walk away. You'll never see or hear of me again."

Jessica replied by shooting another bullet at the tree.

Forland's plan was to have his hired help forgotten about. The moment either man found a way into the house he'd launch a surprise attack. At the same time, Jarrah and Cobar saw one of the men they pulled the trigger of their rifle. The man died where he fell.

Jessica saw another man closing in from another direction. She aimed and shot. The bullet embedded into his arm forcing him out into the open. The few seconds he stood in full view, Lightening Dawn put a bullet in his chest.

"Forland you're all alone out there," yelled Jessica. "If you want to live I advise you to leave."

"The moment you fall asleep I'll shoot you dead," yelled Forland.

The sun felt warm streaming through the window. Jessica could feel her skin starting to sweat under her shirt. She knew Forland had the upper hand. Four kids and two adults couldn't live in the house for too long before they'd run out of food and water.

Another shot came from behind the tree.

"I have to give Forland what he wants," Jessica hinted.

Lightening took hold of her shirt collar, pulling her in close.

"No, we mustn't. If he gets what he wants nothing will stop him from murdering us. By my reckoning, he'll make sure you die last."

"I'd have to agree," replied Jessica. "There are four kids in the house and I'm pregnant, what do you suggest?"

Lightening fell silent for a few moments. Jessica walked to the window. Before she could yell at Forland, Lightening sprinted across the floor. He grabbed her, yanking her away from the window just in time. A bullet came through the window and wedged into the wall near the doorway.

"I have an idea," said Lightening. "We'll use the tunnel. We'll find out where it leads, sneak up on Forland and shoot him where he's hiding."

"Okay. If something were to go wrong at least the kids won't be hurt."

Jessica called for the kids to follow. Lightening picked up Daniel and sprinted down the stairs after Jessica. The group ran into the small windowless room. Lightening shut the door. He pushed the bed across the room so it blocked the doorway. Lifting the trap door, Lightening lit the lantern. He pointed into the opening and gave Cobar the lantern.

"Go now."

Jarrah followed his brother down the ladder. Gip went next, followed by Jessica. Lightening came last carrying Daniel. When he stood at the bottom of the cavity he placed him on the ground and ascended the ladder to close the trap door. Lightening quickly caught the group walking slowly along the tunnel.

"Cobar, speed it up," he called.

The group marched along the tunnel in the light of the lantern.

"The gold vein is thick and long," Jessica whispered, studying the walls as she walked.

The tunnel narrowed slightly. It bent left before swinging to the right, following the gold vein. A few minutes of walking saw them at a wider section the size of an average bedroom. Lightening spied another lantern hanging from a pole. He lit the wick. The extra light showed off Langston's handy work. Wooden boxes were stockpiled on one side of the room. Each of the boxes looked to be the same size; two feet long, one foot wide and one foot high.

"There must be at least thirty boxes in here," reported Jessica.

"Let's see what's in them?" mumbled Gip.

Jarrah, Cobar, and Lightening stepped over to the first row. They prized the wooden lid off one of the boxes using a pick which they found on the ground next to the wall.

Jessica held the kerosene lantern so it hovered over the box. She nearly dropped it from shock.

"The box is full of gold nuggets," blurted Gip, whistling.

Lightening Dawn snatched up another two boxes, repeating the same procedure using the pick which ended in the same result.

"There has to be a small fortune in each box and a larger fortune still in the walls," added Jessica. Her hands were trembling at feeling overwhelmed by stumbling upon a gold vein and striking it rich right in the middle of the gold fields.

"We have to keep moving," whispered Lightening. "Forland will be growing restless when he doesn't hear a shot being fired. We don't want him to investigate the reason too soon."

Jessica's eyes sparkled in the light of the lantern. "I've an idea. Boys and Lightening, grab a box of gold each. We'll flush Forland out by using what he craves the most in life."

"Will your idea work?" questioned Lightening.

"I believe so. When it comes to money, Forland thinks of nothing else. By the time we get back to the upstairs room I'll have the last part of my plan down pat. Forland is in for one hell of a surprise."

Carrying three boxes of gold, the group made their way back along the tunnel. Lightening hauled the boxes one at a time up the ladder. Jessica and the kids replaced the room exactly how they found it while Lightening Dawn carried the boxes upstairs into the main bedroom.

Focusing on Gip, Jarrah, and Cobar, Jessica told them of her plan.

"Lightening and I will shoot ten bullets each at the trees. I'm betting Forland will think we're out of bullets. When you hear three separate clicks from our rifles I need you three to start throwing gold nuggets at the tree Forland is hiding behind. Boys, seeing how you are a little stronger than Gip I want you to throw the first two nuggets. They have to land past the base of the tree. I want Forland to see the nuggets. Each time it's your turn I need you to throw a little shorter. Gip, after the boys have thrown three nuggets each it will be your turn to throw. I want you to aim at the tree. The nuggets you throw have to land short of the tree. I want the gold nuggets to flush Forland from his hiding place."

Gip and the boys carried the wooden boxes to the window in the next room.

Jessica picked up Daniel Snowe, sitting him on the floor on the other side of the bed away from the window. She ruffled his hair.

"I need you to sit quietly and not move till I say. Can you do it?"

Daniel nodded.

Jessica swiped the two rifles leaning against the wall and marched to the window. Lightning reloaded his two Smith and Wesson revolvers and two rifles. He took Jessica's rifles, checking to make sure they were fully loaded. Jessica reloaded her two colt 45s by snatching the ammunition out of the bag they brought. She pushed her back against the wall next to the window, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Hey Forland, prepare to explain your actions to your maker."

"Let me warn you girlie, if I don't see you dead by noon, something's gone wrong. If I die the postal worker will be sending a telegraph message to Melbourne. The message will be sent to my son in England telling him where he can find the blue diamond ring. He'll be on the next boat out here. For you, there will be no rest unless you hand me the blue diamond."

"How do I know you'll keep your word and not shoot me?"

"My word is my bond."

Jessica gave a snappy answer.

"I don't think much of your word. You cheat people out of their possessions by murdering them. You feel nothing over their death. I told you the first time we met Forland if I could get my hands on a gun I'd shoot you. Guess what, I'm holding a gun."

Jessica nodded at Lightning. Aiming his rifle at the tree Forland decided to hide behind, he pulled the trigger. When the rifle was empty Jessica pumped bullets into the tree using her colt 45's.

Twenty shots later, after a short pause in the noise, Forland stepped out from behind the tree. Jessica and Lightning saw him swaying, clutching his chest. He placed his hand against the tree to steady himself. Groaning, he dropped his revolver at his feet. Slowly he turned his head towards the house before dropping to his knees.

Lightning grinned at Jessica. He went to walk out onto the balcony. Jessica shook her head.

"It's a fake groan," she whispered. "Now is the time for the second part of my plan."

She signaled for Lightning to pull the trigger of his empty revolver three times.

Forland quickly straightened. Diving back behind the tree he began to shoot twelve bullets into the room.

"I told you I know how the man thinks," whispered Jessica, quickly moving to the side of the window.

"Thanks for the warning. I'd be dead by now."

Lightning Dawn and Jessica placed their guns back into their holster, cocking their rifles ready to fire.

"I want to be the first one to shoot him," quipped Jessica, looking directly at Lightning.

He gave her a sharp nod before returning his attention to the trees.

Forland reloaded one of his guns, waiting for the shooting to restart.

A full minute ticked off.

"I reckon they might be out of bullets," mumbled Forland. "Or they're dead."

Hearing a thump on the ground behind him, he turned his back on the house and pointed his gun at where he thought the noise came from. Forland saw a gold nugget tumble to a stop. He stared at it for a long time before using a stick to rake the nugget behind the tree. He picked it up, studying it at length. He pocketed the nugget when he heard another tumbling through the bush. The third thud landed short, three feet in front of the tree.

"It's been three minutes since a bullet has been shot from the house. I reckon there's definitely a better than even chance I've killed Jessica Hayes and the black man. The kids are throwing the gold nuggets at me. They must be thinking if I have enough nuggets I'll leave."

Another nugget landed near Forland's tree. The next one only made it half way.

"The kids are getting tired," muttered Forland.

Carefully he crept out from behind the tree, starting to collect the nuggets. He soon realized his pockets were full so he placed his coat on the ground near the tree. He'd scoop up a nugget, throwing it onto his coat before reaching for another.

Gip threw a nugget which landed at Forland's feet. The whole time he went about scooping up the gold he kept an eye on the house. Not once did he see a rifle at a window either on the top floor or the kitchen window.

Jessica and Lightning remained hidden behind the curtain in the upstairs bedroom, amused at how Forland seemed determined not to lose a single gold nugget.

A large gold nugget came at Forland. He saw it being launched out of the window next to the balcony. It seemed to be larger than the other nuggets. He watched it bounce on the ground, rolling

towards him. He saw it hit a clump of clay and change direction. He turned his head, determining where it might stop. He marched over, swiping the nugget from the ground. Rolling it around in the palm of his hand he started to study the gold nugget, working out in his mind how much it might be worth. The moment the kids stopped throwing the nuggets he'd enter the house, interrogate them, extracting the information on the exact location of the blue diamond, the silver guns and the remainder of the gold nuggets. Once he knew the information he'd simply shoot them, taking the gold. He'd find the blue diamond, pack up everything and move back to England to live a happy rich life.

Forland heard two bangs in rapid succession. He felt a burning sensation in his shoulder and leg. The heat downed him, making him fall to the ground face first. Blood oozed from his shoulder and thigh. Instantly Forland knew he'd been tricked. Glancing up at the house, he aimed his gun at the upstairs bedroom window. Before he could pull the trigger a third bullet penetrated his hand, making him drop his gun. Wide eyed he tried to stand so he could get back behind his tree. He took a step. When he brought his left leg forward it couldn't hold his weight. Forland went down again. His leg felt paralyzed. A fourth bullet saw him coil into a ball. He looked down at his white shirt. In the center, the red spot started growing.

He pulled his last gun out of his holster, aiming it at the house. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He managed to pull the trigger twice. A clicking replaced the expected bang. He lost his strength, dropping the gun in the dirt. By the time Jessica and Lightning walked across the clearing Forland was dead.

Gip, Jarrah, Cobar and Daniel came running outside. Jessica and Lightning were encouraged to join in on their dance to celebrate.

The kids raced around the outside of the house excited Jessica's plan worked perfectly.

Eventually, Jessica beckoned them over.

Lightning Dawn kissed his wife. She kissed him back. Each person wore a smile. They won. Their quiet future looked assured.

"What if the letter Forland mentioned has been sent?" questioned Lightning.

"Even if what he said happens to be true, I'm sure if anyone comes searching for the diamond or Forland's where-a-bouts he won't come shooting a gun. I'm certain he'll go straight to the law asking questions, which brings us to the third and final part of the plan. The law will explain exactly what happened. Mistaken identity on Forland's side saw him being shot by us in self-defense. Nobody else witnessed what happened. The law has to be on our side. There's no other way to prove otherwise."

"Sounds like a solid explanation to me," stated Lightning.

To tie up the last loose end Jessica walked over to where Forland dropped his coat. A quick search of his pockets revealed he did steal the thousand pounds from Langston. Jessica left the money exactly where she found it and gently slapped Lightning on the leg.

"Let's take a look at our new home," she hinted.

Jessica and Lightning slowly circled the homestead, making a mental note of what needed to be done.

"A little elbow grease, new glass in the windows and the place will look new again," insisted Lightning.

"Yes, it will indeed. The New Rosedale will shine real soon."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GOLD nuggets were gathered, boxed up and two were placed back in the tunnel. Jessica helped Lightning tie the third box to the saddle of a spare horse.

"Are you sure about wanting to give away a box full of gold?" questioned Lightning.

"I'm certain. I only hope my idea will work."

"I think it will."

Jessica walked over to where Forland lay face up on the ground. Glaring at the man, she spat at his face.

“Forland and his men will have to wait for a burial. After we get Daniel back to his parents we have to ride into town. I suppose we’ll have to wait for another Police Officer to arrive. He’ll ask a few questions, say thanks for the help and follow us back here so he can take the bodies away.”

Jessica walked back to her horse and mounted it. She sat high in the saddle as she gave her horse a slight kick. Gip and the boys took possession of the horses Forland and his hired men owned and followed. Lightening held onto Daniel, bringing up the rear.

Jessica led the way to William and Corice’s home. The group of riders cut across the slow moving river. They even heard a kookaburra laugh. By one o’clock in the afternoon, the group of weary riders dismounted and reunited William with his son. There were many tears and hugs. Even Gip started to cry.

“William, where’s Corice?” asked Jessica, looking about the cleared land.

“She left yesterday. She told me quietly what her plans were. She added there’d be no way she’d stay in Australia. No money happened to be her main gripe. She saw no hope.” He snorted, managing to flash a sharp grin. “She even shed a tear.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Deep down I knew she didn’t want to be here. My stubbornness has put an end to our friendship.”

“Surely she can’t blame you for acting exactly the same way other people have done by making their way to this part of Australia.”

“I hoped by saying good-bye to England we could start a new life together. I used to dream she’d love me how I love her. She’ll never comprehend it. I’m afraid it’s not meant to be.”

“Is there some way I could help change her mind?” asked Jessica.

“I’d need a miracle. I guess her leaving was inevitable. Why stay here when she could have a brighter future back in England? I dare say she’ll latch onto some rich bloke. I believe in putting love first. When things are in the right order the ending is always perfect.”

“What if I talk to her?” asked Jessica.

“The way she looked when she left me I believe the talking idea won’t make any headway.”

“Where is she now?”

“I guess Corice is in Bendigo waiting for the Melbourne-bound train to arrive. The moment she’s there she’ll be organizing a boat ticket back to England.”

“What sort of miracle will it take to get her to change her mind and stay?” asked Lightening.

“I guess if I actually found gold it could do a lot into tempting her to stay.”

Jessica walked over to her horse. Before she could begin to untie the ropes which tethered the box to the horse’s saddle, Lightening ran over, stopping her. Staring wildly Jessica picked up on the silent warning. She back stepped, allowing him to take the box off the saddle. Lightening carried the wooden box back to William and placed it at his feet.

“I haven’t done anything to deserve a gift.”

“You strike me to be a man of honour,” replied Jessica.

“I’m not sure how I can use a wooden box?”

“It’s the contents of the box I’m sure you’ll know how to use.”

William squatted. Using a long handle shovel he managed to open the lid. For a long time, he stared at the pile of at least forty to fifty gold nuggets unable to think of what to say.

“There must be thousands of pounds worth of gold in this box,” he mumbled.

“William, I know I shouldn’t interfere in your private life. However, if you don’t mind me giving some advice, I have something to say,” hinted Jessica. “Go stop Corice from getting on the train.”

“Yes, thanks for the opportunity to get her back. If she agrees, I’ll be a happy man.”

“After the box is buried, we can rush for the town,” announced Lightening.

William walked over to the house, swiping up a pick and walking to the rear of the home. Next to the drying wood he started to dig a hole. Lightening walked over to give him a hand. Jessica saddled William Snowe’s horse and called Gip, Cobar, and Jarrah.

Lightening dropped the box into the hole. Before William threw the first shovel of dirt on top of the box he opened the lid, pulling out a gold nugget and pushing it deep into his coat pocket.

“In case Corice doesn’t believe me,” he commented.

When the hole was covered in and smoothed over, William shook Jessica and Lightening’s hand. “Thank you so much. If this doesn’t stop Corice from leaving nothing will?”

The group prepared to leave for the town by quickly marching over to the horses. Just before Jessica mounted her horse, William took hold of her arm, looking her square in the face.

"I know your little secret," he whispered.

"I'm not sure what you mean?"

"I can tell you're pregnant."

"I'm not."

"There's no denying it. Did Corice mention I used to have a medical practice back in England?"

"Yes, she did."

"Corice tried to convince me not to give up medicine. She didn't like the idea of me gold prospecting. She told me it's too hard a life. She tried to convince me, staying a doctor is a more stable a career."

"Have you delivered any babies?" asked Jessica.

"Yes, I've delivered twenty-seven."

"Tell me something, what actually helped Corice to decide to come here to Australia?"

"I mentioned if we found gold we'd do okay. Once the gold ran dry we might even start a medical practice here. She thought about the idea for a few days before saying yes. Only this morning I realized my idea was wrong. I've figured out prospecting isn't for me."

"Getting back onto the subject of you believing I'm pregnant, what makes you so sure?"

"When a woman is pregnant they have a certain glow. Miss Hayes, I have seen how you and Lightening Dawn look at each other. He's the father isn't he? Please don't look so shocked. I promise your secret is safe. I will never tell a soul."

"Do you have any idea what you are implying?"

"Yes, I do."

"If the rumour ever leaked out about a white woman giving birth to a black man's baby I'm positive both might be hanged. Can you fathom the scandal, the accusations? I'd certainly have a hard time convincing people in this town I'm not pregnant. Mr. Snowe, if I were to ever have a child, I do believe you'd keep the secret," whispered Jessica. "If I were to fall pregnant sometime in the future I'll remember to ask you for help, provided you have a legitimate medical practice."

"I tell you what we can do," hinted William. "Don't tell me if I'm right or wrong. When the time comes and you need a doctor, I'll be in town. You have given me enough gold to set up a doctor's surgery, not to mention a nice amount of money to live on. If I can only get to Corice before she leaves for Melbourne and I can convince her to stay and be my nurse again I'll be more than happy to help. Besides, having a baby at home and not in the town where more help is at hand is a tough ask. One thing in your favour being out in the middle of the bush, nobody will ever know."

Jessica slapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks for the offer. I'll keep your idea in mind if I ever need a doctor. We need to hurry. You never know when one of us needs a medicine man."

The group led by Lightening cantered off into the scrub.

Twenty minutes of riding saw the group burst through the wattle covered bush growing next to the general store. The main street looked busy. People were bustling around the newspaper stand reading about a good amount of gold had been discovered not far from the center of town. A wave of men coming up the road from the train all wore a determined expression on their faces. Their excited chatter sounded endless.

The group of riders started to push past the many wagons on their way to the train which appeared to be almost ready to leave. The commuters were done climbing up the stairs and hurriedly found a seat, eager to get under way. Jessica saw the wiry built railroad employee step out of the shed size office and start to walk along the platform inspecting the doors on the train, making sure no one was left behind when he gave the all clear signal.

Jessica pulled her handgun from her holster and fired two warning shots into the air. She chuckled at the wiry man's antics as he dropped and lay prone on the ground. If a new lawman arrived in the town on the train she felt positive he'd be searching for where the gunfire came from.

The riders came to a halt in a cloud of dust. The train driver stuck his head out through the open window, staring at Jessica. He lifted his fists at her, spitting dirt from his mouth.

"Look at me. I'm covered in dirt," he snarled.

"Sorry," called Jessica.

"Sorry, don't clean my clothes."

"I shot two bullets into the air to get your attention. I need you to wait a few more minutes."

"By doing the stupid act you could've been shot."

"By whom police Officer Jones?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen him today?" questioned Jessica.

"No not of late."

"Do you have any idea why?"

"There could be lots of reasons. Do you know something I don't?"

"Yes. He's dead."

William jumped from his horse. Sprinting over to the first carriage steps, he clambered up and into the carriage.

"Hey, you can't get on the train without a ticket," spat the railroad man.

Jessica dismounted, walked up to the man, staring at him nose to nose. "Why don't you shut up?"

"I know you. I gave you twelve pennies when four bushrangers robbed the train."

"Yes, I'd been on the train. I need to correct a minor detail. There were only three bushrangers."

The man gave her a blank look. "I wrote everything down the way you told me."

"I'm certain I told you there were three bushrangers, not four."

"I pride myself on being correct at all times," argued the man.

"No one's perfect."

"You do realize I will check the records to see which one of us are correct."

"Be my guest," growled Jessica.

"Did you ever get the blue diamond ring back?"

"No."

"What about the solid silver guns?"

"No."

"If you want another favour, I'm out of the market."

"The man who boarded the train just now, he won't be long. If everything works out the lady he came for will be getting off."

"I'm not going to give her money back," snarled the railroad man.

"Do you think it's fair?"

"Probably not," argued the man. "I have to follow the rules."

"Can't you bend the rules? The man and the young lady he's gone to get, have a son."

The man folded his arms across his chest, glaring at Jessica. "No. This time around I'm not backing down nor am I prepared to bend even a little. You've no idea how much grilling I received. My name has been dragged through the mud over me giving you the twelve pennies back for compensation over being robbed."

"Do you want the twelve pennies back?"

"You have the money?"

Jessica pushed her hand into her pant's pocket. Turning her back on the man she pulled out a pound note. When she faced the man she flapped it under his nose.

"Keep the change. As for Corice's fare to Melbourne, keep it for a tip on a job well done."

The door to the police station opened. A tall man in a police uniform stepped outside. Almost immediately he began talking to a young woman who in turn pointed at the train. Jessica saw him dip his hat at the woman, stroke his short beard and start to march down the hill towards the train.

"You're in for it now," growled the railroad worker. "Wait till police Officer Crane gets here." He pocketed the pound note and refolded his arms.

William jumped from the first carriage and entered the second. He wore the look of a determined man. In the middle of the carriage, he spied Corice sitting at the window watching the commotion. She stood to meet him head on.

"William," she cried.

"Corice, please don't leave."

"I really don't want to go. Panning for gold or digging a hole in the ground isn't for me. I tried to get used to it. I can't do it anymore. I need to have people around me not the scrub in the middle of nowhere. Please understand you gave me no choice."

Most of the commuters who were watching the police officer marching towards the train turned their attention to focus on William and Corice. They seemed pleased at something else to watch.

Corice's face drained of colour. She looked on the verge of fainting. William placed her gently on the seat, blowing cool air onto her face. He watched her tears falling. Corice's hands were trembling. William leaned in, kissing her thin quivering lips.

"I apologize for forcing you to come to Australia."

“Come back to England. I’m sure we can restart where we finished. Surely a hospital somewhere will be more than willing to accept your expertise? I for one think you’re a fine doctor.”

“There’s the sticking point. I love Australia.”

“So you’d stay here and lose me?”

“No.”

“Why won’t you come back?”

“I’ve thought things through these past few days. I need to ask you something?”

“Okay.”

“What might convince you to stay?” William pushed his finger to her lips preventing her from talking. “I think I know.”

“How can you know what I’m thinking?”

“I love you enough to understand. I’ve decided to quit the idea of gold prospecting to get you back.”

“I thought you wanted it?”

“I thought so too. I didn’t know the idea could be so hard. If you’d agree to be my nurse I’d like to open a medical practice right here in town.”

“How can you, it takes a lot of money?”

William pushed his hand into his coat pocket, pulling out the gold nugget. He saw Corice’s eyes widen.

“You found gold? You actually found gold.”

“Not exactly,” he stammered. “I’ll explain after we’re away from here. Let me say this, there’s a lot more where I found this beauty.”

The commuters sitting in the carriage stood the shuffled over to view the gold nugget. Whisperings began to spread throughout the train.

“I don’t understand?” whispered Corice.

“You will. My explanation will have to wait. I don’t want anyone to know.” William looked at the faces of the men waiting to hear where he had found the gold. They looked excited at the prospect of finding wealth. William again focused his attention on Corice. When he spoke he sounded serious. “I want you to stay. You have to decide before I say another word.”

“If you’re serious about a medical practice right here in town I want to stay. Pushing the gold nugget aside, I love the man who is a fine surgeon. You’re one of the best. Maybe here in Australia, you are the best. I do love you. The only thing stopping me is the fact you wanted to be a miner and not a doctor.”

“I’m very serious about the medical clinic,” hinted William. “In fact, on the way here to the train, I noticed a large shop. It’s almost finished. I hope if you say yes to staying, we’d look into buying it.”

Corice reached out to hug William’s neck. She couldn’t hide her excitement. “I’d love to.”

“There’s one more thing I need to ask?”

“Please, I want off the train,” cried Corice.

Before she could stand William downed his knee. Looking up at her he announced genuinely.

“Corice, I love you more than life. If you say yes to be my wife I’ll be the happiest man in Australia.”

“Yes,” Corice yelped without delay. “I want to be your wife.”

William stood and kissed her in front of an applauding crowd who were gathering around to congratulate the young engaged couple.

The train driver entered the carriage, yelling in a gruff voice.

“Everyone find a seat. Anyone getting off has thirty seconds. The moment I get back to the engine I’m going to get this train moving. We have been delayed long enough.”

William and Corice stepped from the train with linked arms and started walking towards the group holding the reins to their horse. Daniel saw Corice stepping from the train and ran to her. She picked him up, cuddling the boy tight.

“I’m sorry for leaving. It won’t happen again, to either of you.”

“By the looks of things I can tell you’ve made a few decisions about the future?” quizzed Jessica.

“We have,” replied Corice. “I’m staying. If you’re thinking the reason why I’m residing here in Bendigo is due to the gold you’re wrong. William has asked me to marry him. I said yes. He’s also confided in me he wants to set up a new medical practice.”

“I convinced Corice to reconsider leaving,” confessed William Snowe.

“Does she know the complete tale about the gold?” asked Lightening.

“Mr. Dawn, William has relayed a few facts about what’s been going on. I’m sure in time and when we’re alone he’ll fill in the blanks.” Corice switched her attention to Jessica. “What we discussed when we first met, I’m glad I was correct. I’ll take the secret to my grave. When your time comes William and I will be more than delighted to be there. Your baby will be our first to be delivered in Australia. When your name is recorded by law Lightning’s name will be absent.”

Jessica looked around to see if anyone might be listening in. Seeing no one in cooe of them she mumbled a single word. “Thanks.”

“William also mentioned how many gold nuggets you and Lightning Dawn gave him. Thank you. Where did you get them?”

“Our secret,” whispered Jessica, smiling.

“Yes, of course,” replied Corice.

“What’s the meaning of the gunshots?” growled the Police Officer elbowing his way through the crowd. The moment he broke free he sprinted over.

“The woman you’re looking at did it,” spat the railroad worker.

“Why?” his deep voice sounded extra rough.

Jessica knew in time everything will pan out. Convincing Police Officer Crane might take a while. “I needed to stop the train departing so my dear friend William and Corice, his wife to be, could be reunited.”

The man grumbled under his breath at the annoyance. He looked at each of the group in turn before staring at Corice.

“It’s true,” she confessed quickly. “William and I are getting married.”

“Have either of you seen Officer Jones lately? I received a message over the wire he hasn’t been seen for some time.”

“I know exactly where he is.”

“What’s your name, girlie?”

My name is Jessica Hayes. Miss Jessica Hayes. Police Officer Crane I punched the lights out of the last man who called me girlie. In regards to Police Officer Jones, he’s dead.”

“I see. I’ll keep your warning off the record.”

“Please, call me Jessica.”

“No thanks. Miss Hayes suits me. I arrived in town yesterday. I’ve only just finished reading Jones’ last message. It read something about a missing kid. A man called Forland and a missing blue diamond ring. The message also mentions a woman going by your name.”

“I’m sure I can fill you in on anything which is outstanding,” advised Jessica, innocently.

“I think you should start talking. Explain everything to me as we walk back to the police station.”

Jessica handed the reins of her horse to Lightning Dawn before starting to walk next to Officer Crane, telling him her side of the story.

“The blue diamond ring was originally stolen from me by Forland. Police Officer Jones killed Forland and his men. He came to tell me the news. When I suggested he can stay in the barn he insisted on sleeping under the stars. Sadly he’d been bitten by a snake and died.”

“If you could be kind enough to take me to the bodies I’ll clean up the mess then write my report.”

“Before we go I need to stop off at the post office,” said Jessica.

“When you’ve finished what you need to do, I’ll be waiting at the rear of the police station. The ride will give my horse some well-needed exercise.”

Jessica and Lightning Dawn walked their horses over to the post office. Gip and the boys slowly followed. The few people who witnessed the group riding towards the train stuck their noses in the air before walking across the street to the other side.

Jessica entered the post office. The only customer inside the shop was a miner. He took one look at Lightning Dawn and quickly marched out of the shop.

A tall thin man sitting behind a desk looked up. When he spoke his moustache twitched. He dropped his dark framed reading glasses on the desk and walked over.

“Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” blurted Jessica. “Is there a message to be sent by a Mr. Forland?”

“Yes, there is. I just sat down to send it.”

“He has asked me to tell you not to send it.”

“I have to unless he tells me himself.”

“Please, he’s been detained. He also informed me if you destroy the message he’ll give you twenty pounds.”

The man looked rather pleased at getting paid for not doing anything. "I won't be sending the message. When will I receive the money?"

The whole time Jessica fished for the money in her pocket the man wore a hardened expression. When she handed over the twenty pounds she looked a little uncomfortable.

"Mr. Forland entrusted me to give you the money. I stuffed it deep into my pocket. I didn't want to lose such a large amount."

Even though the man looked slightly suspicious at why a woman carried a large amount of money in her pocket he accepted the reason and snatched the money out of Jessica's hand.

"Before I leave I'm wondering where Mr. Tippet is? The last time I was here he gave me first class service."

"Mr. Tippet has taken himself to the doctor. He said he wasn't well."

"Maybe gold fever has struck him down."

The man didn't seem to understand the dry humour. He grumbled under his breath and watched Jessica walk to the door. The moment she stepped outside, Police Officer Crane met her gaze.

"Are you ready Miss Hayes?" questioned Crane sounding agitated at having to wait.

"Yes, thanks for your patience."

"I'm not a patient man. I expect things to be done quickly. Seeing how Police Officer Jones has died I will be taking over until such time I'm replaced."

"Will you be holding your temporary position long?" asked Jessica.

"The decision is out of my hands. I don't mind being in charge of this town or any other. They are all the same. Full of gold prospectors and people who lie."

"Have you met the workers of the Rosedale?" asked Jessica, quickly changing the subject.

"We haven't been formally introduced yet."

"The man behind me is Lightning Dawn. He's my overseer on the Rosedale sheep and cattle station. The two boys are Jarrah and Cobar. Standing next to them is their sister Gip."

Crane lifted his hat at the kids and shook Lightning's hand.

"I'm pleased to see someone wants to shake the hand of my overseer," growled Jessica, raising her eyebrows.

"Miss Hayes, I can only speak for myself. Personally, I don't care for the colour of a man's skin. There's something about me you don't know. I'm not here to be liked. I don't talk much either. I try to stay neutral over everything and I never get close to anyone. I also don't get involved in people's lives. I will remain single till the day I die."

"It sounds like a lonely life," admitted Jessica.

"If I stay at arm's length from everyone I'm never asked to do them a favour."

"You sound like a man who's in complete control?"

"Your comment is duly noted. Shall we make a move?"

"Yes."

When the riders burst from the narrow trail Jessica pointed to the back fence of the old Rosedale.

"This is the back corner. If you look towards your left you'll see the remains of the original Rosedale homestead. Forland burnt it to the ground. He threatened to kill Daniel and the three kids if he didn't get the blue diamond ring he thinks I have."

"Jones' report clearly states the bushranger he'd been chasing absconded to Sydney. Forland may have been misinformed of its where-a-bouts."

"Exactly," replied Jessica. "Constable Jones's body is over near the shearing shed."

"He did write in his report something about a dead sheep."

"Yes. Constable Jones even dug up the ground. He must have thought I might have been lying."

"In my opinion, I don't see any evidence to suggest you are?" admitted Crane.

Jessica led the charge over to Jones and the charcoal remains of the camp fire. She pointed out the mound of dirt where they buried the ram. When they came to Jones she showed Crane the snake bites and the headless bodies of the snakes. The moment Crane glanced back at the mound of dirt where the bushranger and the ram were buried Jessica started to feel nervous. To her Crane wasn't a stupid man. If anything he might be more trouble than Jones had been. She needed to sound more convincing if they were to be successful in pulling off the remainder of the plan.

"The New Rosedale and Forland's body are further into the bush," confessed Jessica.

Crane mounted his horse. "Lead the way."

The group crossed the river. When they burst into the clearing at the New Rosedale Jessica dismounted at the verandah. She showed Crane the bullet holes in the walls before pointing to Forland's body.

Crane walked over to view the man.

"What a scum bag. Kidnapping children is a deplorable act."

Crane squatted. Searching the body he pulled out the stack of pound notes Jessica gave Langston for the sale of the property.

Jessica pushed her hands onto her hips. "He is a scum bag. He even stole the money I gave Langston so I could buy this place."

Crane shook his head, handing the bundle of money over. "You might as well have it back. Neither of the men needs it now. You can use the money to patch the holes made by the bullets."

"Thanks, it'll come in handy."

"Miss Hayes there's one question I keep thinking about. Where did you get the money to buy this place?"

Lightening Dawn stepped next to Jessica.

"I can explain. When I replaced the fence post, the one you saw at the original Rosedale, the pick I used got stuck in a gold nugget. By the time, I actually dug it up the large nugget shattered."

"We rode into town, to the bank," continued Jessica. "I handed the bank teller a few nuggets at a time. He can verify my story."

"Why didn't you take all the nuggets at once? The act could've saved a lot of time?"

"I didn't want to be robbed by bushrangers again," announced Jessica dryly.

"Good thinking."

Jessica escorted Crane into the home so he could view Langston and the two men he shot coming through the balcony window. Finally, Crane walked back to his horse.

"I've seen enough to substantiate your explanation of things Miss Hayes. When I get back to town I'll go inform the gravedigger. He'll be here in a couple of hours to retrieve the bodies."

"If it's all the same to you, Langston has a small wagon. I'd prefer to have the bodies collected right away so the children don't have to look at them."

"Rightly so," agreed Crane. "I'll hitch the wagon to my horse, gather the bodies and be out of your way."

"Thanks, Officer Crane."

Jessica pulled a twenty-pound note from the bundle Crane took out of Forland's top pocket, waving it under Crane's nose.

"I hope you're not trying to bribe me? Such an act is a jail sentence."

"I'd like to give some money to help pay for the funeral costs of Mr. Langston."

"A noble gesture," said Crane. "I'm sure the government will be pleased to hear of the donation."

Jessica added quickly. "Mr. Langston was a good neighbour. Giving some money is the least I can do."

Lightening Dawn helped Crane place the bodies of the men into the wagon. They shook hands. Crane bid Jessica and Lightening Dawn a good day and started back towards the river to collect Jones. When the wagon disappeared around the first bend Jessica turned her attention to Lightening and the kids.

"I think it's time we moved into our new home."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JESSICA CUDDLED into Lightening's shoulder. He placed his arm around her waist. The scrub seemed to come alive. A few kangaroos bounded into the clearing close to the house, sizing up the group. Koalas climbed higher in the gum trees and the birds started to chirp.

"I hope we catch lots of Brim in the river," mentioned Jarrah.

"I reckon we will," said Lightening. "On the way here I saw some large ones break surface."

Gip rubbed her stomach, smacking her lips at the same time, imagining the taste of fresh fish.

"At last, our fight is over. We can now relax and enjoy life," advised Jessica.

“Hopefully, we’ll have a nice quiet future,” added Lightning.

“The first thing we’ll do is patch the walls of the homestead. Once the bullet holes are gone we’ll be able to put this adventure behind us. I think I’ve seen enough adventures to last a lifetime.”

Lightning gave Jessica a reassuring rub on the shoulder.

“We actually got this place for free. We gave Langston the money. Forland killed the man, stealing the money. We killed Forland in self-defense. The law came and gave us the money.”

“Kind of makes you feel warm inside,” blurted Jessica, laughing.

“There is the matter of the gold vein in the tunnel,” hinted Lightning. “I can always start digging it up and stacking the nuggets in more wooden boxes.”

“We have enough gold nuggets and money to last us forever. It might be a good idea to take some nuggets to the bank each time we go into town. I don’t want to be robbed by bushrangers.”

“I’m positive if anyone attempts to take anything they’ll end up under a dead sheep,” warned Lightning.

“They sure will. If we need more gold to be exchanged into money we can always dig at the vein of gold. Personally, I think if we wait till the gold has dried up in Bendigo it’ll be worth more.”

“You could be right,” bragged Lightning. “What about the cattle and the sheep?”

“Maybe we should sell the sheep and keep the cows. At least we don’t have to be concerned about the shearers nosing about.”

“Do you want to leave the silver guns and the blue diamond ring where they are or bring them into the tunnel?”

“I guess we could actually leave them where they are. They’ll be safe. Like you’ve already stated, you didn’t have a clue about the secret room. Even when Jones poked around the original Rosedale and stamped his feet right on top of the room he couldn’t tell. I’m thinking we can forget about them. Leave them to the ghosts.”

The group walked to the verandah of the New Rosedale. Before entering the homestead Lightning lifted his hand.

“I think we should say a few words of thanks to the man upstairs.”

The kids and Jessica grouped together.

“Thanks for the fortune and for keeping us safe,” announced Lightning. “I hereby name this homestead the Rosedale.”

Gip lifted her head, opening her eyes. “We family.”

Squatting, Jessica looked at her at eye level. “You’re right. The proper way to say it is; we are a family.”

Gip ruffled Jessica’s hair, giggled and ran into the house to view the kitchen. Her brothers sprinted after her leaving Jessica and Lightning alone.

“Late in the afternoon is always a nice time of day,” whispered Jessica.

“Any time of the day is nice provided I can see you,” Lightning announced.

Jessica pushed her arm around his waist, cuddling into him. Lightning did the same. They gave each other a slow luring kiss. Lightning swept Jessica off her feet and carried her over the threshold into the Rosedale. He carried Jessica upstairs to the bedroom, placing her gently on the bed before walking to the window. Jessica came up behind him, pushing her arms around his waist.

“What are you looking for?” she questioned.

“Nothing in particular; I thought I’d glance over the herd. Tomorrow, after I’ve cleaned the main room which has the balcony I will make love to you. Today I will make love to you in this room. Gip and the boys are busy preparing some kind of meal. All is quiet, there’s no more adventure.”

Jessica gently tugged at Lightning’s arm. He followed her to the bed. She helped to throw his shirt onto the floor. He helped to peel hers and watched it fall onto the bed.

“Exploring the inside of the homestead, its beauty and fine workmanship of the balustrade, the kitchen, and the rooms will wait for after lovemaking,” hinted Lightning Dawn.

Jessica knew by the smell of the wood fired oven Gip and the boys were well into planning dinner. This time around they could only make love for three hours. Lightning will just have to be satisfied, if not there’d be later when the stars were out, the birds had settled for the night and the kids were in bed.

LIGHTENING DAWN rode his horse at speed through the scrub towards town. He burst through the medium size bush next to the general store nearly running over a young lad leading his horse to the Ferrier's shop to have it re-shoed. The town seemed busier than usual except for the train station. It looked to be deserted. The large clock on the wall of the station read the next train won't be arriving till the next day. The local hotel looked to be still closed. It was 8:55am and already men were queuing, waiting to get in.

Lightening dismounted his horse outside the brand new doctor's surgery. He simultaneously swiped his hat from his head, opening the door. Marching across the floor to where Corice Snowe sat at the desk looking busy writing in a large book. She glanced up at the intrusion.

"Look who has come to visit?" she chirped. "How are you today Mr. Dawn?"

"Fine thanks. Is the doctor in?"

"William is just about through seeing a miner. He hit his head, needing two stitches to stop the bleeding. He won't be long."

Before Lightening could say another word the door next to Corice opened. The elderly miner placed his hat on his head before walking towards Corice. He held a small gold nugget in his hand which he handed over for payment.

"Thank you, Mr. Petrie. We'll see you again in about a week so the doctor can take out the stitches."

The man nodded, gave Lightening Dawn a wide arc and stepped out into the street.

"What a pleasant surprise," blurted William Snowe.

"May I have a private word?"

William beckoned Lightening to follow him into a small room and closed the door. "What's wrong?"

"Jessica is about ready to give birth. She's sent me to get you."

William immediately marched to the door, swinging it open.

"Corice, it's time. I'll be home when I can."

Corice stood, following the two men to the door. "I'll close early. Hope everything works out."

"Thanks," replied Lightening.

William Snowe grabbed Lightening on his shirt sleeve. "I sent my horse to be re-shod. Let's hope the horse is ready."

While William ran up the street Lightening Dawn mounted his horse and galloped to the shop. When he entered two men stood in his path.

"Mr. Snowe will need his horse. It's an emergency."

"I'm done," announced the taller of the two men. "I'd prefer if you waited outside."

Lightening Dawn didn't have to ask to know why. He turned his back on the men and started to walk out at the same time William entered.

"The black man is the overseer to the Jessica Hayes' cattle station," advised the shorter of the two men. "I met her months ago in the hotel. I can tell you she's a great kisser."

"Thanks to you, brother, she borrowed my horse."

"At least you got paid."

The two brothers chuckled at their different fortunes they received from Jessica which ended in a play wrestle on the ground.

"Is my horse ready to ride?" asked William Snowe.

"She's saddled," blurted the older brother.

William reached into his pocket, pulling out a small gold nugget. "This is for your speedy service."

"The nugget is more than generous. In fact, you've paid me double. The next time you need to re-shoe your horse I'll do it for free."

William shook the man's hand before mounting. A slight kick saw the horse trot towards the door. Outside he collected Lightening Dawn and together they cantered through the scrub, following the narrow trail. The moment they came to the river, instead of continuing to cross to the other side they changed direction. Lightening easily picked up another narrow trail which went straight to the New Rosedale.

Another few minutes saw them burst into the clearing at the homestead. Lightening Dawn led the charge into the kitchen. He sprinted upstairs to where Jessica lay in the bed, her moans signaling the baby might be born in minutes.

“Kids, I need you to leave and close the door,” ordered William. “Lightening you can stay.” William set to work giving Jessica and the unborn baby a quick medical check up. “Both you and the little one are doing fine. It won’t be long now.”

Lightening Dawn paced the floor for a couple of hours waiting. Finally, he picked up his didgeridoo. He sat and started to blow air through the hollow mangrove tube. The gentle whoa-whoa-whoa noise always helped Jessica to relax. She even managed a smile seconds before the baby entered the world.

Doctor William Snowe lifted the baby so Jessica and Lightening could see. Jessica reached out to hold Lightening’s hand. After placing the baby on her stomach, William announced in a quaking voice.

“Congratulations to the both of you. Say hello to your daughter.”

## EPILOGUE

A JUNIOR postal worker full of ideas on how to be the best worker in Australia busied himself by sweeping under the shelves which were full of small boxes, envelopes, and four-inch square pieces of yellow paper used for the telegraph. He dreamt of the day he’d have a whole string of buildings in his charge. He downed his broom to take a well-deserved break. He stepped out into the sunshine for no more than two minutes before walking back into the shop. Out the back of the shop he picked up the wet mop and carried it to the front of the store.

Mr.Tippett, the skinny little postal worker seated behind the long bench looked up. The draw next to him remained open, revealing a stack of messages on yellow paper.

“Thanks, lad, I was just thinking it might be time to clean the floor. I’m hoping the last of the customers have gone for the day. I’ll go sweep up outside before closing the door and we can call it a day.”

“No problem Boss,” bellowed the spritely fifteen-year-old lad. “Before mopping, I’ll clean up inside the shop. Why have you taken out the old messages?”

“I’ve been going through the pile. I keep them for a year before burning the old ones.”

“Why two piles?”

“The pile on my left is ready for the fire. The ones on my right will be stored till I have time to sort through the dates.”

“Allow me to place the ones to be kept back in the draw.”

“Thanks, Eric. My eyes do feel slightly strained. After the last bloke who worked for me left to dig for gold I can see a bright future in you.”

The lad watched Mr.Tippett walk outside carrying a broom. He lit a cigar before starting to sweep the dirt away from the front of the shop. He commenced singing as he went about his work. Picking up the pile of messages meant to go to the fire Eric grinned a little at the boss’ happy attitude. He placed the thin pile into the small pot belly fire and closed the front. He stood listening to the roar of the fire. At his feet, he found a message he thought he had dropped.

“Oh, no, I think I’ve thrown the wrong ones out,” he whispered, starting to panic. “This message doesn’t have a date so I can’t tell if it should be on the pile to be put away or to be thrown into the fire.”

Looking at the boss who appeared to be busy talking to an elderly lady, Eric couldn’t tell what she seemed upset about. Knowing exactly what needed to be done, Eric slipped onto the seat behind the telegraph machine. He squared his shoulders, gave the boss one last quick glance then began sending the message via clicking Morse code.

‘Send this message to England, urgent. Jessica Hayes has the blue diamond ring. The solid silver guns are here too. When you receive this message I’ll be dead; signed Bobbi Forland.’

After completing the message Eric received a reply in seconds.

‘Will post the letter to England; signed the Melbourne postal office.’

Eric quickly placed the message in the draw, slipped off the seat and picked up the mop. Glancing at the boss talking to a second elderly woman, Eric began to whistle as he mopped the floor. He felt happy at knowing he actually did something on his own.

THE LEGEND CONTINUES IN PART THREE.

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'Legendary Blue Diamond Two,' 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. 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](mailto:mark_stewart777@hotmail.com)

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are:

Kiss on the bridge.

Kiss on the bridge two

Kiss on the bridge three

The perfect gift

Legendary blue diamond

Legendary blue diamond two

Legendary blue diamond three

The Blood Red Rose

Blood red Rose Two

Blood red Rose Three

Don't tell my secret (series)

Crime novels: Fire Games

Heart of a spider

I know your secret

PlanetX91 the beginning

PlanetX91the new home

PlanetX91the underwater cave

PlanetX91the storm

PlanetX91the drought

PlanetX91the fire

PlanetX91the plague

PlanetX91doorway to time

Children: A Troglia knows

Luke's cubby house

Malcolm's cubby house

Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the opening page of my novels in order that I have listed them:

Synopsis: Kiss on the bridge. Adventure romance

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 landfall 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.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

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: Legendary Blue Diamond. Adventure romance. Available April 10th 2012

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it that the diamond was no larger than a single carat. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of 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 that drips 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, but I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's where-a-bouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating that the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

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

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, like, why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell that had a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss.'