

on corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Three

A Trip to Derby

By Jacqueline Wright

There it was splashed all over the front pages of the Broome Addie. I spread out the newspaper — **“Broome woman charged with robbery after pearl shop heist.”**

The hairs on my arms stood up even though it was 30-plus degrees in the shade. I dumped my school backpack underneath the mango tree and spread the paper out on the ground so I could read the article properly. The journo didn’t actually name the woman but I just knew it was Auntie Gracie. Why hadn’t anyone told me? The Kimberley grapevine works a treat except when it *doesn’t*.

The article said the arrest and the initial court hearing happened last week in Derby. That was the week Auntie Gracie was visiting rellies in Derby. She tried getting up there every month, mainly to take an old auntie, who lives in the old folks’ home, fishing at the jetty. The more I read, the angrier I became. Someone had come to the cops with ‘fresh evidence’, so the cops had searched the banged-up van Auntie Gracie had just bought from the tourist couple who had to fly back to Germany fast, and found the model with no head or shoulders in the back.

The cicadas were so loud I could barely hear myself think. Sweat dripped down my calves. Inside the house, Mum’s phone went off — I heard her murmur a few words. The murmurs got louder and louder.

“Gawd knows, I’d chuck in the cash if I could, but —”. Those cicadas! I swear they’d turned up the volume.

I smelt cigarette smoke as I tried to get closer to the fibro wall of the house without Mum hearing me, but it was near impossible with those dried mango leaves crunching away at every step, so I took off my shoes and tried shuffling. A bit quieter, but not by much.

“Well, *I* know why that magistrate set the bail so high.” A plume of smoke snaked its way out of the louvres opening from the lounge.

“I don’t want Gracie in that lock-up any more than you do. I —”. That’s when Africa decided to do his best guard-dog impersonation. “Gotta go,” she said, glancing out of the window and spotting me. “Nic’s home. Good dog.”

I heard Africa click, click, click his way back to the tiled laundry and huff himself down in the coolest wet-season spot by the back door. Mum butted out her cigarette and flicked it out of the window. “What are you sneaking around out there for?” She looked down on me, shaking her head slightly.

I felt guilty, crouched by the fibro wall in my socks, newspaper in one hand, but then I remembered, I had nothing to feel guilty about.

“Where’s Auntie Gracie?” I demanded.

Mum’s face softened. “Nic,” she said. “We were going to tell you, but —”.

“But what? You decided to let me read about it in the paper instead?” I scrunched the paper into a ball and threw it at her. “Nic, honey,” she pleaded.

I don’t know if it was the Silly Season kicking in, or the stress of the last few weeks, or the fact that my favourite aunt had been taken away from me. Or all of the above, but I lost the plot. Big time! I called Mum all the horrible names I could think of and, when I ran out of ideas, I started over again.

“And if you gave up the smokes, you’d have money for her bail. But we both know what’s more important!”

“And if you gave up on braggin’ to your scaley mates about stealing that pearl, your auntie might not have ended up in prison in the first place!”

As soon as those words were out of her mouth, she was sorry, I could tell by the way she reached out to me. “Piglet,” she cooed, using the baby name I despised, “come inside. I’ll make you a cool drink and we can talk this through.”

But those words stung. They stung because she was right. “You’re just jealous,” I said.

Mum looked confused. “About what?”

Jealous because I love her more than you! I thought. But instead, I said, “I hate you!” I turned and ran, scooping up my backpack on my way back to the street. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” I yelled for good measure, just in case she’d missed what I was trying to tell her the first time.

I sprinted for a few blocks before ducking down into the cyclone gutter and following it to Town Beach. Once I’d reached the grass, I stopped, dead in my tracks. Double-gees! I was busy picking prickles out of my toes and catching my breath when I noticed two pairs of feet in thongs. Peter and Jane were in their boardies, dripping by my side.

“What up?” Pete said.

“Did *you* know Auntie Gracie was in jail?” I demanded.

They knew, alright. I could see by the way they exchanged guilty looks. I chucked my bag at them as hard as I could, nearly knocking Pete off his feet. Jane started up with lame excuses, just like Mum, but I didn’t want to hear them. Auntie Gracie was my *auntie*, I had a right to know.

“Somehow the cops knew I wanted to steal that pendant for Auntie Gracie and you were the only two people I told, so I’m guessing you doxed me in.”

Mum always told me that when you lose your temper, you lose the battle, but it made me wild when they didn’t answer, and I went at Pete, fists flying.

“Why would you do that?” I shouted.

Jane stepped in quickly. She was a blue-belt karate champion and she deflected my blows. All I could see was Pete’s scared face. Then, with a block and tackle she had me on the ground. As much as I wriggled and twisted, I couldn’t get out of her grasp. I’d like to think it was sweat that was dripping down my face but I knew I was crying.

“I’ll let you go when you’ve calmed down.” She turned to Pete, “Say something!” she demanded.

Pete sat on the ground next to me. “That hoity-toity jewellery shop woman told the cops. She was bragging about it in the supermarket. When your auntie heard that you’d been dragged down the cop shop, she went down and spoke to them.” His cheeks had turned a bright shade of red.

For the second time in an hour the steely blade of truth twisted inside me. I always thought that I'd do absolutely anything for my Auntie Gracie. Turns out, she'd do anything for me. But while Auntie Gracie might have been devoted, she wasn't stupid. No way would she 'fess up to the theft. Someone had set her up. Or maybe that was the reason those German tourists had up and left the country so quickly?

"We're your mates, why would we dob on you?" Jane said, easing her grip but staying alert.

"Anyway, we knew you wouldn't steal it."

"Well, how come the cops knew what I'd said to you?"

"I don't know," Jane said, slowly, thinking hard. "It could have been one of our parents that told them. My mum may have overheard us talking about it right at the beginning, before the pendant went missing. We were laughing, trying to imagine you doing an armed holdup with a water pistol. After the theft she may have felt she had to say something. But I'm sure she would have talked to me about it first. Maybe she'd mentioned it to someone else."

I sat up and rubbed the dirt sticking to my face and the grass off my clothes. "Well, I'm hitching up to Derby tomorrow," I announced.

"But it's school tomorrow," Pete said. Pete was one of those geeky students. He'd been in a high achiever class for as long as I could remember. Not only was he good at school, he was a star on the footy field too. One of those kids that never has to try hard to get far. Both Jane and Pete tried to talk me out of going to Derby and, I have to admit, their arguments were pretty sound. But I had this feeling. Some people call it a gut feeling and I knew that, if I got to Derby,

something would happen. My Auntie Gracie always told me to listen to what my gut was telling me.

“You’re right, I said, looking at Jane in the eye, then Pete, “but I’m still going. With or without my mates.”



Image by Thomas Saunders

Jacqueline Wright

Jacqueline's love of words began when she studied linguistics at the Bosphorus University, Turkey. Since then, she has worked as a journalist, editor and author. Her articles, essays and fiction have been published across platforms such as Radio National, ABC News, Griffith Review, Fairfax, Westerly, and Fremantle Press. Her debut novel, *Red Dirt Talking*, was long-listed for the 2013 Miles Franklin and Dobbie Literary Awards. Jacqueline has worked as a project editor at Magabala Books, and a producer and journalist at ABC Kimberley. She now works at the Purai Global Indigenous History Centre, Newcastle NSW. This year her second unpublished manuscript has been shortlisted in the Penguin Literary Award.

