

# on corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Four

## One Road Out Of Town

By Alex Grose

I wasn't the Prime Suspect anymore, but I'd spent long enough being the Prime Suspect to know it wasn't a good feeling, and now it was Auntie Gracie's turn. I knew I needed to help her, so I decided to start thinking like a Prime Suspect. *I couldn't break her out of prison... I wouldn't know how. But surely, if I made it to Derby, I could help her?*

I figured I had two options. The first would be easy for anyone but me: take my pocket money from under the bed, as well as the money Auntie Gracie had left me 'for a rainy day', and get the bus. The problem was that the bus tickets were sold by an old man who smoked worse than my mum and seemed to know her, and she'd definitely arrive with my teacher before I even got out of town.

The second option was harder: ask someone to drive me. Since Jane and Pete had wussed out, it might just be possible to find a spare seat, as long as I sold the driver a big enough lie. "Uh, yes sir, I'm with the circus! We're performing tonight in Derby and I got left behind chasing an escaped gorilla..."

After Jane and Pete left, I sat in my spot just down from the cemetery for pearl-divers and looked over the ocean. The tide was high and patches of green stuck through the sky-blue water. I wondered why Auntie Gracie had chosen those exact words: *"I wish someone would steal that little treasure for me."* Had she said that to anyone else? Had someone heard us? Did someone else steal the treasure for Auntie Gracie?

On my way home I decided to 'scope out' her house. Maybe I could find a clue that would explain the half-mannequin in the car. That way I wouldn't have to do any prison-breaking. Auntie Gracie's house was in a small cul-de-sac littered with frangipani petals. I walked on the

opposite side of the road, trying to keep a low profile. To my surprise there was a car parked outside her house.

Peeking from behind a tree I heard the fly-screen door slam and saw a figure come walking back up the rust-coloured driveway. It almost looked like Auntie Gracie packing the car for a fishing trip, but then the woman turned her head and I saw her face. It was the lady from the jewellery shop! I knew she would see me as she was driving away, so I panicked and ran straight back up the road, turned down a nearby alley as fast as I could and didn't look back. I don't know if she spotted me or not.

*What on earth was the jewellery shop lady doing at Auntie Gracie's house? Did they know each other?* I had so many questions. I knew by the time I got to Derby I'd have a police-interrogation of my own for poor Auntie Gracie.

That night I heard thunder over the ocean. I took the money from under the bed, and the money from Auntie Gracie. Almost a rainy day, I thought as a distant storm flashed across the sky, but I wished it would all come bucketing down. I packed my school bag with essentials (water bottle, snacks, socks, more snacks...). The frogs were croaking outside my window. Later my mum snuck in and kissed me on the forehead, but I pretended to be asleep. I think I dreamed about diving for pearls.

The next morning, I was out the door as soon as the sky started to brighten. I stopped by Town Beach. The parking spots were all empty and the caravan park looked deserted. In the tourist season this place would be full of holidaymakers heading for Derby and Perth and everywhere else. I resigned myself to the more sketchy plan.

I started heading back towards Chinatown. There was only one road out of town and I wanted to get there before the heat became unbearable. Just past the last houses there was a servo, which I figured most cars would pass on their way out. That's where I'd hitch a ride. I was just smoothing out the details of my story when a car horn honked behind me. *Oh no*. I put my head down and kept walking. I couldn't afford to be seen sneaking around like this on a school day. Here everyone knows everyone and, like I say, word gets around (except when it doesn't).

A voice called out behind me “Nic!” I spun around. Jane was leaning out a car window. Pete's older brother Zac was driving, and Pete was in the passenger seat. “Get in!”

I scanned the street for any would-be snoops and, finding it empty, threw myself into the back seat. “You coming to Derby or what?” asked Zac with a smirk. “Don't tell my mum, she'll knock my block off!” He put his foot down and turned sharp on a roundabout.

I was in shock. I wanted to thank Jane and Pete for coming through but didn't know what to say. Zac nodded at me in the rear-view mirror.

“Pete tells me you're heading to Derby to rescue your uncle?”

“Auntie.”

“Auntie,” Zac corrected himself.

“Something like that,” I said.

“Zac's going to Derby to meet his girlfriend,” Pete declared.

“Nah, she's just a friend.” said Zac.

“She's French,” Pete persisted.

“Ooh lala!” said Jane, and we laughed.

“Nah,” said Zac and drove on.

At the servo we filled the car with petrol and I told Jane and Pete about the pearl-shop lady.

“This story just gets weirder and weirder,” said Pete.

“What's your mum gonna say when she finds out you and your brother skipped school to go on a very dangerous adventure?” I asked.

“It'll be fine,” he said, but Jane gave me a glum look. We both knew it would mean big trouble for all of us.



Image by Thomas Saunders

## Alex Grose

Alex Grose has worked variously in film-making, education, publishing and performance, and has been published as a historian. He has lived and worked in regional Australia (including Broome and the Central Desert) intermittently and has contributed to Corrugated Lines, NAIDOC week and other key events on the Broome calendar, as well as working for Magabala Books and volunteering for Indigenous literacy programs. He is interested in the history of ideas and languages and is currently working on a historical novel set in Western Australia.



*Image: by Amy Vinicombe*