

on corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Seven

A Stinking Mess

By Phillip Walker

With a proud smirk Travis threw me the box, but my hands were sweating. The box slipped through and hit the ground. It bounced open and I gasped, because it was empty.

We looked at each other, stunned.

We searched the ground — nothing.

Travis stared at the box and nodded to himself. “That box has got a hidden closet,” he said. “Look at it. That hole in the top is only half the size of the box. There’s more to it.”

We looked at the box, passing it between us. The sides of the box were smooth. The base was a bit scratched. We could find no tell-tale line or indent or anything to suggest there was another way to open it. I ran my fingers around inside the hole in a futile effort.

Pete nudged me and I followed his eyes to the road. The black Cruiser was rolling into view and the closer it got the more the world shifted. The air chilled and the sea breeze retreated. The incoming tide hesitated. The sun might have been at its zenith, but it went into hiding.

Badly-shaven men in black suits who looked like they’d overdosed on steroids scared me. These guys were more Reservoir Dogs than Men in Black, and I wanted to keep my ears and every other part of my body intact. They sure weren’t tourists.

They left the Cruiser and were staring our way, but as if they were looking straight through us. Their faces were expressionless, and their hands look like they could crush Boab nuts.

Pete spoke. “They’re looking for us. We’ve got to get out of here.” That seemed obvious.

Again, we were ducking and running behind bushes, and I wished I had taken more notice in the botany class, because these plants were gripping at my skin as if they wanted me trapped.

I had tied the box into the front of my shirt, and I held it tight. I wasn’t losing that. We needed to figure out how to get inside it. It must have held a secret, and maybe it was the key to freeing Auntie Gracie.

It’s a way into town and the roads are open, but we took the back road and somehow, by lying low and moving quickly, we made it, or thought we had.

Travis’s parting words still rang in my ears. “If those dudes get you, then they’ll make you forget who you are.”

We seemed to be heading back to the Spini and I wanted to find Zac and just get out of there. A cop car came past, and we had to hide again because we could guess what they'd think of us. Zac explained it once before: "They say they're on our side and then go, 'Sorry mate, your car's got a broken light. That'll cost you a week's pay.' Coppers never stay here long enough to get to know us properly. We're just a launching pad for their careers."

Except, not all cops. A cop once kept my dad out of jail after he messed up, and then got him work. I reckoned it was worth the chance to wave them over.

Suddenly, the Cruiser loomed back in sight. The cop car and the Cruiser flashed their lights at each other, and that meant Zac was right. It was only Pete and Jane I could trust.

I grabbed them. "Quick, this way." I led them down the embankment, and we crawled into a rain culvert under the road. I was almost too scared to breathe. We waited.

I was not sure if I was hearing or feeling right, or just knowing, but I sensed the Cruiser was getting closer. It stopped, doors quietly opened, there were soft, slow, heavy footsteps. At least I thought so. The Steroid Bros could be slithering along on their own slime. They were standing right above us.

A voice. It sounded to me like it was coming from the Cruiser; could it be the blonde from the pearl shop? "You must get that box. Without it, then what I've got is not worth potato chips. The whole deal depends on what that thing is telling us."

I was feeling the box inside my shirt and it was twisting. Maybe it was opening, and I couldn't move, couldn't look.

A Steroid Bro said, "After we get those kids, it will be party time."

"Don't you think we're getting a bit old for this line of work?"

"Huh. You see a pier and you dream of fishing."

"I could get a yacht. I'd call it The Pearl."

"You can't even drive."

"Don't have to. There's no roads on the sea."

They were going to stay here gabbing away for hours. We couldn't be stuck in here, crushed on top of each other forever.

Jane looked at me and Pete and gave one of her wicked winks, as if her eye was the evening sun and morning dawn wrapped up in one. Then she let go a silent deadly stinker. It filled the culvert, got up the nostrils and overwhelmed. I was caught between choking and giggling. I was gagging not to let a noise out. How could she do this to us? I was going to gasp and give it all away. Oh Jane!

But it worked.

“Gawd there’s something putrid down there,” the yachtie Bro said. “Let’s get out of here.”

They might be going now but I was scared like I had never been before. This was like when that nice cop had to come and tell me that my dad overworked and got whacked going home. and he wouldn’t come visiting anymore. Then I thought the world had ended.

I wanted to run away and hide from everything. I wanted a universe between me and the Steroid Bros. I wanted the truth from the pearl-shop blonde. I had no idea how to get any of it.

I didn’t know what was going on. How stupid, thinking I could solve anything. I was a failure, and probably going to end up a dead one and take my best friends with me. They were looking as bad as I felt. Jane held our hands, being defiant. I couldn’t.

I desperately needed to go home. I wanted the surety of what I knew. I really, really wanted Auntie Gracie to be there. She’d know what to do. I was useless. I missed Auntie Grace so bad.

I had been playing with the box without thinking. It had opened. I lifted it and looked. Inside the secret compartment there was a USB.



Phillip Walker

Phillip Walker is not a writer, although he harbours delusions of grandeur. Over the years he has had pieces published in various journals, with a relatively reasonable rate of submission success. A semi-retired wanderer, he was fortunate to spend time in the Kimberley and it remains embedded beneath his fingernails. Currently Phillip resides in central Victoria.



Image by Sandy Joffe