

on
corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Six

Open Sesame

By Nick Rodway

An impending sense of doom washed over me. What was the pearl-shop blonde doing out on the Great Northern Highway? My mum used to say, between smokes, that the only time people like her crossed the Fitzroy was to visit their family's pastoral stations further east.

As we made for Zac's Commodore, I suddenly stopped.

"What are you doing?" Jane whispered. Ahead of her, Pete and Zac looked at me, confused.

Without answering, I ran back behind the low brick fence to the courtyard. The others raced on my heels and crouched down beside me. Then, as discreetly as I could, I peered over and watched the blonde's car drive to a stop. It was a sleek, fancy thing, not something you'd normally see driving down Hammersley Street or parked out at the wharf.

The woman stepped out. She was dressed in an open-neck striped shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. She held a handbag at her side, and the way she stood made me think she was nervous about something. Beside me, the others breathed heavily, and I wiped my brow with my sleeve.

After a minute or so, the woman began to become agitated, and started walking up and down. She kept stopping and looking at her watch, then throwing her head back and sighing. As I watched her, she suddenly became rigid, and looked out onto the highway; I followed her gaze. A huge, jet-black Landcruiser



Image by Grace Dungey

came sidling into the waiting area and drove straight towards the fence where I was crouching. I dropped to my knees and was met by Jane's concerned face.

“Nick, what’s happening?”

I quickly brought my finger up to my lips, and we were silent as the engine on the other side of the wall idled, then ceased. Two doors opened and shut, and two sets of shoes began walking along the bitumen. As the sound drew away, I spoke softly to Jane.

“I’m still working it out for myself. For now, just stay quiet.”

I peered over the wall once more. The pearl-shop woman was with two men. Even in this heat they wore suits, which were as dark and menacing as the tank they had arrived in.

One was smaller and older than his companion. He was bald and had a scowl on his face, and he walked straight up to the pearl-shop blonde. He appeared very angry, and as he spoke he held out his hand. The woman reached into her bag and pulled out a box. The older man motioned for her to give it to his taller companion, who then turned on his heel and returned to the Landcruiser. He opened the car and placed the box on the dash, and then walked back towards where the older man was still talking aggressively. Stopping, he pulled out a packet of cigarettes. With his back to me, the tall man lit up and breathed the smoke into the overcast sky.

I dropped back down and spoke quickly.

“Get back to Zac’s car, right now!”

I don't know what came over me at that moment, but I found myself vaulting over the wall like an Olympian. The sound of Pete gasping filled my ears as I found my feet and ran to the Landcruiser, ripped open the door and grabbed the mysterious box. Before I knew it, I was in the back of the old Commodore screeching 'Drive!' and we were cruising once more.

In the front, Zac's hands trembled on the wheel and he looked furtively in the rear-view mirror. "Are they following us?" I asked.

Slowly, Zac shook his head. Then he turned and looked over his shoulder. He wasn't happy. "What do you think you're playing at, Nicko?" he asked. "You've just robbed one nasty-looking bloke, and now we're all accessories! With moves like that, you're capable of anything. Maybe you really did knock off that pearl after all..."

"Don't be stupid," I muttered, but as I looked at Pete and Jane's open-mouth stares, I began to feel troubled myself. The box I held in my hands was gunmetal grey, and it was locked solid. Only a key or an expert locksmith could break this open.

Zac sped the last fifty kilometres into Derby. Jigals and boabs blended into one. As we drove along Loch Street, down the side-roads I could see the marsh reflecting the heavens. Kite-hawks soared over the town oval and I heard the mournful cry of a red-tailed black cockatoo as a group of kids sped along, taking it in turns to do wheelies on their bikes.

At the Spini, the last watering hole before the road to the jetty, Zac jumped out of the car and slammed the door. We piled out after him.

“I mean what I said. I’m leaving tomorrow — it’s a long walk back to Broome, so you better be here. I don’t want any more trouble, Nick.” And with that, Zac strode through the doors into the pub.

It had been over 30 minutes since Willare — that left just over 30 hours before our ride left town.

“What do we do now?” asked Pete.

“We go in there and question Sophia, like we planned,” Jane replied.

Inside, Zac had disappeared. We looked around for a woman who might be his new flame, but there was only the male manager lingering behind the bar.

“What are you kids doing in here?” he demanded. “And on a school day as well! Out you go, or I’ll call the truancy officer.”

We filed back out, defeated, and with no other option, began to trudge down to the jetty. The tide was on its way in, and we stood in the shadow of a mangrove thicket as the sun neared its zenith.

“Why the glum faces?” a voice called out. I spun around. Sitting off on a bench seat near the boat ramp was an old man, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a checkered shirt. He had a fishing rod with him and was braiding a line.

“Pardon?”

“I said, why the glum faces? Travis is my name, what’s yours?”

We all proceeded to introduce ourselves, and, as each of us did so, the old man raised his hat.

“Lovely to meet youse. Anyway, you kids shouldn’t be sad, you should be seizing the day. Look at me, I’m 89 and I’m off to catch a mulloway. Carpe diem and all that.”

“It’s been a long day, that’s for sure,” I said.

His face softened as he looked at me. “Where are you from, mate? I’ve not seen your face.”

“We’re from Broome.”

“Broome? Well, welcome to the Kimberley, son! I hope your drive up from the north Pilbara was a safe one.”

“Mister,” I said, “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

He chuckled away to himself, and then pointed to my hand. “What’ve you got there?”

I raised the box, my hand sweaty around it. “Something really important. But it’s locked.”

“Well,” said Travis and began whistling to himself. “We fishos, we have ways around that.” He reached into his tackle bag and pulled out a small, red hook, and bent it out flat. He motioned to me and I handed the precious box to him. The old man stuck the straightened hook into the hole and began to twist it around as we all looked on, bewildered.

Just as I thought the old man was having us on, a loud click rang out from the box, and Travis gently placed his hand on the lid.

“Open sesame,” he whispered and winked at me.



Image of Derby Jetty by Grace Dungey

Nick Rodway

Nick Rodway's writing about the people and places of the Kimberley has been featured in some of the world's leading news publications, including *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and *Mongabay*. With a background in community and the environment, Nick is currently director of an Indigenous youth program in the West Kimberley. He has previously lived in Broome and now lives in Derby.



Image by Grace Dungey

Grace Dungey

Grace is based in the West Kimberley and has a background in environmental research and communications. Grace has a passion for languages and writing, having lived in Indonesia and China as part of the Hamer Scholarship Program. Her work has appeared in a range of international publications. Her artistic background is in ceramics and textiles.



Image by Nick Rodway