

# on corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Eight

## Between Jetty and a Marshy Place

By Thomas Saunders

‘Let’s get back to the jetty car park,’ said Pete.

‘No way. They’ll be waiting for us there.’ I replied.

‘What about this?’ Jane held out the small bronze coloured USB device.

‘Let’s go to the Telecentre,’ said Pete.

‘On a Saturday afternoon?’

‘What about the library?’ asked Jane.

‘Closed at lunchtime,’ said Pete.

‘We need to go to the Spini,’ I told them.

‘On foot?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How about we hitchhike?’ suggested Pete.

‘Too risky. We’ll walk.’ I replied.

‘All the way back to the Spini?’ groaned Jane. ‘In the heat?’

‘Look out that way, there’s bound to be some relief.’ I pointed to the north-east. Dark angry clouds towered out Meda way. ‘Feel that?’ a slight breath of cool hit my brow.

Pete rolled his eyes. ‘Nick, it never rains in Derby.’

A yellow lightning bolt whipped the horizon.

‘Whatever. Let’s go.’

We slushed through saltwater mud, our shoes and legs turning an ochry grey.

Behind us I half-imagined, half-heard deep thunder.

With every car passing, we either squatted near a stray mangrove or straggly bush, or ducked down and kept still.

‘This is really hard going. Let’s cross over,’ came the moans.

Peter, Jane and I trudged across the scorching, decaying bitumen, looking for harder ground. I felt the air move. A vehicle. Approaching. A black Landcruiser. Speeding. Towards us.

“Come on!”

I could hear the aggressive rumble of a V8 petrol engine.

“They can’t just run us down, Nick.”

Pete stared at her. ‘Jane, who knows what’s on that USB?’

‘We’ve got to get to Zac.’

The vehicle was slowing now.

‘Run!!’

Pete cried, ‘It’s no use! They’ll catch us.’

“No, they won’t. Follow me.” I called.

I ran further out on to the marsh, across a salty, gritty layer. The 4WD shot from the road and bounced across the marsh.

I led my gang, running and flicking up mud. I looked back to Pete and Jane. Sweat and fear covered their faces. *The dark patches, we have to get to the dark patches, I thought.*

The tyres were cutting up a fresh path, in hot pursuit.

My feet started to stick.

‘Just a bit further.’ I tried to reassure my friends.

I felt mud, wet from spring tides and torrential rain.

The V8 rumbled, then whined. We looked back and saw it was leaning slightly and two wheels were spinning uncontrollably. Like a lone entrant in mud football.

‘Double back, you mob!’

We ran back the way we had come, onto the harder part of the marsh and onto the jetty road. We were puffing from exhaustion, heat and fear. Pete and Jane were laughing and high-fiving me.

‘Let’s go to Zac,’ I gasped.

The last sweaty kilometre to Clarendon Street seemed to take — how long? Hard to tell. The overcast sky and blinding late-afternoon sun gave no clues.

‘Man, I’m tired,’ whinged Pete.

‘I’m thirsty,’ complained Jane.

‘Sophia will give us some drinks.’

‘I thought you said she’s not working at the pub.’

‘Not beer you idiot. Water.’

‘Let’s hurry. Those guys won’t be bogged forever.’

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Sophia was honey-blonde, French and tanned.

‘Zac? *Non*. I ’ave not seen ’im. I wait long time for ’im. ’e didn’t come.’

‘Do you have a computer? Can we use it?’ we pleaded. ‘And some water.’

‘Sure, sure. Come.’

Sophia led us to a box-like donga with green shade-cloth draped like a tent down one side. The box air-cons whirred and grumbled and dripped.

‘Wipe your feet.’

We left the mat a moist grey, like potter’s clay.

A drumbeat of thunder sounded.

We piled into the fanless heat of the room. The panels of the wall were warped and coming away. There was a rickety wooden cupboard, an unmade bed with a backpack, an aluminium chair. No table, but the obligatory bar fridge with souvenir stickers of places it had never visited.

‘*Excuse-moi*. One minute.’

Sophia lifted up the mattress and took out a PC laptop, also well decorated with a colourful collage of stickers.

The computer lit up and whirred to life. Sophia pointed to the fridge. My friend nearly broke off the door. Pete skulled from a one-litre bottle and winced, handing the icy water to Jane.

Sophia clicked and moved the mouse. ‘Photos. Only photos.’

There were scenes of Broome and Derby. Beaches. Boabs. Babes. We looked in disappointment.

‘Just tourist snaps, nothing special,’ remarked Jane.

‘What a waste of time!’ I said.

Pete took the bottle from Jane and handed it to me. ‘What’s the big deal? Why did those crooks so badly want this?’

‘Keep going,’ urged Sophia.

I scrolled through the thumbnails of the photos.

The pearl shop. Pearl rings. Necklaces. And then: the necklace.

‘What is that?’ Sophia pointed her neat French fingers at the screen to a folder called *Plans*.

I clicked on it.

More photos. Of safes. People opening safes. Holding pearls. Their faces unknown, but visible... So many pearls!

*It that her? I thought. It is her!*

A ringtone broke our silent staring.

*‘Alors! C’est lui.’*

‘What did you say?’

‘It is ’im. Finally. It is Zac.’

‘Where the hell did he go?’

‘Allo?’

Sophia listened for a moment and passed the phone to me. She covered her mouth with her hand and her eyes stared intently.

‘Zac? Where are you?’ I asked.

‘Nick, Nick they’ve got me. Give them...’ Another voice interrupted Zac. A polished voice, a voice you would hear on TV, but so out of place in a sultry Kimberley town. ‘Listen. We’ve got your mate. We want the box and everything that’s in it. Make sure you bring it — or who knows what’ll happen to your mate? Prison tree at sunset.’

Then nothing.

I pulled the stiff synthetic curtain aside. Sun was streaming from clouds, bathing Clarendon Street in 45-degree light rays.

We’d have to hurry.

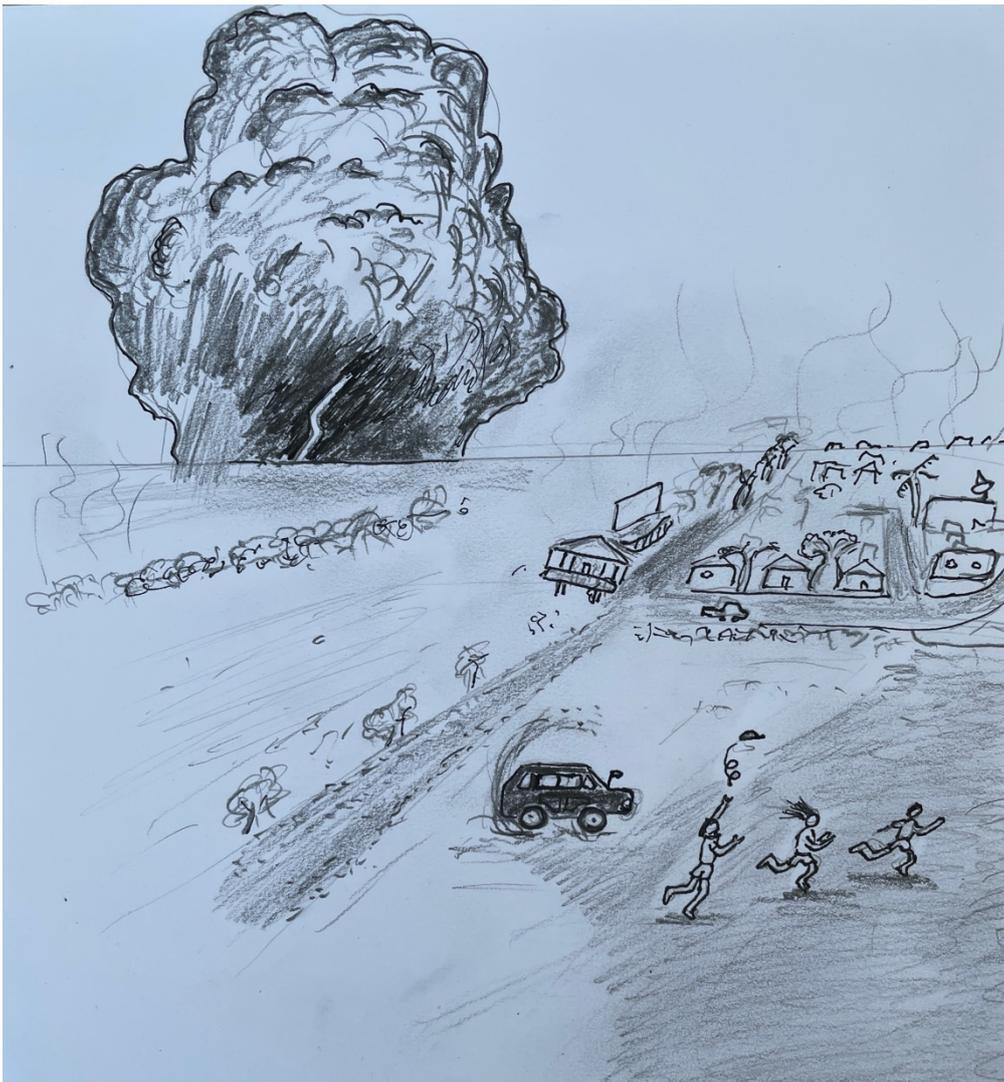


Illustration by Thomas Saunders

## Thomas Saunders

Thomas Saunders is a linguist and writer. He travelled from the east to WA to experience Aboriginal languages and cultures of the Kimberley. After listening to the stories of his own elders in Tasmania and Kimberley Aboriginal elders, he decided to write stories of his own. Thomas has previously been a participant of Corrugated Lines, but Corrugated OnLines, is the first event he has organised. His other interests include history, archaeology and weather. When not exploring the languages of the Kimberley, he likes to work on his novel. He has lived in both Derby and Broome.



Image by Ayesha Moss