

an corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Nine

Run like the devil

By Madelaine Dickie

The tall Steroid Bro shakes a set of bolt cutters.

‘Want your Achilles cut by these, you little piss-streak?’

Zac’s wet himself. His face is pearl-pale. They’ve got him seated at the base of the Prison Tree with his hands tied behind his back. He’s crying.

‘No,’ he says, between sobs.

‘Then your little mates better not be late.’

The shorter bloke’s circling the tree, keeping one eye on the highway and one eye on the bush. Both are sweating in black suits, faces shiny, noses sharp as beaks.

Sophia, Pete and Jane have sent me ahead to do a reccy. Sophia nudged her car into a screen of shrub and mozzies about half a kilometre back. The mozzies are so thick, they’re probably hiding the car better than the scrub is! I’m a bit scared of Ross River—Auntie Gracie got it last year and was laid up in bed for months—but I’m more scared of what the Steroid Bros might do to Zac. Before we left Derby, we made a copy of the USB’s files and got in touch with the police. They said they’d meet us here.

Now, the sky’s gone the electric purple of deep-sea jellies, and the evening clouds look like they’re about to burst. My chest feels like it’s about to burst too, and my stomach’s sugar-sick from too many lemonades at the pub.

A police car pulls off the highway. The pressure eases in my chest. It’s going to be okay. The police will arrest the Steroid Bros, untie Zac, and free my Auntie Gracie.

The tall Steroid Bro casually tosses the bolt cutters into the bush.

Two police officers casually walk towards the tree.

Instead of pulling out their handcuffs, they’re putting out their hands; they’re shaking hands with the Steroid Bros, and everyone’s grinning, though the Steroid Bros’ grins look a bit strained—I don’t think they were expecting the police to turn up, not here, not in full view of the highway. Together, they walk to the boot of the car and the police peer in. Each pulls out a locked black box. One of the police flips a combination on the lock and opens the box to reveal a fat, gleaming pearl. Satisfied, he relocks it and shakes hands with the Steroid Bros again.

It's then that I truly realise this is much bigger than a missing pendant. The car's boot's chock-full of loot.

I pick up a rock and throw it at Zac.

'Zac!' I hiss. 'C'mon, let's go!'

But Zac's paralysed.

'Just give it to them,' he hisses back.

'Don't give them anything!'

The voice startles me. It's familiar. Warm and low and firm. It's accompanied by the scent of warm water and bubbles. I turn to see Auntie Gracie.

'Auntie! How'd you...?'

'Shh...?', she scolds me. 'Remember when you borrowed your mum's car and drove to Beagle Bay?'

How could I forget? Mum almost set fire to my doona with her ciggy, she was so mad.

'Yeah.'

'See those keys in the ignition of the Steroid Bros' car?'

'Yeahhhhh.' I draw it out this time. I don't like where this is going.

'When the police piss off, and those black-suited bastards come back to check on Zac, we're gunna steal that car and make sure all those pearls are returned to their rightful owners. It's the only way we'll be able to prove our innocence! Zac, you're gunna have to run like the devil. Got it?'

I look at Zac. Zac looks at his Achilles.

'Got it.'

Above us, there's a black mudslide of thunder and the first cold spits of a wet season storm.



Image by Charlotte Dickie

Madeline Dickie

Madeline Dickie's first novel, *Tropo*, won the City of Fremantle T.A.G. Hungerford Award and was shortlisted for the Dobbie Literary Award and Barbara Jefferis Award.

Red Can Origami, her second novel, was written on Balangarra country, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and at Youkobo Art Space in Tokyo, Japan. Madeline loves to travel. A surf-obsession has led her from Spain's Mundaka, to Namibia's Skeleton Coast, to little-known waves in the Dominican Republic. Madeline currently lives in Exmouth, WA.



Image by Charlotte Dickie