

# an corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Ten

## **A Little Treasure**

By Fiona Cahill

Aunty Gracie's plan seemed insane. Jane and Pete crawled over to where we were huddled, staying low and out of sight of the police and the Steroid Bros. One of the goons had removed his jacket and slung it over the bullbar at the front of the Landcruiser. We could all see the shoulder holster and handgun that he wore over his sweat-stained shirt. These guys were serious.

"Where did you come from?" whispered Pete when he saw Aunty Gracie. She looked at him and flashed a cheeky smile, not saying a word.

I told them the plan in hushed tones. Jane frowned when I got to the part where I was supposed to dash across open ground and somehow get to the Landcruiser, get in, and drive it away before the big guys got their hands on me.

"Don't worry, Jane, I'll be right, I promise," I said. She didn't seem convinced. I wasn't convinced either.

My heart was pounding as I waited for the right moment.

And then suddenly I heard a car engine. It was Sophie, driving casually up the tourist driveway towards the Prison Tree! Nobody had noticed her sneaking off.

The police quickly pocketed their pearls and walked over, waving at her to stop. Sophie stepped out of the car. She was wearing the Kimberley Tourist Uniform: wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and a camera slung around her neck. The perfect disguise.

"Bonjour!" She said in a sing-song voice, smiling and waving at the Police officers. The Bros walked around to the boot of the Landcruiser and started closing everything up.

"Bonjour!" replied one of the cops, smiling at Sophie.

"Oh!" She exclaimed in faux delight, "Parlez-vous francais?"

"Sorry love," replied the other, older cop. "Parlee voo Australian. You need to get your car back out of here, this is a Police matter."

Sophie looked at him, blinking her big blue eyes in mock confusion. Then she spoke very slowly, as if she didn't understand English:

"I wish to see...the...spicy croc."

The two police officers looked confused. Sophie reached into the car and took out a book, flicking to a page to show the officers something.

“See...here” she said. She arched her back and leaned over so that the two police officers could see the page. They could also see straight down her top.

“Spicy?...croc?” Sophie blinked again.

Her impersonation of a ditzy French tourist was doing a great job of distracting the Police; even the Bros were staring.

Aunty Gracie reached over and pushed my mouth shut, clicking my teeth together. Maybe I was a bit distracted too.

Zac took advantage of the situation, running awkwardly across the open ground with his bound hands behind him. He dived into the bushes where we were hiding. Pete had a Swiss Army knife in his backpack, which he used to cut the cable ties from Zac’s wrists.

We all went back to watching Sophie. If there’s ever an Oscar for ‘great acting under extreme pressure’, it should go to her.

The Police were looking at her book, and they now started laughing.

“Saltwater croc! Salty! Not spicy!” said the younger cop, shouting the words at her as if he thought she was partially deaf instead of French. “None around here! Go ask at the Tourist Bureau!”

“Oui oui...Salty!” she said. “Merci...thank you!”

Sophie took her time getting back into her car, dropping her book, thanking the Police over and over in English and in French. This gave Pete, Jane and Zac plenty of time to creep back along the shrub-line and scarper out to the highway to wait for her.

“I’ll meet you back at the Spini!” I whispered to Jane. I could tell she wanted me to go with them, but Aunty Gracie waved them off.

Sophie drove slowly back out towards the road, tooting her horn and waving goodbye to the cops.

Rain started falling harder and the air felt heavy. The wind was cool, pure bliss after a long hot day of running. Even in all the chaos it was hard not to take a moment to enjoy the smell of the storm rolling in.

“Ok Aunty,” I said. “What’s this all about?”

But she didn’t have time to explain. Short Bro had come around to the opening in the tree to check on their prisoner.

“He’s gone!” he shouted. Tall Bro ran over, a hand going to his holster.

One of the cops swore, and the other one said, “Bloody Frenchie!” They hopped in their car and tore off after Sophie, blue and red lights slicing through the early twilight.

“It’s now or never, Nicko” said Aunty Gracie, and she started sprinting for the Landcruiser. I was frozen. I couldn’t stop staring at that gun.

Tall Bro spotted Gracie and started running towards her, blocking her path to the Landcruiser.

My legs started working. I held up the box and ran towards him.

“HEY!” I called. “Looking for this?” He turned on his heel, making a beeline for me. I threw the box as hard as I could. It sailed over his head and landed in a clump of shrubs. Gracie was at the Landcruiser. I heard the engine start up and she must have put her foot down because she reached me before Tall Bro did. I scrambled into the passenger seat and we sped off, leaving the big fellas behind in a cloud of dust and rain.

“Nick, why did you give them the box?” said Aunty Gracie, sounding defeated. “We need it”

“You mean this?” I asked, holding up the USB stick with a grin.

Aunty Gracie smiled her biggest smile.

“Ok, now you really need to tell me what this is,” I said.

“It’s evidence” said a voice from the back seat. We both turned around in shock.

Her once-neat hair was sticking to the sweat on her face, her eyes were bloodshot, and there were black streaks down her cheeks where her makeup had run, but there was no mistaking who

It was —the blonde lady from the pearl shop. Her wrists were tied with a cable tie and she had a big red mark on her face where it looked like she'd been walloped.

Gracie finally started explaining. "I broke into your shop so that I could put a hidden camera out the back. I knew that pearl pendant was a fake the minute I saw it. I worked at pearl grading tables for years, I know a South Sea pearl when I see one."

"You're right," said Blondie. "They are swapping out real pearls for fakes, selling the real ones in Japan. I didn't want to get involved but they threatened to hurt my mother." Her voice cracked as she spoke. After everything that she had put me and my Aunty through, I still felt bad for her.

"Why didn't you go to the police?" I asked.

"They've got police working for them in Broome too. I think half the cops in the Kimberley are in on it."

Gracie explained she had called her old boss from the Pearl Farm to tell him about the fakes. He got the Feds involved. "They should be arriving at the airport about now," said Aunty Gracie. "We need to get the real pearls to them."

In the road ahead I saw something that made my blood run cold: A second black Landcruiser was parked by the side of the road. Beside it stood a man in a suit. He had a gun pointed at us.

What happened next is a bit of a blur. I didn't hear a shot, but I remember seeing a flash. The windscreen exploded and there was a terrible screeching sound as Gracie lost control on the wet road and the Landcruiser rolled over. I remember lying in the road in the broken glass, lightning cracking the sky overhead while hundreds of pearls rolled around me. Then there were Federal Police everywhere and I think even a helicopter. After that, darkness and the smell of warm water and bubbles.

A week later I was up and about in Derby hospital. Mum was there; Aunty Gracie said she didn't leave my side for days, not even to go outside for a smoke. She told me there had been heaps of arrests. I had lots of visitors: Pete and Jane, Sophie and Zac. An officer from the Major Crime Unit came to interview me. This time I was a witness and not Prime Suspect. One last visitor came before I was discharged — Blondie. I could hardly see her behind the enormous gift basket she was carrying — chocolates, flowers, giant teddy, the works. She also had something for Gracie.

“I can’t thank you both enough for your help,” she said, handing Gracie a little box. Aunty Gracie’s eyes filled with tears as she opened it. It was a beautiful pearl pendant. A real little treasure.



Image by Teresa Thornell

## **Fiona Cahill**

I grew up in Broome after my family emigrated from Ireland when I was nine. I lived there until my late 20s, and I will always consider Broome to be my hometown. I now live in Perth with my husband, two kids, two dogs, seven fish and a stick insect. I enjoy writing as a hobby. I try to maintain my connection to the North-west through my work, which is for a wildlife conservation charity with sanctuaries around the country, including in the Kimberley.



Image by Declan Walsh