

THE ARCHER'S DIARY

by
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Second Edition published 2024

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The Archer's Diary: second edition.

Dedication

To Trish for your constant encouragement,
support and patience . . .
and to Didara for your invaluable input,
perspective and magical touch where needed
in the manuscript.

Chapter 1

He hit the brakes but nothing happened.
The car continued to pick up speed.
He stamped down several more times, only to achieve the same outcome.
Nothing.
He could feel his heart racing, the blood pounding in his ears as he fought to regain control of the runaway vehicle.
Donald Daggett, CEO of one of Australia's top three wine producing companies, was losing a fight for the first time in his life.
He knew it and his wife, Elizabeth, knew it.
He saw the knowledge in her terrified gaze as he glanced sideways at her.
She had her arms out, bracing herself against the dash as he fought to keep the car on the road.
He swiped madly at the sweat trickling into his eyes, burning them, and causing his vision to blur.
Damn it, I can't save us if I can't see, he thought.
He fumbled for the emergency brake, yanked it back, and—nothing.
None of the brakes were functioning.
What the hell?
A leisurely day trip in the bucolic English countryside had become an unexpected hellish nightmare ride through the quiet evening streets of Bourton-on-the-Water.
Daggett sensed an aching pressure building and clutched his chest as the tension suddenly turned painful.
A blood red fog clouded his vision. He tried to shake it away but succeeded only in losing his grip on the wheel.
His wife seized her seat belt and turned her face to her window, screaming at the houses flashing past.

Moments later the car careened across the road, with a screech of skidding tires, and tore into the solid stone pillar of an ancient bridge before flipping into the turbulent stream below.

Water rushed in through the shattered windows, swirling around their heads as the Daggetts dangled by their safety belts.

Donald twisted and fought to free himself as water rose past his head.

He reached out frantically for his wife only to encounter her limp body. The pain in his chest exploded.

Blackness.

A dark figure slipped from the nearby shadows.

It eased down the embankment towards the wreckage with one intention in mind.

And it wasn't to save the Daggetts.

Meanwhile, across the globe in Australia, another Daggett faced challenges of his own . . .

Logan Daggett was up to his neck in trouble—again.

He couldn't risk a backward glance but his heightened senses were keenly aware of the men closing in on him rapidly from behind.

His latest predicament was yet another result of his inherent cockiness.

He tucked his head down and bolted forward like the hounds of the Baskervilles were snapping at his heels.

The ground shuddered with the sound of a dozen sets of heavy feet giving chase.

Two hulking shapes moved to bar his path.

Logan didn't hesitate.

He tucked his head down and, leading with a solid shoulder, he bored straight into them. He sent one of the human barricades careening backwards.

Logan's momentum faltered.

A wave of bodies fell on him before he could move.

Beefy arms wrapped themselves around his neck and shoulders, others clawed at his legs. Just as he collapsed under the attack, he caught a glimpse of his Aborigine mate, Gavin Allawa, charging to his aid.

With a deft flick of his wrist, Logan released his death-grip on the object in his hand and sent it flying to Gavin's outstretched hands.

He felt pure satisfaction to see his friend making a perfect catch and dashing past before Logan disappeared beneath a writhing mass of sweating, grunting, swearing attackers. He laughed as the breath was crushed out of him.

A tumultuous roar went up.

Logan extricated himself from the heap of bodies just in time to witness Gavin's victory dance and bow of appreciation to the thousands of fans enjoying the regional intrastate football game.

Logan staggered toward the sideline.

Then he spotted them—a couple of stone-faced cops.

Shit. What now? Logan thought as a bystander pointed him out to the police, and they began walking in his direction.

The town coppers and Logan were all well acquainted. On a first name basis. The young Daggett was the consummate troublemaker. The Law's first point-of-call whenever a 'disturbance of the peace' was called in. This time, however, Logan was at an utter loss for the 'blues' to be wanting him.

It pissed him off.

Gavin spotted his buddy from across the far side of the field as the two officers converged on him and a sudden lump of ice formed in the Aborigine's stomach. His head rang with warning bells going off.

Thought we'd put all that mess with the girl behind us.

Jostled by his jubilant teammates and supporters, Gavin fought to keep sight of the cops confronting Logan.

He strained against the pull of the crowd, twisting and turning.

Something was definitely wrong, and he grew more desperate to rush to his friend's side. One of the coppers laid a hand on Logan's arm and the young player's shoulders drooped as he hung his head despondently.

That was the last straw.

Gavin tore free of the raucous celebrations and raced across the field as Logan dropped to his knees.

Chapter 2

Three weeks later

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

The somber voice of the pastor drifted upon the melancholy breeze sweeping the hilltop as the congregation looked on as the two caskets were lowered into the double grave. Logan heard quiet sobbing ripple through the crowd as they dropped from view. A gut-wrenching pain clawed at his insides. Like something reaching up out of the grave trying to pull him in with the caskets. He fought down a choking sob. Bile burned his throat.

The young man could care less for people seeing him cry. He tried to focus on one casket in particular through a rippling curtain of tears. Anger brimmed over and he swiped at his face with his hand. He felt abandoned. Strangely betrayed.

He felt alone.

After the ceremony he stood depressed. Withdrawn. Blind to the people filing past him with their sober condolences, gentle touches, before slowly drifting off to their waiting vehicles.

A short time later Logan shook his head slightly realizing, except for one other, they were alone. Beside him his best mate, Gavin, stared grimly down at the caskets covered with a smattering of dirt.

Logan was of two minds. On one hand, he felt overcome with despair at the loss of his closest friend and confidant—his mother. Together they had faced life filled with endless trials and tribulations melded with moments of elation and promise, with unflinching positivity. His brushes with the law never seemed to faze her. As if being his mother gave her more insight to her son's nature that Logan, himself, could discern. That she regarded his rambunctious attitude as harmless youthfulness burning excessive energy. Testing boundaries. Believing with a mother's blind love that maturity would intervene eventually.

At least that's how Logan felt about it. Now his life, his world, felt utterly out of kilter. His legs trembled beneath him as he stared at the graves, unwilling to move.

On the other hand, his insides were ratcheted tight with contempt and fiery anger towards his father.

As far back as he could remember, the bastard always perverted his position as patriarch. He ruled with an iron-will, as uncompromising as a steel rod. His word was law, final and incontestable.

As Logan approached his early teens a noticeable shift took place in the family dynamics. Following the laws of nature, the young man tested the extent and real strength of the patriarchal boundaries.

Elizabeth Daggett found her role as wife and mother shift to one of arbiter in the household constantly rocked with clashes between two alpha personalities. Donald Daggett avoided confrontations by simply spending more time at the corporate office than with his family at home.

Why did he have to take Mum down with him? The question battered Logan's mind like a hurricane as he stared blindly down at his parents' graves.

Gavin laid his hand gently on Logan's shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze, feeling the tension in his mate's muscles. He knew all too well the animosity that surged like a river between Logan and his father.

"C'mon mate." Gavin's voice sounded uncommonly husky with emotion. His normally jovial eyes were dull and brimmed with tears.

Logan placed his hand on Gavin's, nodded and turned from the graveside and barely registered Stan Beaman standing patiently beside their car. The bloke had always been his mother's personal financial advisor as long as he could remember and as he and Gavin drew closer, Logan could see how distraught he was at his mum's passing.

"G'day Stan," Logan said. "What can I do you for?"

The financier collected himself, reached inside his coat and withdrew an envelope. "I didn't want to appear as if we were conducting business at the service, but before leaving for England your mother left this in my possession, insisting I hand it to you as soon as possible should anything untoward happen to her." He passed the item to Logan. "The way she spoke sounded like she expected something to occur, but I never thought . . ."

"Funny you should say that," Logan murmured. "Before Mum and Dad left, I thought something was weighing heavily on her mind, but I never got the chance to ask her what was bugging her. My only regret now is that I never bothered to ask her." Logan fidgeted with the envelope. "Did she happen to mention what's in this?" The weight of the small envelope felt heavier than it should.

"It happens to be the key to your mother's safety deposit box at the bank," Beaman replied.

"Oh? I didn't even know she owned one . . . particularly one of her own," Logan said. "Did my father know about it?"

The financier frowned. "I don't think so."

"Well, thanks Stan." Logan shook the man's hand. "Give me a couple of days to get my bearings and I'll come in to claim Mum's stuff."

"I understand perfectly, Logan. Take as much time as you need. Gavin, always a pleasure." Beaman smiled sadly at Logan and Gavin and left for his car parked nearby.

The two men watched for a moment as his mother's friend drove off.

Logan turned and approached the group of cemetery laborers standing quietly off to one side.

He handed each of them an envelope before quickly rejoining his friend and when the workers inspected their envelopes they were amazed to find them each filled with five crisp one hundred dollar bank notes. They stared in wondrous gratitude as the two young men climbed into their car and drove off.

"Well, if that don't beat all," one of them mumbled.

"Nothin' like his old man at all," another said. "As far back as I can recall, old man Daggett went out of his way to bicker with anyone to save a miserly few pennies."

Logan sighed deeply. He was bone weary and selfishly glad to see the last of his guests depart. It was the longest and saddest day of his young life—having to bury his mother.

Today was his 21st birthday.

It looked to him like most, if not all, the townsfolk from Mudgee turned up at the family homestead to pay their condolences. A few, unable to

attend the actual funeral service and burial for one reason or another, dropped by afterwards at his home with their soft-spoken words.

Despite the solemnity of the occasion, Logan was troubled.

Putting aside his anger, there was something that didn't sit quite right with him about the circumstances surrounding the death of his parents. He read the official reports sent to him from England at the request of the New South Wales Police Department, thanks to his father's corporate attorneys, but they left him with more questions than answers.

Regardless of his animosity towards his father, Logan knew him to be anything but a reckless driver and as soon as he could, Logan was determined to set out for England to carry out his own investigation.

The report concluded his father had suffered a possible heart attack at the wheel; something Logan rejected out of hand. He regarded his father as too much of a heartless bastard to leave the planet like that.

He must find out for himself if it had actually been an accident as reported or whether, for some unimaginable reason, his father committed suicide and murdered his mother in the process.

The more he thought about the incident, the more things just didn't add up. My gut is telling me it was no accident.

Mum always went on about how good her intuition was, so for her to leave that envelope with Beaman must have meant she really did feel something was going to take place on their trip. And despite his mind leaping to the notion of his father committing suicide, Logan now dismissed it.

The codger had made enemies of a few locals right here in town because of his obnoxious attitude and his way of doing business, so what if he had made enemies in the corporate world? Maybe one of them had it in for Dad enough to—

"Here ya go, mate." Gavin appeared at Logan's side with a heavy crystal tumbler in each hand. He passed one to his glum friend and raised his own in a toast. "Here's to mum. God rest her soul." Both downed their drinks and Gavin refilled the glasses. He paused a moment. "I feel bloody guilty mentioning it. Clout me if it suits you, but for what it's worth . . . Happy bir—."

Logan lifted his glass in return. "Weird ain't half of it, but thanks, Gav." For a split-second his dark eyes twinkled with flecks of gold and then returned to the deep green color people always found intriguing, especially

the women. His voice was quiet, strong, but to Gavin's discerning ear there was an unmistakable undercurrent of melancholy tinged with anger. Logan's gaze was unfocused, as he savored the mellow liquor.

It was darker now. The sun having slipped behind the distant hills painting them in purple hues against a deepening golden spring sky. The first stars twinkled overhead and the nip in the air forecast a cold night ahead. He and Gavin sat in heavily cushioned wooden chairs handcrafted by Logan's grandfather and stared at the surrounding vista of the rolling country property from the covered veranda.

They could smell the sweet scent of impending rain on the breeze and to the west a line of dark clouds roiled along the horizon.

The bush was coming alive with nocturnal sounds of birds settling down for the night while unseen animals such as the Echidna and Eastern Bettong shuffled about foraging in the undergrowth for their evening meal while off in the distance sheep bleated as they hunkered down.

* * * * *

Beyond the soft spill of light from the house, a shape lurked in the damp shadows, the faint rustle of leaves blending with the distant cry of a nocturnal bird.

Chapter 3

Logan was the epitome of the 'bronzed Aussie'—tall, broad-shouldered, deeply tanned, muscular, ruggedly handsome with chiseled features. The V-shaped birthmark on his right temple, considered by some as a blemish, merely enhanced his rugged face.

Conversely, Gavin, proud of his Australian Aborigine ancestry, was slim and wiry, ebony skin-toned, eyes deep brown—verging on black, and wore his dark wavy hair buzzed short compared to Logan who preferred the actor Hugh Grant's unruly style. At six feet three, Logan towered over his mate's diminutive five feet seven stature.

"You given your folks a bell to let 'em know about Mum and Dad?" Logan asked. "I know you call 'em at least once a week to update 'em on things around here."

"Yeah, I gave 'em a call while you were caught up organizing the funeral," Gavin answered. "They send their condolences and wish they could've flown down for the service. Mum was pretty shaken up 'bout the news. Dad was his usual stoic self . . . mind you, I thought I heard his voice wobble a tad as he handed the phone to Mum."

Gavin grew up among his tribe not far from Darwin, the capital of Australia's Northern Territory. Commonly referred to by Australians as The Top End, the federal territory is slightly more than twice the size of Texas but with only 1% the population of the American state.

When he was ten years old and began exhibiting exceptional intelligence, Gavin's parents made the difficult decision to send him away to 'the big smoke' where opportunities for advanced education were more prevalent. So the young boy found himself living with relatives in the country town of Mudgee where he encountered Logan at school.

The two boys bonded instantly and their friendship began.

Weeks later, when Logan learned of his new friend's disruptive life at home—Gavin's uncle turned out to be an abusive drunk—he approached