

---

## Chapter 1

---

### Pearl

**U**nder the bright fluorescent lights, the jewels glistened and sparkled in their glass display cabinets. While Pearl didn't expect to ever own any such expensive treasures herself, her job as sales assistant at the high-end, exclusive jewellery shop, Mon Addi, afforded her the opportunity to gaze entranced at the colours sparkling off the diamonds, the fires crackling in the opals and the creamy translucence oozing from the pearls and moonstones. When she was rearranging the displays or serving clients, as the customers were called, she could hold the beautiful objects in her hands or against her skin, and occasionally try on a necklace or bracelet when asked to model one.

In the few months she'd been working at Mon Addi, she had, however, saved up to buy a pair of diamond studs. She wore them every day, and sometimes when she was gazing into the display cabinets, her hand would reach up to touch one to remind herself they were there, tiny but beautiful and sparkling.

It was a quiet morning in the brightly lit, elegantly decorated

store, but Pearl didn't mind. She was equally as content admiring the treasures in the display cabinets while she polished the glass or as she was laying them on a black velvet cloth for clients to consider. She couldn't explain why she was so drawn to objects that glittered, flashed and shimmered in the light; all she knew was that they fascinated her and she wanted to learn everything she could about them.

She glanced up as the door tinkled to herald a client entering. In case she was called upon to be of service to the tall, expensively-dressed man coming in, she quickly returned to the main counter and hid her cleaning equipment behind it, then straightened her black skirt and primped her short, thick ash-blonde hair.

"No you don't, Pearl. Marcus Holding is mine. Stay away," her boss, Marcie Jones, hissed as she glided past on her way to greet the client. "Marcus!" she called in a decidedly friendlier tone. "What a nice surprise. It's been far, far too long."

Her voice dropped seductively as she reached him, took hold of his arm and gazed up with her most inviting bedroom eyes.

"Hey, Marcie," the dark-haired man greeted her, bending to exchange cheek kisses. As he did so, he glanced beyond her and caught sight of Pearl. Their eyes met and Pearl gasped as a bolt shot through her. She quickly dropped her eyes to the ground, peeked up, then lowered them again when she saw he was still watching. Her whole body was trembling for reasons she couldn't explain. She'd seen enough to know Marcus Holding was, without doubt, the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen but, as he was so far out of her league, there was no reason for her pulse to be racing as it currently was. He must be wealthy if he shopped here, and everything about him oozed confidence and sophistication while she was a simple country girl and retail assistant.

Giving herself a silent dressing-down for her ridiculous reaction to his handsome face, dark hair, muscular body and dominant air, she retrieved her cleaning equipment and moved

to the farthest end of the store, facing away from her boss and the unsettling client. She wanted to have a better look at him. Who wouldn't? But brazenness was not in her nature so she kept her eyes averted and minded her own business as she dusted and polished the glass display cabinets attached to the wall, and lost herself in admiring the shiny gold chains hanging within them.

"Pearl." She started at her boss's voice directly behind her, and swung around to find herself being glared at by a pair of angry eyes.

"Yes, Miss Jones?" she replied, quickly casting her eyes down, wondering what she'd done wrong but certain she would find out soon enough.

"Mr Holding has requested you serve him. I warned him that you have practically no experience and are ignorant of fine jewellery, but I think he feels it is his duty to at least let you try."

"Yes, Miss," Pearl replied obediently.

"But," Marcie went on in a low voice, "don't get any ideas about flirting with Marcus Holding. If I see any inappropriate behaviour from you at all, it will result in your instant dismissal. Are you absolutely clear about that?"

Pearl's eyes stayed staring at the floor. "Yes, Miss."

"Right, well, I shall be watching you closely. Mr Holding is not only a VIP as far as Mon Addi is concerned, he is also my, shall we say, special friend? So don't go making a fool of yourself and embarrassing the good name of this store. Do what you can and call me when you are out of your depth. I will stay close enough to keep an eye on you."

"Yes, Miss." Pearl glanced over to see the handsome Mr Holding waiting for her by the main display cabinet. She quickly went to him and replaced her duster and spray bottle behind the cabinet.

"Good morning, Mr Holding," she said as professionally as she could, ignoring the unnerving thumping of her heart which

kicked in the minute her soft brown eyes met his piercing blue ones.

“Hello. Marcie tells me your name is Pearl Sinclair. Is that right?” His voice was deep but gentle.

“Yes, sir. That’s right,” Pearl replied, demurely keeping her eyes down, all too aware she was being watched.

“Well, I’d like to call you Pearl, if I may.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you.” She nodded shyly, thinking she’d never heard her own name sound as pretty as when he said it.

“Right, Pearl. Then perhaps you can help me choose something for my mother for her birthday today. I’m on my way to meet her for lunch and, as usual, have left buying her gift until the last minute. It has to be expensive, I’m afraid, or she will accuse me of not loving her. She’s rather inclined to value love with a dollar sign. And don’t be embarrassed about the price tag. I have an obscene amount of money.” He grinned a charming lop-sided grin to take some of the sting out of his words and Pearl had to exert all her control to prevent her knees from buckling.

“Of course, sir.” Pearl’s hands fluttered with eagerness and she had to clasp them together as her cheeks deepened to a rosy pink at the prospect of showing off her lovely treasures. “Do you have something in mind?” she asked as Marcie had taught her.

“To be honest, I didn’t, but now I think pearls might be just the thing.”

“Oh, yes. We have lots of lovely pearls. Come and see!” Well aware she was being watched by her boss, Pearl forced herself to walk calmly as she led Marcus to a floor cabinet containing an array of pearl jewellery behind which was a wall cabinet holding strings of pearls of all sizes and colours. She took the display board from behind the cabinet and placed it on the glass top.

“We’ll be fine, Marcie,” Marcus said firmly, dismissing Pearl’s boss who had followed them and was hovering nearby. Pearl

heard a small grunt of annoyance behind her and inwardly flinched. Marcie was not impressed and would no doubt take it out on her once they were alone in the shop. Pushing those thoughts aside, she assumed her most professional smile and focused her full attention on her client.

“Why don’t you pick something out?” he was saying to her.

Pearl clasped her hands in front of her chest as she ran her eyes over the cabinet’s contents. Having quickly made her choices, she opened the sliding door and removed the first piece.

“This is perfect for a woman who prefers traditional, understated jewellery,” she said, mimicking the voice and words she heard Marcie use when talking to clients. She placed a delicate brooch consisting of a small clump of pearls set in the centre of a gold spray on the cloth. “Or perhaps she would prefer something that makes a slightly bolder statement? These are so lovely, aren’t they?” she asked, fetching a single strand of gold South Sea cultured pearls from the wall cabinet behind her and draping them on the cloth. “And for a woman with flair and her own unique style, we also have these exquisite earrings.” She took a box containing a pair of pearl drop earrings from the floor cabinet, and laid them on the cloth. Each one had four chains of black mother-of-pearl falling like rain drops from a single pearl set in gold and diamonds. Her treasures displayed, she clasped her hands under her chin and gazed in awe.

Marcus immediately reached for the earrings.

“Oh, I do like the black on these. I think that suits my mother perfectly. And she does rather fancy herself as avant-garde. Yes, I think these will do nicely, thank you.”

Pearl looked up to see him smiling down at her. Her heart did another crazy thump and she had to drop her eyes afraid of what he would think and worried Marcie, who was watching like a hawk, would notice the slight trembling of her hands.

“Well, Marcie told me you were new—and you can’t have been here long because I haven’t seen you before, and I generally

come in at least a couple of times a year. She said you wouldn't know what you were talking about, but I'm very impressed with the small selection you showed me."

"Thank you, Mr Holding." Pearl's outward demeanour remained calm and professional but she was inwardly thrilled by his praise as she returned the unwanted brooch and strand to their cabinets, and then put the earrings in their box. Marcus reached out and took her hand.

"You don't wear much jewellery yourself, I see. No rings? No symbol of you belonging to any man anywhere." He'd said it all casually, almost disinterestedly, but Pearl felt her heart race out of the blocks again, and this time her palms grew damp with dread that Marcie might have noticed.

"That's right, sir," she said coolly, withdrawing her hand and ducking her head to hide a blush as she finished packaging the earrings. "If there's nothing else, I can show you..."

"Actually, there is. I've just realised I do need one other piece of jewellery, but have no idea what. I will need your advice. Perhaps we could start with you showing me your favourite piece. If you have a favourite piece, that is; I rather get the impression you like most of them."

"I do love them all," she admitted bashfully. "But," she went on, her face lighting up, "I do have a favourite piece. I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Although, it may not be to every woman's taste." She paused for a moment and wrinkled her nose. "I'm sorry, I assumed it was for a woman, but perhaps it is for you, or another man?"

"No," he said with a chuckle. "You were right first time. It is for a woman. In fact, it's a surprise gift for an exceedingly lovely and quite delightful woman, so I'd like the most special and beautiful thing you have. I'm sure if you love it, she will too."

Pearl led him to the main cabinet, laid the display board on top, unlocked the sliding door at the rear and removed a choker.

"I don't know what your lady friend will think of it, but I love this more than any other jewellery I've ever seen."

Marcus picked it up and turned it around in his hand, studying it minutely. It had a big heart made of champagne diamonds in the centre at the front, and smaller filigree hearts tessellated three up then three down made up the band. The first three hearts were white diamonds, the next three champagne, the next three white, then champagne and so on.

After studying it for a moment, he turned to Pearl, his eyes burning into hers. The casualness of before had gone. His muscular body was taut under his business shirt, and Pearl noticed a small pulse in his neck. Impaled by his eyes, she couldn't move and the air between them was suddenly so thick it would have been like walking through molasses if she'd tried to get away.

When Marcus finally broke the spell, his voice had a gruffness she'd not noticed before.

"This is your favourite?"

She nodded, her eyes shining. "Oh, yes, sir. I love how it fits around the neck, like a beautiful collar. And how it has love hearts all the way around. And how all the beautiful diamonds sparkle and throw off flashes of colour, like tiny fairies, when it moves. And see how beautiful these champagne diamonds are!" Suddenly realising she had been enthusing perhaps too eagerly, she blushed and lowered her gaze.

"Look at me, Pearl," he said softly.

She obeyed, feeling herself falling into his fathomless eyes.

A tiny smile hovered around his lips.

"It's perfect," he said quietly. "It couldn't be more so. I'll take it."

"Pearl!" Pearl jumped at the sound of Marcie's angry voice right behind her. "What are you doing? Don't just stand there. I believe Mr Holding is in rather a hurry. Isn't that right, Marcus?"

You're having lunch with Linda, aren't you? His mother," she explained proprietorially to Pearl.

Marcus gave Pearl an exaggerated sigh and another heart-stopping grin. "She's right, unfortunately. I must get a move on. Mother awaits and," he glanced briefly at Marcie, "we both know she hates being kept waiting, don't we? But I think my business here is very satisfactorily concluded... for the moment."

"Shall I gift wrap these for you?" Pearl asked quickly.

"Just the earrings, thanks. The other doesn't need wrapping." She hurried off but could overhear him telling Marcie how pleased he'd been with the service.

He left with his purchases shortly after without saying anything else to Pearl except another 'thank you' and a 'good-bye'; Marcie made certain of that.

"May I go to the bathroom, please?" Pearl asked quickly when Marcie returned from showing Marcus out. Sensing she was about to receive a dressing-down, she raced off before she could be stopped, desperate for a moment to herself.

Once locked safely behind the bathroom door, she couldn't hold herself together a moment longer. Collapsing on a stool, she shivered as cold perspiration formed beads on her upper lip and her thoughts scrambled as they tried to make sense of what had just happened. She had made the biggest sale of her short career, almost a six-figure sum, and yet it wasn't that achievement, exciting as it was, that was uppermost in her mind.

Marcus Holding. She whispered the name to herself, feeling her whole being resonate with the music it created. It was ridiculous. She was being ridiculous. But for this brief moment, she was giving her imagination permission to go wherever it wanted, and it wanted only to conjure that handsome face in front of her, those blue eyes staring deeply into hers, those lips kissing her softly, and those strong arms wrapping around her and keeping her safe.

She pictured him holding that beautiful diamond collar and



trembled. How she envied the woman around whose neck he would place it. She was sad the beautiful thing was gone, but glad it was Marcus Holding who had purchased it, and gladder still she didn't know the woman who would wear it. There was nothing stopping her imagining that she was the woman in front of him, and hers the neck around which he was fastening it.

Pulling herself together, she prepared to face her boss. She knew she hadn't done anything unprofessional but Marcie had seemed angry anyway. Time to stop dreaming, accept whatever reprimand was coming, forget about Marcus Holding and get back to work.