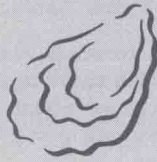
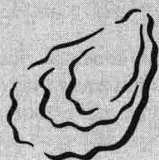


Pearl Cove



ELIZABETH
LOWELL

Pearl Cove



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LOWELL

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*For my sister
Susan Mills*

*always there for me
always a pleasure*



*Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow;
He who would search for pearls must dive below.*

DRYDEN



Prologue

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

SHAKESPEARE

BROOME, AUSTRALIA

November

The sky was violent over the southern sea. There was no horizon, no center, no boundary to the onrushing storm. Heat lay over the land like an invisible, burning shadow of the sun.

Humidity stuck to the man's naked chest as he unlocked the door to the pearl sorting shed, entered, punched a code into the security panel, and relocked the steel door behind him. Even though he had just tossed out the sorters on the pretext of a random security check, it would quickly become murderously hot inside. In a metal-roofed building, air-conditioning didn't last long after the switch was thrown to Off, but that was the first thing he did after entering his security code.

He didn't enjoy sweating. It was simply that when the air-conditioning was running, he couldn't hear the sound of the door opening or footsteps sneaking up behind his back. So he flipped a different switch and settled for the small comfort of

Elizabeth Lowell

ceiling fans. Overhead, metal sliced like slow mixing blades through the sullen air. He could have opened steel-shuttered windows to let light and air flow through the shed, but he didn't. The last thing he wanted was to be spied on by any of the eager employees.

Everybody was dying to know where he hid his hoard of magnificent pearls.

Automatically he wiped sweat off his face and arms and hands with a cotton towel. Only then did he approach the sorting tables. Beneath full-spectrum lights, gleaming sea gems lay in tidy rows and inviting mounds. The pearls begged to be touched, stroked, savored, caressed.

Worshipped.

But not by sweaty hands. Pearls were the most delicate of all gems. The oils and acids of human sweat ate away the thin, smooth layers the captive oyster had so patiently, mindlessly, created to mask an internal wound. Careless handling dulled the fabled orient of pearls, dimmed the subtle ribbons of dawn dancing just beneath the satin surface, just out of reach. Like a dream. Like a miracle.

Just out of reach. Always.

But man reached. Always.

Four thousand years before Christ, man collected, treasured, revered, and wondered about the gleaming miracles from the sea. Born of thunder, conceived in mist, impregnated by moonlight, tears of the gods . . . all explanations for the pearl's origin shimmered with the transcendent mystery of the pearl itself.

Barbarous or civilized, savage or aesthetic, few cultures had been proof against the pearl's allure. It was the most perfect of all gems, for it needed no cutting, no polishing, nothing but man's recognition. And greed. Believed to embody both the carnal and the sublime, pearls adorned the altars of Venus and the reliquaries of saints. Dissolved in wine, pearls cured diseases of the flesh. Buried with the dead, pearls celebrated the wealth of the living. Worn by kings, priests, emperors, sultans, and sorcerers, pearls were a signal of absolute power.

Whoever owned pearls owned magic.

Magic lay all around him, trays and mounds of miracles gleaming, pregnant with all possibilities. The gap between mod-

Pearl Cove

ern rationality and Stone Age awe was as thin as a layer of nacre spread over the glowing ocean gems.

Surely in the midst of all these miracles, another one was possible. . . .

Slowly he went past the virginal white, shimmering gold, and peacock black of the South Sea pearls that keen-eyed sorters had been matching for size, color, and degrees of perfection. None of the pearls on the tables interested him. He had been the one to do the first sort, at harvest, when he creamed two years of work, taking only the best. When a man made offerings to gods or devils, only the best would do.

As he moved toward the twin steel doors that went from floor to ceiling at the end of the shed, the whisper of hard rubber gliding over the tile floor followed him wherever he went. He no more noticed it than a walking man would notice the soft sound of his shoes on a floor.

Though this second set of doors led nowhere, another combination lock guarded them; behind their steel lay a treasure like no other on earth. He released the lock and pushed the doors wide. The lockers inside the vault were deep, protecting tray after tray of pearls, the riches of other seasons, other harvests. Each locker had a hefty steel handle and a tumbler lock of the type popular on low-tech personal safes. The tropical climate was hell on fancy electronics. Behind the locker doors lay tray after tray of pearls, enough wealth to make a saint covetous.

Even though he knew he was alone, he couldn't help looking over his shoulder again. Again, nothing was there but the long shadow of his own suspicions. He turned back to the vault.

Now came the difficult part. Everybody knew that he could no longer come to his feet without help; therefore, he couldn't reach higher than a sitting man's head. No one would believe that he could get to the top lockers by himself.

When they searched in darkness for his cache of pearls, they always looked low, not high.

With a grim smile he wiped his hands again, reached up, and grabbed the highest handle he could. His legs might be pipestems, but his arms and shoulders were heavily muscled. He dragged himself up the ten-foot-high wall of lockers in a

series of one-armed chin-ups. Once his hand slipped on its own sweat. Before he caught himself, the odd stainless steel ring he wore on his right index finger clanged and scraped steel. The fine scratches blended with many others, silent testimony to the number of times he had climbed this very personal mountain.

Breathing hard, he grabbed the handle of the top center locker with one hand and worked its combination with the other. A latch gave way somewhere at the back, toward the wall. *Click. Click.* Then, slowly, a final *click*.

Quickly he let himself down the cabinet until he could take the weight off his arms. Then he grabbed two handles at random and gave them simultaneous yanks.

The front of the bank of lockers shifted. Slowly, with elephantine grace, a thick steel panel swung open on concealed pivots. The lower lockers weren't quite as deep as they seemed from the front. Behind them, cut into the vault itself, lay a series of narrow, shallow, locked drawers. He fitted the spiky steel edges of his oyster ring into the holes at the front of the left-hand drawer, turned, and pulled gently.

The drawer slid out.

For the first time he hesitated. Looking quickly over his shoulder to assure himself that he was still alone, he pulled a long, flat jeweler's case from the drawer. With the reverence of a priest taking communion, he opened the case.

The Black Trinity glowed against velvet the color of dawn.

Though he had seen it many times, the unstrung triple necklace made his heart squeeze and his breathing quicken. Undrilled, untouched, as natural as the day he had eased them gently from their cool, slippery wombs, the pearls were like no other on earth.

Each pearl came from a genetically singular strain of Pearl Cove oysters. The result was a black pearl with unique orient, utterly distinct from the familiar Tahitian gems. The harvest from Pearl Cove's special oysters resembled a black opal as much as a pearl.

That difference alone would have made the triple necklace recklessly valuable. But the Black Trinity was value piled on value, rarity on rarity. Each strand was made up of a single

Pearl Cove

size of pearl. The shortest necklace held twelve-millimeter pearls. The second, longer necklace, had fourteen-millimeter pearls. The third and longest strand was made up of incomparable sixteen-millimeter gems. Each pearl was round. None had any obvious imperfections. The color match between pearls in each strand was very, very close, which added immeasurably to the worth of the necklace as a whole.

Yet it wasn't wealth that had urged the man to claw hand over hand up a steel wall. Nor did beauty goad him. Like a medieval alchemist or a bloody penitent, he was driven by the hope of transcendence. A miracle. Something unspeakably valuable replacing the ordinary dross of life.

He opened drawer after drawer, scanned the oddly radiant black pearls within, compared them to the Black Trinity, and moved on to the next drawer and then the next and the next until none remained.

Frowning, he glanced from the shimmering Black Trinity to the last drawer of Pearl Cove's unique midnight-and-rainbow gems. No matter how closely he looked, none of the new harvest offered a better match or a more perfect pearl for the triple strands than any of the gems already chosen.

A chill went through him, a panic darker than the blackest pearl. The Black Trinity was complete.

But he was not.

No! It needs better eyes, that's all. Her eyes, damn her. Damn her to hell for her strong legs and unnatural eyes.

For seven years he had needed her almost as much as he hated her. He would have to take the new harvest to her and watch in seething impotence while her profane fingers handled his most sacred prayers.

Outside, the storm struck with the casual savagery of a beast whose womb had been a cauldron of warm water as big as an ocean. Lights dimmed and brightened, then dimmed again. It was early for the monsoon's battering storms, but the graveyard in Broome was filled with men who had drowned out of season in their quest for saltwater miracles.

Finally fuses melted and darkness fell inside the shed. Slowly the fans stopped turning. There was no lag time for the alarms on the front door. They died as the lights had, instantly.

Elizabeth Lowell

The electronic lock on the outside door froze. Unless he used the interior manual release, no one could get into the shed.

Just before rain battered on the metal roof like buckshot, drowning out the ground-shaking thunder, he heard the sounds of metal gnawing at metal. He knew it was a chisel against the hinges of the front door; he knew, because it was what he would have done.

Someone was out there, gnawing away at the barriers to the Black Trinity.

Quickly, working by touch alone, he replaced the jeweler's case and closed up the trays of less worthy but still priceless rainbow pearls. In his haste, he wrenched one tray free of its tracks. Exquisite black rainbows flew in every direction. There was no time to go after them, for he would have to drag himself over the floor like a snake. Swearing viciously, he jammed the empty tray back in, swung the heavy panel into place, and closed up the highest tier of lockers, the ones he wasn't supposed to be able to reach.

He didn't close up the rest of the vault. Instead, he began flinging pearls from the lower locker trays onto the floor of the shed. When the middle tier of lockers was empty, he went on to the lowest tier. He emptied those trays, too, scattering pearls like ball bearings in all directions.

After he emptied the lockers, he left them open, like square tongues sticking out of the smooth face of the vault. Nor did he close the vault itself. He wanted whoever was hacking his way into the shed to believe that Pearl Cove's treasure lay undefended at his feet.

When he was finished, he grabbed a piece of discarded oyster shell, went into the deepest pool of darkness he could find, and worked on the shell until he had a pointed fragment as long as his hand. Then he did the only thing left for a man in a wheelchair to do.

He waited.



one

*Like grains of sand grinding inside the oyster,
Like pearls being formed from the grains;
Still waiting, though in unbearable patience
Still believing, though almost in disbelief.*

ZHOU LIANGPEI

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON
November

Archer Donovan wasn't easily surprised. It was a hangover from his previous line of work when surprised men often ended up dead. Yet the unique, peacock-and-rainbow radiance of the teardrop black pearl Teddy Yamagata was holding out did more than surprise Archer. It shocked him. He hadn't seen a black pearl with such color for seven years.

That particular pearl had been clutched in a dead man's hand. Or nearly dead. Archer had fought his way through the riot in time to pull his half brother out of the mess and get him to a hospital in another, safer place.

Long ago, far away, in another country.

Thank God.

Archer had done everything in his power to bury that part of his past. Years later he still was shoveling. But he had learned the hard way that no matter how determined he was,

his previous undercover life had a nasty habit of popping up and casting shadows on his present civilian life. The proof of it was gleaming on the palm of Hawaii's foremost pearl collector and trader.

Teddy wasn't in Hawaii now. He had flown to Seattle with a case full of special pearls to show Archer. The extraordinary black pearl was one of them.

"Unusual color," Archer said neutrally.

Peering through the thick, blended lenses of his glasses, Teddy measured the expression of the man who was a sometime competitor in the pearl trade, an occasional client, and an invariably reliable appraiser. If Archer was particularly interested in the tear-shaped black pearl, nothing showed on his face. He could have been looking at a picture of Teddy's grandchildren.

"You must be a helluva poker player," Teddy said.

"Are we playing poker?"

"You've got your game face on. At least I think you do. Hard to tell under all that fur."

Absently Archer rubbed his hand against his cheek. He had given up shaving several months ago. He still wasn't quite certain why. One morning he just had picked up his razor, looked at it as though it was a remnant of the Spanish Inquisition, and dropped the blade in the trash. The fact that it was six years to the day since he had quit working for Uncle Sam might have had something to do with it. Whatever, his beard had grown into a short black continuation of his short black hair.

And if there were a few gray hairs among the black, tough. The dead didn't age. Only the living did.

"Must be hot when you go to Tahiti," Teddy said.

"It's always hot there."

"I meant the beard."

"I never sent it to Tahiti."

Teddy abandoned subtlety and tried the in-your-face approach. "What do you think of the pearl?"

"South Sea, maybe fourteen millimeters, teardrop, unblemished surface, fine orient."

"Fine?" Teddy hooted. His black eyes nearly vanished into

Pearl Cove

lines of laughter. "It's goddamn spectacular and you know it! It's like . . . like . . ."

"Molten rainbows under black ice."

Teddy's thin black eyebrows shot up and he pounced. "You *do* like it."

Archer shrugged. "I like a lot of pearls. It's a weakness of mine."

"In my dreams you're weak. What's the pearl worth?"

"Whatever you can get for it." Archer's cool, gray-green glance stopped Teddy's immediate protest. "What do you really want to know?"

"What the damn thing's worth," he said, exasperated. "You're the best, most honest judge of pearls that I know."

"Where did you get it?"

"From a man who got it from a woman who got it from a man in Kowloon, who supposedly got it from someone in Tahiti. I've looked for that man for six months." Teddy shook his head emphatically. "He's not there. But if you buy the pearl, I'll give you the names."

"Are there more?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I'll bet you were."

Archer looked at the stainless steel space-age clock his father had brought back from Germany and placed in the front room of the series of suites that were the Donovan family residence in downtown Seattle.

Two o'clock in Seattle. Wednesday afternoon. Autumn closing in on winter.

Where the black pearl had come from, it was early morning. Thursday. Spring closing in on summer.

What went wrong, Len? Archer asked silently. *Why, after seven years, are you selling your unique Pearl Cove gems?*

He looked at the radiant black gem, but it had no answers for him except the one he already knew—seven years ago, his half brother, Len McGarry, had mixed the undercover life with one too many shady deals. It had nearly killed him. It had certainly maimed him.

Archer was one of three people on earth who knew that Len had discovered the secret of how to culture extraordinary

black pearls from Australia's South Sea oysters. But Len had refused to sell even one of the thousands upon thousands of black gems Pearl Cove must have produced in seven years.

Yet here was one of those gems: beautiful black ghost of the past.

Part of Archer, the part that stubbornly refused to bow to bleak reality, whispered that maybe Teddy's pearl was a sign that something had gone right, not wrong. Maybe Len was finally healing in his mind, if not his body. Maybe he was beginning to understand that no matter how many glorious South Sea pearls he hoarded, he was still the same man.

Linked with the thought of Len came unwelcome memories of Hannah McGarry, Len's once innocent, always alluring wife. Alluring to Archer, at least. Too much so. He had seen her only twice in ten years. He could recall each moment with brutal clarity.

She was like the black pearl, unique. And like the pearl, she hadn't the least idea of her own beauty, her own worth.

When he had showed up with her broken, bleeding husband in his arms and told her she had two minutes to pack, she didn't faint or argue. She simply grabbed blankets, medicine, and her purse. It had taken less than ninety seconds. Their flight out of hell had taken a lot longer. He was bleeding over the controls of the small plane he flew and seeing double from the concussion he got fighting his way through to Len.

Hannah hadn't said a word the whole time. She sat in the copilot seat and mopped blood out of his eyes, ignoring the blood that welled from her lower lip where she had bitten through skin to keep from screaming her own fear.

Automatically Archer shoved Hannah McGarry from his mind. He wasn't the kind to yearn for what he would never have. Hannah was married. For Archer, marriage—family—was one of the few things left in the modern world that had meaning. Old-fashioned of him, even mulish, but there it was. The twenty-first century was big enough to have room for everyone, even unfashionable throwbacks.

"So you don't think this is a Tahitian pearl?" Archer asked almost idly.

"What makes you say that?"