



PEARL NECKLACE

A MYSTERY THAT TAKES YOU
ON AN ADVENTURE.

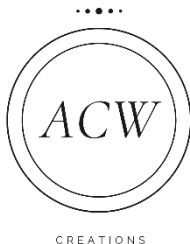
AC WALLACE

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The wind picked up as the clouds rolled in, and Natalie watched the first flakes catch in the streetlights outside the car window. Snow by morning. Good. She'd been hoping for snow all week — her Resolution party was Saturday, and snow on the ground made the apartment look like a Christmas card. Three hundred guests last year. Five hundred this year. The biggest one she'd ever thrown.

She turned the ring on her finger with her thumb. Tom had given it to her on Christmas morning, and she still hadn't told a soul. She was saving the announcement for Saturday night, after the welcome speech, just as the band started to play. Let everyone find out at once. Let the whole room turn to look at her at the same time.

The car slowed. Her driver had pulled up to her building, and the front door of the lobby was standing open. No doorman. That was strange.

“Thank you, Marcus,” she said, and stepped out into the cold.

The lobby was empty. She crossed it quickly, her heels loud on the marble, and stepped into the elevator. The doors opened the moment she pressed fifteen, as if the car had been waiting for her. She rode up alone.

The doors opened onto a hallway full of people.

Her neighbors. Every one of them lined up along both walls of the corridor in their dressing gowns and slippers, watching her step out of the elevator. A woman near the front whispered something to the man beside her, and the whisper traveled down the line like a wave. Then Mrs. Petrowski — Natalie was almost certain it was Petrowski — pushed forward from the crowd with both hands extended.

“Oh, Natalie. Sweetheart. Come here. Let's talk.”

“What's happened?” Natalie said.

Mrs. Petrowski took her by the elbow and walked her down the hall, slow, the way you walked someone who might fall. Two police officers stood outside her apartment door.

“Give me your bag, dear,” Mrs. Petrowski said. “Give it to me.”

“Why are there police at my door?”

“Tom was meeting with someone at the apartment tonight.” Mrs. Petrowski's hand tightened on her elbow. “About an hour ago there were gunshots.”

Natalie pulled her arm free and ran.

She pushed past the officers at the door. She pushed past a man with a camera in her foyer. She came around the corner into her living room and saw a pair of shoes on the floor — leather wingtips, expensive, the toes pointing at the ceiling — and beyond them, the rest of the body. Not Tom. A man she had never seen before in her life.

“Where is Tom?” she said to the room.

She turned, and Tom was standing by the fish tank.

He looked at her the way a man looks at the last person he expects to see, and for a moment she thought he might say something — explain it, deny it, anything. Then her eyes moved past his shoulder to the tank itself, to the strand of pearls coiled on the gravel at the bottom, white and luminous under the aquarium light, the clasp still fastened.

“Tom. What did you do?”

“Nat —” He took half a step toward her. An officer caught his arm and turned him around. The cuffs were already on. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Don’t —”

They led him out before he could finish. She watched him go, the back of his head, the line of his shoulders she had loved for eight years, until he was through the door and gone.

“Will somebody please tell me what happened?” she said, and her voice cracked on the last word.

A tall man in a gray coat stepped forward from the kitchen doorway. “Miss Bellamy. Detective Johnson. I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances.”

“What happened in my apartment?”

“That's what I'd like to figure out. Can you tell me — do you recognize the gentleman on your floor?”

“No.”

“And the pearl necklace in your aquarium?”

She opened her mouth to say no, and then she stopped. She thought of the strand in her jewelry box. The one Tom had given her three Christmases ago, in a velvet case, with a card she still had in her desk drawer. He'd said it had belonged to his grandmother.

“No,” she said. “I've never seen it before.”

Detective Johnson held her eyes for a moment longer than she was comfortable with. Then he nodded and turned to speak

to one of the officers. She slipped past him before he could ask her anything else.

In the bedroom, with the door shut, she went straight to the jewelry box on her dresser and lifted out the necklace Tom had given her. She held it under the lamp. The pearls had a soft, uneven luster — the kind of luster she'd seen in magazines and assumed was airbrushed.

She went to the closet and took down an old shoebox from the top shelf. Inside it were the white tennis shoes she'd worn at her sister's wedding eight years ago and never thrown out. She lifted the left shoe, dropped the necklace in, set the shoe back inside the box, replaced the lid, and pushed the box to the very back of the shelf behind a stack of sweaters.

Then she sat on the edge of the bed and waited until her hands stopped shaking.

In the morning the apartment was quiet. The body was gone. Two strips of yellow tape crossed the doorway to the living room, and a card on her kitchen counter listed Detective Johnson's number in case she remembered anything.

She had Thursday and Friday off — she always took the two days before the party — and she had planned to spend them on flowers and seating arrangements. Instead, she dressed in jeans and a sweater, put the necklace in her coat pocket, and took a cab across town to a jeweler she had never been to before.

He looked at it for a long time under the loupe before he set it down on the velvet pad between them.

“It's a beautiful piece,” he said. “South Sea. Natural not cultured. The clasp alone is worth more than most people make in a month.”

“What would the whole strand be worth?”

He named a number.

Natalie thanked him, paid him for the appraisal in cash, and walked out onto the sidewalk holding the necklace in her fist inside her coat pocket. Then she stood there in the cold and tried to figure out what she was going to say to Detective Johnson, and what she was going to say to Tom, and which of those conversations she was going to have first.