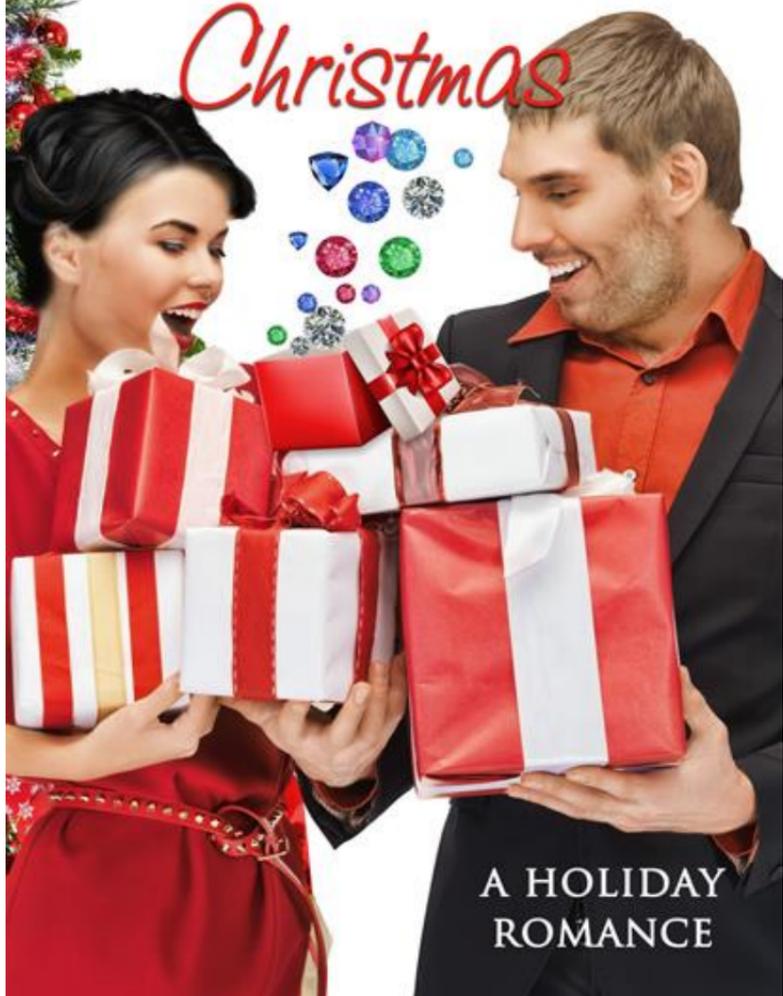


JAN ELDER

*A Semi-Precious
Christmas*



A HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

A Semi-Precious Christmas

Jan Elder

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Semi-Precious Christmas

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Dedication

To my mother, Eleanor Cunningham, who introduced me to the wonders of a good book. An author in her own right, she later instilled in me a desire to tell my own stories. More importantly, her close walk with the Lord introduced me to Jesus. Thank you, Mom. You are very precious to me.

And to my own gem of a husband, Steve. You bring laughter into my life on a daily basis and fill my days with warmth, meaning, romance, and joy. I will love you forever and always.

What People are Saying

A Semi-Precious Christmas should be on everyone's wish-list this year and for years to come. Jan Elder serves up a finely-seasoned dish of intrigue perfectly paired with a splash of heart-tugging romance in this delightful holiday tale. ~ Mary Manners

A Semi-Precious Christmas takes us on a multifaceted caper: the hero a godly gem, the no-nonsense heroine named after a birthstone, and the crime a dastardly jewelry store robbery. I particularly enjoyed the twists in the crime, which never let me settle too comfortably into the romance and made me wonder if the two would have a merry Christmas. I shouldn't have deliberated—a fun ending.” ~ Zoe M. McCarthy

Wow, what fun!!! Jan Elder knows how to paint characters who entice you to read more right from page one. I loved it. ~ Connie Almony on *Manila Marriage App*

1

My hand stilled as cold steel pressed hard against my temple. A gloved hand covered my mouth, and a low voice rumbled in my ear.

“Keep your mouth shut and turn off the alarm. We won’t hurt you if you play nice. All we’re after is the jewelry.”

God, help me!

I couldn’t see the man who’d sneaked up behind me, but he wrenched my left arm behind my back and shoved the gun up against my skull. I wasn’t about to resist, but my heart stuttered so hard I barely recognized my own voice. “It’s easier to open the door and disarm the alarm if I have both hands.” Where had that come from? I almost sounded collected.

He released me. “Well, aren’t you the plucky thing? Remember I have my .45 pointed at the back of your head.”

As if I could forget. With trembling fingers, I turned my key in the lock of Keaton’s Jewelers, switched on the lights, and fumbled to shut off the beeping alarm. The robber didn’t need to know my uncle was too frugal to spring for an alarm system that notified the police...or anyone.

We. He’d said we. How many of them were there? And where was the accomplice? I caught my bottom lip between my teeth. It wasn’t quite 10 a.m., and the

jewelry store was due to open in five minutes. Where was Uncle Marty? He was always here early. Always.

With an unrelenting hand on my back, the man hustled me into the showroom.

I peered over my shoulder and stole a good look at him. He was tall and burly, his mouth twisted into a sneer. And that was all I could see—his mouth. A dark blue ski mask covered his hair and the rest of his face. But his eyes. His eyes were a cold, mean, arctic blue. This guy exuded unbridled malevolence.

“Do you think she has a key to the jewelry cases?” The second robber’s voice cracked.

I twisted until he came into my line of vision. His slim build pegged him as a kid, maybe mid-to-late teens. He slouched in his worn black jeans, black t-shirt, and a black hoodie. So cliché. His mask drooped a bit on the left side, and I could just make out the beginnings of a scraggly beard covering a thin, café au lait African-American face.

“That’ll take too long,” Mean-Eyes snapped. “Why do you think we brought the hammer, moron?”

“OK, OK, OK.” Hoodie-boy lowered his voice to a whisper. “And I ain’t no moron.”

“Shut your trap.” Whipping a small, oddly shaped orange hammer from the waistband of his jeans, the nasty man moved over to one of the gem cases, raised his hand high, and let fly. The watchcase fractured into little pieces. Thank goodness, safety glass covered the display cases.

Hoodie-boy opened an old backpack and hurriedly scooped up men’s and ladies’ watches.

Mean-Eyes broke open another case, the diamond engagement rings this time. He nailed me with a contorted leer that lifted into a smirk. Then he slipped

a diamond ring on his pinky—one of our gaudier items. The way he waved that gun around was nerve-wracking. But then he zeroed in on me and aimed the pistol at my head.

I froze. *Was I about to die?*

He seemed to savor the feel of the heavy piece. “That’s a good girl. Just stand there quiet-like and wait until we’re done.”

My mouth was too dry to reply.

The two men—or the man and the boy—became preoccupied with their task.

A blond man with a fluorescent, plum-colored tie walked up to the front door.

To my absolute horror, a small child peeped out from behind his coattails. *Please, Lord. Don’t let the robbers see them!* My lips quivered as my gaze locked with those of the man at the door.

Comprehension dawned on his face. He whisked the little girl into his arms and stepped out of sight around the corner of the building.

More glass shattered behind me as another case was broken into. The thieves tossed sapphires, rubies, and emeralds into the bag. These thugs were no dummies. They went for the good stuff. No semi-precious stones for these criminals. Many of the “lesser” gems happened to be my favorites, and I found them captivatingly beautiful, but these guys were obviously looking for high-dollar. And they hadn’t noticed the man and his little girl.

Thank you.

Air whooshed from my lungs as the crooks turned to the estate pieces. They started throwing jewelry into their bags willy-nilly, antique diamonds and gold chains sliding into the backpack with a faint hiss. They

moved over to the pearl display on the wall. As Mean-Eyes lifted his hammer over the lustrous rings, bracelets, and necklaces, a most welcome wail arose in the distance. Police cruisers, sirens growing louder every second, echoed in the frosty December air.

Hallelujah! Help was coming.

The beautiful noise mingled with curses from the burglars. The leader scowled at me, fury shooting from his eyes. "What did you do?" He grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled my head back. "I *said* what did you do?" He pressed his gun hard to my temple and gave my hair one last yank.

I flinched, beads of perspiration breaking out on my forehead.

A wicked sneer appeared on his lips, and then the butt of the gun connected with my cheek.

The pain staggered me. A moan escaped.

Mean-Eyes sniggered, making it clear who was in charge.

There was a sharp rap on the front door glass.

Mean-Eyes turned and froze.

The man with the purple tie stood in the doorway, holding up his phone. He'd caught Mean-Eyes on camera.

With one swift movement, the burglar lifted the gun and aimed the pistol at my fearless new friend.

He angled his head and stared back with calm defiance before he ducked around the corner again.

The sirens grew louder.

Spinning, Mean-Eyes turned to his partner. "Come on, kid. We're outta here. Now!"

"But you promised I could have something for my girl. You know she likes to look classy."

"That little witch? You really are an idiot." The

man grabbed the boy by the hoodie and pulled none too gently. "We're leaving now. You're too old to go to juvie this time."

The younger criminal slipped on the broken glass, regained his footing, and the two raced out the back entrance. An engine revved and tires laid rubber.

I leaned heavily against an undamaged counter, careful not to disturb anything. Sudden full-body tremors swept over me, and I hugged myself to stop the shaking.

Three police cars zipped into the front parking lot, and one continued around the corner, presumably making its way to the back of the building. Police officers exited their cars, weapons drawn. A pudgy police officer tried the locked front door and motioned for me to open it.

After I turned three hefty deadbolts, he walked into the store, his eyes touching every surface, including me.

I stepped back to give him a wide berth.

"Stay where you are and don't move until we have a chance to check things out." He motioned to another officer. They strode around the store and inspected everything. Satisfied, the officer stomped in my direction. He offered his hand and shook mine, his grip akin to a boa constrictor's hug. "I'm Detective Locksley. And you would be?"

I jiggled my hand to get the feeling back. "Peri, uh, Peridot Keaton-Jones. My uncle owns the store." A soft knock made me turn toward the front entrance.

Purple-tie Man pulled open the door and flashed me an encouraging smile.

Detective Locksley was not amused. "Lane, I may be your ex-brother-in-law, but you can just turn your

butt around and waltz out of here. This is a crime scene."

Lane put up his hands and started forward, one slow footstep at a time. "Victor, I'm a witness. So you might want me to stay."

Locksley looked him up and down. "Well, if that don't beat all. I know your crew sniffs out stories, but I wasn't aware you took part in the actual crime."

"Hey, I'm the guy who called the police." Lane smiled. "Right place, right time."

"We'll need to get a witness statement from you. Until then, you can go wait outside." Locksley's voice was gruff.

"Can't. Maggie's with me. I've got to get her home."

"Go get her." Locksley frowned and scanned the area. "As long as you're quiet, the two of you can sit way in the back, away from this mess. And tell Maggie not to touch anything, or I'm holding you responsible."

Lane bounded out the front door and returned carrying the cute kid. The dark-haired pixie shivered in her puffy lavender coat. "Meet my daughter, Maggie. Maggie, this is Ms...?"

"Keaton-Jones."

Maggie stared at me, the beginnings of a half-smile gracing her bow-shaped lips. Then she spied Locksley, gasped, and hid her face in her father's neck.

Lane glared at Detective Locksley, ventured a hesitant step toward me, and frowned. "I'm Christopher Lane, by the way. Chris. Are you hurt? Stupid question. You are hurt."

2

Chris tilted his head and touched my smarting cheek with his thumb. His frown deepened into a scowl, and he pinned Locksley with it, his face darkening. "She needs medical attention."

"I'm fine...I think. Just a bit shaken up." That was a serious understatement. My thudding heart was finally beginning to settle down, but I was still shaking and close to tears. I donned my brave face and inhaled a deep, stabilizing breath to clear my brain. "Thanks for calling the police, Chris."

"I hate to break up this budding romance, but I'd like some answers." Detective Locksley motioned me toward the comfortable seating area at the rear of the store.

Uncle Marty had insisted on providing a place where customers could relax. As a happy byproduct, we discovered contented customers led to increased sales.

I crumpled a bit and pushed off a nearby half-wall on the way to the back. The aftershock was affecting my equilibrium. I collapsed into a chair next to the mini-fridge full of juice, soda, and water.

"Now, I realize you've been through an ordeal, but the sooner we can get your statement, the sooner we can start tracking down the perps." Locksley jerked his right ear. Something he learned in anger management

class?

The last thing I wanted to do was make this irritable man mad. "OK."

He pulled pen and paper out of his breast pocket and straddled one of the chairs. "Start from the beginning and don't skip any details, no matter how insignificant they seem."

A local TV station van swerved into the parking lot.

Detective Locksley groaned and rubbed the space between his eyes.

Chris's face brightened, and he waved at the crew. "Hey, Magpie, why don't we go say hello to Jennifer?" He beamed at me. "Be right back." Chris strode outside and handed Maggie off to an older woman with the lights and camera crew. The little girl wrapped her arms around the woman's neck.

"Ms. Keaton-Jones, could you describe the perpetrators?" Locksley pushed his chair closer.

I shook my head to clear it and then cupped my aching jaw. "One of the men, the older one, had a gun. He was a couple inches taller than me, but not by much. He was Caucasian, and he had blue eyes."

"Did you see any identifying marks? Tattoos, scars, et cetera?"

"He had a mask on, so I couldn't see much else."

"Clothing? Approximate age?"

"Blue jeans, black shirt, black pea coat. Sneakers? Yeah, I'm pretty sure he had on sneakers. And I have no idea how old he was, but he wasn't a kid. Maybe in his thirties?"

"Gloves?"

Had the men been wearing gloves? "I...I think so. I'm not sure."

"You think?"

Of course. Mean-Eyes had placed that hand over my mouth when he'd first crept up on me. "Yes, he had gloves on."

"Good. Tell me about the second man."

It was hard to concentrate with the officer staring at me. I peeled off my coat and massaged my sore neck. My unfocused thoughts drifted. "Uh, what?"

"Describe the second man, please." He'd ratcheted down his gruff tone a notch, and for that I was grateful.

My gaze fell to the floor. Glass everywhere. An overlooked diamond ring twinkled on the carpet. Uncle Marty would be so upset. He'd worked hard to make this store a real showplace. And where was he?

Chris cruised back in and plunked down next to me. "Sorry. I didn't get a chance to mention I work for WWAG." He glanced over at Locksley. "And yes, I called them. This is big news." Chris turned to me. "Do you mind if we film the store? Only some wide-angle shots from outside, for now. Hopefully, you'll be up for an interview at some point."

I'd had the inane idea he might be interested in me, but apparently, he just wanted a story. My cheek throbbed below my left eye, already tender to the touch. "OK, but they have to stay outside." I was a certified mess, and that didn't play well on TV. I wiped clammy palms on my pants and shuddered.

"Ms. Keaton-Jones, I need your cooperation."

Chris whipped out his cellphone and held it out. "Perhaps a few pictures of the two men would help."

"Why didn't you say you had pictures to begin with?" Detective Locksley crossed his arms and glared at him.

"How did you...?" I started to ask.

"I sneaked my phone around the side of the building when they weren't looking. Not my best work, but I was doing my best not to be seen."

My head pounded as bright camera lights filtered through the door and into my eyes.

Chris's attention drifted out front and then back to me. He couldn't seem to decide if he wanted to stay or step outside with the crew. Work won out, and with an apologetic smile, he took off to join his co-workers.

"Lane's pictures won't matter, anyway since we'll have your security camera tapes." He looked up at the small, black devices affixed to the wainscoting.

I sighed as a full-blown headache pulsed behind my eyes. "Nope. No cameras. Uncle Marty grew up in this cow town before the world turned crazy. He expects the best from people and can't get it through his dear head there's evil in the world." I rested my elbow on the table, chin in my palm. "The best I could do was put up a few fake cameras as a crime deterrent."

"You can't possibly be serious?"

Outside, Chris was hugging Maggie tight. Perhaps I'd misjudged him.

The back door slammed and heavy footsteps moved our way. An officer motioned Locksley over, and male voices conferred.

"Ms. Keaton-Jones? Do you know a Martin Keaton?"

"Uncle Marty owns the store."

The men exchanged a glance. "Would you come with us, please? Officer Benson found your uncle unconscious in the back parking lot. He's still alive, but he's been beaten."

3

The ride to the hospital took forever. After a quick, but thorough evaluation, the EMTs had declared me concussion free and given me an icepack for my cheek. With no medical needs of my own, I perched on a seat in the ambulance as the medical technicians worked on Uncle Marty.

His banged-up scalp worried them the most. Blood clotted in his hair, a half-dried trail trickling into his ear. A lump the size of one of his golf balls rose over his right eye, and Uncle Marty groaned in his sleep.

I whipped my cellphone out of my pocket and called my sister, Amee, on the way across town. I didn't tell her much—just that Uncle Marty had been in an accident. She met us at the entrance to the ER.

A whole team of people whisked Uncle Marty through operating room doors. There was talk of bleeding on the brain, concussion, and even a cracked skull.

I hauled in air to maintain my composure, but the occasional whimper escaped.

Amee piloted my shaking body to a chair in the corner. She unwound the handmade turquoise wool scarf I'd often admired, wrapped it around my neck, and slipped her arm around me.

We sniffled together.

I was used to being the big sister, always in control, always the one who knew what to do. But I let her comfort me and covered my face with the scarf.

Mom had died here in this hospital on the third floor. Thank God for Uncle Marty. I'd been only ten and Amee five when he'd taken us in and given us a home.

I shifted in my chair as Chris Lane strode through the revolving doors of the ER. No TV crew this time. Just him.

I pulled out a tissue, and dabbed my eyes with a clean corner.

He hurried over and sat on the plastic chair next to me. "How's your uncle? I heard they found him unconscious."

"We don't know anything yet. This is my sister, Amee."

I avoided Amee's probing gaze while the two said hello. She was relentless in her endeavors to marry me off again.

I'd had my one shot at true love, and now Mark was singing with the angels on high. After four years, my grief was gradually lessening. I didn't need another husband. I glanced around for my purse, but I must have left it at the store.

Chris placed a warm, calming hand on my shoulder. "The police are finished searching for evidence, for now. I made sure they locked up and sent the TV crew on their way. We certainly don't want a fine jewelry store sitting open to the general public."

Amee's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean 'police' and 'evidence'? Did something happen at Keaton's? You said Uncle Marty was in an accident. And what happened to your face?" She unwound the

scarf, studied me intently, reached out a fingertip to trace my emerging bruise.

I filled her in, softening the part where the police had found Uncle Marty lying on the asphalt next to his car. Ameer, being on the fragile side, probably couldn't handle everything right now.

Then, what Chris had said hit me. "What time is it?"

Ameer pointed to the clock on the wall over the triage nurse. "Five past eleven."

Had it been only an hour since I'd had a handgun jammed against my head?

"Todd and Miralee were coming in at twelve so Uncle Marty could take the afternoon off. He was going Christmas shopping before the snow hit." I resisted the urge to chew my nails. Two hours ago, I'd been coiled up on my couch finishing my second cup of coffee, one warm cat in my lap, the other sleeping in her bed next to the heat duct.

Uncle Marty had called, excited about his half-day off. Too cold and windy for him to hit a few balls out at the golf course, he'd made other plans. He'd sounded so animated, too.

We'd had a hard frost that morning, and there was a possibility of "precipitation." That could mean anything from a foggy drizzle to a blizzard. In Maryland, December could behave like autumn or winter.

With Christmas only a couple of weeks away, we'd been swamped with business, and we were gearing up for a super-busy weekend. Although the robbers hadn't made off with everything, there were precious few high-dollar pieces left to sell. Who would take care of cleaning up, buying new display cases,