

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 AM 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 slipped a diamond ring on his pinky—one of our gaudier items. The way he waved that gun around was nerve-racking. 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. My eyes flicked up to see 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 tossing 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, 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 and a moan escaped. Mean-Eyes sniggered, making it clear who was in charge.

There was a sharp rap on the front door glass and 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 the kid. "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.

Officer 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." Victor 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."