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Waiting for Him

Keren Moros

My job is a terrible place to meet men. Nearly every guy who walks in here already has a woman on his mind: either he's madly, hopelessly and blindly in love, or he's strangely obsessed with his mother. But I guess that's what I get for choosing to work at Zales. After five years here, I've come to realize that I should have started working here *after* finding my soul mate.

I specialize in engagement rings, so I have to go through the light torture of seeing happy people in love all the time. But despite this, I really do love my job, because I have a gift for helping these people. I only need the guy to talk to me about his girlfriend for a few minutes, and then I can lead him to the gem that perfectly expresses his feelings. I usually get it right within the first three tries. When he actually brings the girl, I get it right the first time.

But one guy changed all that when he came every week for three months. He compared diamonds and settings and cuts and carats with a passion that I hadn't seen in a long while. He claimed he'd been to every jewelry store in the county. Last week, he finally decided on a radiant-cut one-carat diamond between two smaller radiant-cut diamonds with round diamonds around the white gold band. Even though the store had a sale on radiant-cut diamonds that day, he insisted on paying full price. He didn't want to be even remotely cheap when it came to buying an engagement ring for the love of his life, Angela, whose name suits her because he said she was his angel.

I had wished him luck and had told him to let me know how the proposal turned out. I was only half serious because once they find the perfect ring, they don't come back unless something goes wrong. And after getting to know this guy, I knew that there was no chance of that. He was genial, good looking and intelligent. Those types of men never come back to Zales.

I'm thinking of him right now because another guy is walking out of the store with the same ring. It happened to suit his girlfriend perfectly, too. I sigh happily, proud of my work, and look over the list of the new rings, which came in this morning.

"Excuse me," a hoarse voice says, sounding despondent.

I look up and it's him: the perfectionist I thought wouldn't come back. Last week, he was practically skipping out of the store in excite-

ment. But today, his shoulders are hunched forward, his face is drawn and his eyes are languid and dark. His hands are stuffed in his coat pockets, as if he's bracing himself for an impact or shielding himself from something, and he's frowning.

"Remember me?" he asks. His upper lip trembles slightly as it fails to attempt a lop-sided smile. "Mr. No-that's-still-not-the-right-ring?" She didn't dare, I think, as I quench the smile fueled by customer-service habits and nod solemnly instead.

"Can I help you?" I ask, my voice pitching down with bleakness. His hand moves in his pocket. "I'm here to return the ring," he says, dropping a heavy hand on the counter and sliding the small black box and his credit card across the glass.

I gasp softly as my mouth drops open. For any other client, I would give a cool "Right away, sir" and give him his money back with a sympathetic smile. But this guy is practically a friend after so many hours of talking.

"She—?"

"She said no," he interrupts bitterly, and his sullenness seems to rise. He rolls his lips as if he's trying to bring the words back into his mouth. "And she laughed, too. Not a lot. But she did chuckle a few times."

"Ouch," I say, hating her for a moment. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, me, too."

His words take me back to dozens of sad movies I've watched.

But this isn't a movie, and my sympathy is real.

He seems to be hesitating to say more. "She—she said she had something to tell me, and I told her I did, too. I wouldn't have insisted on going first if I had known that she was about to break up with me."

"May I ask why? I don't want to be nosy, I just . . . care." I say the word carefully, hoping he won't think I'm trying to intrude.

"She just doesn't feel that we're compatible," he says, shaking his head and looking down at the gems, which are depleted of the promise they held for him only last week. "She said she wants a different life and that she's come to understand that I'm not her type—and a bunch of other nonsense about how lucky we've been to know each other."

I look down. "I'm sorry," I say again, feeling pathetic because it's the only thing that's coming to my mind to say. "I can tell you really love her."

His eyebrows go down as he looks at me briefly. "I do love her.

Everything I was planning for our future has gone down the drain,

and now it's empty, you know? These rings don't even sparkle anymore."

I nod. "Without the feeling of knowing it's going to represent the biggest thing in your life, they're just pretty rocks."

"So now I'm like a rock that's just sitting there with no purpose."

I don't know what to say to that, and it's pointless to say sorry again, so I decide to concentrate on the reason he's here.

"I can give you a full refund."

He doesn't look up. "Thank you."

The register is right near us, so I only move about a yard away from him.

"How often do you see this?" he asks, as if assuring himself that he's not the only loser on the planet. "You know—guys like me who have to return rings."

"I've lost count," I say. "It's not uncommon, unfortunately."

"Do they ever come back wanting to buy another ring?"

"There's been a few," I answer, continuing to make the transaction. "I think most of them feel that coming to the same store will give them bad luck or something."

"Yeah—yeah, I guess you're right."

As I finish up, I feel a tug at my heart to give him something more than just my sympathy. And I decide to say what's really on my mind, no longer caring whether or not it's any of my business.

"If I may," I start slowly. "I don't think that you should blame yourself. If she had already been thinking about this, there was nothing that you could've done."

He glances at me and twists his head. "But there has to have been something. I just don't understand how I—" He bites his lip and looks down, and I wonder how much emotion he's holding back.

I lean closer to him and lower my voice to a half whisper.

"You can't understand how you couldn't keep her, and you hate yourself for it. It's only natural. You're not the first man to have felt this way. But I know that you did everything in your power to make her happy and to love her and make her the center of your world. You've told me. But when you give and give, and you don't get anything back, it's time to move on. Sadly, you had to realize it this way. But if you hadn't now, it would've been worse later. It would've hurt more."

A few seconds of silence pass by as he stares at the displays, and

I see the diamonds giving his eye the sparkle that was there last week.

"I keep wondering what went wrong," he says, chewing his words. "Then I think of the millions of times when I saw that she had doubts about our future. But I ignored them. I told myself everything was going to be okay."

"We do that when we're in love." I glance down at the diamonds, which are now empty and cold to me, too.

His heartbreak is making me admire him even more because he's told me their story. I know of all the sacrifices he's made for her and all the dreams he had for them.

He takes his gaze off the diamonds and looks straight into my eyes, making my heart stop for two seconds.

"I don't know if I can move on."

I dare to smile.

"You will. The heart heals, and one day you'll meet with a girl who will give you as much as you give her. Happened to my brother after his girlfriend of six years dumped him."

He smiles, but just a bit. It's more like a wince.

"So it's not hopeless?"

I shake my head as I hand him his credit card and keep my hand in his.

"We're human. I believe love is celestial. That's why so many people get it wrong. But you're one of the few who's got it right because you know it's a commitment. You don't stop halfway, and that's what every girl wants."

His hand closes over his credit card and my hand for a moment, but he quickly pulls it away when he realizes it.

"I have to go," he says, stuffing the credit card into his pocket.

"Sorry I took so much of your time."

"Don't apologize. You've never wasted my time."

His face looks brighter as he says, "That's good because you'll see me again. My grandmother's birthday is in six months, and I want to get something special for her. She's going to be one hundred years old."

"Wow, I bet she's had a great life."

He nods and then lowers his eyebrows. "Do you just sell engagement rings?"

"Well, I specialize in engagement rings. But I can sell anything here."

"Good. I don't want to buy my grandmother's gift from anyone else."

The exhilaration at hearing that statement causes me to take a deep breath and smile.

“I appreciate that.”

“Thanks for everything. What you said—I really needed to hear it.”

He turns around and starts walking out. Then he stops suddenly and turns back.

“What’s your name again?”

I don’t mind that he’s forgotten again. After all, he’s been obsessed with another woman for three years.

“It’s Amber. Amber Lewis.”

“I’m Brett Richmond.”

I say his name at the same time he does, and he nods sheepishly as if he’s realizing that it’s obvious that I should know his name after three months and after looking at his credit card.

“You know, you’re the nicest jewelry store worker I’ve met in the past couple of months, and I’ve met a lot of them.”

I give a warm smile. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. See ya.” He holds himself a bit straighter as he walks out.

I keep looking until he’s in his car and gone, and even though I know I have to get back to work, I can’t concentrate. The only thing I can think of is that he’s going to come back.

And it strikes me suddenly—I’m in love with him. Somewhere between the first time I saw him and the moment I wondered why she said no to him, I fell in love with him.

He’ll be back for his grandmother’s present, and after that I might never see him again.

But we’ll talk when he comes, and his wounds will have started to heal.

And maybe that will lead to his coming back on his own—not because of jewelry, but because of me.

I shake that last thought out of my head. It’s better to not get carried away. The only thing I’ll concentrate on is the fact that he’s coming back.

And when he does, I’ll be right here waiting for him.