

The Gift of the Magpie

When she saw her ex-boyfriend Rod coming out of the fanciest department store in the upscale mall, Sophia wasn't sure whether she wanted to try to attract his attention or avoid him completely. She was sitting on a bench not twenty feet from the store entrance so there was nowhere to run, but she realized that she could hide by continuing to stare at her phone screen.

It didn't work. As soon as he spotted her he bolted in her direction and plopped down next to her on the bench.

"Hello stranger," he said cheerfully.

She paused before looking up, preparing to act as though she didn't recognize him at first, then be surprised and delighted when she did. But it was impossible to hide her feelings. "Fancy meeting you here," she said.

"Yeah," he said, nearly blushing, "you always had to drag me here kicking and screaming when my clothes got too ratty."

She surveyed his outfit. Still very casual but now he wore a Ralph Lauren shirt with his jeans. "Well you look fine now so it must be something important to get you here," she said.

"My wife's birthday," he said. "The big three-oh. I was just looking for something special."

Sophia's life flashed before her eyes. At least the three-year portion of her life that involved him. They had dated on and off and had never been exclusive but there were weeks at a time when they saw no one else. Then there would be conflicts in their work schedules because he was busy building his business. Sometimes during those lapses Sophia would meet a man she thought might be "the one" and she would hardly miss Rod at all. But they always managed to drift back together around their birthdays and that was when it became evident to Sophia that their relationship was never going to work.

"Shopping voluntarily and buying gifts, very special indeed," she said. "How things have changed."

"I'm still no good at this," he said. "I suppose it's nothing I should be telling you of all people..." his voice drifted off and he appeared to be studying the pattern of the terrazzo tile floor.

"It's okay," she said. "Of all people I might be the one to understand."

Over the years she'd had plenty of time to wonder what might have been if birthday gifts hadn't been a source of trouble between them. But birthdays had always been important to Sophia.

When she was a child, she had explained to Rod, her family didn't have much money so birthdays would be the occasion when she and her brothers and sisters were provided with all the things they needed. There would be clothes and books, but seldom any toys or luxuries. She always dreamed that someday her birthday would become a special day in which she was given something she really wanted. She had tried many times to communicate that fact.

"I'm like a magpie," she told him when he first asked what she wanted for her birthday. "You know, those birds that collect shiny things? If it glitters, I'll like it." But he never seemed to understand that she meant it literally.

Sophia, on the other hand, had a real knack for picking out exactly the right gifts for the people in her life. She didn't make much money as a secretary, but she knew that good gifts didn't need to be expensive.

Rod's birthday came about a month after they started dating and she knew that a too-generous gift would be inappropriate. But she also knew that he liked The Eagles and got tickets for a local tribute band performance. He was delighted.

For her birthday, just over a month later, he presented her with a bouquet of red roses and a golden-colored box of Godiva chocolates.

"You said you liked shiny things," he said as she opened the lid on the candy box.

It was a nice first effort, she thought, a little impersonal but not bad for someone she hadn't been dating all that long. It was unfortunate he had seemed to disregard her hint that daisies were her favorite flower, and that he hadn't noticed that on every one of their dates she had avoided desserts. But she let it slide and encouraged him to eat most of the candy.

The second time around she had picked up on his expressed interest to some day study the stars and bought him a telescope. He loved it and for the next few weeks they spent almost every evening on the roof of Rod's apartment building viewing the heavens.

A month later he presented her with a birthday surprise. That night when they went up onto the roof he aimed the telescope and had her look for the star he'd had named for her. He produced an envelope containing the official certificate. "I just couldn't imagine anything more glittery than a star," he said.

Later she told her girlfriends how sweet and special it was, but she could never make herself believe that she preferred it to the star-shaped crystal pendant she had admired in the window of the budget jewelry store next door to his apartment building. She'd remarked on its shiny beauty every time they walked past it.

Sophia was still thinking about the star incident when she realized that Rod was in the present day and had continued talking.

"I never was any good at buying gifts," he said. "There I was looking at fancy rings and Janet doesn't even really like jewelry. She didn't want an engagement ring because she said it was a waste of our resources. She really has very simple tastes. But we're starting to go to a lot of gala events now and I thought she might like a cocktail ring like all the other women seem to have."

Sophia's mind was reeling. It was impossible not to know that he was successful now, and she had recently seen a video of him and his wife on the news. It was coverage of a fundraising event for an environmental charity and there they were: Event chairs Rodney and Janet McDermott with the other dignitaries at the elegant and meaningful soiree.

"If only..." she had often thought. Now it was all too clear that someone else was living the life Sophia had wanted.

But Sophia had never known Rodney McDermott, Successful Businessman. She had only dated Rod, the guy with a degree in social work who cleaned offices at night. He was building a business to help others, he had said, finding clients for his cleaning service and hiring people nobody else wanted — displaced homemakers, developmentally disabled people, non-violent offenders on probation — to do the kinds of jobs that nobody wanted to do. At least, nobody in the circles in which Sophia hoped to travel.

They argued often about his not being available in the evenings because he insisted that his business would succeed only if he supervised things closely. Someday, he promised, he would be able to afford to hire qualified managers. But for the time being he had to go out and work alongside his crews, emptying trash bins and cleaning toilets. All the while he lived in a tiny apartment, drove an old car, wore jeans and T-shirts, and invested whatever money he could spare in stocks and bonds. Sophia had thought his plan for success sounded like a good one, but didn't want to wait for a someday that might never come.

"I'm sorry," Rod said. "I'm so rude. I haven't even asked how you're doing. You look great. I heard you got married."

"And divorced," she said. He had apparently not noticed that the custom-crafted two-carat-total-weight diamond engagement and wedding ring set she still possessed was worn on her right hand.

"I'm really sorry," he said.

"It's okay, really," she said, and raised her right hand with a flourish. "At least I have this to show for giving him the best twenty-two months of my life. If it had lasted the full two years he would have owed me alimony."

"Ouch!"

"Well, it takes a good lawyer to write a good pre-nup and Jack's a very good lawyer," she said.

"But you're okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'm okay."

She looked down at her diamonds and tried not to think about how life could have been if he had taken her hint about that inexpensive pendant. If only Rod had ever really gotten a clue as to what would make her happy. If only she had been able to fake not caring. Or actually bring herself to not care. But their third round of birthdays had made it clear to Sophia that it wasn't meant to be.

They had gotten back together after about three months of Rod's being too busy for dates. He had acquired two new clients who needed their work done on weekends and had been breaking in a bunch of new recruits from the training center for developmentally disabled young adults. She had listened politely to his excuses and in the interim had met Jack.

Jack was already a successful corporate lawyer and given his talent and charm was bound to be a community leader in addition to becoming very rich. But they'd had only two dates when Rod had called, apologetic for being neglectful and hoping to pick up where they'd left off.

"I'd really like to take you out for your birthday," he'd said. "I'd like to do something really special."

"But I missed yours," she'd said.

"Maybe we can make up for lost time."

Sophia had eagerly anticipated their reunion and quickly ordered a belated birthday gift: a silk tie, custom embroidered with a tiny broom and dustpan. A part of her had always wanted it to be Rod, not Jack or anyone like Jack, who would be the one. There was something special about this eager young man who wanted to succeed while helping others. He was so rock solid. A real diamond in the rough who just needed a little bit of polishing to become a real gem.

When he arrived for their date, Sophia was delighted to see him wearing a nicely tailored suit along with the tie, which she'd had

delivered to his office. Her delight evaporated when she discovered that they would be dining at one of his clients' establishments.

"It's good business for me to be seen patronizing them," he said as they pulled into the parking lot of a pizza parlor that catered to children. She felt like an absolute fool dressed in her best outfit and wearing a set of one-sixteenth-carat diamond earrings that she'd bought for herself.

After the clown-suited server had brought her birthday cake, Rod reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. "Happy birthday," he said. She tried not to show her disappointment, just as she'd tried to smile through their pepperoni pizza dinner, which had been interrupted twice by other birthday girls, both of whom had just turned eight, dropping by their table to show off their gifts.

Maybe this is just the card, she thought. Maybe there's an engagement ring in his pocket.

She held the card to her ear and jiggled it playfully. "Well nothing rattles," she said. "What could it be? Another star perhaps?"

Rod's smile had beamed as she tore open the envelope and didn't fade when she registered astonishment at the contents.

"You are now the proud owner of three percent of Mr. Sparkle's Pizza Palace," he proclaimed. "They plan to go public and you're in on the ground floor."

The scene in the pizza parlor faded as Sophia felt Rod take her hand. Her heart leapt. Then she realized that he was just studying her rings.

"This is a really nice set," he remarked. "It's sort of the thing I had in mind for Janet, but like I said she doesn't really seem to like jewelry all that much."

Sophia looked down at her rings, then up into Rod's face and thought, *You poor sucker. You still don't get it, do you?*

But she said: "If you're really set on giving her jewelry, they do some great custom work there." She nodded toward the department store across from where they sat. "They did mine."

"It's really nice," he said admiringly.

Sophia let her mind wander to a possible outcome. She pictured Janet's birthday and the woman of simple tastes and charitable leanings opening a tiny box to gaze at a mass of diamonds that cost more than some people earn in a year. Perhaps, in a way that was the reverse of her own, it would be the beginning of the end of a relationship. Perhaps Janet would soon be telling her girlfriends that "he just didn't get it," and donate the ring to a charity auction before heading off to join the Peace Corps or something. That would leave Rod available and perhaps...

She just couldn't let it happen. Frivolous and superficial as she might be, she was honest and wanted the best not only for herself, but for those she cared about. And she still cared about Rod. Perhaps helping him select a present for his wife would be the best gift she could ever give.

"If your wife doesn't care for jewelry you should get her something she really wants," she said boldly.

"But what?"

Sophia's mind clicked back to the news story about the charity gala. "How about a rainforest?"

"A rainforest?"

"Sure. Don't those conservation groups purchase land to preserve? You could make a donation in your wife's name and have a big chunk of land set aside. I'll bet she'd like that. For what you might spend on a ring you could save a lot of acreage. And you could give her a tiny palm tree as a memento to go with it."

"A rainforest," he repeated. "What a great idea. Thank you."

"Well, I've always been good at shopping for other people," she said with a smile.

"That was a long enough lunch break," Sophia's co-worker said when Sophia returned to her place behind the counter in the store's fine jewelry alcove. "I'm starving and there's only been one customer in the last hour and even he was just looking. He could afford a whole tray of rings but he's going to think about it," she mocked.

"Rod McDermott," Sophia said.

"How did you know?"

"I was talking to him in the mall."

"You know Rodney McDermott, the King of Clean?"

"Used to," Sophia said, trying to sound casual. "We dated for a while. I was talking to him about using our custom creative service for a gift for his wife. That's why I was late getting back."

"Well la-di-dah! So did he ever give you a ring or didn't it go that far?"

Sophia couldn't help smiling. "In a way he got me this," she said, brandishing her wedding set.

"I thought those were from Jack."

"And I thought you were starving," Sophia said, wishing to be rid of her co-worker and be as alone as possible.

"I am. But I want to hear that story when I get back. See you in thirty."

The jewelry corridor was empty except for a couple of young women who were examining chains of beads at the clearance counter. Again Sophia contemplated the two carats of diamonds on her right hand and recalled how good she had felt the Monday after her last birthday spent with Rod. Knowing that he'd be out working, she called Rod's home answering machine and left a message that indicated it was over and there was someone else. Then she called Jack, who was delighted to help her find a buyer for her share of Mr. Sparkle's.

Jack, as it turned out, was the one. Enchanted by her looks and impressed with her personality, it wasn't long until he invited Sophia out for a romantic dinner at which he produced the impressive engagement ring and, later that night, an envelope containing their prenuptial agreement.

He could afford to buy a whole tray of rings, Sophia recalled her co-worker's words.

Sophia took a small key from her pocket and opened the display case where the best stock was kept. She pulled out a tray of cocktail rings

and looked at them steadily. None of them was as nice as her own wedding set, she thought.

She reverently placed the tray on the counter and began selecting a ring for each bare finger of both hands. When she had made her choices, she gazed at her hands and wiggled her fingers. Under the store's strategically placed spotlights, diamonds, emeralds, amethysts, and rubies glittered.

For just a few seconds, Sophia thought she had everything she'd ever wanted.