
Some Kind of Hero

by Leigh Michaels

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Chapter One

LAUREN LEANED into the display window and pushed at the crumpled sheets of red tissue paper that lined it. If she flattened an area at the corner, there would be room for a small velvet box to nestle comfortably, almost against the plate glass, where no passerby could miss the ruby-studded ring it held. And then... should she put out that sterling silver bracelet with the heart-shaped links, or would the window look better with only gold?

She drew back to study the effect. It was hard to tell from her position inside the store what the finished window looked like from the outside. From this angle, it was impossible to tell if the glorious diamond in the necklace that was the centerpiece of her display caught the spotlight and fractured it into a dazzling rainbow, or if it looked as dull as a rock instead. She glanced out to the street, her head to one side, and then looked thoughtfully over her shoulder at the girl who was straightening the trays of diamond engagement rings in the display case across the store. “Kim,” she began, “could you give me a hand with this window?”

Kim didn’t look up. “If you’re going to suggest that I stand on the street and tell you in sign language when you’ve got each piece of jewelry at the right angle, don’t even think about it.”

Lauren laughed. “I wasn’t — not exactly.”

“Good. Because I’m not going out. Haven’t you noticed? It’s sleeting now.”

She was right. The January wind had shifted, too, and pellets of frozen rain were rattling against the plate glass. Lauren shivered. “It’s inside work,” she said. “Just hand me things, will you? I can’t keep crawling in and out, but I can’t reach both the window and my supplies.”

Kim locked the engagement rings into the display case and crossed the room. “Why can’t you crawl in and out? It would certainly draw a crowd.”

Lauren made a face at her. “Hand me that white leather glove. And the ruby dinner ring. No, not that one. The really exotic marquise with the baguette diamonds.”

Kim picked up the glove and the velvet box from the assortment scattered over the top of the display case and looked thoughtfully out at the storm. “I may not go outside ever again. At least not till spring.”

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From the back of the display area, the owner of the jewelry store sniffed. “As long as you’re not going anywhere,” he said, “do you suppose you could manage to do some real work, instead of simply leaning on a display case looking decorative?”

Kim shrugged. “I can’t sell things if there are no customers, Mr. Baines,” she pointed out sweetly. The instant the man vanished into his office, she tugged hard at Lauren’s sleeve. “I thought he’d never leave,” she said in a rush, “and he might be back any instant, and I’ve been choking myself to keep from asking since I came in the door this morning. Ward got the tickets for you, didn’t he? How can you be so calm about it?”

Lauren’s hand trembled just a little as she slid the ring onto the proper finger of the glove, so it looked like the languid white hand of a ghostly lady, draped across the red tissue. But her voice was perfectly calm. She had known, of course, that this would happen, and she had rehearsed the conversation in the mirror. “No,” she said. “He didn’t.”

Kim’s mouth dropped open. “But he said—” It was practically a screech. “Some birthday! I thought Ward told you it was going to be a special celebration.”

“He did. And it was. We had a very nice evening at his apartment, and he cooked steaks, and—”

“He didn’t even take you out to *dinner*?”

“—gave me a book I’ve been longing to read, and—”

Kim dismissed the book with a gesture that verged on obscene. “How perfectly romantic!” she said dryly. “You were counting on those tickets, Lauren. What a horrible thing to do to you. Aren’t you just furious at him?”

Lauren had to swallow hard to keep from agreeing, but admitting that to Kim would only encourage her to continue, and Lauren wasn’t sure her pride could take much more.

If only Ward had not told her that he wanted to keep his plans for the “very special celebration” of her birthday a surprise, she might not have let herself hope so much. She had been a fool, perhaps, but after that buildup, how could she help but be disappointed by an ordinary dinner and an ordinary book? Oh, the food had been wonderful, and she would genuinely enjoy the book, but how could things

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like that compare to the much-coveted tickets to the Hunter Dix concert?

The biggest trouble with Ward, she thought, was that there was not a single romantic bone in his body. If there had been, he would appreciate Hunter Dix's music — the most touching love songs anyone in the world was singing today — and he would not have to be told why his concert tonight was so important to Lauren.

“He knew how much you want to go,” Kim wailed. “How could he *not* get you the tickets?”

Lauren had practiced the answer to that, and it came out sounding rather flat. “The same way you and I missed out on getting them. There just weren't enough to go around, and they were snapped up by the members of the group that's sponsoring the whole event.”

“A bit selfish of them, I'd say,” Kim said unforgivingly. “Just because we're not alumni of the college doesn't mean we're the dirt under their feet. They could have given us ordinary people a chance to buy them. But Ward knows enough of those people. Surely he could have talked a couple of tickets out of one of his doctor friends.”

“Apparently not. The few that aren't held by fans are in the hands of the scalpers, and they want a fortune. I can't blame Ward for not wanting to spend so much money on a single evening's entertainment.”

Kim didn't believe a word of it, and Lauren had to admit it sounded rather unconvincing. But how was she supposed to convince Kim when she wasn't convinced herself? she thought rebelliously. Kim was right; she *was* absolutely livid at Ward. She would walk on ground glass to be able to go to that concert, but just because Ward didn't happen to like Hunter Dix and his kind of music, he wouldn't ask his friends if they had extra tickets. He wouldn't do even that much for her....

“Ward is a jerk,” Kim said, under her breath.

The comment startled Lauren back into sanity. “No, he's not,” she said soberly. “He's a very nice guy who just doesn't understand that this is the best chance I'll ever have to see Hunter Dix in person.” She stopped and bit her lip, and went on in

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a very small voice, “The best chance I’ll ever have to actually see and hear the best singer in the world.”

“Well, you’d better think twice before you marry him,” Kim said unsympathetically, “or you’ll never have a chance to go anywhere or see anybody.”

Lauren looked at her in surprise. “Who said I was going to marry Ward?”

Kim shrugged. “Everybody on the street thinks you’re practically engaged. And you certainly act like it. You never date anyone else.”

That was true enough, and Lauren thought about it while she finished trimming the window, scattering pink marshmallow hearts and red silk roses among the jewelry. She had been dating Ward for months, and oh-so-slowly she’d stopped seeing anyone else. She almost hadn’t noticed the change, for Ward had filled her time, and she liked him better than anyone else she had ever dated. So much better, in fact, that only yesterday it wouldn’t have bothered her to know that everyone along the close-knit little street assumed that someday they would marry.

Whereas today. . . today it bothered her a lot.