UP CLOSE

Zander discovers something surprising at the thrift store—about himself

BY NAN MARINO  |  ILLUSTRATIONS BY KYLE M. STONE

My mom whistled as she rummaged through the clothes at the thrift store. Like she didn’t have a care in the world. Like we had always shopped there.

She held a pair of jeans in front of me. “What about these, Zander? Do you think they’ll fit?”

The weird guy who worked behind the counter smirked. “Whatever you pick is fine,” I whispered.

The door opened. Nicole, a girl from school, and her mom walked in and made a beeline toward the picture frames. They looked like twins instead of mother and daughter. Both had dark hair and matching jackets. Expensive jackets. Not ones they bought here.

“Can I go?” I begged. “X and Y are waiting outside.”

“And missing Z,” said Mom, grinning at the old joke. I cringed. My two best friends are Xavier and Yuri. We’ve been called X, Y, and Z since forever.

I was almost to the door when Weird Counter Guy called out, “Hey, kid. What’s the hurry?”

Before Nicole could see me, I ran outside.

The next morning when I was getting dressed for school, I reached into the back pocket of those pants and felt something round. I pulled out a ring. A real ring! At first I thought it was cheap and plastic, but when I held it up to the window, it sparkled in the light. The ring was gold, with a diamond in the middle. And not just any diamond. A monster-size diamond surrounded by emeralds and rubies.

My mom knocked on my bedroom door, and I closed my fist. “Ready for school?” she asked.

“Yes?” I squeaked.
After school, we’d sit in my bedroom with the ring on the floor between us, eating spicy potato chips and dreaming about all the things I could buy with that money.

Well, Xavier and I dreamed. Yuri did his best to squash every last dream.

“A car? Dude, you’re only 12,” he said one afternoon. “And a new skateboard? You hate skateboards!”

Xavier gave him a sharp elbow. “Nicole skateboards.”

Yuri elbowed him back. “What about the person who lost the diamond? What if it belonged to some grandmother, and it was the last thing her husband ever bought her?” He pointed to Xavier. “What if the owner was your grandmother?”

“Those jeans were bought and paid for,” said Xavier, totally avoiding the grandma question. “Finders, keepers, dude. That’s the way of the world.”

Yuri threw a pillow at him. “Someone might be looking for it.”

That’s how it is with these two. One says one thing, and the other goes the other way. X and Y? After all these years, it’s a wonder they’re still friends.

For the next few days, the ring was all we talked about. The three of us researched the value of diamonds and became experts on carat weights and color and shape. We unanimously decided that my ring was real. And that it was worth thousands.

I kept the ring hidden all day. Through math. And English. And lunch. And even in the hall when Nicole said hello. And when I was walking home with Xavier and Yuri, I didn’t say a word. They’d want to see it right away, and, let’s face it, I didn’t exactly live in the best neighborhood.

It wasn’t until we got back to my apartment and were munching on potato chips that I showed them what I’d found.

Xavier patted me on the back. “Now that you’re rich, I hope you remember your friends.”

Yuri gave a low whistle. “Are you going to keep it?”

“Of course he is,” Xavier said, grabbing the ring and waving it in Yuri’s face. “Finders, keepers, dude. That’s the way of the world.”

Yuri threw a pillow at him. “Someone might be looking for it.”

That’s how it is with these two. One says one thing, and the other goes the other way. X and Y? After all these years, it’s a wonder they’re still friends.
the tie, like I always did when they disagreed. But this time, it was different. Even if by some miracle Yuri and Xavier had the same opinion, this decision was up to me. I thought about a car and video games and skateboards.

“The ring is mine,” I said finally. “We paid for it.”

We heard the sound of keys rustling in the door and the click of my mother’s heels on the floor. I pushed the empty potato chip bag over the ring before she walked into the room.

Yuri leaned over and whispered, “If you really believe that ring is yours, then how come you keep hiding it from your mom?”

The pillow I threw landed right in Yuri’s face. I hate it when he’s right.

I spent the next few days staking out the thrift store, watching people go in and out, trying to find a person who looked worried or sad. An old lady hobbled to the door. A grandmother type. It wouldn’t be so bad returning the ring to someone like that. I imagined standing next to her while the newspaper took our picture. She’d tell me about her grandkids, and every single one of them would thank me for finding it.

A few minutes later, the old lady left the store with her arms filled with bags and a smile on her face.

A fast-walking guy with a leather jacket hurried through the door. It could have been his. Maybe he’d spent weeks working overtime to buy an engagement ring for his girlfriend. They’d both be so happy, they’d invite me to their wedding. It would be a different type of thank-you, but that would be OK too.

There was a woman holding the hand of a little girl. The ring could be hers. Maybe she was a single mom, and maybe money was tight.

That’s when I got the idea. Instead of giving it back to some stranger, I could give the ring to my mom. That wasn’t keeping it exactly, but it wasn’t giving it back either. A perfect compromise. But there was no way my mother would keep it. After 12 years, I pretty much had her figured out. She’d search for the person who lost it. For my mom, this would be an easy decision. A no-brainer.

I wished it were easy for me. The more I watched people go in and out, the closer I moved toward the door. That’s when I saw the sign on the window. It was old and faded, like it had been there for a while. Right in the middle was a picture of a diamond ring with large black words that said “Lost.” In even larger print, it said “Heartbroken.” Below, the phone number was crossed out. Someone had written the words “Inquire within.”

I waited for the store to empty out before I stepped inside.

Weird Counter Guy was wiping down a display case with a dirty rag. I stood there, waiting for him to notice me. He didn’t look up until I coughed.

Yep. Every . . . single . . . part of this was
going to be hard.

I decided to do it fast, all in one breath. “I need to speak to the person who posted that sign about the ring. I think I found it.”

Weird Counter Guy didn’t answer. Instead, he glanced around the store, reached under a counter, and pulled out a glass jar filled to the brim with diamond rings. They all sparkled.

He tossed one in my direction. “Did it look like this?”

“They’re fake,” he explained. “Got them from a friend a few years ago. Don’t feel bad, kid. They fool everyone.” He grinned. “I guess you could say I’m a student of human behavior. Every once in a while, I hide them in some clothing here to see what people will do. It’s been a while since someone turned one in. Most people don’t.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the other ring. My ring. They were exactly alike.

I threw them both on the counter. They rattled on the glass. “Do you know what you put me through? For nothing?”

Weird Counter Guy shook his head. “Not for nothing, kid. You learned something. There are two types of people in the world. The Keepers and the Returners. You never know which type you are until you’re put to the test.” He pointed the rag at me. “And you, kid, are a Returner.” He handed me a ring. “It’s yours. You’ve earned it.”

“It’s worthless. What am I going to do with it?”

Weird Counter Guy shrugged, and I bolted out of there.

I stopped running only when my lungs ached and my muscles hurt. I leaned up against a garbage can, gasping for breath. The ring. The stupid ring. But instead of throwing it away, I put it back into the pocket of my jeans.

Maybe I’d keep it. Maybe I’d give it to my mom. There was no need to hide it anymore. It might be a fake ring, but it has a real story to go with it.
A CLOSER LOOK AT ONE OF OUR FAVORITE AUTHORS!

Nan Marino

Nan has always loved reading and writing. So it’s not surprising that she got the idea for “The Choice” from a news article she read: In June, a Minnesota woman found a diamond ring estimated to be worth $6,000 or more in the pocket of a pair of pants she bought for $3.99 at a thrift store. We love how Nan turned this real-life event into a fabulous story!

Write to Win!

Why was Zander tempted to keep the ring? What did he gain by returning it to the store? In the end, do you think he was satisfied with his decision to return it? Explain your answers in a well-organized paragraph, using evidence from the story. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Hiding Out at the Pancake Palace. Send your entries to “The Choice Contest” by February 15, 2013. See page 2 for details.

Nan grew up on Long Island in New York. Memories from her childhood have a way of showing up in her stories.

Nan's second novel, Hiding Out at the Pancake Palace, comes out in April. We can't wait to read it—especially with a great title like that!

Not only is Nan a great storyteller, she’s also a librarian—and a big-time dog lover! Here she is with her gorgeous pooch, Chi.

WRITE TO WIN!

GO ONLINE FOR HELP WITH THIS ACTIVITY

Photos courtesy of Nan Marino