

Excerpt from “Technical Support” - Ben’s story

In the quiet of the front room, he re-assembled the casing and tightened the screws on the back plate. Studying the finished product, he noticed the wear scratches on all the corners and the gauge window.

This EMF detector wasn’t pretty, but it was functional and easy to read. He switched it on and watched the needle quiver slightly in the low, green range. That had been all it could do when it first landed on his desk, wrapped in a work order. Ben held the device toward the check-out monitor and watched the needle climb, then watched it fall as he moved it away. Standing, he headed for the display of re-furbished laptops, watching the needle swing decidedly into the middle and higher ranges, edging the dial’s orange zone. Then he looked around, trying to remember what his conscious brain had hardly noticed during his six months’ working here – ah, there it was: the circuit breaker panel in the far corner, next to the ancient mini-fridge marked “For Employee Use ONLY!!”.

Even as he approached, the needle jumped, waving wildly for a moment before settling into the corner of the red zone. He smiled. “Gotcha.”

“Good thing that isn’t right next to your workbench,” an amused voice said from just behind him.

Ben whirled, the detector nearly sliding out of his grip.

“Sorry,” said the newcomer. “Didn’t mean to startle you. Hi.” Her smile lit the room.

He got his mouth working again just as she went on. “Well, isn’t this a coincidence,” she said, pointing at the device in his hand, “because I’m pretty sure that’s mine. Or ours, I guess. I’m—”

“Rachel,” he said, nodding. “Yes, I knew you’d come. Today. For this. Which is yours, you’re right.” *You know, this is why Joyce prefers you don’t speak to customers.* The knowing commentator at the back of his mind was familiar: it had spoken up on his first day here, offering reminders about professional behaviour and how he couldn’t afford to lose this job. Ben shut his mouth firmly and headed for the front counter.

“I know I’m a little early,” Rachel was saying. “But I came in, saw you there and just thought, really, how many EMF detectors could they be fixing at one time? So I took a chance.”

“Right, yeah. Good. Um, was there a box with this, or...?”

“Are you kidding?” She laughed. It was so genuine it almost made him laugh himself. She had nice teeth. “If there ever was, it’s long gone. We used to keep most of our gear in fishing tackle boxes, if you can believe that, but we’re finally moving up in the world enough to spring for hard-sided suitcases with foam inserts. It always makes us look like we’re smuggling illegal weapons or something. And putting everything away at the end of a job is like 3-D Tetris on multiplayer mode. So, a box? No. This one will just have to slum it in my bag for a while until I get can get it tucked in with the others.” She dropped her purse on the counter and held out a hand.

Ben blinked at her as if she’d been speaking another language. *Doesn’t matter. Give it back.* He placed the device carefully in her palm.

“Great. Thanks.” She shoved it into her purse with hardly a glance and dug out her wallet while he winced. “And at least I know for a fact that it works – saw it pegged in the red while you were over there in the corner.”

“It works,” Ben confirmed, trying not to sound defensive. “I wouldn’t give it back to you if it didn’t.”

She looked up from her wallet and studied him a moment. “No, you wouldn’t, would you?”

*Say something professional.* He turned to the register. “Parts and labour... \$17.50.”