

The Ring

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Rated: G

Submitted: June 2017

Summary: Clark finds himself drawn to a certain item of jewellery over the course of his relationship with Lois Lane.

Story Size: 1,054 words (6Kb as text)

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Julia Phillips used her hip to steady the tray of rings while she gave the hatch to the window display the hefty tug it needed to open. As the most junior member of the sales team at Mazik's Jewellers, she got stuck with the more onerous tasks — including setting up the window display. Balancing the tray in one hand, she carefully inserted her head and shoulders into the cramped confines of the glassed-in cavity before lifting the tray and its precious contents to a point where she could reach it. Each of the diamond engagement rings on the tray was worth more than she made in a month; it wouldn't do to drop any of them, and the last thing she wanted to do this early on a Monday morning was chase glittering rings all over the store.

She was putting the last few rings out when she became aware of someone studying the window display. Looking up awkwardly, she spotted an attractive, dark-haired man; he met her gaze for a moment, giving her an engaging, almost shy grin before he turned his attention back to the rings. With a final flashing smile, he walked away, leaving Julia craning to see where he went.

The stranger out of sight, she withdrew from the window display, shoving the hatch back into place and locking it. That had been one gorgeous man. Pity he was taken. Men never showed that much interest in engagement rings unless they were in the market for one. With a mental shrug, she returned the now-empty tray to the safe and went about her work.

Clark Kent walked away from the jewellery store, lost in an internal argument. There was a ring in the window that was perfect for Lois; in his mind's eye, he could see the look on her face when he gave it to her; see it on her finger, nestled next to a gold band...

But.

But. He was jumping the gun. While Lois had agreed to go out on a date with him, they hadn't actually had that date yet. And although he knew beyond the tiniest shadow of a doubt that Lois was the only woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, there was no guarantee that she felt the same way. For all he knew, their first date could bomb, and then he'd be stuck with a ring that symbolised all he'd hoped for and never gotten.

Regretfully, he decided not to buy the ring.

Knowing that it was too soon to buy it didn't stop Clark from occasionally checking on the ring he'd mentally earmarked as 'Lois's ring'. From time to time, he'd walk past the store; he even saw the young saleswoman that had been putting the ring in the window more than once. She recognised him, he knew — if she spotted him, she never failed to nod and smile in his direction.

The intrusion of Daniel Scardino into his life changed things.

As the DEA agent got closer to Lois, Clark's dreams seemed to fade. The diamond ring became a sad reminder of a future that

seemed to become more distant and remote on a daily basis.

Heavy-hearted, Clark walked towards the jewellery store for what he promised himself would be the last time. After his conversation with Lois at the end of Superman's trial, he was almost certain that she'd chosen Scardino.

The young saleswoman was cleaning the windows as he approached the store. He nodded politely to her, standing to one side so she could get on with her work. With one side of the storefront cleaned, she gathered up the scrunched-up pieces of paper towel she'd been using.

"Is it still there?" she enquired conversationally.

He nodded.

"You know, I could do a good deal for you on it. If you're interested."

A little taken aback, Clark shook his head slightly. "I think... she wants someone else."

"You think?"

"I know."

She started spraying the windows on the other side of the storefront. "That's too bad."

Clark nodded and started to move away.

"If she changes her mind—"

Clark looked back over his shoulder at the saleswoman.

"She won't."

"If she does... the ring will still be here."

Julia went back to cleaning the windows. She doubted she'd see the tall dark stranger again. Even in the short amount of time she'd worked in the store, she'd learned to tell the difference between the men that proposed because they were genuinely in love with their girlfriends, and the men that proposed because it was the expected thing to do. The stranger belonged firmly in the former category. And if he was right — if his girlfriend wanted to be with someone else — then she felt sorry for him. He'd looked utterly despondent as he'd walked away. Checking the time, she packed away the cleaning supplies and went to wash her hands. One of her few personal clients was due in in a few minutes; if the ring she'd got in especially for him was what he was looking for, she'd be looking at a big commission.

Julia looked around the store. Setup was done; the display cases were sparkling; all of her usual start-of-day tasks were done. They'd only just opened their doors, and there were no customers as yet. Sighing inwardly, she pulled her customer book out from the front counter and started updating some of their details.

"Hi."

Startled, Julia looked up to see the stranger standing in front of her.

"Hi. I didn't expect to see you." Covertly, she took stock of him. He was almost a different man to the one she'd spoken to the day before. Gone was the despairing man convinced that the woman he loved had fallen for someone else; in his place was this smiling, confident person in front of her.

"Do you still have that ring?"

THE END