



**It was beautiful, and she wanted it.**

A moment of madness and misplaced envy  
leads Julie to a shocking discovery.

# THE RING

She knows that the only reason she has been invited for the weekend is because; by some miracle, Izzy is popular. How, considering a traumatic start in life, and being raised by a stressed single mum, she has managed to come out as confident, caring and resilient is a source of constant amazement to Julie.

As she unpacks, these thoughts circle without conclusion, except to make her feel even anxious. She listens to the shrieks and giggles of the girls in the next room. Soon, another, deeper voice joins in the cacophony, it's John.

'Calm down girls!' She hears him shout over the din. 'Justin Bieber and Josh Hutcherson won't be arriving till six, so you've plenty of time to get ready.'

'Oh Da-a-a-d', Phoebe wails. 'Shut up, you're so sad!'

Julie smiles to herself as she hears John laughing, and then the creak of the stairs as he heads back to the kitchen. She takes her empty suitcase and slides it under the bed then goes over to the window. The trees in the garden have turned vibrant shades of gold and orange; behind them fields fall away towards the distant sea: a ribbon of steely blue underneath an over-cast sky.

Another wave of anxiety washes over her and she instinctively puts her hand to her stomach. Bryony always makes her feel like this; ever since she first saw her at the school gates, in her expensive skin-tight running gear, doing her stretches with her foot lodged high on the railings. Slim, toned Bryony made Julie feel like there was just too much of her; too much hair, too much breast, too much hip and thigh. It wasn't that Bryony was rude; in fact she had made a real effort to socialise with Julie once it was clear that her daughter, Olivia, and Izzy had become inseparable; but there was something about her that set Julie's teeth on edge. She was too perfect, her life was too perfect. She had a beautiful home and a handsome husband who was constantly putting up messages on Facebook about how wonderful and sexy his wife was. She had gone to their house once for dinner, and had vowed never to do it again. The people round the table had spent most of the night talking about vintage markets and house prices. Thank God John had been there or she would have had to feign food-poisoning just to get away.

She knows its kind of Bryony to have invited her to stay for the weekend, but she can't quite shake the small bitter feeling of resentment that Bryony owns not just one, but two homes, while Julie has to rent from a series of increasingly capricious and callous landlords. But she

swallows the feeling down into the pit of her stomach, grabs her wash bag and heads out of the room.

In the hall she can hear the girls chatting in their room; cautiously she stands just outside and leans her head towards the slightly open door. There is something irresistible about having the opportunity, even for a moment, to gain access to the breathless, secret world of the thirteen year old girl.

'Your dad's really nice.' She hears Izzy say.

'He's not, he's a right pain!'

'He is, he's funny and he's kind.'

'If you say so, it gets annoying after a while though, he's always trying to be my friend.'

'What about *your* dad Izzy?' It's Bryony's daughter, Olivia, talking now, 'why don't you ever mention him?'

Julie's heart tightens, she dares herself to lean in a little closer so she can hear Izzy's response. 'I haven't seen him in years -'

A hand appears on Julie's shoulder, she almost jumps out of her skin. She spins round, it's John, smiling at her. '*Naughty, naughty!*' he mouths silently. '*Oh fuck off!*' she mouths back. He puts his hands over his ears in mock-horror then turns and knocks at the girl's room. 'Come on you horrible lot, it's time for that walk.'

Groans emit from the room behind the door.

'No excuses, come on, then we'll come back and have tea and you can have your Lord of the Rings film marathon just like you wanted.'

He smiles at Julie then heads downstairs again. She is about to follow him but remembers the wash bag and crosses the hall to go into the bathroom. It's a pretty room with an old-fashioned suite, blue and white-checkerboard tiles and a striped wood floor. She puts her wash-bag on the window sill, and then something catches her eye. It's a ring, a large, ornate ring, on the sink to the left of the tap near the soap. She goes over, she recognises it. It's Bryony's, a lovely old art-deco one, with a large square citrine stone set in diamonds and an intricate platinum band decorated with angular leaves. She knows all this because at that dreaded dinner party, everyone had spent half an hour admiring the ring and Bryony had waxed lyrical about its provenance.

As if she is watching someone else's actions, Julie sees her hand go over to the ring, pick it up and put it in the pocket of her denim skirt. She feels curiously weightless and dreamy. She walks out of the bathroom and back into her own room. Once in, she shuts the door, listens out for the girls, then when she hears them spill noisily into the hall, she goes out too and follows them blithely down into the kitchen.

It's chilly outside and Julie slips her hands into her pockets as she walks. In her left pocket she holds the ring, it takes just seconds to warm in her

hand. The impossibility, the sheer naughtiness of its presence in her pocket gives her a strange sense of hyper-awareness, as if she is more visible, and more present. The sensation makes her feel pleasantly giddy.

John's wife, Shula, is walking ahead with Bryony and David; on walks or social occasions like this, she always seems to make sure there is distance between herself and her husband. She treats John with mild contempt, as if he is a slightly naughty child or annoying relative. John seems oblivious, or maybe he's just resigned to it. Either way it is good for Julie, she enjoys his company, and likes his kind face with its wide mouth, big brown eyes and trendy thick-framed black glasses.

By comparison, Bryony and David are, as usual, arm-in-arm. They are almost always touching, whatever social situation they are in. Julie finds these constant 'public displays of affection' annoying and unnecessary, or maybe it's just the stark light it casts on her own loneliness that upsets her.

John follows her gaze to the front of the little group. 'Well at least she's not running it this time.'

Julie looks up at him and frowns, 'What do you mean?'

I came up here last summer and she ran the route, up and down, past us three times, while we all walked it. Olivia was squirming with embarrassment, so she never did it again.'

Julie looks down at her own feet, in their battered converse high-tops, richly coloured mud has made its way up the side of the soles. 'I should start running, but I never seem to have the time.'

'Why on earth would you want to run, you cycle everywhere anyway.'

'Oh, you know, to lose a few pounds. You wouldn't want to see me in Bryony's running gear, I can tell you, I'd look like a string of sausages.'

He looks at her and shakes his head. 'Don't be daft you're lovely the way you are.' Their eyes lock for a moment, but then Izzy bounds up and flings her arm around Julie's neck. 'Come on mum, I'll race you to the next tree.'

When they get back the girls flock into the living room to start their Lord of the Rings film-marathon, and the adults disperse: Bryony to shower, David and John to the kitchen to start on the food, and Shula and Julie follow Bryony up the stairs to get changed. When she gets into her room, Julie sits on the edge of her bed. She knows she should feel panicked, Bryony has gone into the bathroom, she's bound to see the ring has gone. And yet she isn't scared, instead she feels a strange kind of calm. She smiles at herself and goes over to the wardrobe, she puts on her favourite dress, a fifties style one with a cinched waist and a full skirt. She drops the ring into one of the dress' patch-pockets and feels its weight fall satisfyingly against the cloth. There's a bright red lipstick

that she wants but she realises it is in her wash bag in the bathroom. She bumps into Bryony in the hall; she's still wet from her shower and is clutching her towel around her, her face looks pale against the saturated darkness of her hair.

'Julie, you haven't seen my ring about have you? You know, the big vintage one that I inherited from my grandmother?'

Julie feels a gentle composure settle over her face, she looks Bryony straight in the eye. 'No, but I'm sure it will turn up, where did you last have it?'

'In the bathroom, I'm sure that's where left it, on the side of the sink.'

'Show me.' says Julie in a soft voice and Bryony clutches at her arm and leads her into the bathroom.

'There,' she gestures, 'right by the tap.'

Julie looks at the sink keenly then pulls out the old-fashioned plug. 'Look, there's no grille over the plug-hole. It could have slid down.'

'Shit, shit shit!' Bryony starts to bite at the side of her thumb.

'Go and get David, he can undo the u-bend, it could be there.'

Bryony brightens. 'Thanks Julie, that's a good idea!'

After she's gone, Julie goes over to the windowsill, retrieves her make-up bag and carefully applies the bright-red lipstick.

She feels more alive that evening than she has in years. It's as if the ring in her pocket is emitting some kind of power, a subtle electricity that leaves her feeling vivacious and sexy. Everyone tries to console Bryony, David says that the ring is worth ten grand, he goes upstairs and inspects the u-bend. Of course, he doesn't find anything. Julie suggests they put a sieve under the bottom of the drain-pipe outside to catch the ring in case it gets washed down; she says her mother had found her wedding ring this way, but this is a lie. David gets a sieve and goes outside. She flirts constantly but invisibly with John. He can barely keep his eyes off her. Shula, of course, doesn't notice. Bryony is as articulate and charismatic as ever, but there is a brittleness about her and she is drinking steadily.

At around eleven Julie goes into the living room to take the girls some crisps and drinks. As she enters the room a rasping voice says suddenly: '*What's it got in its pocket? Is it the ring?*' and Julie's heart beats jarringly against her ribs and she realises how drunk she is.

Izzy smiles as she takes the crisps from her mum's frozen out-stretched hand. 'Don't worry mum, it's only Gollum!'

Julie nods numbly, she needs some air. She avoids seeing the others by going through to the hall and out of the front door. The moon is bright, and the jagged shadows of trees cut across the wide lawn like black lightning strikes. As she rounds the corner of the house she bumps into Bryony who has a cigarette clamped in her right hand.

'Bryony I...I didn't think you smoked?'

'I said I was coming out to check the sieve, and make sure I hadn't dropped my ring in the garden. David's so angry.' Bryony's voice shakes slightly as she speaks.

'Let's go in, it's really cold and you're trembling. . '

Bryony doesn't seem to hear her. 'Do you know why I run?'

Julie shakes her head.

'Because every time I do, I think maybe I'll just keep running and get away...but then I think about the girls.'

'I don't understand - '

'He doesn't let me do anything on my own.' She blurts out, louder now. 'He watches me all the time. He checks my phone all the time. I can't breathe, I don't know what to do. When I try to talk to him about it he just tells me I'm stupid. I hate sleeping with him now, it turns my stomach when he...' She takes a sharp drag on her cigarette. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you this. I...I don't know why I'm telling you this. It's not like he's ever hit me or anything like that. I'm being stupid, I'm just a bit drunk.'

Julie hesitates then reaches over and touches Bryony lightly on the arm. 'I've never told anyone this; but that's how it was with Izzy's dad. It took me years to have the guts to leave him, but I did, in the end. Give me a puff on that.' She reaches out for the cigarette.

'But you don't smoke either?'

'No, not any more. But sometimes it just feels good.'

They catch each other's eyes for a moment. 'You know it's only going to get worse, don't you?'

Bryony looks away, hugging herself against the chilly night air.

'If you look deep inside yourself,' Julie continues, 'you know it.'

Bryony takes the cigarette back and sucks on it sharply. 'Yes. I know.' She stubs out the cigarette and looks anxiously back at the house.

'Here.' Julie takes Bryony's hand, turns it over and opens out her fingers. She reaches into her pocket, takes out the ring and lays it in her friend's palm.

Bryony looks up at her, frowning. 'I don't understand, why?'

'I'm sorry. I thought you had something I wanted...but...'

Bryony nods, slides the ring back onto her finger and looks at it abstractedly. 'What do I do now?'

Julie puts her hand on Bryony's shoulder. 'First things first, we've got to go back inside. We can say we just found the ring in the sieve. And then tomorrow, well, you're not alone now; I'll help you.'

They turn back towards the house, but Bryony pauses for a moment and studies her hand. Moonlight catches in the diamonds of her ring and casts sparks out into the dark.

'Thanks for finding it.' she whispers.

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