

THE RING

by

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NOVELS BY WENDY L. KOENIG

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THE RING

Marla jogged across the beach diagonally, trying to limit her exposure to the sucking, calf-pulling sand, aiming for the harder wet sand near the ocean's edge. Already her new running shoes were filling with tiny grains of foot death. She wasn't sure she was fooling anyone. It was obvious she wasn't a jogger. Her arms see-sawed across her body, and she stopped to gasp for breath way too often. Sweat cascaded down her boiled-lobster-red face. And it *was* sweat, not perspiration, as her mother, years ago, had admonished about ladies. But, she reminded herself, she wasn't there for health benefits.

She was trying to catch the attention of an Adonis who jogged this beach, a corporate slugger CEO type that she'd noticed two days ago while sunbathing. So, she'd bought the latest jogging clothes, dolled up in waterproof makeup, and pretended to want to be healthy.

Def Leppard was piping through her earbuds, and she was trying to time her footsteps with the music. But it was either way too slow or too fast, she didn't know which; it just didn't work right. And it irked her that bands she'd grown up with, that had been on the cutting edge back then, were now classified as oldies. Jagger was in his 70s, for God's sake!

She planted her feet and stopped, gulping in as much air as she could. Her side ached from a deep-seated cramp, and she massaged that offending part of her body. Sweat coursed down her face, as if she'd had a glass of water dumped over her head.

This jogging shit was for the birds. No man was worth it.

Glancing down at her expensive running shoes, she gave a rueful laugh. Did she really think they would impress her Adonis? Then her gaze moved between her feet where a small perfect circle was depressed in the sand. She squatted, carefully scooped her fingers rake-style beneath the object, and lifted it into the bright, summer sunlight.

It was a ring. What were the odds that she'd stop at that very spot?

Turning it around and around, her fingers brushed off the crusted sand. It was a man's school ring; 1846 was printed to one side of a giant pink ruby. A non-discernible school insignia to the other. The sunlight snagged on a shaky inscription inside the ring, and she shifted it back and forth to read it. "Cursed" is what it said.

Stunned to stillness, staring at the word, she jumped when a strong masculine voice behind her said, "Hello. Are you all right?"

She whirled. Adonis stood not more than two feet from her, head cocked, waiting for her response. Her stomach turned cartwheels.

"I...No...I found this." She showed him the ring.

Taking it from her, he held it up to see through the gem. Marla let her gaze unabashedly roam across his body. He said, "Well, I think it *is* a ruby. And it's an artifact. It could be worth something. It's a good find." He handed it back without noticing neither the warning inside the band, nor the desire in her eyes, which she felt pretty sure was visible.

He motioned down the beach. "I'm headed the same direction as you. Would you like company?"

She shook her head, gave a rueful smile, and tucked the ring into her pocket. "I wouldn't want to slow you. I'm just a beginner."

"I noticed." He pointed at her shoes, and she nearly wanted to die. Then he laughed. "We all start like that. Anyway, I'm just winding down. I wouldn't mind the company."

It turned out Carleton Maguire, aka Adonis, was in Los Angeles on business. And, he actually *was* a corporate CEO. His Portland, Maine based non-profit company, RheenRoster, ensured blood

was available for the Red Cross and other organizations that dropped into emergency zones. He was in California to line up emergency transport into Indonesia for the zones hit by the earthquake.

After jogging, they met for lunch, which turned into supper. Nine days later they married, and Marla moved to Maine. The newspapers called it Portland's Wedding of the Century. And it was, at least for Marla. She couldn't believe her luck. Ever since she found that ring.

She took the ring to Portnoy's Jewelry, the best Portland had to offer, had it cleaned and polished, and also had the inscription inside removed. Cursed! As if! It was her lucky ring. And curses weren't real. The jeweler confirmed Carleton's earlier words that the ruby was high grade, hence the bright pink color. He told her, however, the amount of gold in the band was so small it had a negligible meltdown value; it would be best to sell it as it was. The ring was worth a fair bit, especially to a collector.

Marla had no plans of selling her lucky ring; she'd hang on to it forever. She took it home in a fancy box and tucked it into her dresser. On their one month anniversary, she presented it to her husband. "My lucky ring for my lucky guy."

He put it on and admired it in the candlelight on their table. He smiled. "I'll never take it off."

Three days later, he died of a massive coronary occlusion at his desk.

She picked up his personal effects from the Medical Examiner's office, throwing the unopened bag on Carleton's dresser when she got home. She'd finally found love and happiness. Now it was all gone.

The funeral was a gigantic affair. Apparently, Carleton had been a favorite in the business world. After the funeral was the reading of the will. The prenup she'd signed stated she got nothing in the event of her foul play, but the M.E. had found no such evidence. It wasn't entirely unknown for a young man who took exceedingly good care of his body to die in such a manner. She inherited everything.

Marla resigned her inherited seat on RheenRoster's board in favor of a large cash settlement and cashed in her stock options. She moved the remaining stock, part of a very large portfolio which included several different types of bonds and a large stash of cash, to a small investment firm recommended by the probate lawyer.

She wasn't rich, but she felt like it. The investment broker told her she'd need a job; her inheritance wouldn't last her even ten years, given her current expenditures. Still, she'd hold out until a good position came along somewhere. She'd sell the house sooner or later, but for now, she liked being where memories of Carleton were waiting for her in every room. They'd been happy together, even for such a short time.

Eventually, though, her thoughts turned to cleaning out some of his things. Just a few small items. She'd read clothing was the easiest place to start, so maybe she'd sort out a few things to donate to charity. Yet, when she opened Carleton's closet, it smelled so much of him, she slammed the door shut and sank to the bed sobbing. She'd thought she was all out of tears, yet here she was, crying buckets.

Her gaze wandered around the room and lit on the still unopened bag of personal effects. Those were the items her husband had with him every day. They traveled where he traveled. Stretching, she snagged the bag with her fingertips and dumped it on the bed in front of her. There, centered on Carleton's wallet as if carefully placed, fell her lucky ring.

Shockwaves ripped through her. Like a lightning flash, it came back to her: the inscription had said "Cursed". And she hadn't taken it seriously! Had she killed the man she loved? Her heart felt as if it was being torn right out of her chest. Her breath wouldn't come. She couldn't rip her gaze away from the ring. She could just put the ring on her own finger. Wear it. Death wouldn't take long, of that she was sure. Then she could be with her love.

A split second before Marla slipped the ring on her finger, she instead flung it across the room where it bounced hard against the corner wall. She flew out of the house.

That night she checked into a five-star hotel and stayed there for three more nights. By the time she came home, she had convinced herself that curses weren't real and a ring couldn't kill anyone. Still, she picked it up with some trepidation, placed it gingerly in the jeweler's box, and dropped it into the dresser.

Almost immediately, her doorbell rang.

Robert Dobbs was a long-time associate of Carleton's. He was tall, broad of shoulder, and at least twenty years her senior. He smelled of expensive cologne as he stepped past her and settled in her living room. He asked in a smooth voice, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Marla smiled gently, handing him a finger of brandy in a crystal glass. "I'm fine. Just, you know, learning to get along without him."

He sipped from the glass, leaned back on the sofa, and said, "Perhaps a change of scenery would help. You've been cooped up alone in this house for far too long already."

She didn't tell him about her running away for a few days because of the ring. She just nodded. "Perhaps."

"My daughter and I are headed to Morocco for ten days in the morning. Would you join us? My expense. Tricia, my daughter, would love to have another woman along."

It seemed her lucky ring was still lucky for her, but the thought of it only depressed her. She shook her head. "I have too much to do. Thank you for the invitation, though."

Dobbs stood. "We'll leave for our private jet at the airport by ten. If you change your mind, please don't hesitate to call."

She took his card and showed him out.

Throughout the night, the thought of the ring made her jump at any small noise in the house, and sleep was long in coming and light when it did. By morning, she was exhausted. Perhaps Dobbs was right. Maybe she DID need to get away.

She made the call and met them at the airport. Tricia was a lovely redhead that all the men watched and, though she welcomed Marla with a hug, she gave a menacing glare when Dobbs hooked Marla's arm through his.

Morocco was everything she thought it would be. There was always something to do or see, and Tricia was absent at parties for the duration. Dobbs was charming; he took her to the car races, to see the Prince's Palace, to the Musee Naval. They wandered the Riviera arm in arm. Dobbs said she needed to be pampered. And well, he was just the one to do it.

The nights, however, were hellish for her. Carleton's ghost filled her dreams, visiting her room nearly every night, fury skewing his face into a mask of menace. He was full-voiced, screaming at how she'd known about the curse on the ring and had murdered him. She pled for him to listen to reason; she hadn't known for sure. She thought it had been a lie. He lunged at her again and again, his fingernails like claws, ripping at her skin.

She woke then, in the midst of his brutal attacks, sweating, sobbing, and her heart thundering. Most nights she stayed awake, but if she was unlucky enough to fall asleep again, the nightmare began all over.

When Dobbs noticed her rundown condition, he suggested a doctor for an anti-depressant or sleeping pills. She shook her head. It was fear, not sadness or wakefulness, that kept her from resting. Perhaps, though, it was her guilty conscience dreaming up Carleton's threats. She HAD known the ring was cursed; she just hadn't believed it could be real.

By the time they returned home, Marla was nearly a walking zombie. She decided that, even if it was just her feelings of guilt that made the nightmares come, she could alleviate that by fixing her mistake with the ring. She tucked it into her purse and headed to Portnoy's Jewellery.

Exiting the taxi, she heard her name called. Looking around, she spied Tricia, who was crossing the street toward her. Marla narrowed her eyes suspiciously. What could the girl possibly want?

Dobbs's daughter reached her and asked, "What brings you downtown?"

Marla lifted her purse. "Getting a ring cleaned. You?"

"At Portnoy's? Excellent. I'll do a little browsing while you conduct your business. Then we can have lunch together."

"Great." Just her luck. Now she wouldn't be able to tell the jeweler to put the inscription back inside the ring. Marla pulled open the door to the shop and walked in, Tricia on her heels. She placed the little burgundy box on the counter. Before she could say anything to the clerk, whom she felt sure was Mr. Portnoy, himself, Tricia scooped up the jeweler's box and flipped open the lid.

"Oh, what a kitchy ring! Where did you get it?" The girl tugged the ring out of the box and, before Marla could stop her, slipped it on her thumb.

"It ... it was my husband's. Late husband's, I mean."

"Oh. Since it belonged to a dead person, I won't keep it." Distaste puckered Tricia's lips. She returned the ring to the box and slid it across the counter to the jeweler. "Make sure to remove all of the dead husband's germs."

They went to a tiny sandwich shop nearby and it soon became very clear that Tricia's friendship was just a subterfuge. Though Marla tried to pay for the meal, Tricia beat her to the check. Then, she insisted on sharing a cab home. As Marla walked up her drive, Tricia called, waving again, "Stay away from my dad. He's too good for you. If you don't, I'll make your life hell."

An hour later, before Marla could remember to call Portnoy's to order the inscription, her phone rang.

It was Dobbs. His voice was broken, quiet. "Tricia's been in a car wreck. She's died." He went on to tell her the cab had been hit head-on by a texting driver who'd crossed the center line at high speed.

"I'll be right there." She slowly set her phone on the coffee table. So, it *was* true. The ring really was cursed. Not just for men, either. Why, then, didn't it affect her? Why was it lucky for her? Was it because she'd actually never worn it? And why had both people died at different intervals from when they actually wore the ring for the first time? Was that gender based? What about children; did it kill them, too?

She shook her head. Preposterous! It was all just coincidence. Still, she'd call the jeweler as soon as she got Dobbs settled. When she arrived at his country mansion, she couldn't find a single place to park, there were so many cars. Finally, she just pulled onto the lawn and raced into the house. She found rooms full to capacity. Laughter and loud voices filled the den where Dobbs, by himself, was seated on the couch, head in hands, a glass of whiskey on the side table.

In fury, she turned to the visitors. "Shame on you! This man is in pain and you behave as if this were a party. Get out! All of you!"

In shock, most of them just stared at her, wide-eyed. Violently, she pushed the one closest toward the door. "Get out!"

Only then, did they listen. One-by-one, they filed out the door. As the cars crunched down the drive, Marla sank to the couch beside Dobbs. She said nothing, just leaned into him, wrapping her hands around his nearest arm. With a deep, tremulous sigh, he patted her hand, then reached for his

glass, but it didn't make it to his mouth. He broke right there, his face twisted in despair, deep shuddering tears pouring down his face.

She held him until her arms ached and grew heavy, until he quit sobbing, until his breaths grew heavy with sleep. Then she eased him back on the couch, found a soft blanket, and covered him. Throughout the whole ordeal of the funeral, he never went anywhere without her by his side. She lived at his place.

Two weeks after the funeral, she checked her phone messages and found a call from Portnoy's Jewelry, informing her the ring was clean. In the business of caring for Dobbs, she'd completely forgotten about that! Guilt flooded her. It was true she hadn't cared for Tricia, and was a tiny bit glad the girl wasn't around any longer. But, she cared for Dobbs. If she had been just a bit more on the ball, her friend wouldn't be grieving his daughter's death. She stood, resolved. Time to get that ring inscribed again. No need to risk if the curse was real or not. Dobbs was standing at the window, staring at the rain, full glass of scotch in his hand.

"I need to take care of an errand. Will you be all right?"

He nodded, not turning, but gave no other sign he'd noticed her words.

Her car had been moved into line with the family vehicles, but she decided to call a cab. Even though much smaller than her native Los Angeles, downtown Portland could get busy at times. It would just be easier to have someone drive her, and she didn't feel comfortable asking for Dobbs's driver to take her.

The taxi was quick to arrive, and even quicker to town. However, the block around Portnoy's was packed. And the shop was filled to the brim with customers waiting to speak to one of the three clerks. It seemed the ring had been busy while in the jeweler's possession. Marla waited patiently, though it didn't seem as if the crowd was lessening. After half an hour, her phone buzzed in her purse.

It was Dobbs. "Where are you?"

"I told you, I have an errand. I'm downtown. At Portnoy's."

"Perfect. I'll meet you there." Then the call ended. She frowned at the picture on her cellphone: Carleton. What was it with the Dobbs family and that jeweler? She reached the counter just as her friend arrived.

He walked in, and as if he were a giant of a prophet, the crowd opened to let him reach her. Taking her hands, he said, "I looked around and you were gone. It occurred to me how much peace you've brought me during this time. How much you've come to mean to me. I'm an old man, and I have no family left. I need you with me. Stay with me always. Marry me."

Marla's jaw dropped. She looked around the room, which had gotten suddenly quiet. She looked back into his ancient eyes. No, it wouldn't be a long marriage. But he was wealthy, and she'd want for nothing. "I will."

The crowd broke into collective applause as the clerk slid the little jeweler's box across the counter to her.

Yes, marriage to Dobbs might be good. But if not, well, there *was* always the ring.

THE END