

## The Ring

By Andrea Graham

A light came on and my next-door neighbor's voice boomed, "Adriana Wesley Malone, get out of that bed! It's time to go and I'm not leaving without you. If I don't go, our moms and Eliza don't either. And you know what they'll do to you if they don't get to go to church."

I turned over in bed and hid underneath my pillow. "Abe! Who let you in? Go away; it's too early, I'm asleep!"

Abe grabbed for the pillow and a tug of war ensued. He won. "Dear, it's almost ten. Get up and shower, or I will pick you up and put you in the car and you can go to church barefoot and in your PJ's. Your choice."

"You wouldn't!" He would. Abe never made idle threats.

Eliza came in. "Hurry up, Adriana. The big lug refuses to leave you

behind." At fifteen, patience wasn't her strong point.

Groaning, I sat up and pulled myself out of bed, every muscle crying out in protest. I looked around, bleary eyed and sleep-sand crusted.

Abe steered me towards the bathroom. "Come on, we're going to be late."

I glared. "Abraham Desmond, you are a royal pain, you know that?"

"You'll thank me later."

I stuck out my tongue. My cheek anticipated a smart-aleck kiss even though Abe put that sort of behavior to a stop over three years ago.

By the time we reached the church five minutes after the services were to start, I was fully awake. I should've known better than to stay out so late. I needed to stop letting Duke talk me into these things. If Abe knew how late I was out the night before, he'd be furious. Thankfully, I was often difficult in the morning, so he didn't seem to find my behavior out of the ordinary.

As we entered the sanctuary, Abe grabbed my left hand. "Where's your ring?"

"Eliza stole it out of the bathroom a month ago," I said, surprised.

Hurt flashed through Abe's clear blue eyes. Before he could respond, however, his mother frowned. "Abraham, come sit next to me."

Sending another hurt look at me, Abe trotted to her side, clear on the other side of our party.

On the way home after the service, I turned to Abe. "Thanks for waking me."

Not taking his eyes off the road, he said, "No problem."

That was one thing I liked about Abe, he wasn't the sort to say, "I told you so." The amazing part was he actually meant that. I treated him so horribly whenever he had to wake me. I don't know why he bothered.

A few minutes later, Abe asked, "Where is it, Eliza?"

She wrinkled her forehead. "What?"

"The ring, Eliza, the ring. Where is it?"

"Oh... in my jewelry box at home, I think."

He stopped the car in front of his house. "Go get it, Eliza. Now."

"Abe...." his mother started.

He sent her a pleading look. "Can you yell at me later, please?"

"Who said I was going to yell at you? Behave and we'll discuss this later."

My mother sent me a scolding look. "So will we." She turned to Abe's mother. "We'll talk tonight, Shirley."

Mrs. Desmond nodded. "Lord willing." She got out of the car and went inside the Desmond house. My mother followed Eliza into ours.

Once we were alone, I said, "What's wrong, Abe? You're tense."

He just grunted.

I rolled my eyes, exasperated. "I'm not moving until you tell me."

"And I have nothing to say until Eliza returns."

I felt like strangling him. A few minutes later, Eliza flung the ring at Abe, then ran back into the house. Abe extended a hand. I stared at him, wishing for maybe the first time ever I knew what was going on in that head of his.

"Your hand, please," he said.

I gave him my left hand, sensing something wrong. He slid the silver braided band onto my ring finger and patted my hand. "There, all better."

If only putting my ring back where it belonged could fix everything.

"What's wrong, Abraham?"

"You know what's wrong." Abe paused. "Maybe you don't and that's what's wrong. You probably don't even remember what that ring means."

"Sure I remember. You gave it to me in middle school. It's a friendship ring."

"Is that the way you remember it?" He pulled a chain out from under his shirt. The kind of ring you get out of a box of a bubble gum machine hung from the chain, bringing back the memory.

###

"No, I'm going to be the bride!" shouted seven-year-old Eliza.

"No, I am!" corrected eight-year-old Adriana.

"I know! I'll be the bride, and you'll be the groom!"

Abe, then nine, rolled his eyes. "Adriana's a girl, she can't be the groom. Besides, I'm the groom and Jerry's going to play the preacher."

The six-year-old looked up from his coloring book. "I said I ain't playin'!"

Mr. Desmond asked, "Are you sure this is a game you kids want to play?"

That got a "no" from Jerry and a "yes" from the other three. Mr. Desmond declared, "Well, then we're all going to play. Abraham will be the bridegroom and the bridegroom decides who the bride is. The other girl will be the bridesmaid and Jerry will be the best man. I will be the minister. Understood?"

Jerry grumbled as the other three nodded.

He turned to Abe. "Son, don't let these girls go talking you into this unless you're positive this is a game you want to be playing. It'll haunt you for years to come."

"I'm cool with it." Abe turned to the sisters. "You can be the bride, Adriana."

Eliza started screaming, but Mr. Desmond cut her off. "Alright, now do you have the rings ready? The dress?"

The children stared. Mr. Desmond laughed. "Well, your Easter dress will work for a mock wedding, but what will you do for the rings? The bride and groom are supposed to exchange rings."

Abe ran and made a ring out of a piece of wire and tin foil. "Here's one!"

Eliza pulled a plastic bubble out of her pocket and handed it to her sister, jutting out a pouty lip. "Here, daddy gave it to me. You can have it."

Adriana hugged her sister. "Thank you, Eliza."

###

The same ring now hung from Abe's neck next to a cross pendant. I stared at him in disbelief. "You still have it?"

"It's... a reminder of more innocent times. Now do you remember?"

I felt sick to my stomach. "I wore that thing clear up until middle school, even with the kids teasing me mercilessly over it. Then I lost it."

"And I bought you that 'friendship ring' the following Christmas. To replace it."

I hesitated. "It was only a game, Abe. You haven't even kissed me in years."

He glanced away. "I grew up and decided to save those things for my real wife. At about the same time, we promised to abstain from the dating game." He paused. "But, some of us don't keep our promises."

I felt defensive. "Is that what this is about? Duke and me? The only reason I said that was because I didn't think anybody would ever want me and you didn't count. It was a foolish thing to say."

“There is nothing foolish about waiting for the one God has planned for you.” He sighed, visibly struggling to remain calm. “Look, I don’t trust Duke, he’s up to no good, but that’s not the only promise you’ve broken. This is the third time in a row you’ve dumped me for him.”

While the rest of the teen world went out, we traditionally stayed home, ate popcorn and watched a movie on Saturdays, not too unusual for best friends. Abe’s gender was the only snag. I couldn’t use the “girls night out” line to explain this to Duke. “Abe, I have a boyfriend now, of course things are going to change. We can hardly expect Duke to understand me passing him up on Saturday nights to spend time with another guy.”

“That’s not the issue here, Adriana. The only time you ever come by is to use our computer. Otherwise, you’re with Duke. It’s Duke this, Duke that. I just have one question for you, Adriana. Who was there for you when all the kids at school turned their backs on you? Who’s been through thick and thin, good times and bad times with you? It wasn’t Duke out there taking hits for you on the playground. It was me. Not Duke, me.”

I took in a sharp breath. “That’s a low blow, Abraham Desmond.”

“Don’t you think you were asking for it?”

I got out and slammed the car door behind me.

My mom was waiting for me in the kitchen. “You’re not going out this

weekend.”

I tensed. “I’m not?”

“No. You’re staying home and hanging out with Abe like always.”

“Mom! I have a boyfriend now!”

“And you are only sixteen and I am still your mother. You’re not going out with that Duke fellow this weekend. I don’t trust him. Abe is a good Christian boy and he’s been very good to you, Adriana. You are not going to throw away his friendship over some here-today-and-gone-tomorrow boy. You’re smarter than that.”

Eliza appeared from around the corner. “Mom’s right, Sis. Abe’s the sort of friend you don’t throw away.”

I took three deep breaths, struggling to remain calm. As much as I hated to admit it, they were right. Even mad at him, Abe still meant a lot to me.

I met Abe the next morning at our locker. “Sorry for storming out on you the day before. That was rude of me.”

He shrugged. “Its okay, I wasn't upset. You haven't been yourself lately.”

I could tell from his posture he really was upset. “No, Abe, I was wrong. I’m sorry for ignoring you and neglecting our friendship. I know you feel used and I’m sorry, I didn't mean to. We've been through a lot together and I don't want to lose you now. You're my best friend and Duke is just going to have to

understand that. Right?"

He turned away from the locker and faced me. After a moment, he smiled and hugged me. "Always, Adriana."

I put my things away and retrieved my books and folders for my early classes. On the way to class, Abe asked, "Any plans this weekend?"

"Yes, hanging out with my best friend Saturday night. You?"

His hand brushed mine, but then he seemed to change his mind. "The same."

###

Duke found me right before lunch in the darkened corridor outside the library. "Adriana, you'll never believe it! I scored us tickets to the movie premiere at the megaplex this Saturday!"

I said, a note of pleading in my voice, "Duke, can't you give my ticket to someone else? You know I don't like all that gore. I don't know how you can watch that stuff. Besides, I promised Abe we would hang out this weekend."

"But I don't want someone else to go with me. I want my girlfriend to go with me. What's more important to you, Adriana? Keeping your commitment to your boyfriend or to that freak?"

I clenched my teeth. "That 'freak' is my best friend, and that is not going to change, Duke. I already made plans for this weekend and they don't include a

stupid movie premiere."

Duke grabbed my hand. "What are you doing wearing his ring again? That's cold, Adriana. If you want back with him, just say so."

I stepped back, a warning flashing in my head. "What are you talking about, Duke? How can I get back with him, I was never with him! Abe's my friend and that's all he is. I don't want to be with anyone but you."

"Well, let's see, you're wearing a ring a guy gave you on your left ring finger. What are we supposed to think? Why do you think I waited until the ring came off to ask you out, Adriana?"

I took another step backwards. "Duke, Abe never was, is not, and never will be my boyfriend. He doesn't believe in dating and its days like this that I wonder why I changed my mind."

"Because only freaks and losers don't date and you're not either. Abe is both, however. I seriously don't understand why a beautiful girl like you hangs out with the likes of him."

"The only loser I know is you, Duke, and if you'll excuse me, I am now late to lunch. Abe must be wondering what is keeping me." I turned and walked away.

Duke ran after me. "Hey, look, I'm sorry. I won't bag on your friends anymore. Look, I'm just mad at Desmond 'cause he's keeping you from going to

the premiere when I know you want to go. I mean, going to this premiere with me, your boyfriend, is more important than hanging out with your friends. You can do that any night."

He wasn't listening, but he seemed to be trying. I took a few deep breaths. "Fine, I'll go, but only if you promise to stop trying to keep me from seeing my friends. Please understand, Duke, Abe and I go way back. Don't try to come between me and my friendship with him because I guarantee you'll lose."

"Sure, you two have been friends forever, but he's crushing on you something awful. Everybody knows that."

I stared, shocked. "That is not true." I fled into the cafeteria.

After going through the lunch line, I joined Abe at our usual table.

He asked, "Where have you been?"

I averted my eyes. "Duke stopped me in the hall. I left when I realized how late it was getting."

Abe nodded. "Okay. Anyway, which movie do you want to rent this weekend? The Christiano brothers have a new one out."

I looked down at the unappetizing food on my tray. "Um, Abe, I'm sorry, but Duke got tickets to the movie premiere Saturday and I have to go with him. We'll have to save our plans for another night."

Abe sucked in a sharp breath and a wounded look came over his face. "If

Duke had lunch this period, you would have to sit with him instead, too, huh?

No matter what we plan, if Duke wants to do something, you have to drop everything. Forgive me if I sound jealous, but I don't think that's fair."

The J-word hit me square in the stomach with Duke's accusation against Abe still ringing in my ears. "The three of us would eat together if Duke had lunch this period. There is no reason why not."

Abe replied, "Besides the fact Duke thinks I'm a freak and a loser?" He laughed at the look on my face. "I know what he thinks of me, Adriana. No, if we all had lunch the same period, you would eat lunch with him and his friends. I would be left out. As it is, you're already leaving me to go hang out with them. When was the last time we were both invited to their parties? Never. The world doesn't want anything to do with me and there was a time when they didn't want anything to do with you, either."

I ignored the barb. "Do you have any idea how hard this is on me? I'm sorry if you feel excluded, what else can I do? It's just this one weekend, we'll start hanging out again soon, I promise."

"So you keep saying." He paused. "That movie ridicules our Lord."

"It's just a movie, Abe. It's no big deal."

"It is to me and it used to be a big deal to you, too. Duke's no good for you, Adriana. He's really bringing you down. I'm worried about you, Love."

His old pet name for me sent me reeling.

Abe turned scarlet. "I need to go, there's something I forgot to do."

As he fled, I shoved my tray away and dropped my head to the table.

Overhead, the florescent light flickered and went out.

I avoided Abe the rest of the week. On Wednesday, Eliza and I rode with Kenny Hobart to church instead of Abe. Our Youth Pastor preached one of his infamous sermons against worldliness with a section devoted to criticizing those of us in dating relationships. It barely registered, but I still felt the sting of conviction. Part of me knew Abe and our Youth Pastor were right. I was compromising my principles. Still, I had no intentions of repenting.

By Saturday night, I was just going through the motions. After sitting through one painful scene after another where my God was ridiculed, guilt tightened it's grip on my stomach as my youth pastor's emotion-packed words echoed in my mind. I had no business being there.

The actor on the screen took Jesus' name in vain for the seventh time. The characters had done and said worse, but I just couldn't take another second of this. I stood up and left the theatre.

Fifteen minutes passed before Duke came after me. He found me sitting on the ground next to his car, feeling very sorry for myself, considering calling Abe, but too proud to actually do it. Duke asked, "What's wrong, Adriana?"

I swallowed. "I'm sorry, Duke, but I find that coarse talk and behavior offensive. I just couldn't take another moment of it. I tried, really I did."

He hugged me. "It's okay, want to go for a drive?"

A quiet voice in my head whispered, "Tell him to take you home."

I ignored it. "Sure."

The next thing I knew, we were parked in a dark deserted area, and Duke was groping me. I was scared and tired and by this time did just want to go home, but he wasn't taking my protests seriously.

Then, a bright light blinded me. As a dream-like fog surrounded me, someone yanked open the car door. "Get out of the car, Duke."

Duke kissed me again. I felt like smacking him.

"Stay here, Adriana," he said. "I have a little business to take care of."

He stepped out of the car and put his hands up in a threatening position. "Are you going to make me, pretty boy?"

I stared, unable to believe my eyes as I blinked against the glare of the headlights of a second car. I got out of Duke's and approached it. It was Abe's. I turned around to face them. Abe had four inches and eighty pounds on Duke, but Abe wasn't really a fighter and Duke knew it. Fear pierced my heart. "Abe?"

He put a hand out. "Its okay, Adriana." He said to Duke, "I don't have to make you. You're already out of the car. And a fight is hardly necessary. Words

will suffice."

"Words? Bah!" Duke snorted. "You know plenty about words! All words and no action. You're a coward, Desmond. That's why Adriana's with me and not you. Now just admit defeat and scurry on home."

Abe shook his head. "I'm not leaving her with you. This has gone on long enough. It's not too late to call my claim, and I will if that's what it takes."

I froze. Claim?

Duke stared at him.

Abe laughed. "So, you thought I didn't know the rules of your little games. I know plenty. I have the right to a claim on Adriana and until midnight to call it."

I glanced at my watch. It was just a quarter till.

Duke looked at his and swore. "You wouldn't. That would put you in the game, you know, the game you begged out of?"

"What are you boys talking about?" I asked.

Abe answered, "It's part of the rules of a sick contest most of the upper-class guys at school are in, including your precious Duke. He's trying to score with you. I could've stopped him from pursuing you at all. One of the rules is before you can claim an upper classmen's sister you have to ask his permission. Otherwise, the other guys will hold you down while he breaks your skull in. I

know I can use that because Kenny's covered Eliza with it and we're even closer.

I didn't because you'd be furious."

I said, "You're right about that."

Duke screamed in frustration. "Look, this isn't going to work. It's up to you, Adriana. You've got to choose. It's me or him. You can have me or you can stick with that loser."

I froze. "Duke..."

"Choose."

I looked at Abe. He nodded. "He's right, Adriana. It's time to choose."

The words my Youth Pastor spoke burned in my ears. Tears stung my face as I stood behind Abe. "I warned you that you'd lose, Duke. Did you think it was a joke?"

"Adri—" Duke started.

A bitter taste filled my mouth. "Good-bye, Duke." I touched Abe's shoulder. "Can we go home now?"

Abe nodded. We started towards his car, but then Abe stopped. "Just one more thing." He turned around. "Duke, if I ever hear you spreading any lies about Adriana, you will have to deal with me. And I won't be using words."

After we pulled out and left Duke standing in our dust, I said, "I'm sorry, Abe, I should've listened to you. How did you find us?"

"Kenny called earlier tonight and a group of us got together to pass out tracts at the premiere."

"You followed us?"

He nodded sheepishly.

"Thanks." I paused. "Was there any truth to Duke's allegation?"

Abe kept looking straight ahead. "What allegation?"

From the blush darkening his cheeks, I gathered he knew exactly what I meant. "He said you, uh, like me as more than a friend. Is it true?"

Abe pulled off to the side of the road. "Why do you have to ask? You should know how I feel. You certainly don't have to say anything for me to know how you feel."

I opened my mouth, but only squeaking came out.

Abe took my hand, touching my ring. "Adriana, would I have given you this if it was just a stupid game to me? I never said anything because I figured you knew. Besides, we're still too young, so I just didn't see the point. Why torture ourselves?"

I leaned my head against the window as tears filled my eyes. How could I be so blind? Abe put his arm around me a moment, reassuring me with this that he understood. I peaked back at him, feeling shy with Abe for the first time in my life as my heart beat sped up. As I began to comprehend why he quit kissing

me, his gender was no longer an annoying snag, but a gift from God I came close to throwing away.