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THE  
SEVENTH  
SENSE

IN  
THE RUNES

Lia Sebastian

In The Runes:  
The Seventh Sense  
By  
Lia Sebastian

## **The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian**

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### **In the Runes: The Seventh Sense**

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## Dedication

For Nick, Brittany and Stephanie, the best nephew and nieces an aunt could have. Thank you for asking about my writing and for offering unique ideas. I'm only sorry there wasn't room in *The Seventh Sense* for an army of ninjas, a magical princess, and a beautiful fairy. Maybe next time.

Additional thanks to Alisa, Heidi and Jana for their helpful comments about this story and to Sylvia for a listening ear as I ask endless questions about this adventure called publishing. Last, but certainly not least, thanks to Deanna and Sable for giving me the opportunity to make my dreams come true.

## Chapter One

I became a believer in the supernatural the day thirty pounds of roofing nearly smashed in my skull.

The day started innocently enough. My morning had been occupied with preparations for an afternoon presentation. After hours of creating charts, analyzing data, and anticipating possible responses, I was ready.

At noon, I met a friend at a restaurant for lunch. It was her turn to pick the place, and she wanted to try a new, out-of-the-way Italian restaurant. I loved Italian food, but the crowd suggested it would be tough to find a table. I should have called for reservations.

"How many in your party?" The dignity of the maitre d's plain black uniform was offset by his spiky hair, which looked as if he'd run his hands through it.

"Two. I'm meeting a friend."

While he reviewed the restaurant seating chart, I glanced around the room. Carly and I were in for a long wait.

The door opened and another wave of people entered. "Erin."

Even if Carly hadn't said my name, I would have recognized her voice. I turned as she made her way through a stubborn group of people. As always, she looked perfect despite being jostled by the people surging through the doorway. Her trim black pantsuit made her look as if she'd just stepped off the runway. "Carly. You okay? This crowd is brutal."

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"You said it." Her fingers slid over her sleeves as if to brush away the crowd. "I'm fine. If this crowd is any sign, Monday's exhibit will be a hit."

"Exhibit?" I asked as I leaned down for a hug.

She turned her attention to the harried waiter. "I called in reservations for two. The name's Carly Deluca."

Once we were seated and had placed our orders, she returned to the topic of the exhibit. "It's a special, two-week exhibit about Roman artifacts. Looks like it's generating a lot of buzz."

"I didn't know you were interested in Roman anything."

"Tom is."

That explained it. Carly changed her hobbies to match those of the man-of-the-day. Apparently, Tom had an interest in Roman history. Oh, wait. He worked at the campus museum as an assistant. Or something.

Our salads arrived, and I picked up my fork to begin eating. "I take it you're going to see the exhibit."

"I had no idea you were interested."

"I'm curious, not interested."

She raised a brow. "All right, I'll buy that for now. But you usually aren't even curious."

"What do you mean?" I set down my fork.

"It should be obvious. Myths, legends, and artifacts don't typically interest you."

It was a familiar discussion. I was a classic believer in only what I could see, while Carly leaned toward the mystical. "And this particular display emphasizes myths, legends, and artifacts?"

"It is a museum, Erin." Her tone made it clear she was teasing me. "They do have one or two artifacts. Okay, okay," she added at my mock glare. "I don't know the specifics, but the jewelry collection is supposed to be spectacular."

"You going to see it?"

"Of course." She ate a few bites of her salad. "I'm going with Tom on Monday. Opening night and all. In fact, I'm catering the event."

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"That's great." I admired Carly's devotion to her catering business, one she started last spring. "Things still good with you two?"

"Yes." She slumped slightly, then began picking at her food.

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Her forced smile came into place.

"Carly, I know you. The smile doesn't convince me you're happy. You look like you need to see a doctor."

Her shoulders slumped, and she set her fork down. "Tom's been acting funny."

"Define funny."

She smoothed her hands over the tablecloth in front of her plate. "He's been getting lots of strange phone calls, more than usual."

The Tom I met had been glued to the phone. He couldn't be on it more than usual unless the phone was now surgically attached.

"He won't tell me who calls." She lifted her gaze to meet mine. "Do you think he's cheating?"

I answered the only way I could. "I don't know." But I wouldn't put it past him. "What does he say when you ask about the calls?"

"He says he's conducting business, which doesn't make much sense. Business didn't have him on the phone like this before. Our relationship feels different now."

"Hold it." I lifted my hand in a stopping gesture. "It *feels* different? What does that mean?"

"I forgot who I'm talking to. Ms. Practicality." With a sigh, she rolled her eyes. "Never mind."

I deserved the sigh. I had pushed my point too strongly; it was time to backpedal. "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm saying you shouldn't act on one feeling. Feelings change every minute."

"I know, I know. I'll wait and see." One of Carly's arms rested on the table as she held my gaze. "Someday I'd love to see you in a situation you couldn't explain, one that forces you to focus on feelings instead of facts. Even better if it involves a man."

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I smiled but couldn't imagine such a scenario. I simply wasn't geared to be much of a feeler. Of course, I had emotions like anyone else. But they took a back seat to analysis and had for a very long time.

When I remained quiet, her eyes narrowed. "Are you dating anyone?"

"No." I couldn't remember the last time I had a date. If something didn't change, my social skills would dry up completely.

"How about work? How's it going?"

I told her about my upcoming afternoon meeting, and we continued to discuss work as we moved on to the main course.

When we finished eating, Carly waved away my attempt to cover the check. "You staying out of trouble today? It is Friday the thirteenth, you know."

"Ha ha. You know I don't believe in superstition."

She snapped her fingers before pointing at me. "I've seen you go out of your way to avoid walking under a ladder."

I had to say this for her—she was persistent. "It's common sense, Carly. If a ladder's going to fall, it's easier to get out of the way if you're not right under it."

She shrugged. "All right, all right." She took one last sip before standing. "Good luck with your meeting."

"Thanks. I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Especially since my boss, Ryan Fletcher, was a two-faced viper. "I think I've covered the contingencies." You had to with Ryan. He liked nothing better than catching the people he worked with off guard.

Heads turned when Carly and I walked through the restaurant. People noticed her because she was blonde, beautiful and petite. Not me. I stood out because of my height—at five feet nine inches, I towered over Carly.

"Call me later," she said, as she opened the door of the restaurant and walked outside. "I want to hear about the presentation."



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"Sure." I waved as she headed to the parking garage. I had parked on the street, knowing I'd enjoy a walk after lunch. It was a nice day for a walk; the leaves had only started to change colors.

I passed a row of shops as I walked: a candle store, novelty shop and bookstore. The street was less crowded than the restaurant, which meant I had a better chance for light traffic back to work. Glancing at my watch, I realized I had time to stop at one of the stores if I wanted.

That's when I saw the small antique store. I hadn't noticed it before—no surprise since I didn't do a lot of antique shopping. Wedged between a coffee shop and a Laundromat, the shop epitomized hole-in-the-wall shopping. The handmade wooden sign above the door announced *Buried Treasures—Knick Knacks & More*.

*What qualifies as more?* The question intrigued me enough to draw me closer. To avoid returning to work for another review of my notes, I opened the door to Buried Treasures and walked inside.

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The scent of patchouli flooded my nose as I entered the dimly lit shop. Couldn't they open the windows? Or turn on more lights? Something besides a few lamps. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I decided fluorescent lighting would destroy the ambiance. Tables and display cases were cluttered with antiques, and the windows were lined with heavy burgundy curtains. It wouldn't have surprised me to see a fortune teller in the corner.

It didn't take long to remember why I didn't often come to shops like Buried Treasures. Antiques weren't my thing. My taste leaned toward contemporary décor and furnishings. Maybe I should go back to work...That option wasn't appealing, and since I was there, I decided to take a look around.

One large shelf held china and pottery. One set of teacups looked perfect for Carly, and her birthday was next month. I glanced at the price. *Ouch*. I'd stick with a gift certificate.

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"May I help you find something?"

The woman walking toward me wore a broomstick skirt and a blouse with billowing sleeves the same color as her brown eyes. She fit right in with the rest of the décor. "Uh, no thanks. I'm just looking."

"Of course." She smiled and tossed her long, red hair over one shoulder as she walked away.

I turned back to the china. A quick scan of the items in this section told me I wouldn't find anything I wanted. Same with the furnishings and decorations. It looked like I wouldn't make any purchases here.

"Would you like to look at our jewelry?" The red-haired woman gestured to the jewelry cases by the cash register.

If Carly had been with me, she would have commented on the irony of me looking at necklaces, bracelets and earrings. I rarely wore them, and antique jewelry? Call me strange, but there was something kind of creepy about wearing jewelry once owned by a stranger.

I paid an unusual amount of attention to the jewelry in the two trays on the countertop. Most of the jewelry was gold, and there was a wide selection of earrings, bracelets and a few rings. I looked at everything the two velvet trays had to offer before I realized my heart was pounding. I felt anxious, as if there was something more I needed to see.

I waved to the saleswoman to get her attention. "Excuse me?"

"Yes." She looked up from cleaning a counter. "Did you need help? There are some lovely pieces here."

"Do you have any other jewelry?"

Her gaze bounced around the room. "I'm not sure. I'm pretty new here." She bit her lower lip. "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing in particular. Just...never mind."

"Wait." She put her hand on my arm. "I know I saw a few pieces in the back. I'll go see what I can find. Maybe those are waiting to be cleaned..."

Under most circumstances, I would have been put off by the thought of trying on jewelry when it hadn't been cleaned yet. Strangely, I wasn't. "I appreciate it. I'd like to see anything you have."

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While she slipped into a back room, I looked at my watch again. I could stay another ten minutes before I needed to leave.

The woman came back in less than two. She moved the other trays aside, replacing them with a smaller plastic tray.

I noticed the ring immediately. It was fairly plain as rings go, only a wide gold band. Light from the lamp made the ring gleam faintly. I found myself wanting to reach down and grab it. It didn't belong on a cold, dull tray. It needed warmth; it needed to be worn. Even before trying it on, I wanted the ring more than I could remember wanting anything.

"Would you like to try it on?"

I looked up and into the saleswoman's eyes. She was good at her job, a quality I admired. She saw right where I'd focused and was closing in on the sale. I had a moment of panic as she picked up the ring and handed it to me. *Don't touch it*, I thought irrationally. *If I do, I'll never be the same.*

The ring fell into my hand.

It was warmer than I expected for a ring that hadn't been worn recently. It grew warmer the longer I held it. I lifted my hand to examine the ring more closely and noticed something I hadn't seen before. There were small stones lined up in the center of the ring. They were set flush with the thick band instead of being raised above it.

There were three stones altogether—one was purple, a second was orange, and the third was a blend of gray, white and cream in a wavy, circular pattern reminding me of the one you see on a tree stump. Under any other circumstances, I would have said the color combination was odd at best, but with this ring they looked perfect, even harmonious. I'd never seen anything like it. I desperately wanted to try it on so I slipped it on the third finger of my right hand.

It was a perfect fit.

Was my hand warmer than it had been a second ago? It sure seemed like it. I spread out my fingers to gauge how it looked.

"It looks wonderful on you."

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In my interest in the ring, I'd almost forgotten about the saleswoman. I scrambled to call on my bargaining skills. Rule number one: do nothing to reveal how much you want something. Once you do, you've lost the position of power. With this in mind, I opened my mouth to say I thought the ring was okay, but nothing special. What came out was, "How much?"

Hell. So much for rule number one.

She looked down at my hand. When I followed her gaze, I realized I had made a fist, a subconscious indication I wasn't letting the ring go anytime soon.

Oops.

She looked up and our eyes locked. "It's \$200," she said with a smile. "The gems are authentic, and this is a rare piece." Under the smile was a hint of exhaustion. It had been a long day already, and she wanted to go home. In fact, she was hoping her handmade soap and candle business would take off and she could quit.

I blinked. How had I come up with that? Obviously I was projecting my own wish for time off work. And who doesn't want to leave work early on a Friday?

"Hmm." I hoped I sounded casual.

"A bargain."

Unfortunately, I didn't know enough about jewelry to know if she was right. It could be more sales rhetoric. I *did* know the amount was a lot more money than I wanted to spend. It was payday, but I knew I didn't have \$200 left after paying bills and buying groceries. Unless I dipped into my savings.

No. Unclenching my hand, I pulled the ring off my finger. I forced myself to set it down on the counter. "I'll think about it." I took a deep breath and turned my back on the woman and the ring.

"Ma'am? I could drop the price to \$190. How does that sound?"

*Great* warred with *still too much* in my mind. Practicality won out. I'd evaluate my finances and decide from there. Chances were I'd forget

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about the ring within an hour anyway. "I'll get back to you," I called over my shoulder. I didn't make it five feet before stopping.

I wanted the ring. There was nothing logical about my desire for it, nothing sensible about making an impulse purchase. In most cases, I preferred to do some investigation, compare prices.

I didn't care.

I turned around and walked back to the counter where the woman still waited. "How about \$150?"

We haggled for a few minutes, finally setting on \$170. The woman smiled as I gave her my debit card.

"Erin Andrews." She looked at my card before swiping it through a machine. "What a pretty name."

"Thanks." I took a deep breath. Since the purchase was complete, I was anxious to get back to work. My afternoon meeting loomed.

"Would you like a case for it?"

I thought about saying no, but reconsidered. I wouldn't wear the ring all the time, and I might as well have a case when I'd spent more than \$150 on the ring. "Sure. I'd like one."

"You're welcome to sign up for our mailing list. We can notify you about upcoming sales." She bent to look under the counter, and I heard her move items as she looked for a case.

The mailing list consisted of a notebook on the counter, and I wrote down my name and address. I didn't think I'd return anytime soon, but the next time I made a big purchase, I wanted a coupon.

The saleswoman's head popped up from behind the counter. "Here we are." She rose and held out a jewelry case.

I took the small black box and opened the lid. The inside was purple, a nice complement to the ring. I placed the ring inside and closed the case.

"Your receipt." She handed me a sheet of stationery with the store logo on it.

I shoved the receipt in my purse. "Thank you." This time, I really was leaving, and I walked toward the door.

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"I hope you'll return soon."

If I did, I was likely to leave the store covered in jewelry if today's trip was any indication. Oh well. I started to put the jewelry case in my purse then I stopped. I would wear the ring back to the office. I opened the case and felt an unusual sense of relief when I saw the ring. It was bizarre. As was the comfort I experienced when I slipped the ring back on my finger.

I didn't know why I should feel comforted. Maybe buying something not-so-new alleviated my anxiety about the upcoming meeting.

Tucking the case in my purse, I left the shop. It was surprisingly bright outside, or maybe it seemed bright after being in the dim light of the antique shop. I turned right and saw my car in a parking spot about 50 yards away. What time was it? It felt like I'd been in the shop forever—I needed to get back in working mode. I looked at my watch and saw it was 1:30. Not too late, but I needed to hurry.

There was a nice, cool breeze, I thought as I walked. I avoided looking in any more shop windows, since I'd already spent well over my limit today. No way was I buying anything else.

The ring felt nice on my hand. I was surprised by how conscious I was of wearing it. I didn't often wear jewelry, but it wasn't like I'd never worn it before. Another oddity of the day. Carly would chalk it up to Friday the thirteenth. The idea made me snicker. It was a beautiful day, and I lifted my right hand to see how the ring would look in the sun.

*Move left. Now.*

Huh? I wanted to turn and look around, but I knew I wasn't hearing a real voice.

*Now.*

I stepped to the left at the same time I saw a large object slip off the roof and fall directly to my right. It hit the sidewalk with a jarring crash. After staring at the pile of rubble for several seconds, one important fact was clear.

It had landed exactly where my head would have been if I hadn't moved left.

## Chapter Two

"Hey, lady, you okay?"

My legs felt shaky but I remained standing, looking at the wreckage next to me. It had been a blur as it fell; now I saw it was a large clump of roofing tiles. Judging by its size and the mess it made on the sidewalk, it weighed at least thirty pounds. *Thirty pounds.*

My head had nearly been smashed by thirty pounds of roofing.

"Lady!"

I looked up, lifting my right hand to shield my eyes from the sun. "I'm fine." Actually, I wasn't. I was shaken up and confused...and the ring was glowing. I jerked my hand down, thinking it was a trick of the light or a mere reflection of the sun. I turned my hand left and right, waiting for the glow to disappear. It didn't.

Okay, I'd narrowly escaped a serious head injury, and I now owned a glowing ring. *Please, God, I can't take anything else.* I watched as the ring continued to shimmer. Did this increase or diminish its value? Was I really concerned about the value? No, but thinking about that kept me from thinking about having a smashed skull.

"You sure?" The man on the roof moved closer, and I could see concern in his eyes.

"Yes." Or I would be, once I got a grip. The near miss had shaken me. I returned my gaze to the roofing and inhaled slowly. I was a lot better than I would have been if I hadn't moved.

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"I'm really sorry about that."

I exhaled. "Don't worry about it." I started walking fast, making straight for my car. He shouted something after me, but I couldn't make out the words. I wanted to get in my car and get away from this shopping center.

Next time, I was meeting Carly somewhere else for lunch.

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By the time I made it to work, I felt almost back in control. I stopped in the bathroom to do my routine hair-control. I'm trying to grow out my short, curly, black hair. It was in an orphan Annie stage at the moment, which meant I usually went to the office bathroom at least once during the day to pull the curls out of my face and wet it down if I needed to. Today, I needed to.

I needed some color, too. I looked white as a ghost, except I didn't believe in ghosts. What was the voice if it wasn't a ghost? I scowled at the thought. The voice telling me to move left was definitely a warning, but it wasn't a ghost. It was...a sixth sense or something, which I also didn't believe in.

Okay, now I was arguing with myself, something I didn't have time for. I needed to fix my hair, survive the afternoon meeting, and pick up my niece from her karate class. Why waste time debating what had happened? It was an accident, plain and simple. I wasn't hurt—I was shaken by the experience, which was understandable. Moving before I was hurt was mere luck, something I *did* believe in.

With that settled, I finished my hair, glanced down at the ring and opened the bathroom door.

"Andrews."

Ryan, the boss from hell. No luck there.

"I'm leaving early today. Let's meet in fifteen minutes."

His tone suggested it should be no problem to reschedule the meeting. Creep. Fifteen minutes would give me barely enough time to get



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back to my desk, notify everyone about the meeting time change, make copies, and get to the conference room. All because Ryan didn't want to miss his 4 p.m. golf time. "All right. Have you contacted everyone about the changed meeting time?"

He sniffed as if to say the question was absurd. "You have your job, Andrews. I have mine. I don't notify people about meetings. That falls in your aegis."

Pretentious ass. I'd love to see some roofing fall on his aegis. Instead, I told him I'd meet him in the conference room in fifteen minutes.

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I heard voices murmuring as I approached the meeting room—not the kind of voice I'd heard outside the antique shop, thank goodness, but the soft sound of casual conversation. Silence descended as I entered the room. I didn't have to turn around to know Ryan had walked in behind me. The man strangled the life from a room simply by walking into it, something he seemed not to recognize.

He moved to sit in his usual place at the head of the table. I took the only seat available, the one to his right.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Thank you for agreeing to meet at the new time."

As if we had a choice.

"Erin will supply the handouts, and we'll move on to discussing the plans."

I was used to Ryan's attitude, but I still fought indignation over his suggestion that I was merely a secretary, a copy-center girl. I passed out my handouts and heard paper rustling as people reviewed the information and began turning pages. Once everyone else had a copy, I handed one to Ryan.

*He'll take credit if he can.*

I went from ready to weirded out in less than five seconds. As before, I knew I wasn't hearing a physical voice. It sounded strangely

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hollow. A quick glance showed everyone examining the papers—a sure sign no one besides me had heard it. I did a double-take when I turned to my right and noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

The ring was glowing again.

After a moment of confusion, I stood and directed everyone's attention to the first page of the handout. I launched into my presentation, secure in the knowledge of the research I'd done to prepare for this moment.

*Erin's done a wonderful job of compiling my data. It will be very helpful as I finish the project.*

I kept talking even as I heard Ryan's voice in my head. When I looked at him, it confirmed my suspicion. He hadn't said a word. I tucked my right hand behind my back, not wanting to risk anyone else catching a glimpse of the shining ring.

Somehow I got through the presentation and the inevitable questions that followed. As I was about to sit down, Ryan stood and spoke.

"Erin's done a wonderful job—"

Oh, my God. "Thank you, Ryan." As I spoke, I felt almost as if I was watching the scene, watching a play rather than being one of the principal actors. "Ryan's been very supportive to me as I worked on this project. As you may remember, I came up with this approach several months ago." My words were directed to the group, but my gaze remained on Ryan. "Next week we'll enter the implementation stage, and I will send a follow-up memo outlining the additional assistance I need."

Ryan said nothing, but his mouth fell open in surprise. As if realizing how stupid he looked, he closed his mouth abruptly and glared at me. I simply returned his dark look with a calm stare. When I continued to look at him, his gaze dropped and darted around the room before he sat back slowly in his chair.

I turned to face the rest of the room. "Any questions?"

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Compared to the earlier part of the day, the last few hours of work flew by uneventfully. At five, I left the office to pick up my niece Danielle. My sister had started a part-time job and asked me to pick up Danielle from her karate lessons. When I saw Danielle last week, she demonstrated a few moves. She had a mean-looking kick for a twelve-year-old.

After finding the studio without much trouble, I pulled into the parking lot. I half expected Danielle to run outside when she saw my car, but she didn't and the place looked pretty quiet. When I noticed several kids doing karate moves through the window, I realized I was a little early.

I spotted Danielle after a few seconds and watched her. Along with several other kids, she practiced kicks and punches. There was something sweet about it, about seeing a young girl this focused on what she was doing. That's Danielle for you—when she did something, she wanted to do it right. Her face was a little sweaty, and she bit her lower lip with each repetition.

After another moment, I realized she was mimicking the instructor, who stood on the left side of the room. Maybe I was prejudiced, but I thought she was one of the more skilled students. I watched her for a while before shifting my attention to the instructor.

I stopped thinking the second I saw him.

First, I was arrested by his movements—he performed each kick slowly at first, giving the kids an opportunity to imitate him. Then, he repeated the action in real-time. Each move was executed with a skill and grace that made it difficult for me to take my eyes off him.

Next, I noticed his body. I couldn't help it. He wore a simple white jacket and pants, with a black belt tied around his waist. As he moved, the jacket gaped open, offering glimpses of his chest. They weren't the muscles of a body-builder, but sculpted muscles that invited a woman to touch. Muscles that said he took care of his body and wasn't afraid to put it to work.

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Thinking of how he might put it to work nearly gave me hot flashes. Though it was cool outside, I turned on the car's air conditioning.

I'm not usually one to swoon over a beautiful face, but I couldn't get over the complete masculine beauty of this man. His blond hair fell a few inches past his shoulders and was pulled back from his lean face. He could have been a male model, but he was more muscled than any model I'd seen.

But I wanted to see his eyes.

I was out of the car and into the studio before I realized it. I smiled at the woman at the front desk who wore a karate uniform.

She stood and walked toward me. "May I help you?"

"I'm here to pick up my niece Danielle."

"Oh, yes. Your sister told me you would be coming. You are...?"

I understood and appreciated her caution. "Erin Andrews."

"If you'll wait here, she'll be out in a few minutes."

I didn't want to wait there. "Could I watch the last few minutes of her class?"

"Parents and guardians are not allowed to enter and disrupt the classes, but you're welcome to watch from the observation room."

I felt a sharp pang of disappointment. I'd been hoping to see Danielle's instructor up close, but I obediently followed the woman. She led the way to a small side room with a row of chairs and what appeared to be a two-way mirror. It was the next best thing to being inside the classroom.

I sat down in one of the chairs as the lesson began to wind down. The children had stopped doing repetitions and were instead jumping and shouting, "We'd love it," "You promised," and "Oh, please?"

The instructor only smiled. I was starting to wish I could turn up the air conditioning in here, too.

Another man entered the room. He was taller than Danielle's instructor and he wore a tank top and loose pants. "We did promise, Luke."

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"All right, all right." There was an element of impatience in the instructor's voice, but I suspected it was only for show. "Ben?"

The kids scrambled to the sides of the room, and within seconds I knew why. Luke gestured to Ben, and they returned to the center and bowed. What followed was a flurry of movement as Luke and Ben flew into motion. One struck as the other blocked, and the violent moves were smooth and fluid. I didn't want to blink for fear I would miss something, but the exchange of actions continued, leaving me as mesmerized as the kids in the room.

"He's wonderful, isn't he?"

I jumped at the woman's voice. I had forgotten she was standing behind me.

She laughed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you, although I'm not surprised you were caught up in him."

There were two men fighting, and Ben was perhaps the more attractive of the two. But I knew the assistant meant Luke when she referred to "him." I resented her comment—not because it wasn't true, but because it made me feel like I was one of a thousand women who'd had the same reaction to Luke.

Hell, I probably was.

The fight—or the dance, I wasn't sure which—continued for a few more minutes before the two men retreated and bowed again. Once the men stepped off the mats, the kids swarmed around them, and began a chorus of "Cool!"

I could only agree.

Luke smiled again, and I watched him as long as I dared after the kids started streaming out of the room. He picked up a towel and wiped his face with it. I wanted to keep watching him. His movements were smooth, almost hypnotic. And there was something else, something I couldn't put my finger on. I wanted to figure it out...

"Erin!" Danielle burst into the observation room.

"Hey there, kiddo." I stood, putting an arm around her and guiding her back to the lobby.

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"Did you see?"

Her enthusiasm tugged at my heart. "I saw. You did great, Danielle." I leaned down to kiss the top of her head as more kids ran through the lobby and outside.

"I figured out the kick."

"Yes, you did. You were terrific." When I looked up, Luke stood in the doorway of the classroom, watching Danielle and me. My heart stuttered as our eyes locked. *They're hazel*, I thought stupidly. His eyes were hazel. He still held the black towel I'd seen him use earlier.

He wasn't as tall as I'd thought. When I was watching from the observation room, I'd estimated him to be taller than six feet. Now I realized he was maybe five feet eleven. His presence was so intense it made him seem taller. And his muscular build didn't hurt either. My miscalculation didn't decrease my attraction, and I kept staring into his eyes.

He looked away first, turning his gaze to Danielle. "You did good today."

"Thanks." She pulled away from me to bow solemnly.

He bowed in return. "See you next week."

Danielle took my hand and began telling me about her day. Normally I enjoyed Danielle's excitement, but I was a little distracted. Still, I let her chatter, and we walked together toward the door.

When I turned back to the classroom, Luke was gone. I shrugged, trying not to be disappointed.

"Let's go." Danielle tugged my hand to pull me outside. "You said we could stop for ice cream."

I followed her without a word, still trying to process what had just happened. The ring had started glowing the moment I'd met Luke's eyes.

### Chapter Three

When I arrived home, there was a note on my door. I'd dropped off Danielle, and now I looked forward to a quiet evening. In fact, I needed a quiet evening—my system was on overload with the day's events, beginning with the large purchase of a ring and the small inconvenience of a pile of roofing almost falling on my head.

After everything I had experienced, I wasn't thrilled to see the note.

Several things rushed through my mind when I saw the sheet of paper taped to my door. It was probably an advertisement for a new hair salon. Or a change to the homeowner's association. If they wanted to raise rates again, I was moving out. My condo was okay, but I didn't like it as much as I thought I would. On the other hand, I'd lived here only three months; maybe I'd like it better once I got used to it. I took the note, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

I set my purse on the kitchen counter and wandered to the fridge. It was my Friday night ritual to decide whether I would make myself dinner or order out. I loved arriving home on a Friday afternoon. I liked the feeling of having nothing to do, with a full weekend ahead of me.

The ring was tucked safely in its case in my purse. I'd put it there after taking Danielle home, after it had stopped glowing. Who knew what it was doing now? Maybe a glass or two of wine was in order. I wanted to take a good look at the ring, but I had my priorities. Dinner first. Nothing in the fridge looked appetizing.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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Ordering out was a better option. Maybe the paper taped to the door was an ad for a new pizza parlor. I could go for pizza. After walking to the counter, I picked up the sheet of paper. It was small, maybe half a sheet of paper, folded in half again. I opened it.

*Heard you had a close call today. Happy Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>! Fancy footwork won't save you next time. Nor will a ring that doesn't belong to you. Return it or be prepared to face the consequences.*

The words blurred the longer I looked at the paper. This was a joke, right? I told myself it was a joke, but I crossed to the door to make sure I'd remembered to lock it. I had, but now I turned the deadbolt.

I dug in my purse for the jewelry case. I exhaled raggedly when I lifted the lid and saw the ring was still there. It wasn't glowing now. What the hell was going on with this ring? Snapping the case closed, I tossed it into the corner of the room before sitting on a chair and burying my face in my hands.

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It took me about an hour to calm down. I made myself some pasta and washed it down with a glass of merlot. I convinced myself the note thing was a prank—Friday the thirteenth, ha ha. Joke or not, I resolved to find out who had sent it and tell them exactly how unfunny it was. I'd read it again for clues, after pouring a second glass of merlot.

The good news was there weren't many suspects since it had to be someone who knew what happened outside the antique shop. Tomorrow I would return to the Laundromat and talk to the man who worked on the roof. I'd also question the woman who sold me the ring. She was the most likely to have written the note. Someone had probably come in after I did, asking for a ring like the one she sold me and prepared to pay twice what I had. In that case, the note would have been part of a scheme to get the ring back.



Tomorrow, I'd go back to the store and see how much she offered me for the ring.

I didn't want to return to Buried Treasures, whether I had the ring with me or not. And I didn't want to sell the ring back, even for twice the amount of money I'd paid for it. My plan was to confront the saleswoman, not give the ring back. If I ever chose to sell it, I'd find a buyer who hadn't tried to intimidate me. At the moment, however, I would do some research. Focusing on a plan of action also kept me from dwelling on the note.

I began with a search on the internet. "Buried Treasures" seemed like a logical starting point, but it resulted in page after page of search results. A quick scan of several links turned up nothing useful. I guess the store hadn't heard of online shopping.

My next search was "antique gold gemstone ring." A mistake, I realized, when it resulted in hundreds of listings for antique rings I could buy for a good price. *No, thanks. The one I have is enough trouble.* I tried other combinations including "stone" and "band" but still had more search results than I knew what to do with. Time to try a different approach.

On impulse, I entered "northern California antiques," and ran across this link and description:

***Aptus Artifacts***

*Specializes in authenticating wood, stone, and metal artifacts*

I clicked the link. The site was well designed, a sign of a business that cared about its image, a point in their favor. Aptus Artifacts bought and sold antiques as well as appraised them. It was a local business owned by an L Hunter. Geez. Why didn't people give their full names on business cards or websites? Was I really supposed to call and ask to speak to L?

I wrote down the phone number and address and decided to pay L Hunter and Aptus Artifacts a visit. Maybe L could tell me why someone else would want this ring.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I returned to the shopping center the next day. I'd passed the place where the roofing had almost fallen on me. There was no sign of the incident—the roofing was gone from the sidewalk and the work appeared to be complete. I entered the Laundromat and asked for the name of the company they'd hired to do the work. The answer? No company, just a friend of a friend of a friend. Did I want to leave a message?

No, I didn't, although it amused me to imagine it. *You almost killed me yesterday. Did you also leave me a threatening note?* "No, thank you. Never mind." I left the store, walking as far from the roof as I could manage and stay on the sidewalk. No point in taking any chances.

The antique shop was next. A handmade sign in the window announced it was open; I pulled the handle and walked inside.

I wasn't wearing the ring. I had it with me, tucked in the front pocket of my jeans, and I felt its warmth even though it wasn't in direct contact with my skin. Weird, but I had other things to deal with.

"Hello." It was the saleswoman I'd seen yesterday. Today she wore white, a long, flowing dress covering her from neck to ankle. "May I help you?"

I walked to the counter. "Do you remember me?"

Tilting her head, she examined my face. No recognition lit her eyes, and it was obvious she hadn't expected the question. If she was an actress, she was a damn good one. "You look a little familiar, but..."

"I was here yesterday."

"Oh." Her face resumed a polite shopkeeper expression. "Did you put something on hold?"

Oh, yeah. She was good. "No. Actually, I bought something."

Her eyes widened and she gripped her hands together. "Was there a problem?"

"No. I'm very pleased with my purchase."

"I'm glad." Her face relaxed into a smile. "Now, what can I help you with today?"

"You sold me a ring yesterday."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"A ring?" Her forehead creased. "Did you want to find something to go with it?"

Excellent idea. "I can take a look."

"Let's see." She moved behind the counter again and started riffling through the tray. "Remind me what it looked like. It was silver, right? I know I sold a silver ring."

I froze. "The ring I bought is gold."

"Gold? Are you sure? Perhaps you bought it earlier this week?"

"No. It was yesterday. I have the receipt right here." I opened the side compartment of my purse. "I..."

The receipt was gone.

My heart skittered when I went through my purse and saw the receipt wasn't there. Now what? "I must have left it in my car," I mumbled.

"Well, I'm sure we can find something else you'll like, although we're low on necklaces and bracelets right now. Let's see what I have." She put a tray on the counter. It was familiar; I remembered it from the previous day.

For the first time since entering the store, I met her gaze. Her feet hurt. She'd been out dancing last night and wasn't sure why she'd worn heels today.

I shook my head, startled by the strange direction of my thoughts.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Still shaking my head, I looked down at her feet. "Those shoes look uncomfortable," I managed.

She sighed. "They are. I wish I hadn't worn them after going dancing last night..."

Oh, my God. This was too bizarre. Forget about the plan—I had to get out of there. I turned to the door.

"Don't you want to look at the jewelry?"

"I have to go." I tucked my purse against my side and almost ran for the door. Thoughts tumbled through my head. How had I known about the woman's feet? It made no sense, and thinking about it was

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starting to make my head pound. I wanted the receipt, something logical and tangible. There would be a logical explanation for everything. The shoe thing was a lucky guess. The receipt was probably on the floor of the car. It had to be somewhere, right?

“Wait—” she called after me, but I left without looking back.

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I couldn’t find the receipt in my purse or in the car. All right, I left the receipt at home. No big deal. I wasn’t getting anywhere with the saleswoman anyway. I’d have to rethink my strategy with her.

In the meantime, I had another option. Opening my purse again, I saw the address and phone number of Aptus Artifacts. It was Saturday, and there was no guarantee they’d be open. Still, a phone call wouldn’t hurt. Pulling out my cell phone, I dialed the number and waited.

The phone was answered on the second ring. “Yeah.”

Not the most professional greeting...maybe I had the wrong number. “I’m trying to reach Aptus Artifacts.”

“You’ve reached it.”

A man of few words. Too bad Ryan didn’t share the trait. But I needed information, and this guy’s reticence was only frustrating. One or two more words might have been helpful.

“Uh, I’ve got something I’d like to know more about. I picked it up in an antique store.”

He sighed. “What’s the item?”

“It’s a ring.”

Pause. “What did the store tell you about it?” Progress. I’d managed to elicit a complete sentence. He had a nice, deep voice, one I thought I recognized but couldn’t quite place.

I thought back to the purchase. “Nothing. The saleswoman wasn’t very helpful.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Impatience was evident in his voice.

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That did it. "How the hell should I know? I'm not the antique expert. But I do have some advice for you, so listen up, L. If you don't want phone calls, don't list your phone number on your website. And don't make people beg for your help if you want repeat business."

My outburst earned a longer pause. "I'm sorry. You caught me at a bad time. I get a lot of people calling and wanting me to appraise their ring. Appraisals aren't what I do." He sounded apologetic.

I hadn't even considered having the ring appraised. I'd have to look into it. But first, I wanted any information I could get from the socially unskilled L. "I'm not looking for an appraisal. However, I think there's something odd about this ring, and I was hoping you could tell me about it."

"What does it look like?"

I took the ring out of my pocket and put it on my finger. The ring wasn't glowing now, one small mercy. "It's a gold band, about half an inch wide, with three square stones in the middle. One stone is purple, one orange, and one a swirl of colors."

He was silent so long I thought he'd hung up.

"Hello? L?"

"There are three stones? Do they circle the entire band or only one side of the ring?"

At least he was talking again. His silence had been disconcerting. "They cover one side. Does this mean you know something about it?"

"Maybe." He said the word quietly; I barely caught it. "Maybe. I need to take a look at it first. Should I meet you somewhere? Your home?"

My condo? Not an option. I still had no idea who the note writer was, and I wasn't taking any chances. "I've got your office address. I'll come to you. I can be there in twenty minutes. Will you be available?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. See you soon."

I was about to hang up when I heard him say, "Wait."

"What?"

"Drive safely." I heard a click as he hung up.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I closed my cell phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat. *Drive safely.* Huh. Well, it was good advice, I supposed as I pulled out of the parking lot. Traffic was heavy, and I waited impatiently behind a row of cars.

Within minutes, I was on the road and heading south. The address was in an area I didn't often visit. It would be interesting to meet L, and I was curious what he'd have to say about the ring. There probably wasn't much *to* say.

Even as I thought it, my brain froze. I could tell myself the ring was nothing special, but the truth was there was something unique and...amazing about it. Even if I disregarded the voice of warning and the moment of mind reading, the glowing itself was remarkable. It was shining on my hand right now. I glanced down at it to make sure. Yes, it was glowing.

When I returned my gaze to the road, two cars collided in front of me.

## Chapter Four

*Oh, hell.* For one instant, I thought I was dead. Then, I felt a strange sense of calm, the kind that accompanies a crisis when there's no time to panic. The scene in front of me moved as if in slow motion. A red car had passed me earlier and was now four cars ahead of me on the four-lane road. It drifted into the opposing lane, causing the first collision when it crashed into a minivan.

Seconds later, a white car slammed into the red one. The driver of the white car hadn't even had time to put on the brakes. The car in front of me braked and started spinning. I hit the brakes and swerved sharply to the right. What else could I do? I narrowly missed the spinning car and came within feet of barreling into the minivan. I pulled onto the side of the road, making sure I was well away from more oncoming vehicles.

I jumped out of my car to see if anyone needed help. A passenger in one of the cars had called 911. From what I could see, most injuries were minor, but I stayed to be a witness if one was needed. Once the ambulance arrived, I returned to my car, got in, and leaned back against the headrest.

I didn't know how many people had been hurt; I did know four cars had been damaged. All within feet of me.

*Drive safely.*

Shit.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I arrived at Aptus Artifacts more than an hour later than I'd initially anticipated. After giving a witness statement, I discovered the police had blocked the road. This meant taking a back route to the address, even though the area wasn't entirely familiar.

When I pulled up to the address, I thought I'd written it incorrectly. The only building within a block was a two-level converted warehouse. Despite L's claims of not appraising jewelry, I had expected his business to resemble Buried Treasures. No matter.

Was the whole building part of Aptus Artifacts? If so, it was bigger than I imagined. I got out of the car and walked to the main entrance. As I got closer, I saw the sign on the door indicating I was in the right place. I lifted my hand to knock.

The door swung open before my fist connected with the door. I found myself staring at a well-toned man wearing a blue turtleneck and jeans. His long blond hair was down around his face instead of tied back as it had been the day before.

L Hunter was Luke, my niece's karate instructor.

I hadn't seen this development coming. Nor had I expected to start shaking the second my eyes met Luke's. I knew why it happened—the events of the past two days, culminating in the discovery of Luke as L, had caught up with me.

"You're Erin?" He looked as surprised as I was.

I held out my right hand, ignoring the way it trembled. "Yes."

His hand engulfed mine, and he used it to pull me inside the door. "You okay? You look pale."

"I think I need to sit down. I was almost in a car accident on the way here."

"Shit." He acted quickly, sliding one hand behind my back and leading me through the warehouse. I was focused more on breathing than anything else, but I caught a glimpse of several metal racks; they held a variety of objects—pottery, coins, and weapons. By the time we reached a



## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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staircase at the other end of the building, I realized he operated a significant business.

He led me up the stairs and into a large living room. "I'll get you some water," he said, pushing me into a leather chair. I sat, feeling my entire body begin to tremble. When he left the room, I focused on breathing. Long breaths in, then out. I could have been killed—first from the roofing, then from the multi-car accident on the way here.

My hands had almost stopped shaking when Luke entered the room with a glass of water. He handed it to me without saying a word.

I gulped down the water, desperate for something to soothe my throat.

"I was going to ask if you're okay, but it's clear you're not."

I shook my head. "No." Leaning back in the chair, I closed my eyes and pressed the half-full glass of water against my forehead. Its coolness felt good, eased my building headache.

He sat in a chair next to me. "Tell me what happened."

I pulled the glass away from my face and set it down on the coffee table in front of me. "I told you. I was almost in a car accident on the way here. Two cars crashed in front of me; then, two more cars hit them."

"You're all right?"

"I'm not injured, if that's what you mean." I picked up the glass again and took another long swallow. "I managed to swerve away from the wrecks." I explained what had happened, beginning with the first collision.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt."

Yesterday, in the karate studio, I'd seen him from several feet away. Today we sat less than a yard from each other, and I couldn't keep from looking into his eyes. They were hazel, but looked bluer today because of the blue turtleneck he wore. His gaze met mine, but kept dropping down to my hands. What was up with the glances at my hands?

Then I remembered. The ring.

"Do you want any more water?" he asked, even as he reached for the glass.

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"Sure." The second he was out of sight, I took off the ring and put it in my pocket. It was an impulse, but I wanted to see what he would do when he saw it was no longer on my hand.

He was back in less than a minute and handed me the glass as he had before. When he resumed his seat, his gaze shifted again to my right hand, and I saw a flash of surprise before his eyes met mine.

We sat and stared at each other for several heartbeats. Finally, I took the ring out of my pocket and set it on the table. "You know something about this, don't you?"

His gaze stayed steady on my face another five seconds before his gaze dropped to the ring. "Where did you find it?"

"An antique shop, like I said on the phone."

"Which one?" He leaned forward almost imperceptibly.

"Buried Treasures. It's in the Woodson Shopping Center off Tenth." He still hadn't picked up the ring, and I gestured to it. "Don't you want to examine it?"

"Yes." But he didn't move.

Again, we stared at each other. "Well?"

"Would you hand it to me?"

Weird but whatever. "Fine." I grabbed the ring from the table and dropped it into his hand.

As I had done in the antique shop, Luke lifted his hand to examine the ring more carefully. I figured he'd pull out a loupe or consult a resource manual—books covered one entire wall in the room. Instead, he looked at it for maybe five seconds and set it down carefully on the coffee table.

He returned his gaze to me, one of such intensity I felt pinned by it. Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I leaned forward and picked up the ring in hopes of breaking his focus and the tension.

"Interesting ring you've got there." He settled back in his chair. "How much did it cost?"

Hell. He was about to tell me I'd been scammed. I should have known. "I thought you didn't do appraisals."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"I don't appraise antiques. I do appraise and authenticate *artifacts*." I clenched my fist around the ring. "What's the difference?"

"An antique is something you'd find in Grandma's closet or at an estate sale. Artifacts are what you see in a museum."

The explanation made sense, although I didn't get why he wanted to know how much I'd paid for an antique ring. "I see. I bought the ring for \$170."

He didn't say a word for a full twenty seconds. "You got a good deal," he finally said. His gaze followed my movement as I slipped the ring back in place on my finger. "I could get \$25,000 or more for the Ring of Custodia."

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"Twenty-five thou—" I choked before I could finish the word. Was he insane? "The Ring of Custodia? I've never heard of it, but this ring isn't worth \$25,000." I punctuated the comment by shaking my fist in the air. "It's only a ring."

"A ring rumored to have been forged by Antony in 37 B.C. for his lover, Cleopatra."

"Antony and Cleopatra?" I opened my fist to look at the ring again and was unsurprised to see it glowing. Its cold metal felt surprisingly warm in my hand, and I slipped it on my finger. "You've got to be kidding."

"No."

No argument. No explanation to try and persuade me to believe him. Only one word—*no*. The simple statement convinced me Luke was completely serious.

"The ring is believed to have protective powers."

Protective powers? The two words echoed in my mind as I had a sudden image of what would have happened yesterday if I hadn't stepped to the side when I walked from the antique store to my car. For

one second, I saw myself in a hospital room, hooked up to tubes and monitors.

I took a deep breath. Had I seen what would have happened if I hadn't been wearing the ring? No, the idea was crazy. My mind was screaming against the idea of a ring with reputed protective powers, a ring that might have played a part—even a small one—in saving my life. Twice, if I counted the car accident.

My heart couldn't completely dismiss the theory.

I led with my mind. "This ring cannot be two thousand years old. It would look a lot worse than this." I thought back to my limited knowledge of the star-crossed lovers. "And Cleopatra killed herself, if I remember right. Doesn't sound like the ring gave her much protection."

"She lost it about a year before her death, in 31 B.C., according to one source."

"You're an expert on ancient history?"

"You might say that."

I returned my gaze to the ring. Still glowing. How in the world could a ring glow like this? How could I believe everything Luke said was true? I didn't want to deal with it, *couldn't* deal with it. "I've never heard of any of this." And I was starting to feel nervous about being in the same room with a guy who thought I was wearing a \$25,000 ring. This was crazy. He was crazy. If I wasn't careful, I'd follow him to insanity. I stood. "I think I'd better go."

"Wait." He moved quickly, boxing me in against the wall between his arms before I reached the staircase.

I glanced at his arms—God, I could see the bulk of his muscles through his shirt—before lifting my gaze to his. "You're freaking me out, Luke." I hated the way my voice sounded, as if I were afraid.

"I'm sorry." But he didn't move away. "Look at me."

I closed my eyes, feeling torn between turning to face him and pushing him away. I was seriously tempted to go home, get in bed, and pull the covers over my head. Getting away from all this definitely appealed to me.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"Erin."

My eyes opened, although my attention was focused on his neck. His arms were still on either side of me.

"Look at me."

I looked up slowly until I was looking into his eyes, bluish-hazel eyes that held a hint of understanding in them.

"If this ring is what I think it is, it offers guidance about people as well as protection. Has it helped you know things about people? Things you couldn't have known otherwise?"

I thought about yesterday's meeting with Ryan, and how I'd heard his voice even before he'd said a word. I remembered what I'd sensed about the saleswoman at the antique shop—that her feet hurt because she'd gone dancing last night. Once again, my heart and mind wrestled with what conclusion to reach about this.

"Yes." My voice sounded strangely hoarse; I cleared it and spoke again. "Yes."

He leaned even closer. "Try this. Focus on the ring, then look at me. What does it tell you about me?"

I closed my eyes again, shifting my attention to the weight of the ring on my finger, its warm feel against my skin. I waited to hear a voice like I had before. I should hear Luke's voice the same way I'd heard Ryan's. Or maybe I'd get quick impressions as I had with the saleswoman.

Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes, looked directly into his...and still didn't hear anything except our mingled breathing.

I blinked. One second, I was looking into Luke's eyes. The next, I was seeing a series of freeze-frame images reminding me of strobe lights—snatches of images implying movement instead of showing it. Luke starred in all the images. First, he was fighting. I couldn't see who he was fighting, but it was no performance like I'd seen the day before in the studio. This was *real* fighting—cool, intense, and focused.

He was fighting for me.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I don't know why I reached this conclusion, but I knew it in the same way I knew about the saleswoman's sore feet. Somehow I knew Luke would fight for me.

Then he was kissing me. It took a moment to realize he wasn't actually kissing me—I was only watching him kiss me in another series of images. His mouth was warm on mine, and he brought one hand up to toy with my hair as he deepened the kiss. Heat spiraled in my belly and I felt my panties go damp.

I was totally turned on by a kiss that wasn't really happening.

I blinked again. In the next image sequence, we were no longer kissing. Luke was naked—hell, we were both naked—and I was sliding all over him. My hair fell around my face in a curtain that also obscured his features, but I knew it was him. One hand was in my hair again. The other moved down to touch my ass. I stifled a whimper at the succession of explicit images.

In one frame, I took his cock inside me.

Hoo-boy, if the real Luke was anything like one in these images, he was seriously ripped. Everywhere. I leaned heavily against the wall to keep from sinking to the floor.

"Erin?"

Luke's voice yanked me back to the moment. When I blinked again, I was looking into his eyes once more. His face was only inches away from mine.

"What did you see?"

No way was I answering the question. "What do you mean?"

"Your eyes moved as if you were...I don't know, reading or watching a movie."

"It wasn't a movie." But close.

He moved back at last, lowering his arms until I was no longer trapped between them. "What did the ring tell you?"

I swallowed and lowered my gaze. That he would fight for me and kiss me with equal intensity. That I wanted his cock inside me. That I still knew little about him. "That I can trust you." *For now.*

## **The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian**

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“Good.” Nodding slowly, he gestured back to the couch. “Come sit down. I’ll tell you what I know.”

## Chapter Five

"You said it started with Antony and Cleopatra." Back in the living room, I sat in the same chair I'd used before. It was a large chair, and I'd pulled up my legs to sit with them crossed beneath me. Luke had also returned to his chair. I could see the right side of his face clearly, but the other side was hidden in shadow.

"Yes. He was obsessed with her from the moment they met, though he married another woman for political reasons. In 37 B.C., Antony had a ring forged for Cleopatra on the occasion of their marriage."

Hold it. "You said he was married to another woman."

"He was."

"And he married Cleopatra anyway?"

"Yes. It was a political mistake, one that ultimately led to his downfall. But he loved her, and at some point, he took the ring to a priestess who imbued it with protective powers. The stones symbolize those powers—amber, amethyst, and eye agate. Amber wards off negativity. Amethyst symbolizes psychic gifts and knowledge. The eye agate represents a protective eye watching over the wearer. The ring is said to have protected Cleopatra more than once."

"Do you really believe in such a thing?" I realized I was rubbing the ring with my thumb, and moved my thumb away. "Gemstones with power to protect the person who wears the ring?"

"Do you?"



## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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What could I say in response? I'd worn the ring both times I avoided physical injury. It could be a coincidence; in fact, reason told me it was almost certainly coincidence. I was less certain what to call my impressions about other people, along with the strange slide show I'd had regarding Luke. I took the safe route by saying nothing.

"Antony believed it. Maybe his belief is the important part of the story."

"How do you know all this?" I hadn't been particularly interested in history during school. And I didn't follow the news much either. But this didn't seem like common knowledge.

"I have a degree in ancient history. I used to teach it at Woodson University."

"Oh. I guess you'd know."

He smiled faintly.

"You don't teach anymore?"

His smile vanished. "No."

Since it appeared to be a touchy topic, I changed the subject. "Okay, Cleopatra got the ring. What happened next? How did she lose it?"

"This is where the stories begin to contradict each other. Some say she left it behind accidentally, others report it was stolen. Either way, the ring vanished. Cleopatra and Antony were defeated in Actium by Octavian Caesar's forces. Within a year of this defeat, both lovers were dead."

Yeah, I knew the story hadn't ended happily. "And you think the ring in these accounts and this ring are the same one?"

"Yes."

"What happened after it was lost?"

"Nobody knows. I found a few oblique allusions to it—one in eighteenth-century France, another in nineteenth-century England. They refer either to Cleopatra's ring or the Ring of Custodia." He lifted his chin in a subtle gesture toward my hand. "Apparently, it crossed the ocean and somehow ended up here."

Could I really be wearing a ring once worn by Cleopatra? I couldn't remember if she was said to be beautiful, but I was aware of my own average looks. No one was willing to die for me. I shook my head. "If this ring has survived more than two thousand years, it should look older than this. Hell, would a ring this old even be intact?" I held out my right hand and allowed him to see the condition of the ring.

Instead of looking at the ring, he took my hand in his, linking fingers.

A current of attraction sparked between us. We sat in his living room for several seconds, with linked fingers before I pulled my hand free. "How do you explain it?"

He hesitated, as if pondering the same question I was: did I want him to explain the ring's well-preserved appearance...or the connection between us? His eyes met mine. "Explanations are important to you?"

"Of course. They help us make sense of the world. Not long ago, people still believed the world was flat."

That prompted a smile. "Granted. But science doesn't have answers for everything. Many things can't be explained."

I stretched out my legs. "I can't explain the principle of gravity, but I know someone can. Not being able to explain something is different from unexplainable."

"No. I mean, sometimes there is simply no explanation. Science proved the world was flat, but it can't prove everything."

"An interesting statement for an academic to make."

"Former academic. And my field is ancient history, not science. But you're missing the point."

"What point? I'm not even sure what we're talking about. Ghosts? The Bermuda Triangle? We may not know what the explanation is, but I'm willing to bet there is one. We simply haven't discovered the answer yet. There's a simple explanation for the fact that this ring doesn't look old enough to have been worn by Cleopatra—it's not the same ring."

"The nineteenth-century source suggests the ring's protective properties also reduce its rate of decay."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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How convenient. "I don't believe that."

He nodded. "Let's talk about what you do believe. You said you've felt guidance about people. From what I've read, the individual stones on the Ring of Custodia glow depending on the circumstances. If a situation calls for clarity, for instance, the amethyst would glow."

"It doesn't work like..." Was I really going to say this? "That's not the way it works for me." I turned away.

"Tell me how it works for you." He said it as calmly as a friend might say *tell me about your day*. On one level, his casual attitude baffled me. How could anyone be matter of fact about this? On another level, his straightforward statement calmed me. Centered me. It was crazy, but just being around Luke calmed me.

"All right." I told him everything, starting with the near-miss incident with the roofing. He listened, saying nothing when I went on to describe the meeting with Ryan and today's incident with the saleswoman. I left out the note. I was pretty sure I could trust Luke, but I decided to wait before sharing that piece of information. I felt oddly relieved once I'd finished.

I no longer felt alone.

He leaned back in his chair. "My God. It's true."

I had no idea what he meant. "What?"

"The ring." He gestured to it. "It allows you to channel the seventh sense."

"The what? Don't tell me I'm about to channel the dead."

His expression turned pensive. "I don't think so."

"Hell, Luke. I was kidding." Obviously he wasn't. "Okay, explain the seventh sense." Once I realized what I'd said, I pressed my hands to my temple and shook my head. "I can't believe I said that. 'Explain the seventh sense.' That's got to be an oxymoron."

He laughed. "Contradictory or not, I'll try to explain. The theory is the seventh sense is the body's subconscious ability to detect and fight illness. Like when you get a cold, your body senses it—" He hit his fist against his open palm. "—and fights it."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"Okay." I frowned. "But I haven't been sick."

"No. The seventh sense is working on another level. The ring helps you tap into a subconscious ability to detect danger and receive protection. How else would you explain hearing a voice that shields you from harm?"

I couldn't explain it—that was the problem.

When I looked at the ring, it was glowing again.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stayed for lunch. Luke prepared a simple meal of sandwiches and chips. Sitting on tall bar stools, we ate in the kitchen at a long counter.

"Drinks." He walked to the fridge and opened the door. "I've got water and Coke." I heard him shifting things around in the fridge. "And beer. Which do you want?"

"Do you have Diet Coke?"

He stood, turning to give me an exasperated look. "There's something you can't explain. Why do people like diet drinks?"

I held back a laugh. "I'll take that as a no. Water or Coke is fine."

He brought our drinks to the counter and set one in front of me.

I unscrewed the cap on the bottle and heard the trademark fizz.

"Thanks for lunch."

"You're welcome."

We ate in silence for a while until Luke said, "I think we should go back to Buried Treasures."

I set down my sandwich. "Why?"

"I'm curious about how the ring got there. Maybe they can tell us."

I shrugged. "Okay. They'll be closed by the time we finish eating and drive out there. They don't open again until Monday."

"We'll go on Monday if that's all right with you."

"Fine." I hesitated. "I can meet you during my lunch hour, I guess."

He frowned. "What? Your schedule's packed? You don't want to go?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"No, neither of those things." There was no delicate way to ask this. "I don't understand why you're interested."

"You called me. Are you saying you don't want my help?"

"You gave me what I asked for—you told me the history of the ring. I'm not sure what's left for you to do. How much do I owe you for your time, anyway?"

"I'll send you a bill."

He wouldn't, I was sure. "Luke, I mean it. I want to know why you're offering to help, why you want to get involved."

He picked up our plates and carried them to the dishwasher. I recognized his actions for what they were—a delaying tactic. It was an effective one.

"Let's say I'm interested in the ring and leave it at that."

I thought about the note. Did Luke orchestrate all this to get the ring for himself?

*No.*

A definitive response. But it didn't mean he didn't want the ring or wouldn't try to take it from me. "I don't think I want to sell it."

His gaze shifted. When I followed the look, I saw my left hand was covering the ring as if to protect it.

"I don't think I want to buy it."

Could he be more cryptic? "All right. I'm going to trust you're telling the truth." And now it was time to trust him with information. "There's something else you should know. I received a note last night." I explained how it had been left on my door and what it had said.

"Do you have it with you?" He looked stern now.

"No. I left it at home."

"And it was on the outside of the door. No one entered your home?"

Hell. As if I needed to be more worried than I was already. "No." With luck, I could convince myself. "I'm sure no one did. It was probably a prank."

"Are you trying to convince me or you?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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Good question. Slumping on the stool, I remembered the note and how much it had scared me.

"Erin." He held out his hand. "I'll help you."

I looked up and our eyes locked. I hadn't known Luke long, but I trusted him. I wanted his help. For that reason, I took his hand and held it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. We'll find out who wrote the note."

"I figured it was the saleswoman at Buried Treasures."

"All the more reason to go there on Monday. Know any good places around there for lunch?"

The question made me think about lunch with Carly the previous day, what she'd said about Tom.

"Erin?"

"Huh?"

"Lunch? Got any ideas about where you want to meet? I didn't realize it was a complicated question."

"It isn't. Sorry. I was just thinking..."

"About?"

"I had lunch with a friend yesterday. She mentioned an upcoming exhibit on Roman artifacts."

"Yeah, at Woodson University. I know about it."

"Is the Ring of Custodia supposed to be part of the exhibit?"

"No. In fact, most scholars of the period believe the ring is a myth—an object that doesn't exist."

"But you think they're wrong."

"Yes. And after today, I'm sure of it." He smiled, and there was a light in his eyes that made it even harder to look away from them.

"Well. I'm not convinced." *Yet.* I let out a long breath.

"You haven't been researching the ring as long as I have." He took a step toward me, while I wondered how long he'd been studying the ring. His eyes looked blue. "You fascinate me."

Oh, my God. "What do you mean?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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He smiled and brought up a hand to touch my cheek softly, with one finger.

I shivered.

"You say you're not convinced the ring is two thousand years old. Or if it allows you to tap into the seventh sense. Yet you want to keep it. You're protective of it. I wish you could see how you look at it, how you shield it. You like explanations—can you explain this to me?"

I opened my mouth to speak...and didn't say a word. I couldn't explain it. I'd spent money on the ring, which gave me a financial investment. But money wasn't the reason for my actions, and I wasn't going to lie about it, even to myself. I'd never felt an attachment like this before with anything I owned, let alone a piece of jewelry I'd owned for one day.

I'd also never felt an attraction like the one I felt for Luke. He'd barely touched me—a wisp of a finger across my cheek—but I felt the touch down to my bones, to the core of me. Who was he, really? A man I'd just met, and I felt a connection with him in the same way I did with lifelong friends. I couldn't explain this either.

He seemed to understand my dilemma and looked at me, eyes filled with understanding. "I know a few people at the university," he said, letting me off the hook for now. "I should be able to arrange to see the exhibit tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? I thought it didn't open until Monday."

"Like I said, I have connections. We'll take a look."

"All right." I gave him my phone number and address. "Tomorrow morning?"

"I'd prefer after noon."

I smiled. "You like to sleep in?"

"No. It's Sunday. Church is early."

Wait a minute. "You go to church?" Once I said it, I wanted to cover my mouth with my hand. I hadn't intended to sound skeptical. And his religious beliefs were none of my business.

"You're surprised?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"Well—" I didn't quite know how to put it. "Yes. You believe in protective rings and ghosts—"

"Did I say I believe in ghosts?" But he smiled.

"—and I'm not sure what else. I didn't think someone who believes in mystical rings would believe in organized religion."

"Why not?" He gestured for me to continue when I hesitated. "It's okay, I won't be offended."

I shrugged. "I don't know." I thought about a couple of friends—one sought inspiration from tarot cards and astrology and had no use for religion. Another friend took the opposite approach. "They seem contradictory to me."

"There's an old proverb—all truth springs from one source."

Hmm. "So God, rings with protective powers, and ghosts are the truth?"

"They are to me." He walked me down the stairs and to the front door of the warehouse. "I'll call once I've made arrangements."

\* \* \* \* \*

*They are to me.*

Luke's words lingered in my mind as I drove home. The trip took longer than I expected, but I was taking defensive driving to an extreme. I wasn't about to take any chances.

I envied him a little. He seemed secure in what he believed, assured of his truth. I'd often said I didn't believe in something I didn't see, but I hadn't given the matter much thought, actually. My parents weren't devout or believing people, and they'd raised me in their image. I hadn't questioned it.

I questioned it now. I couldn't deny some very strange things happened once I started wearing the ring. There was no doubt the roofing tiles had fallen, that Ryan had tried to undermine me, and I had almost been in a terrible car accident. Those were things I could see.



## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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The voice was another matter. I couldn't explain where it was coming from—it was more than intuition.

I approached my condo warily and was relieved not to see a note on my door. I unlocked it and let myself in, hearing the clock strike 5 p.m. as I locked the door behind me. I felt completely exhausted. I wanted to spend time thinking about what I'd learned and about my attraction to Luke, but analysis would have to wait until I'd taken a nap. I fell face down on the couch and slipped gratefully into sleep.

## Chapter Six

I woke hours later when the phone rang. Feeling groggy, I stumbled up from the couch and reached for the phone. "'lo?"

"Erin."

*Luke.* Hearing his voice woke me in a hurry. "Hi."

Pause. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I was in bed." On the couch. Maybe I wasn't as awake as I'd thought.

"Really?" The word was long and slow, as if he was imagining me in bed. Hell, he probably was. "Did I wake you?"

"No." When he didn't say anything, I continued. "Okay, yes—but don't worry about it. I was napping and needed to get up. What's the plan? I guess you reached your contact."

"Yes. Miranda will meet us on campus, and she or her assistant will take us through the exhibit."

"Who's Miranda?"

"A former colleague at Woodson University. She's still with the history department. She can get us inside."

"You're friends?" I was fishing. I couldn't help it.

Long pause. "Of a sort."

I felt sick to my stomach. "Are...are you dating her?"

"No."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I hoped my sigh of relief wasn't too obvious. "And you stopped working there last year?"

"Yes."

His curt tone told me there was a story there, but I didn't want to push it. "And you think she'll be able to help?"

"Maybe. We'll talk to her. I'll pick you up around 1 p.m. and we'll go up to campus."

"All right."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, I found a note taped on my door. The message was straightforward and short.

*Stay away from him.*

Since the *him* was unnamed, I couldn't say for sure who I was supposed to stay away from. I was between men at the moment and hadn't dated in a few months. I didn't think the note referred to one of my exes. That left Luke—I couldn't imagine who else it would mean.

Well, hell. Now I had someone who was not only mad about the ring, but wanted me to stay away from Luke. It was disconcerting to realize someone was watching me. How had someone known I'd spent time with him?

Luke was scheduled to pick me up in a few hours to go to campus. Was I supposed to tell him to get out of my life? *No*. I didn't need a mystical voice or seventh sense to tell me I wouldn't walk away from Luke. Note or no note, it wasn't going to happen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke arrived right on time. At his knock, I opened the door and admired the way he looked in black pants and a gray long-sleeve shirt. It made his eyes appear lighter. I locked the door behind me and we walked to his jeep.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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He held the passenger door open and waited for me to sit down before he walked around to the driver's side. I handed him the note without comment before he could start the ignition.

"What's this?" He opened the paper before I could answer. His head jerked up and his gaze met mine. "Shit. Where did you get this?"

"It was on my door this morning."

"Did any of your neighbors see who put it there?"

"I don't know." I hadn't thought to check with my neighbors. Truth was, I kept to myself for the most part and didn't have much interaction with other condo owners. "I'll ask around." It was worth a try.

He put the keys in the ignition but didn't start the car. I could see he wanted to ask me something, but I had no idea what.

"Luke?"

"Are you seeing anyone? Who's the 'he' you're supposed to stay away from?"

I almost smiled. "I'm not seeing anyone. You're the only 'he' I can think of." I felt my cheeks heat as I realized how the words could be interpreted. Hell. "I mean I don't know of any other men in my life it could be, not that you're the only man I think about." Even if it was true. Still, that didn't sound right either. Where was a piece of roofing when I needed one? If the ring wanted to be helpful, maybe it could arrange for a tile to fall into my mouth. *Shut up, Erin.*

Luke smiled and leaned toward me. "I know what you mean. There's no one else."

And somehow, I knew Luke would be it for a while. Still, I was feeling overheated. "Mind if I roll down the window?"

"Go ahead." He laughed and started the engine.

As he drove, I wished I'd thought to put my hair in a ponytail. It was going to be seriously windblown by the time we arrived on campus. Oh well. I stopped worrying and allowed myself to enjoy the slight breeze in the air and the gorgeous man sitting next to me.

The gorgeous man gave me a quick glance before returning his attention to the road. "You have the ring?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"Yes. It's in my pocket."

"Good. I think you should keep it there for now. I don't want Miranda to see it."

"Why not?"

"I didn't tell her about the ring." His glance slid over to me as if he wondered how I might react.

"Oh." What else should I say? I had no idea why he hadn't told Miranda about it. "Why are we going to see her if we're not telling her about the ring?"

"Trust me, Erin."

My internal debate on the subject was short. "I do." I looked out the window, admiring the vibrant colors of the autumn leaves. "You know Miranda. I'll let you decide how much to tell her."

He must have sensed my hesitation. "But?"

"Since I don't know her, I need your help. Is there something you're not telling me about her? About you? This is your territory, and I need your help to make sure I don't go into the situation blind."

He said nothing for a few miles. I could feel the tension building through the silence. There was definitely something he needed to tell me. I waited.

"Miranda knows about the Ring of Custodia—what she calls the myth of Custodia." He maneuvered the jeep into the exit lane.

"She's one of the scholars who dismiss the story?"

"Yes. She's convinced the ring doesn't exist. She believes the stories are based on a real ring worn by Cleopatra, although it didn't have protective powers. The stories were merely a way to make Romans fear Cleopatra more than they already did."

Luke's tone made it clear their diverging opinions were a source of contention. "You worked together."

"Sometimes."

I wanted to understand his relationship with Miranda, but I was starting to feel like I had arrived late for a movie and couldn't follow the story. "Has she read the sources you mentioned about the ring?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"One or two. But the Renaissance is her main field of study, and she never shared my interest in the ring." He entered one of the campus parking lots.

"Okay. Anything else I should know?"

He pulled into a parking stall close to a building and turned off the ignition. "She used to be my girlfriend."

Used to be? Questions were swirling in my head. I knew the who, but the when, where, how and why remained a mystery. How long ago were they together? What led to the breakup? How would she react when she saw Luke with another woman—namely, me? After experiencing two narrow misses in the past two days, I didn't want to go for a third.

Then, I remembered the note I'd tucked in my purse when I rolled down the window of the jeep. *Stay away from him.* I grabbed Luke's wrist before he could get out of the car. "Is it possible she's the one who wrote the note?"

"No."

He hadn't hesitated to answer, which was a good sign. I paused, considering. "Would you recognize her handwriting?"

"Yes."

This came as a relief. I didn't want the note writer to be someone Luke knew, because I wasn't sure how he'd deal with it, but I wasn't ruling her out yet. I'd reserve judgment until I met her.

\* \* \* \* \*

If I felt like an awkward colt when compared to Carly, it was nothing compared to the way I felt next to Miranda. The first word I thought of when I saw her was porcelain. She was a perfect porcelain doll, with luxurious black hair framing her soft, fine features. Her eyes were a pretty, almost unreal shade of blue. She wore a blue silk suit the same color of her eyes, perfectly accessorized with silver hoop earrings and a coordinating necklace. Her shoes alone—blue to match the suit—showed more sophistication than I had in my entire closet.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I knew immediately she was still in love with Luke.

"It's lovely to see you," she said, greeting him with a kiss on the cheek.

His whole body tensed as if preparing to draw away from her. "Let me introduce you. Miranda, this is Erin."

By the time he finished the introduction, she had turned to face me. Oh, yes. This woman loved Luke and wasn't at all subtle about it. She spent a moment sizing me up, gauging the competition before dismissing me as inconsequential. I looked down at myself to see if I'd made an obvious fashion *faux pas*. Hmm, not that I could see. If I had to guess, I'd say my jeans and sweater weren't up to snuff, and there was no getting around the fact that my hair rivaled Medusa's, thanks to the ride in the jeep.

Could Miranda have written the note?

She smiled warmly, as if she hadn't dismissed me moments before. "Nice to meet you, Erin."

Yes, I decided. She could have written it. "You too."

She returned her focus to Luke, and her gaze clung to his. "Your phone call intrigued me. You haven't shown much interest lately in the museum. Are you reconsidering?"

"No." He took a small step to his right, which meant he was standing closer to me. It was a move—and a rejection of her words—small enough no one would notice unless she looked very closely.

Like Miranda was. Like I was.

Her lips turned down in a frown. Hell, even her pout was sophisticated. "I was hoping you'd return to teaching after your leave of absence."

Leave of absence? I thought he'd quit entirely.

"You still have two months to make a final decision," she continued. "I hope you'll consider it." When Luke said nothing, she shrugged delicately. "Well, since you're not here about coming back, how can I help you?"

*I'll help you with anything.*

Geez, I thought I had to be wearing the ring to hear voices. Guess I was wrong.

"Jenna didn't tell you? I wanted to take a look at the exhibit."

"Really?" Her voice suggested both skepticism and hope. It was easy to see she was hoping his interest would result in his return to academia. "Let me contact Jenna, and we'll see what we can work out." She turned and entered her office, where I heard her pick up the phone.

"Jenna is Miranda's assistant," Luke told me while we waited.

Miranda returned moments later. "She'll be here in a minute. I'll let her escort you through the exhibit."

Her response was surprising. I figured she'd seize any opportunity to spend time with Luke.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm going to get a drink of water." He stepped out of the room, and I decided I'd hurt him later for leaving me with Miranda.

Her gaze shifted to mine once Luke left the room. It was like she couldn't see anything else when he was around. I couldn't blame her for it, though. He was compelling. "How long have you known Luke?"

I ignored the possessive tone. "Not long." I wasn't about to admit I'd known him only one day. Two if I counted seeing him at the studio.

"He hasn't mentioned you." She sat at her desk, crossing her legs in an elegant gesture.

"Really?" I leaned my arm against the back of a chair. "Do you talk very often?"

Bingo. It had apparently been the right question. Color rose in her face and told me what she wouldn't—she and Luke didn't see or talk to each other much anymore.

"I don't see him as much as I used to when he worked here, of course."

I had to give her credit; she'd recovered smoothly.

"I used to see him almost everyday and got to know him very well. He's a brilliant scholar, perfect for this university."



## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I didn't know how long she'd known Luke. I'd known him one day. Any objective bystander would have said she knew him better than I did. But I realized something with sudden clarity—he might be perfect for this work, but this work wasn't perfect for him. I remembered how animated he was when discussing artifacts. *That* Luke was completely different from the one who'd been here, in this room.

Academia was not for him.

I didn't know if I was right, but the thought made me feel better. "Yes, he's very good at what he does."

She flushed deeper, and I realized how suggestive the words sounded. Did she really think I would rub it in her face if I were his lover? Is that what she'd have done? Little did she know I had no direct knowledge of Luke's sexual prowess. Maybe she knew I'd like to.

"Hey."

I turned as another woman entered the room. She was tall and slim, with long red hair and brown eyes. Her outfit, a peach sweater set with cream trousers, wasn't as elegant as Miranda's, but it made her look approachable. I was glad someone else had joined us.

Miranda smiled, and I thought I saw a hint of relief in her expression. Apparently she was glad for the interruption too. "Jenna. This is Erin, a...friend of Luke's. They'd like to see the exhibit."

Jenna walked toward us. "You're interested in Roman artifacts?"

*I am now.* "Yes."

"What's your favorite period?"

*Uh-oh.*

"Don't quiz her, Jenna." Luke entered into the room. "I've been telling her a little about Julius Caesar, but she's not a Roman scholar."

"Neither are you."

Luke laughed. I didn't think the joke was that funny, but the tension in the room eased considerably. The awkwardness between Luke and Miranda didn't exist with him and Jenna.

"Sorry," Jenna said with a smile. "I'm a little enthusiastic about history."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"No problem." I returned her smile. Her excitement was infectious.

"If you're ready, I'll give you the grand tour."

When Miranda didn't move, Luke asked, "You're not coming with us?"

"No." Her smile looked tight, tighter than it had been before.

"Since I'm here, I have one or two things to do. I'll catch up with you if I can. If not, I hope you'll stop by on your way out and let me know what you think."

Jenna led the way, and Luke walked a little behind me, with one hand on my lower back. His hand wasn't touching my skin, but I enjoyed the warmth of it nonetheless.

I felt Miranda's gaze on my back and didn't relax until Luke and I were out of sight.

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The museum was dark when we approached it. Jenna kept up a running monologue about the different pieces on display. I tried to keep up with everything she said at first, but as Luke had pointed out, I was no Roman scholar. I managed to follow Jenna's description of inscriptions and coins, but once she talked about sculptures, I became lost in a barrage of names from Artemis to Augustus.

We hadn't even entered the museum yet.

I gave up. Luke would tell me later what was relevant, and I'd ask questions as we went.

"What about jewelry?"

Luke's voice brought me back to the conversation. I became aware of the ring in the pocket of my jeans; I'd almost forgotten it was there.

"One part of the exhibit is dedicated to jewelry." Jenna nodded to a security guard before unlocking the door. She waited until Luke and I entered the building before locking the door behind us. "Most are gold, although there are some silver and bronze pieces."

"Any with stones?"

She pointed down a long corridor and signaled for us to follow her. "Stones were pretty common in jewelry of the time, Luke. You know that. I'll point them out to you."

"Great. Any rings?" he asked casually.

The reaction he received was anything but casual. Jenna stopped walking and grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop. "Luke." She shook his arm. "None of us have heard from you in months. Then, out of the blue, you call and want to preview an exhibit. *And* you're asking about rings with gemstones. This isn't about the Ring of Custodia, is it? Tell me you're not still looking for it."

Luke pulled his arm out of Jenna's grasp. "I'm not looking for it."

"Don't go there." She stepped closer until she was almost in his face. "I'm serious."

"I know you are."

I watched them, and it was like watching a tennis ball fly back and forth between competitors. Jenna looked ruffled, more upset than angry. Luke's face showed no emotion. I couldn't begin to guess what he was thinking.

She turned and took three steps before spinning around to face him again. "If you start this up again, you won't be asked back once your leave ends. You know it. Why are you pushing?"

"Yes, I know." He stood his ground. "But it doesn't matter. I'm not coming back."

"Miranda says you are."

"She's wrong. Teaching isn't what I do any more. I'm not coming back to this."

"Or to her?" Jenna tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear. "She still loves you."

He shook his head and strode down the hall.

"Wait, I'm sorry."

Luke stopped walking.

"I shouldn't have brought it up. But she does, and you know it." She seemed to remember I was there and had heard the whole

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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conversation. "I'm sorry," she repeated, this time glancing toward me. "I won't say another word about it. But don't start with the Ring of Custodia again."

"I'm not looking for the ring."

Their eyes met, and I wondered what silent message passed between them. Finally, she nodded. "All right." She continued down the corridor, and we followed her in silence. The mood had shifted dramatically. I found myself wishing she would resume her monologue about Roman history, but she said nothing.

At last, she stopped in front of two wide doors. She pressed a sequence of numbers on a security system in the hallway, waited for a beep, and opened the doors.

"Here we are." She stepped aside to let us enter. When I heard a click, faint lights illuminated the room as well as the connecting rooms ahead of us. "Would you like me to play tour guide?"

"I think we can manage." He took my hand and walked to the first display case.

"I have to stay with you." But she walked to a corner of the room, as if to stay out of our way.

I let Luke set the pace. Artifacts were his business, and I wanted him to see as much as he wanted to see. While he examined a case with Roman coins, I focused on the feeling of his hand in mine, our fingers interlocking.

*He's not going back to Miranda.*

I nearly jumped when I heard Jenna's voice in my head. I was startled anew when I realized I had heard her thought even though I wasn't wearing the ring. I'd heard Miranda's voice earlier but had thought it a fluke.

We worked our way through three rooms. I wasn't a history buff, but I thought some of the artifacts were interesting.

"The jewelry's in the next room."

I knew it even before Jenna spoke. I didn't know how I knew — maybe it was connected to the seventh sense. Whatever it was, it didn't

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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even seem weird anymore. Perhaps it would later, but for the moment I treasured the feeling of peace.

Luke pulled his hand free of mine and turned to Jenna, who had been silently following us. "Any objection to turning on the interior lights in the room ahead?"

"No," she said after a hesitation. "I'm not sure which switches they are, but I know they're in here." She walked toward a curtain.

"Be right back." Luke stepped away to join her.

My peaceful feeling fled the moment Luke walked away. It was ridiculous—he was only going to turn on the lights. No big deal. It'd take him two seconds. Even though I could have walked into the next room and started looking at the jewelry, I waited, shivering by the entrance to the next room.

The temperature felt as if it had dropped at least ten degrees, although it had seemed cool before. Maybe some of the items in the next room needed to be preserved in lower temperatures.

A light switched on in the room ahead, inviting me to walk forward. I took one step and froze. Something was wrong here.

That's when a hand swung out to hit me.

## Chapter Seven

There wasn't time to run. I closed my eyes, lifted my hands to shield my face, and braced myself for the pain to come. The sound of a fist hitting flesh made me jump, but I wasn't hurt. The sound was distinctive enough I was sure I'd feel something. I didn't, and when I opened my eyes, I knew why.

Luke stood in front of me, blocking the first blow and the ones that followed. I'd seen him fight before—with Ben, two days earlier, in a beautiful dance of moves and countermoves.

If the flying kicks and punches I saw now were beautiful, it was in a dark way. The man who had struck first was several inches taller, though less muscled, than Luke and wore a mask covering his face. This was no casual show of abilities. It was war, with each man determined to win. I didn't know what the intruder wanted, but Luke's goal was obvious.

He wanted to protect me.

Deciding it was best to stay out of the way, I backed up and looked around the room for something I could use as a weapon. Luke was more than a match for his opponent, but the guy might not be alone. And what if he was armed? I didn't see anything useable, and I began to panic. The longer the fight continued, the bigger the chance of Luke getting hurt.

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Where was Jenna? She knew the museum better than I did—she'd be able to find a weapon or call the police. I turned and saw her standing frozen inside the room, watching the fight.

"Call security, damn it!" I vented all my anger about the situation on her.

My shout made her jump, and she sprinted back the way we'd come.

I turned back to see if I could do anything to help Luke—*please, let him be all right*—and saw the intruder running through a side door.

I ran to Luke. "Should we go after him?"

"No. We can't be sure he's alone. He might want us to follow him, which would allow an accomplice to come in and take what he wants. We need to stay and protect the exhibit." He barely sounded out of breath.

"Are you all right?" I reached out to him.

"Fine." He grabbed my hand, tugging me closer.

A second later I was in his arms, wrapping my arms tightly around him. "You sure?" My voice was muffled against his neck.

"Erin." He eased me away just enough to look into my eyes. "I'm fine. What about you?"

"He didn't hurt me, didn't even touch me."

"Good." He pulled me toward him again, and we held each other for I don't know how long. It was the closest we'd been aside from the freeze-frame thing I'd seen yesterday, which didn't count. Or mostly didn't count, since the memory of it aroused me. Despite our attraction for each other—and I could feel his growing by the second—having his arms around me made me feel secure.

It felt good to hold on to him.

A cacophony of approaching voices made us move apart. He grabbed me before I could step completely away from him, moving me to shield him a little. "Stay there."

Understanding why he wanted me to block the view, I smiled and took a small step forward, swaying my hips in the process.

"Erin," he growled, giving my butt a light swat. "You're not helping."

I shot an innocent smile over my shoulder.

Jenna entered the doorway, followed by Miranda, several campus security guards, and two police officers. Luke explained to one of the officers what had happened. When he described how the trespasser left, another officer went out the door with a security guard. They asked Luke to go with them, which I suspected was done in part to ensure I was questioned separately.

I made my statement, sparse as it was. I couldn't tell them much because I didn't know what the intruder wanted—none of us did.

Luke returned as I was finishing my report of what happened. He started to walk toward me but was intercepted by Jenna.

"I'm sorry. You were attacked, and I did nothing. You saved the exhibit, and all I did was stand there."

He glanced toward me and gave a small shrug. "You called the police."

"Only after Erin told me to." She wiped at tears on her face. "You could have been hurt."

"I wasn't. Give yourself a break and forget about it."

She nodded, but pursed her lips as if trying not to cry harder. "All right. But we're increasing security. This won't happen again."

Miranda joined them. "Are you sure you're all right?" She reached out to stroke his arm until her gaze flew past him to me. Her hand fell back to her side. "It sounded like a serious fight. We should have someone take a look at you."

"I'm fine." The tone was tight, indicating it wasn't up for discussion. When Miranda looked at me again, he turned to follow her gaze. He smiled, and the action transformed his face from annoyance to warmth.

My heart skipped at the sheer beauty of his smile.

"We'll leave the rest to you." He walked to me and took my hand. We left the museum without looking back.



## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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He didn't drive me home. When we passed the street leading to my neighborhood, I realized we were going straight to his place. We hadn't spoken since leaving the museum and didn't say anything until we got back to his place.

I waited until we entered Luke's living room. "Why do you think he attacked us?"

His jaw clenched. "Us? He tried to hit *you*. I got in the way."

I sank into the couch and wrapped my arms around myself. "Is it cold in here? This place is so big, I bet it's tough to keep it at the right temperature."

While I spoke, he went to a closet and took out a small blanket. Bending down, he wrapped it around my shoulders.

"Thank you." I didn't look at him. I *wouldn't* look at him.

He crouched in front of me until our faces were level. "I'm sorry." He took my hand. "I shouldn't have said it like that. We don't know his motives, but it sure seemed as if he wanted to get to you."

"Jenna and Miranda think he was there to steal some of the exhibit pieces."

"I know." He rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand.

"They could be right, couldn't they? You said you didn't know his motives. Maybe he planned to take something and I was in the way."

"Maybe."

"But you don't think so."

"No, I don't. For one thing, if he wanted to steal from the exhibit, all he had to do was wait for us to leave. But he didn't wait." He shifted to sit next to me on the couch. "There's another reason. I believe in Cleopatra's ring. I don't believe it's a coincidence that someone wanted to hurt you once the ring came into your hands. I just don't buy it."

*The ring.* I'd sort of been hoping to forget it. I didn't want there to be a connection between the attack and the ring. I knew someone wanted

the ring—the notes I’d received made that clear. But deep down, I wanted to dismiss the intruder’s motives as an attack on the museum, and therefore unrelated to me.

I sighed, pulling the ring out of my pocket and putting it on my finger. “I could learn to hate this thing.” But I didn’t want to give it up, either. Weird as it was, I was in this until the end. I only hoped we’d figure out who was writing the notes.

“You knew about the exhibit,” he prompted. “How did you learn about it?”

“My friend Carly told me about it. Her boyfriend, Tom, helps at the museum...” Uh oh.

“And?”

“Carly told me Tom’s been acting weird lately—distracted and short tempered. She said it started when he first learned about the exhibit.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

He sat for a moment, silent. “He’s connected with the exhibit, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Will he be at tomorrow’s opening?”

“Yes. So will Carly.”

“We’ll go too. I want to meet him. And you should see if wearing the ring helps you figure out if he’s behind the notes and the attack.”

“Won’t someone recognize the ring if I wear it?”

“Not if you turn it to make the stones face your palm. Like this.”

He took my hand and twisted the ring as he said. His fingers stroked up and down my palm. I met his eyes, which looked pale blue today. They also held my gaze, with passion evident in them.

I liked the way passion looked on him. But I needed to ask him something. “Why doesn’t Jenna want you to research the Ring of Custodia?”

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Luke's hands slipped away from mine. I was surprised by how much it disappointed me. "It's a long story." He headed for the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

I realized suddenly he used the kitchen as an avoidance tactic. Another piece of the puzzle named Luke fell into place. "Sure. Water sounds good." When he brought me a bottle, I added, "We've got time."

He opened his own bottle before sitting down, this time across from me. It made me wonder if he didn't want to get too close. "It's a long, boring story."

I took a drink. "I don't bore easily. Why don't you start with your leave of absence?"

"Shit," he muttered and stood to pace. He said nothing more for some time as he walked back and forth. It was clear he didn't want to talk about this.

He stopped walking abruptly. "I was at the university for a few years. Teaching, publishing articles. I stayed until last year."

Then what? I wasn't sure what to say when he paused. I said nothing, hoping he would continue.

"I started working on an article about Cleopatra's ring. The head of humanities learned about it and objected."

"Why? It's an interesting topic, seems as if it would generate a lot of attention and interest in the university."

He nodded. "Right. And there's the problem. He...let's say encouraged me to focus the article on the stories about the ring and what those stories indicated about Roman and Egyptian society. But that's not what I'd planned to do. It's not what I wanted to do. Anyone could write the kind of article he preferred. I wanted to write about what the ring was said to do."

"And when you explained?"

He smiled tightly. "As I said, he tried to talk me out of it by saying it would bring bad publicity to the university in general and the humanities department in particular. When I told him to wait and read

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the article before reaching a decision, he said he wasn't interested in a topic unless it was based on serious scholarship."

Ouch. I knew enough about Luke's professionalism and pride to know the comment must have hurt. "Do you have tenure?"

"No. I would have come up for tenure this year."

"And? What happened?"

"He offered me a one-year paid leave of absence to consider my priorities. His words. I took it. There was no reason I shouldn't," he said as if he needed to defend himself to me. "A year gave me time to do a lot of research."

"Miranda seems to think you're going back." I held my breath, waiting for his answer.

He shook his head. "No. I founded Aptus Artifacts five years ago. While I was teaching, it was a part-time thing, but it's moved front and center now. I'm not going back."

I exhaled, feeling a small sense of satisfaction that my hunch on the issue was right. But I still had questions. "What's your interest in the ring?"

He responded by taking a long drink.

Hell. "Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

"It's not as bad as you think."

"I won't know until you tell me."

He set down the bottle with care and precision. "I heard about the Ring of Custodia about ten years ago. I was intrigued by Roman warfare, and I came across the story about the ring's role in the battle of Actium." His gaze met mine. "From the first time I read about the ring, I felt connected to it—despite the fact that I hadn't seen it, not even a picture. I'd read one description of it."

I tucked my right hand between my knees to keep from looking at the ring.

"I started tracking references to the ring, and I found a few other sources. I kept looking—it was one reason why I pursued a degree in ancient studies."

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It sounded like an obsession. Or a... "Finding the ring became a quest?"

"I wouldn't call it a quest. It didn't dominate my life. But I wanted to find it. Researching the ring was like looking for a piece of...for something I didn't know was missing. I was still looking." He glanced up. "And you called."

I knew he'd had a personal interest in the ring. I hadn't known the extent of his interest. Whatever Luke said, this sounded like a quest to me. And since he'd found the ring, it was a successful quest, right? Looks like the note writer wasn't the only one interested in getting his hands on the ring, although Luke never said he expected me to hand it over to him. Or take it from me.

How strange that this object of fascination for so many people was a small piece of metal and stone. When it wasn't glowing, the ring looked like any pretty jewelry—an ornament, nothing more. I desperately wanted to believe it was only a unique trinket. But I couldn't.

Although I'd never thought myself as much of a believer in anything even a little mystical, I believed the ring on my finger was the Ring of Custodia. I believed in the seventh sense.

I'd begun to believe it the moment thirty pounds of roofing fell on the sidewalk next to me.

Oddly enough, I felt better once I admitted it to myself. I stopped feeling torn between following my heart or my head. Since I *knew* this was Cleopatra's ring, I was still making decisions with my head. I needed to use it to decide where to go from here.

Luke watched me. He'd stopped moving and simply stared at me as if to see what I'd say or do next. He reached for my empty bottle. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know what to think." Yes, I'd reached one decision. Now I had to figure out whether to keep trusting Luke, this man who had been searching for the ring for ten years. Yesterday I had decided to trust him, at least to a point.

Today he had fought to keep me safe.

But was he protecting the ring or me? Why was he helping me?  
What did he want?

He nodded, as if he'd expected my reply. "Your mind's racing over the speed limit. Want to tell me what's on your mind? I can't help if I don't know what's wrong."

"How do you know my mind is racing?"

He touched the bridge of my nose. "This spot becomes furrowed when you're trying to work something out." Leaning in, he pressed his lips on the spot. "It's cute."

"Cute?" I considered the idea...and realized my skin was furrowing. I felt him smile against my forehead before he pulled away.

"That's what I said."

Sitting this close to him was a bit distracting. I found myself wanting to shift to sit in his lap but stayed where I was. Sometimes acting—or in this case, not acting—with my head sucked.

"What every woman wants. To be cute."

He laughed. "Don't knock it." His eyes warmed, making my skin begin to tingle at the look in them.

If he was this attracted, maybe cute wasn't such a bad thing. And I'd gotten off track.

"Go ahead and tell me."

I frowned. "What makes you think I have something to tell you?"

"You have an expressive face."

The way he said it made me wonder if he was putting together the puzzle of Erin the way I was piecing together the puzzle of Luke. "You'll have to tell me sometime why you're able to read my face this easily. For now, though, let's talk about the ring."

"Go ahead."

"You've been looking for it for years—and now you've found it." Our eyes met, and I knew he realized I'd come to a decision on the issue. "What I want to know is what you're planning to do. Are you hoping I'll sell it to you? Give it to you?"

"No to both."

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"How do I know you won't take it?" He could. I'd seen him fight. If he wanted the ring, he could get it from me in seconds.

"I can't answer the question for you. I can tell you I won't take it, but it's up to you whether you'll believe me."

I wanted to believe him. Looking into his eyes—they looked more gray than blue, I was certain of only one thing. I wanted to believe him, to trust him. "All right."

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I stayed at Luke's place all afternoon. After taking an hour-long catnap in his guest room, I returned to the living room and found him lying on the sofa, watching a movie.

"What are you watching?" I stood by the sofa transfixed by the image of two women fighting in the midst of thousands of swirling leaves.

"*Hero*." He shifted from a lying to sitting position to make room for me.

I sat next to him, close enough for our thighs to touch. "This is amazing," I said as the scene continued.

"Yeah."

Leaning into him, I shoved my worries out of mind and focused on the rest of the movie. When the credits began, I put my hand on his leg and felt his muscles tense. I eased my grip, and brushed my fingers up and down his thigh in soft, teasing strokes.

"I've never seen this movie before," I said, after we'd watched much of the credits in silence. "How long have you been doing martial arts?"

"Since I was eighteen."

"Have I thanked you for protecting me from the guy at the museum? I don't want to think about what I would have done if you hadn't been there." I kissed his cheek. "You weren't hurt, right?"

"I'm fine. And you're welcome. I'm glad I was there."

"Can you teach me to do it?"

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He looked confused. "Do what?"

"Fight. You teach karate, right?"

"Karate isn't about fighting."

"I want to learn," I persisted.

"I'll teach you. But we'll start with something else and work up to karate." He stood up, turning off the TV with the remote before pulling me down the hallway. He led me to a makeshift gym with standard equipment, weights, and a wide area I guessed was where he practiced karate. Blue mats covered the floor. "Let's get started."

*Something else* turned out to be instruction in balance and lessons in escaping from different holds.

I wiggled against him. "I...want to...do karate."

"You just can't remember how to get out of this hold," he said near my ear.

He was right. I couldn't remember, and the proximity of our bodies wasn't helping matters. I stood in front of him, arms at my side, while his arms wrapped around me and rested directly under my breasts. My struggling wasn't getting me out of his arms—it was only pushing my breasts against his forearms and making me feel out of breath.

"You're wrong. I do remember." I didn't, but I didn't want him to know it.

"So?" I felt his chest move as if he were trying not to laugh.

"What's your next move?"

Hell. I wasn't sure what the move was supposed to be, but I wanted to turn around and push him against the wall. With only a few short tugs, I could get his pants off and my pants off and then I'd wrap my legs around him and sink onto his cock...

His arms tightened a fraction. "You sure you know what to do?"

Oh, yeah. I knew what to do, and the dampness of my panties signaled how ready I was to do it.

"Are you hoping I'll get bored and let you go?"

No, not even close. "Yes, it's part of my plan to distract you from whatever you're planning to do."



"It's not working," he muttered, and I felt his dick swell against me.

Maybe I could use this. He had my upper body immobilized. Now I'd see what I could do with the rest. I wiggled again, this time doing my best to press against him.

"Nice try." He tightened his arms again.

Okay, that hadn't worked. I tried to ease my arms out of reach and realized it was hopeless. *Use your head*. But I was so distracted by Luke that I couldn't have located my head if I had a map and directions.

"Think about it, Erin. If my arms are around you, what does that mean?"

I was pretty sure I knew what it meant. That was the problem.

"You can't move your arms, right?"

"Right."

"What can you move?" His arms loosened, just a little.

"What?" I looked down. Oh, my legs. *Right*, the instep. "Oh. I would step on your instep."

"Don't simply step on it. Stomp it, hard. It's got to hurt if you want to make the person let go." Luke dropped his arms and pulled away.

"Follow it up with an elbow to the face once the grip loosens."

"I'm not sure if I can do that."

"It's hard now because you know me, and you know I don't want to hurt you. You could do it if you had to—if you were grabbed by a stranger or someone who meant you harm."

I doubted it, but I nodded.

"It'll come with practice, but let's stop for now."

I nodded again.

He paused in the middle of reaching for his bottled water. "You're pretty quiet. Were you afraid when I held you?"

"No. I don't fear you." I didn't think about the words before I said them, but they were true. I didn't fear him. What I felt was poles apart from fear, and there was only one thing to do. I took his face in my hands, pulled him against me, and kissed him.

## Chapter Eight

I initiated the kiss, but Luke took over almost immediately. He kept the kiss slow with light, teasing nips followed by quick retreats, until I was desperate to feel his tongue inside my mouth. My lips parted, inviting him to enter, but he held back and kept his actions gentle. The brush of his mouth on mine was soft, making me aware of each sensation until my lips felt ultra-sensitive and I was desperate for a deeper touch.

Aching with need, I slid my hands up his chest, over his shoulders, until I gripped his hair in my hands. I used my hold on his hair to pull him toward me. A moment later, I felt the wall against my back, and I knew he'd shifted me and I hadn't even realized it.

His body pinned me to the wall, but I was a willing prisoner. I cried out when his tongue plunged into my mouth. Our tongues dueled with firm strokes that sent pleasure throughout my body. My hands slid down his sides to grip his hips. I wanted to feel the firmness of his cock between my legs, so I brought him closer and—*yes*.

I felt him, the heavy weight of him, hard and alive against me. I wrapped one leg around his hips to get as close as I could without climbing into his body. Then I ground my hips against his and heard him groan. It made me want to do it again, this time without the barrier of clothes. Why were we wearing clothes, anyway? I wanted to see him naked. I wanted to wrap my legs around him when nothing was between us.

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I wanted him to take me against the wall.

“God,” he muttered before kissing me again. I stood with one leg around him, the pressure of his body the only thing keeping me from sagging to the floor. I was on sensory overload and we still had our clothes on. What would it be like when we took them off, and I could finally feel his skin on mine?

I wasn’t sure I’d survive the pleasure, but I was willing to risk it. I rubbed against him, remembering the images I’d seen of us together, making love. We hadn’t been against the wall, but I didn’t care. I’d take him—and let him take me—anywhere. Would he look the way I’d seen him in the images? It was no wonder we were this good together. The images from the ring had been great foreplay...

Images. The ring. Hell.

I wanted Luke more than I could remember wanting anyone. Ever. But I froze, suddenly terrified about why I wanted him as much as I did. He was interesting and gorgeous, and I enjoyed being around him. But would I feel this way if we’d met at a party or on a blind date? If I was willing to believe the ring had unexplainable powers, was it really such a stretch to wonder if it was affecting my feelings about Luke?

*Hell.*

Luke was kissing my neck now, and my arms were wrapped around him. My body was revved and ready to go. His was too. Why couldn’t I lose myself in this, in what was between us? We were consenting adults who wanted each other. I wanted him with a desperation I wasn’t completely comfortable with.

Desire wasn’t the problem—I was. Or the ring was. I wasn’t sure which, and I wanted to make sure my feelings were genuine before I got in over my head. Although tempted to lose myself in the moment, I pressed one hand against his chest.

He pulled away and looked into my eyes. “What is it?”

I didn’t want to be a tease, but I had to back away. “I’m sorry.” I pulled my arms back until they fell off his shoulders and back to my sides. “I think I’m more freaked out by what happened today than I thought.”

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Concern filled his eyes. "Hey." He stroked my hair before brushing it over my shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

I was such an ass.

He pulled me toward him in an embrace I might have called comforting if I hadn't felt his cock, still large and erect, against my stomach.

I wasn't only an ass; I was a *complete* ass. Holding me like this couldn't be comfortable for him, but he was concerned for me, wanted to comfort me.

He patted my back in a slow and gentle rhythm. "You'll be okay."

I would have felt better if he'd been angry or upset at being thwarted. Instead, he was...kind. It was almost more than I could stand. *You'll be okay*. I didn't feel okay, but I wanted to believe him. I buried my face in his neck.

"Erin."

Tucked safely in his arms and feeling angry with myself, I let a few tears fall.

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Luke wanted me to stay at his place, but I needed time alone. I tried to talk him out of following me to my condo, but he said he wanted to be sure there weren't any notes waiting. There were none, much to our mutual surprise. After checking out my condo to make sure no one was waiting, he left when I agreed to lock the door behind him and meet him the next day.

The second the door shut behind him, I wanted to call him back inside. Hmm. I was used to having him around, that's all. I could be by myself. In fact, I liked time to myself. I had plenty of ways to occupy my time without depending on someone else.

Within five minutes, I reached for the phone.

Carly answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

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Uh oh. Her voice sounded tremulous, which usually meant bad news on the relationship front. "Carly, it's Erin."

"Oh. Just a minute." I heard a click as she set down the phone, then a sound as if she were blowing her nose. "I'm back. Hi. How'd your meeting go?"

"My meeting?"

"With evil Ryan?"

Oh, that meeting. With everything that happened since Friday, I'd nearly forgotten about it. "Better than I expected, actually. But how are you?"

My question resulted in a wave of sobs.

"Carly. What's wrong?"

"It's...it's...Tom." More weeping.

I'd figured as much. "Oh, no. Did you break up?"

"No." She broke off to blow her nose again. "He says he loves me."

"Uh..." This was a problem? "Isn't this a good thing?"

"Not when he won't talk to me. I confronted him about his phone calls and why he seems distracted when he's with me."

"And?"

"He says he loves me but he won't tell me who calls him. He says it's about the museum and some Roman artifact that could boost his career."

*Some Roman artifact? Shit.*

She sniffled. "Do you think he's having an affair?"

"I don't know. What if I come to the exhibit tomorrow night to see how he acts toward you?" And to see if he seemed like the type to write threatening notes.

"Would you? I could really use another opinion."

"I'll be there."

"Thanks." She sounded a little better already. "I'm going to lie down for a while now. My head hurts."

"Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow night." I hung up the phone, wondering what Carly's boyfriend knew about the ring.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I didn't go to work on Monday, but took the day off instead. Luke was meeting me at Buried Treasures, and I didn't know how much time we'd spend there. My mind on tonight's exhibit, I decided work was a distraction I didn't need. Good thing I had plenty of vacation days I could use.

After picking up some dry cleaning, I pulled up outside Buried Treasures. Luke was waiting for me in the parking lot.

"What's in the bag?" He gestured to an opaque garment bag hanging in my car.

"My dress for tonight."

Interest sparked in his eyes. "What does it look like?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

"What color is it?" He took my hand and we walked toward the door together.

I laughed. "Wait and see."

The shop was as I remembered it, except it was brighter inside today. The curtains were open to let in the midday sun.

"Hello."

A different woman greeted us instead of the red-haired woman who had sold me the ring. The surprise left me unsure how to proceed. "Hi." My gaze wandered around the room as if looking for a place to settle.

Luke squeezed my hand, a gesture of support I needed.

"What can I help you find?" The woman appeared to be in her fifties and wore her gray-streaked brown hair in a prim bun at the nape of her neck.

"I was hoping to talk to the woman who was here last week." Luke and I exchanged glances. "She was here on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning."

She frowned. "I'm sorry to hear it. She no longer works here."

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One more thing to surprise me. "Oh. She said she was new."

"She was." Her back straightened.

Luke smiled at the woman in a way that would have made the bones in my legs evaporate if he'd directed the smile at me. "I hope she didn't have a family emergency."

The woman smiled in return, although the smile was almost too thin to qualify as one. "Nothing like..." Her body tensed as she remembered we were strangers. "I'm sorry. I'm not at liberty to tell you why she left."

*She was fired.*

I'd been examining the jewelry cases when I heard the voice. I jumped slightly, lifting my gaze to meet hers.

"I'd be happy to help you." Her gaze skimmed over me before returning to Luke. I couldn't blame her there.

"Are you the owner?" Luke asked.

"No, but I've worked here several years. But if you'd like to talk to the owner, she works Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays."

"That won't be necessary." I felt Luke's gaze shift to me. "I think you can help us." He gestured to me. "We were hoping you might be able to tell us about a ring she bought here last week."

I pulled my hand out of my jacket pocket and held it out, giving the saleswoman a chance to see it.

She pulled out a pair of glasses and put them on. "Hmm. May I?" When I nodded, she reached out, taking my fingers to bring the ring closer. "It is a lovely piece. However, I don't recognize it. I'm sorry. Did you want to sell it?"

"No," I said quickly.

Her brow wrinkled. "How may I help you?"

I cleared my throat. "I was hoping to find out more about who sold it to you. Or where you purchased it. I should have asked last week, but didn't think of it."

"Why do you want to know?" She crossed her arms.

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I opened my mouth, not at all sure what I was going to say, when Luke saved the day.

"Once I saw it, I wanted to find more pieces like it." He leaned in and kissed the side of my forehead. "I want to find a complete set for Erin."

"Yes. I love this ring, and I hoped you'd have matching pieces." I tried for a casual tone but wasn't sure I succeeded.

"Do you keep notes on your jewelry?" Luke asked.

"We do with some items. As I said, I don't recognize this ring, but..." She strode to the back room and was out of sight for several seconds, before returning with a small box. "Let's start with finding the receipt. You didn't happen to bring it with you?"

"No." I still hadn't found it. "Sorry."

"I should be able to locate our copy. When did you say you purchased it?"

"On Friday. Friday afternoon."

Luke stood behind me, with one arm around my shoulders.

She pursed her lips as she flipped through several receipts. Next, she pulled out an invoice and handed it to me. "Does this look familiar?"

I took it. The sheet said only *miscellaneous jewelry*: \$170. The word made me smile. *Miscellaneous* was an accurate description of the ring.

"Yes, this is what I paid. It's probably the right one."

"I'm afraid this description doesn't give me much to go on. Since there's no other documentation attached to the receipt, I'm not sure I can help you. The ring doesn't look familiar."

"Would you mind looking at it again?" Luke pulled away from me to lean against the counter and smile.

I didn't blame the woman for smiling back at him with an adoring look in her eyes. I felt my own heart trip. Luke's smile should be registered as a dangerous weapon.

Color rose up her cheeks. "Of course." She turned and looked at me expectantly.

This time, I removed the ring from my hand and gave it to her.



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She took it with the careful touch of someone accustomed to handling antiques. "Oh. This is a lovely piece."

I leaned forward.

"I'd say it's a few hundred years old at least."

*Try a few thousand.*

"Other than that..." She handed the ring back to me. "I can't say."

Can't say or doesn't know? I looked into her eyes, hoping for answers, and heard nothing.

"Thank you." Luke took my hand again, shifting my attention back to him as he pulled me outside.

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"The woman who sold me the ring doesn't work there anymore." I walked with Luke to my car. "Does this seem odd to you?"

"Yes."

"I'm pretty sure the woman who sold me the ring was fired."

He stopped walking. "How do you know?"

I shrugged, unsure how to say it. "I heard the woman's voice saying the other one had been fired."

"You heard a voice?"

"In my head, like before." I started walking again. "I don't know why, though. I wonder if it's connected."

"Let's assume everything is connected unless we find proof it isn't."

It wasn't my usual approach to life, but under the circumstances it was better to be cautious. "What did you think of the saleswoman? Did you trust her?" We reached my car, and I dug in my purse for my keys.

"I haven't decided. But I know you trusted her."

My hand stilled. "How do you know? I don't even know if I trust her. How can I trust someone I barely know?"

His expression blanked.

The words hung between us, and I wished I'd bit my tongue off before I'd asked the question. It wasn't the same with Luke. Despite our

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short acquaintance, I knew him. I didn't know everything about him, but I knew *him*. And this knowledge made all the difference.

I reached out to him. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I—"

"Forget it." He moved his arm out of reach. "All I meant is you trust her on some level or you never would have handed her the ring."

Dear God. My keys slipped out of my hand and onto the street. He was right. Maybe my trust was on a subconscious level, but it was still a measure of trust. I hadn't sensed danger or a threat from her; therefore, I'd handed her the ring—willingly—without hesitation, without giving it a thought.

"You hadn't realized it?"

I shook my head slowly, and felt my curls swing with the movement. His hand came up to tug one curl lightly before smoothing my hair. When our eyes met, I knew I was in serious trouble. I enjoyed being with him. I'd missed him last night. While I valued my privacy, my condo had seemed empty.

Luke and I had settled into a strange limbo once I'd pulled away from him. It may have been a sensible move, but the holding pattern was driving me crazy. Did I really believe the ring had enough influence to affect my feelings? It hadn't before. And I trusted Luke. If he asked me to let him hold the ring, I'd let him.

I'd give it to him without hesitating.

"Your mind is racing again."

If he was right, it was time for him to catch up. "I was thinking..." I lifted his hand and kissed it. "How long would it take to get to your place?"

He scooped up my keys and unlocked my car door. "Race you."

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I followed Luke to the warehouse. I'd seen how fast he moved when he was fighting. He moved just as quickly to get me in bed. When we arrived, he pulled me out of my car, and guided me through the

ground floor area of the warehouse to get to the second floor. I tripped on the first stair.

"Sorry," he growled, before pressing me against the wall of the stairs and kissing me.

I didn't blame him for rushing me—I wanted this as much as he did. Even if I had been annoyed, it was impossible to speak when his mouth covered mine. We stood, kissing on the stairs for several seconds, before he pulled away, reached for my hand, and led me the rest of the way up.

We went through the living area, past the kitchen, and down a long hallway to his bedroom. As we walked, I realized how much I liked his place. It felt comfortable. Then we were in the bedroom. Skylights allowed the sun to stream into the room and created a spotlight effect on the bed.

"Cool skylights." Feeling suddenly nervous, I shifted and pulled my hand away.

"I like natural light."

"It's nice." And not surprising when I thought about it. Luke was a man who disliked artifice. It was only natural he'd prefer things and people who were...well, natural. Our eyes met—his were bluish-brown today—and I couldn't look away from him. Looking at him was like watching an eclipse that prevented you from seeing everything else. It wasn't because he blocked the view, but because it was impossible to look away from such male beauty. "You're nice," I added and felt foolish about the awkward compliment.

He didn't seem to mind. "You're beautiful."

I remembered what I'd seen when I looked in a mirror this morning, and I knew I didn't look much better now. My hair, still in its awkward growing-out stage, hung in corkscrew curls around my face. Lack of sleep from the night before had resulted in shadows under my eyes. And at my best, I'd never been especially curvy, something I didn't usually think about until I was about to get naked with someone. Like now.

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With these imperfections flooding my mind, beautiful wasn't the word I'd use to describe my appearance. Even so, I knew Luke wasn't lying. None of my supposed flaws mattered when I looked into his eyes.

He thought I was beautiful.

All the anxiety I'd been feeling dissipated as if it had never existed. For the moment, at least, it no longer did. Being with him made me happy, and I wanted to share the emotion with him and experience more. I leapt into his arms and pressed kisses against his neck.

He laughed at my exuberance before sliding his hand down my arm. Once my hand was in his, he pulled me against him. He was still smiling when our lips met. We settled for short, nipping tastes at first as we explored each other's lips until he teased my mouth open with his tongue.

Leaning against him, I let my tongue tangle with his. When my legs began to feel weak, I braced my hands on his arms. The feel of his hard biceps under my hands made me gasp. I appreciated a good body as much as the next person, but I was surprised by how turned on I was by his muscle tone. I wondered fleetingly if I would be this attracted to him when we were both flabby and gray.

Yes.

I gasped again when I heard the voice, and tucked away the information to be considered later. Even if it was true, that time wasn't now, and I didn't want to be in any other place at any other time. Here and now were all that mattered, and now heat coiled below my belly as Luke continued his sensual assault of my mouth.

Skin. I wanted to feel his skin. Shoving my hands under his untucked shirt, I ran them over his chest until they zeroed in on his nipples.

He sucked in air at the first brush of my fingers over the small, tight buds. His kiss grew more demanding as I began to lift his shirt. We broke apart long enough for me to pull the shirt over his head. That's when I saw the bruises.

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Hell. *Bruises* was an understatement for the mottled spots covering his right arm. Other marks mottled his chest. *Damn it.*

He pulled the shirt out of my hand and tossed it to the floor. When he tried to yank me back toward him, I eased away to examine the dark bruises on his arms.

"Erin..."

I ran a finger over the marks, careful not to apply any pressure. "These look painful. How did you get them?" But I knew. Yes, I knew.

"Forget it."

His dismissive response convinced me I was right. "This happened at the museum, during the fight." He'd used his right arm to block the first blow at the museum, the punch that would have struck me.

"Yeah. Don't worry about it. It's an occupational hazard with martial arts. You train, you fight, you get bruised and you feel sore. It happens."

*Hell.* Could I be any more *unobservant*? "You're sore?" I backed away and let my gaze run over his body as if I'd be able to see where it hurt.

"Quit it. I'm fine." His hands slid to my hips.

"If a bruised arm and chest is fine, how bad do the injuries have to be before it's okay to worry? Damn it, Luke. Why didn't you say something?"

"The bruises don't hurt much. But if you're concerned, there is something you can do to make it up to me."

"What?" Maybe I could give him a massage. Or rub soothing cream on his arm. Or—

His hands tightened on my hips, and he pulled me firmly against him. When our hips collided, and I felt his thick, hard cock, I knew one part of him felt just fine.

He kissed me. "If you want to help, give me your undivided attention." He ground his hips into mine to punctuate the statement.

*Men.* "Has anyone ever said you have a one-track mind?"

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"So?" He raised an eyebrow, an unspoken gesture—*I'm a guy; I can't help it.*

I laughed. "All right, all right. I'll give you some attention." I kissed the center of his chest, letting my lips linger, enjoying the taste of his skin. I kissed my way to the bruises on his chest and his upper arms. I used my kisses to say what he didn't want me to say in words: *Thank you for being there, for protecting me. Thank you for being with me now.*

At some point, he cupped my face in his hands to bring our faces level and kiss me again. I forgot about the exhibit opening, I forgot about the bruises. I even forgot about the ring. We broke apart long enough for me to remove my shirt.

I'd consciously or subconsciously selected underwear designed for seduction. My bra was pale blue, so sheer Luke could see through it. He seemed to like what he saw, judging by the intense focus of his gaze. His hazel eyes appeared almost blue...no, they *were* blue, I corrected, when he lifted his gaze to meet mine.

He reached for my pants.

"No. Let me." Brushing his hands away, I shucked my socks and shoes. Next I unbuttoned the top button of my jeans and slowly lowered the zipper to reveal the pale blue panties. Watching him watch me was a hugely arousing, and I swiveled my hips in a smooth motion before pushing my pants down my legs. They slid with an audible sound, and his gaze followed as the jeans fell to the floor.

While I teased one bra strap off my shoulder, he made quick work of the rest of his clothes, removing them with smooth, economic movements. His cock was at half mast, jutting toward me. By the time my second bra strap fell, Luke had himself in hand. He slid his hand from base to tip, and I saw a hint of pre-come on the head of his penis. His thumb moved as if to spread the moisture over the tip of his cock.

I felt myself go damp just by watching the small movement of his thumb. *I wanted to be the one to do that.*

"Come here," he said, as if he'd heard my thought.

I'd been holding the cups of my bra in place to keep it from falling. Now I let go, not caring where the bra landed, and walked toward him, stopping when my breasts pressed against one side of his chest.

His hand covered mine and returned to the base of his dick. Our hands moved together in a long, firm stroke. Before he could do it, I lifted my thumb to slide the warm moisture of his pre-come over the tip of his cock. I slid my hand back and squeezed.

*"Erin."*

Seconds later, he pulled me to sit on the edge of the bed. I still held his fully erect cock, and realized if I weren't wearing panties, I could take him inside me simply by hopping in his lap. Time to shed the panties, fast.

I wanted to feel every inch of him inside me.

He pulled me on top of him, kissing me ravenously, as if our lips had been parted for months instead of moments. His arms tightened around me, one hand resting on my hip and the other on my lower back.

I lifted a hand to stroke his hair. I didn't usually like long hair on a guy, but it suited Luke. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sensations of my mouth against his, my breasts pressed against his chest.

As he teased my lips open with his tongue, his fingers toyed with the elastic waistband of my panties before slipping under the elastic to brush my skin. I shivered when his light touch slid around my hip before stroking my ass. His touch was more magical than any mystical ring could be.

I arched against him. "Help me...get this off."

"I'll help you get off." His smile widened when I growled in response, but he helped tug off my panties. *Finally.*

He rolled until I lay under him, and began nibbling my chin and my neck until his tongue slid down my neck in one long stroke. When I felt his cock slide between my thighs at the same time, I climaxed.

He lifted his head from my neck. "Whoa. Was that—?"

"Yeah." It surprised me too—I don't usually come this quickly, especially when he hadn't been inside me; I'd felt him pressed against me. But I didn't want to analyze it. I cupped his neck and brought his head

down to kiss me again. The rest of his sentence was lost as our tongues tangled in a tantalizing motion, one that reminded me of what would come next.

Which meant we needed something... "Condom?"

"Got it," he muttered, rolling away to reach into the drawer of his nightstand.

I didn't want him to move away, even for an instant, but it didn't keep me from admiring his toned and muscled ass. Oh. My. God. One more second of looking at his ass would have me drooling. *Look away, Erin, before you make a fool of yourself.* But it was too late. I didn't care if I made a fool of myself, and there was no way I could stop looking at him. If I started to drool, it was his fault.

I loved what martial arts did for his body.

He turned, and the amused look in his eyes told me he'd caught me watching. "Enjoy the view?" With condom in hand, he rolled back toward me until we faced each other again.

"Yes." My gaze scanned his body. "This one's good too." When he lay beside me, I tried to take the packet he held so I could open it and put the condom on him.

He held it out of reach. "Wait."

"I don't want to wait." I tried to be subtle as I shifted toward his hand.

"I'm on to you, Erin." He moved the packet to his other hand, where it was even further out of reach.

I scowled. "I want you into me, not on to me."

His appreciative laugh almost made me smile. "What's your hurry? You've already had a taste."

"That was an appetizer. I want the meal."

"I want to enjoy the entrée before getting to the main course."

This was new. I couldn't think of a time I'd ever had a man want to slow things down in the sheets, especially when I'd done everything I could to indicate I was ready to proceed. But this was different. Luke was different.



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I'd known it the first time I looked into his eyes.

I knew it now as I lightly traced my finger over bruises he'd received fighting for me—fighting to protect me. Emotion swelled in my heart, and I followed Luke's lead. If he wanted to slow down, we'd slow down. I stopped trying to grab the condom and bent down to kiss his bruises.

He groaned.

"Do they hurt?" I lifted my head and met his gaze.

He gripped my upper arms and rolled until I was underneath him. "No." He picked up where he left off, kissing my throat and working his way to my breasts. He plucked my nipples gently until they pebbled in his hand.

Even though I wanted to slow down if he wanted, seconds later I was desperate to have him. I wanted him to kiss me everywhere. I had suspected we'd be good together. I hadn't expected it to be this intense, hadn't known I would feel this overwhelming sense of completion, even before he came inside me.

He slowly licked one nipple before drawing it into his mouth. I gasped at the warm touch of his tongue as it rubbed my sensitive nipple. Before I could savor the sensation, he wrapped his lips around the areola and sucked.

Then one of his hands glided down my abdomen and slid between my legs. He used one finger to slide over my labia, stroking open the lips.

My hand locked in his hair. "*Luke.*"

At my plea, one finger pushed inside me. He moved the finger slowly, gliding it up and down in quick, shallow movements. Incredibly, I felt the onslaught of orgasm again. The pressure built fast, but I didn't want to come again—not until I felt his cock inside me. "Luke, please. Hurry."

He slipped a second finger inside, using both of them to stroke me, hard and fast. Despite my wish to hold off, my hips lifted with each stroke, pushing his fingers deeper into me. This time, I shuddered so much I thought I might fall off the bed.

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When the climax finished, I collapsed beside him and tried to catch my breath. I shook my head in mindless wonder that I'd had a second orgasm before Luke experienced even one.

He brushed one of my curls off my face as he leaned up on one elbow. "You're something."

"Yeah, I'm something." The statement made me laugh. "But I don't know what."

"I do."

His tone was thoughtful, and I turned to face him. I was still trying to get my breath back. "You do?"

He nodded and leaned down to press light kisses on my face.

My eyes closed. "Are you going to enlighten me?" I felt the brush of his lips against my eyelids.

"Someday." He pressed me back on the bed.

"Hey, tell me. Please?" Opening my eyes, I pinched his sides to find out if he was ticklish.

"It won't work." Now he had a huge grin.

Oh, yeah? I had a better weapon, and I proved it by making his smile vanish when I cupped his balls. Once I had him where I wanted him, though, I remembered there was a place I wanted him to be even more. I looked around the bed. "Where's the condom?"

He didn't say another word, only shifted to reach the packet, then tore it open with his teeth. His...enthusiasm hadn't diminished, and I helped him slide on the condom. When my hand returned to his balls again, Luke acted quickly, pushing me on my back and sliding his cock into me.

I was still wet, and my mouth fell open at the new onslaught of pleasure as he moved in long, slow strokes. Spreading my legs to increase the sweet friction, I moaned, "Faster," and felt the pace quicken. I looked down, and the sight of my body swallowing his cock with each movement was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen.

A climax engulfed me, and Luke kept thrusting through my shudders until I felt the small tugging of my body trigger his own release.

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I wrapped my arms around him in an effort to share the moment, to be as close to him as possible. Seconds later, he collapsed on top of me. Sighing, I drew him closer. And realized the ring was glowing.

## Chapter Nine

I startled awake at the brush of something soft on my butt. It felt like butterfly wings, or how I imagined butterfly wings felt. Too lazy to move, I sighed and buried my face in a pillow.

"You awake?"

*Oh.* Not butterflies. Luke. "Huh?"

I heard him laugh—felt him laugh.

"Okay. I'm awake," I muttered.

The bed shifted as he moved to lie beside me. One hand slid up and down my back.

I opened one eye to look at him. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About twenty minutes."

Good. I was glad I hadn't slept through tonight's exhibit opening, though I was sure he would have woken me up before that happened. Still, we had a little time before we needed to get ready. I snuggled close, letting our legs tangle companionably.

"Are you nervous about tonight?"

I lifted my head to see his expression, but the angle was too awkward. Instead, I rested it against his shoulder. "A little. I don't want to go back there."

"They'll have increased security for the opening. Probably more since yesterday's incident. It'll be safe." He kissed my cheek. "Tell me about Tom."

"I don't know much about him," I admitted. "To be honest, Carly goes through boyfriends quickly; I don't try to get to know them anymore. She's been seeing him for a few months. I've met him a few times—like I said, he spends a lot of time on the phone. I'm actually kind of surprised she likes him this much. She prefers guys who shower her with attention, which isn't Tom's style."

"What is his style?"

"Hmm. When he's not on the phone, he's...aloof. The first couple times we met, I tried to draw him out a little, make small talk. He's good at small talk about politics or the weather. He diverted my attempts to find out more about him—where he's from, his background, that sort of thing."

"So he's secretive, not self-absorbed?"

"Actually, he's both. Most of our conversation the first time we met centered on his new car—how much it cost, what features it had, yadda blah."

He laughed. "You don't like talking about cars?"

"Not when the reason for talking about them is to boost someone's ego."

"How'd she meet him?"

I frowned, trying to remember what she'd said. "I'm not sure. She says he's connected to the museum, an assistant or something. Maybe he arranged to use her catering service. Hell, I don't remember."

"Probably doesn't matter. Meeting him should be interesting."

Saying nothing, I slid my hand over his chest.

"What's wrong?"

"Why do you think something's wrong?"

He ran a finger over the bridge of my nose.

Furrowed. Hell. "This gives you an unfair advantage over me."

"I need every advantage I can get," he said and smiled.

Laughing, I smacked his chest lightly. "No, you don't. You've already got an advantage. One look in your eyes and I'm putty in your hands."

"Really?" His eyes sparkled, and he rewarded me for the comment with a deep, prolonged kiss. When he pulled away, I felt dazed and wondered if my eyes were crossed. "You aren't getting out of answering my question, though. Tell me what's wrong."

I snapped back to reality. "I don't like Tom, but I don't want Carly hurt. It will hurt her if it turns out he's using her, or if he's involved in something that would hurt me."

"I see what you're saying. But if you were in her position, wouldn't you want to know? Wouldn't you rather find out he was using you now instead of later? And don't you want to find out who's sending the notes?"

He had me there. I wanted to know who was sending the notes. I was tired of being nervous about returning to my condo. My condo no longer felt safe, and I resented it. I had a right to be safe in my own home. Even as I told myself there was no sign—yet—the note writer had entered my house, each incident was escalating. There was no telling what my anonymous enemy would do next. Someone who would try to hurt me in a public place wouldn't balk at doing something worse.

I sighed and held Luke closer. "Yes, I do."

He lifted my chin with one finger, forcing me to look at him.

"There's something else."

God, he was good. How had he come to know me so well? "It's probably nothing."

"Erin."

I didn't know how to describe it. "I don't know. I...I think something's going to happen tonight. I don't know what, and I don't know why. It's just a feeling, okay?" By the time I finished talking, the words were coming out fast, almost on top of each other.

"Okay. Let's see if we can figure it out."

His prosaic attitude reminded me of our first conversation. As it had before, Luke's calm manner eased some of my anxiety. It also helped when he took my hand. Seeing our linked fingers gave me an idea. I took

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off the ring and put it on his pinky. It didn't get past the second joint of his finger.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to know what it's like for you to wear the ring." I rested my hand on top of his to ensure he didn't remove the ring. "What do you feel? Do you sense anything about me?"

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with the ring."

"What?" My gaze slid down his body to his rising cock. I smothered a laugh. "Luke, that's not what I meant."

"Yeah, I know."

When he said nothing more, I had to keep myself from poking him. "Well?"

He tugged the ring off his hand and slipped it back on my finger. "I'm sorry, Erin. I don't feel anything. It was a circle of metal on my finger, nothing more."

I didn't know if I believed him. Was it a trust issue? I didn't think so, not when I'd trusted him with my body. Considering, I turned the ring around my finger.

"You're disappointed." His hand brushed over my hair.

Yeah, he knew me, all right. "A little."

"I'm sorry. I wish I had felt something—maybe it would make you feel better."

The way my heart constricted made me realize why I hadn't believed him a minute ago. I didn't want to believe I was the only one who experienced what I did while wearing the ring. If he'd sensed it too, I would have felt less alone.

It did seem odd he wouldn't feel anything. After all... "You felt a connection to the ring the first time you heard about it. I don't understand why you didn't feel one now."

He shook his head. "I don't have all the answers."

"What do you know?" I muttered.

"I know the ring belongs to you—"

"Of course it belongs to me. I bought it."

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"It belongs to you in a unique way—if you gave or sold the ring to someone, it wouldn't belong to its new owner in the same way."

I was ready to believe the ring had protective powers and offered occasional guidance. I wasn't prepared to accept the idea that the ring was meant to be mine in a larger, cosmic sense. I tucked the notion aside as something to deal with later.

He tugged a lock of my hair. "I don't experience what you do when you wear it, but you can help me understand it a little. You can tell me whatever it makes you feel. I'll listen. I'll believe you. But you need to tell me anything you can to be prepared tonight."

He was right. "I don't know what I can tell you. Usually I hear a voice when there's danger, but I haven't heard anything yet."

"Based on the past incidents, the voice doesn't give much warning."

Right again. "True."

"You don't sense you're in physical danger?"

Trying to connect with the ring, I touched it with two fingers. Nothing. "No. Maybe it will become clear once we get to the museum."

"If it does, I want to know."

I nodded.

"In the meantime..." He smiled.

My stomach fluttered under the force of his smile. "Yeah?"

"This feels pretty good."

I kissed his throat. "I won't argue."

A faint smile wisped across his mouth and was gone. "In fact, pretty good doesn't begin to cover it. You're...amazing."

I was glad by the way he finished the sentence. There were a number of directions it could have gone, not all of them good. "I won't argue that either. But I think I'm more amazing with you."

The look he shot me was one hundred percent confident male. "I'm glad you feel that way. Ready for round two?"

Or in my case, round four. I'd never been multi-orgasmic before, but apparently Luke inspired me. "Love to," I said, and thought to look at



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the clock. "Hell. We don't have time if we're going to get ready for the opening."

His head turned toward the alarm clock on his nightstand. "We have a little time."

"Not if we both want to shower."

He smiled wickedly. "Want to conserve water?"

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"Do you like your water warm or hot?" Naked and at ease with it, Luke turned on the water in the large shower and tested it with his hand.

"Hot."

He laughed. "Why am I not surprised?" In two quick moves, he activated the shower and pulled me in the water with him.

I gasped at the first spray of water on my skin and swallowed water in the process. "Geez," I said, once I finished sputtering. "Give me a little warning next time before you drag me in."

He shook his head. "It's best to jump in and get wet right away instead of trying to ease into it."

He was joking, I knew, but the words did seem to sum up our differences. I tended to be cautious, while he jumped right in. It surprised me to realize I liked that about him.

Reaching down for the soap, he lathered his hands and brought them to my breasts. The move wasn't entirely unexpected, but still... "Ohh."

"Since you were nice enough to help me conserve water, I thought the least I could do is give you a hand."

The soap was long washed off his hands by the time his fingers slipped down my stomach and into my sex. If this was how he lent a hand, I'd take his help every time I showered. "Oh, my God."

A second later, I felt the wall against my back and the water no longer buffeted me. Instead, it pounded Luke's back as he pressed me to the wall.

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It felt like his hands were everywhere—my hips, my waist, my neck—until they stopped at my breasts. When he bent, the water showered my breasts and belly. Then he took one moist nipple into his mouth. I was grateful for the wall. Without it, I would have sunk to the floor of the shower.

I sagged when he pulled away. He stepped out of the shower, and I heard him open the door to the bathroom cabinet. When he returned to the shower, he was wearing a condom. I kissed him, enjoying the sensation of being wet in his arms at the same time our tongues meshed and teased.

When I opened my eyes, I realized his hair was completely wet. I ran my hands over it to slick it back from his face and appreciated the way the water from the showerhead sluiced over his body. Just looking at him made my need expand. It was as if I hadn't made love to him, hadn't spent all afternoon in bed with him.

I boosted myself up to wrap my legs around his waist. I wanted to sink onto his cock, but he stopped me with one finger pressing into my sex. I was ready—more than ready—so I rotated my hips to push his finger deeper inside me.

He groaned, removing his hand and pressing me against the wall.

"Luke, please." I gripped his biceps, reveling in his strength.

He entered me with one quick thrust of his cock. In one corner of my brain, I heard my hoarse cry echo in the confines of the shower. The rest of my mind had shut off completely, leaving me a mass of sensation as he pushed into me. After each thrust, he pulled back until the head of his cock was the only part of him connecting us. Every time he withdrew, the friction of our bodies made me quiver.

"I want you," he muttered. "I want every part of you."

"Yes," I managed, nearly sobbing with the pleasure. "You can have me."

"Look at me."

At his abrupt tone, I jerked my gaze from his chest to his face. I lost myself in his bluish-brown eyes, and thought I could face anything if I

could only have Luke look at me like this every day. He looked at me as if I were...everything. I didn't know if that's what he really thought, but the idea pushed me over the edge into ecstasy. My body tensed around him, milking his cock and making him come.

I swayed when Luke set me back on my feet, which made me laugh. He smiled and kissed me. God, I enjoyed being with him. Not only having sex with him—although I definitely enjoyed it—but simply being together.

He stepped away long enough to dispose of the condom while I recovered enough to stand without swaying. When he returned to the shower, he took my hand and started to pull me toward him.

I pushed at his chest with my free hand. "I think we've used up our free time."

He smiled. "This time we'll shower." He grabbed the soap again.

We took turns washing each other. I loved having an excuse to run my hands along his muscles in his arms, his chest, his legs.

He didn't seem to mind. In fact, he returned the favor, washing my body thoroughly and lingering over my breasts.

We didn't speak for a while, simply stood in companionable silence under the spray until Luke grabbed shampoo and began to wash my hair.

"I love your hair." He lathered it, taking care not to get any shampoo in my eyes.

"Thanks." It seemed natural for him to be washing my hair. Before I could savor the moment, my mind kicked in. How could this be natural? Luke was gorgeous. No woman alive would be able to shower with him and not enjoy it, but it didn't mean we were building a relationship. How could it when we'd only known each other a few days?

"Close your eyes," he said, before shifting me under the water to rinse my hair.

I kept my eyes closed as the combination of shampoo and water slid down my face and body, as my mind raced. What did Luke and I share? Good sex, for one thing, which couldn't be discounted. We both believed in the Ring of Custodia. Aside from this, though, we didn't have

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many similarities. All this, my mind reasoned, made it likely a relationship between Luke and I wouldn't last.

*Damn mind. I could grow to hate you.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The museum lobby was filled with people—the crowd amazed me and made me wonder if people were interested in Roman artifacts or if some classes had been required to attend. There was a real mix of people. Many appeared to be students barely out of high school, but others were older, ranging from late twenties to fifties and sixties.

"Can I take your coat now?"

I almost smiled at the hint of impatience in Luke's voice. I'd made him wait to see my dress. He knew it was blue—he could see the bottom of it extending past the lightweight coat—but I'd wanted to surprise him. Turning my back to him, I let him remove the coat. When I faced him again, he looked astonished.

I can't say I blamed him. The dress I wore was blue and fell to my ankles in a swirl of silky fabric. However, he wasn't looking at my feet. Instead, his attention was focused on the way the bodice clung to my skin. Spaghetti straps criss-crossed my back and kept the top from gaping open, a phrase that aptly described Luke's mouth as he looked at me.

I liked the way he looked at me.

"Luke?"

He closed his mouth, and sent me a smile. "That's some dress."

Leaning in, I gave him a quick kiss before slipping my arm through his. He wore a navy turtleneck and trousers. I liked the way they showed off his body. "Glad you like it. Tell me a little about these people. Do you recognize anyone?"

He tore his gaze away from me and scanned the room. "A few people, mainly academics. Some students." His gaze returned to me, heating as he examined me slowly from head to toe. "I'm more interested in your dress."

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I laughed. "Let's get in line for this thing."

He slid an arm around me, guiding me forward as the line moved. Leaning toward me, he pressed his mouth against my ear. My high heels put us at the same height. "Let me know when you see Tom."

"Will do."

"Erin?"

I turned and saw Carly walking toward me, wearing a form-fitting, knee-length black dress and three-inch heels. We greeted each other with a hug.

She turned her gaze speculatively to Luke before she shot me a long glance.

Introductions. Of course. "Luke, this is my best friend. Carly, Luke Hunter."

"Nice to meet you," she said, holding out a hand.

Luke shook her hand. "You too."

When he said nothing more, she turned back to me. "I wasn't sure you'd make it." She'd put on a good show for the first few seconds, but her eyes were a little red, as if she'd been crying.

"Hey." I patted her arm. "I wouldn't miss it."

Luke feathered his hand up and down my spine. I fought a shiver when he touched bare skin. "We're looking forward to seeing the exhibit."

Ah, yes. I remembered why we were here—to see Tom.

"Where's Tom?"

Carly's shoulders slumped. "I'm not sure exactly." She waved her hand as if swatting at a bug. "He's inside the exhibit."

It was obvious something had happened. Maybe they'd argued. I took a deep breath, reminding myself I wasn't here to strangle Tom for upsetting her.

"Hey—"

"I'm fine." Her lips widened in a smile that was almost a grimace.

No, she wasn't. But she apparently didn't want to talk about it. I could understand it, since we were in a public place, and she was working.

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"There's quite a crowd here. Have you handed out many business cards tonight?"

She looked grateful for the change of subject. "A few. It's gone smoothly to this point."

"Could I get one?" Luke held out a hand to take it. "I don't need a caterer right now, but I know a few people who do."

"Really?" Her eyes widened and her smile became more genuine. "But you haven't tried the food yet."

"It comes highly recommended."

With another smile, she handed him the card.

If we hadn't been surrounded by people, I would have kissed Luke in the middle of the lobby for making Carly smile. "Can you join us for a few minutes or are you too busy?"

She looked at her watch. "I can walk with you for about ten minutes."

"Great." We'd reached the front of the line and were about to enter the first gallery.

We walked through the first room of the exhibit. I tried to pretend I was interested in the artifacts, but I was really focused on locating Tom. It wasn't long before we found him, and my dislike of him was solidified. He stood in the corner of the room, talking with three people, one of them a woman who was standing much too close. If I wasn't mistaken, he was trying to peek down her dress.

If Carly noticed the way the two were standing, she didn't show it. She walked straight toward him, leaving Luke and I to follow. "Tom, darling."

Maybe it was small of me, but I had to battle a smile when he jumped at Carly's voice.

"You remember Erin," she continued, once we stood beside her. "And this is Luke Hunter."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Professor Luke Hunter?"

"Yes."

Turning his back on Carly, Tom faced Luke and went into what I considered total schmooze mode. "I've read some of your articles—"

"We'll be back." Taking my arm, Carly led me into a small sitting area outside the room, which was private, at least for the moment.

I was reluctant to leave. I hadn't thought about Luke's articles before. As an academic—or a former academic—he'd have written several. I wanted to hear what Tom had to say about them and resolved to ask Luke later.

"Who is Luke?"

Her question interrupted my speculation and jerked me back to the moment. "A friend."

"A very friendly friend."

Oh, boy. I needed to tread carefully here. Carly was a friend, and if the situation was reversed, I'd be wondering why she hadn't said anything about the new guy in her life. I didn't know what to tell her, partly because I couldn't explain a relationship I didn't understand. I opened my mouth to speak, then stopped. Hell. This was not a conversation I wanted to have in the middle of a museum. We were alone now, but surely someone would wander to the sitting area soon.

One hand flew to her hip. "Don't give me that look. You've been holding out on me. I can't believe you didn't mention him at lunch Friday."

I hadn't met him before lunch Friday, but I wasn't going to say that. It would lead to another round of questions. "I'm sorry. Things...happened quickly."

"I'll say. Well, at least he's handsome. And he and Tom seem to get along. Maybe we can go on a double date." The brittle smile reappeared.

A double date? The relationship wouldn't last another week if what I'd seen was any indication. "Carly." I reached out to touch her arm, but she pulled away. "Tom froze you out just now. I saw it."

"I don't want to hear it." She plopped down on a sofa.

"I know you don't." I felt stupid standing when Carly was sitting, but she was sending off a clear don't-come-near-me vibe. "But when we talked yesterday, you said you wanted my opinion, and—"

"I mean it, Erin. I have to go back to work soon. I can't deal with this right now."

"Okay. But call me when you want to talk, all right?"

She avoided my question. "It's stress. Nothing more." But her lower lip quivered.

Did stress make a man examine a woman close enough to practically fall into her dress? I didn't think so, but wasn't going to argue the point when Carly was already upset. But my impression was he was enjoying himself, reveling in the attention. "Yeah, stress."

"You'll see. It'll be different after tonight. Once the stress of tonight is behind us, the pressure will let up, and things will go back to normal between us."

"I'm sure you're right."

She stood, wiping her eyes with her fingers as if she were brushing away tears. "I'll meet you back in the gallery, okay? I'm going to fix my makeup."

My heart sank as she walked away. Damn Tom for putting that look on her face. I worried she might fall apart at any moment until I remembered her work ethic. No, she'd pull herself together and make it through the rest of the evening. I hoped tonight's success would result in more business for her. And once this ring business was settled, I'd make her listen to my opinion about Tom.

I ran a thumb over the ring. As Luke suggested, I wore it with the stones facing my palm. Speaking of Luke, it was time to get back to him. I turned to go back to the gallery and almost ran into a stocky man. "Oh! Sorry."

"No problem." He reached out as if to steady me before pulling his hand back in an awkward movement. "Are you Erin Andrews?"



I sized up the man. He looked like a football player, not only in build but in age. Probably a student, but I couldn't imagine why a student would be looking for me. He had an open, friendly face. "Yes."

"Glad I found you." He smiled. "Luke asked me to bring you to one of the galleries. He's having a hard time getting away."

That surprised me. Luke didn't seem like the kind of man who had a hard time doing anything he wanted—sending someone to get me seemed contrary to his style. Then again, I hadn't completely filled in the puzzle of Luke. Maybe he was caught up in conversation with Tom and didn't want to leave.

During the moment I hesitated, the man started to walk away. "It's this way," he called over his shoulder.

Since he was walking back to the gallery, it seemed safe enough to go with him. I took a few steps and decided to question the man while we were walking. "So, you know Luke?"

"Yes."

"Are you a student or..."

"I know him from campus."

We were almost back to the gallery when I realized he hadn't really answered my question. "Really? You must have taken some classes from him."

"No." He gestured toward the door, indicating I should go first.

When we walked inside, I saw the man was right. Luke was gone.

"Come over here." He motioned to a door on the left side of the room.

"The exhibit continues that way." I pointed to the right.

He frowned. "I know a shortcut."

I began to walk where he gestured, but his evasiveness made me feel a little nervous. "What did you say your name was?"

"Bruce Wilkins."

*Liar.*

I froze when I heard the voice. Streams of people moved through the room, looking at the exhibit, and I felt safe enough there. Following

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lying Bruce into a separate room was another matter. I had no idea what was on the other side of the door, and I didn't want to find out. Somehow I knew I wouldn't like whatever waited for me.

"Come on," he said, impatience in his tone.

"I want to go through the other rooms to see the entire exhibit." I started to back away from him.

"Luke wanted to talk to you. It sounded important."

If it was important, Luke would have found me himself. He wouldn't have sent a stranger. "I'll catch up to him," I said, easing back into the main group of people.

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I found Luke in the room with the jewelry. He was talking with a few people, but he excused himself once he saw me and pulled me into a quiet corner.

"I don't think Tom's the note writer." His breath tickled my ear.

Okay, good to know. And we'd get to that. But first things first.

"Some guy tried to get me to go with him. He said you were looking for me."

"What?" He lowered his voice when several people turned to look at us. "What guy?"

"He said his name was Bruce. Bruce...I think it was Wilkins. He claims to know you from campus. I think he was lying." I knew he was lying.

He put his arm around me. "The name's not familiar. What does he look like?"

"About your height, bulky build, short dirty blond hair. I didn't get a good look at his eyes, but I think they were brown."

I knew what Luke's answer would be even before he shook his head. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know from campus. And I didn't send anyone for you, Erin. I wouldn't."

"I know." I leaned into him, wanting to get away from this place.

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He pulled the coat check tags out of his pocket as if he'd read my mind. "We're done here. Let's leave."

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We went to my place. After Bruce's appearance, I expected someone to confront us as we left the museum or approached my condo, but everything was quiet. Relief drained me of energy, and I felt limp and lethargic. We remained in the jeep while Luke explained why he thought Tom wasn't behind the note campaign.

"He's transparent—can't hide a thing." Luke tucked a stray curl behind my ear. "I see why you think he's creepy."

"Did I say he was creepy?"

"It's what you meant, whether you said it or not."

Hell. He knew me way too well.

"Carly's too good for him."

God, I lov—I mean, appreciated this man. Remembering how I'd wanted to kiss him for making Carly smile at the museum, I leaned toward him, grabbed his shirt in one fist, and pulled him close. We were both laughing when our lips met. It felt strangely natural to make out in Luke's jeep after an evening out. The kisses were long and languorous, tender and tantalizing. Maybe I wasn't as exhausted as I thought...

*Ouch.* My feet hurt. Dress shoes were one thing, and I wore them all the time for work. Two-inch heels were something else. "Ugh."

"That bad?"

I realized how my exclamation had been interpreted and rushed to reassure him. "Not you. My feet. These shoes are strangling my feet."

Mollified, he looked at them. "They don't look that bad."

"You try walking in them and see how you like it."

"They don't look like my size."

I laughed and gave him a quick kiss. "Let's go inside. I think my feet know I'm almost home, and it makes them hurt more."

We got out of Luke's jeep. I was hoping he wouldn't want to go home right away. In fact, I was hoping to talk him into staying the night. I didn't think he'd take much convincing.

"You all right?" He looked at my feet and sounded amused.

"I will be. Eventually."

He smiled as we walked up to my condo. The smile faded, and I looked at the door to see what made him frown.

It was another note.

"Shit." Luke yanked it off the door.

I eased by him to unlock the door. When we entered the foyer, he said, "Don't move. I want to check out the apartment, make sure no one's here."

"There's no sign of a break in."

"Not here, but someone may have broken through a window. I want to make sure." He left and was back within a minute. "Okay, no one's here. Let's look at the note."

I opened it.

*Last chance. Put the ring in a padded envelope and leave it inside your screen door. If it's not there by Wednesday, you'll regret it.*

After reading the note, Luke grabbed it and tossed it to the floor. "Shit. This is the last anonymous note you're getting from this coward. We're going to find out who's writing the notes and put some protective measures in place."

I nodded, unable to speak. The note had shaken me.

"Here's the new plan. First, you're having a camera installed to monitor your outside door. It's been far too easy for this asshole to leave anonymous notes. No more. Second, I'm moving in here or you're moving to my place. Take your pick. Third, you're keeping a cell phone with you at all times. You have to work. I have to work. I get it. But when I can't be with you—and I'm going to be with you all the time except when we're at work—you need my number on speed dial to make sure you can reach me anytime."

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Wow. This was a side of Luke I hadn't seen before. "Are you finished?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, as if preparing for an argument. "For now."

"All right. First, if you want a camera, we'll get a camera. It's probably a smart idea. Second, I'm too tired to go anywhere tonight, which means we're staying here for now. We'll figure out the rest tomorrow. Third, I have a cell phone, and I'll add your number."

"And you'll keep your phone with you?"

"I'll take it with me everywhere I go from now on. Okay?"

Luke nodded. "Are you finished?"

"Not quite. These precautions are sensible, and I'm willing to accept them. However, don't think I'm going to say yes to everything you say."

A small grin tugged at his mouth. "I figured as much."

"Good." I smiled. "There's one more thing. You look way hot in those pants," I said, and jumped into his arms.

## Chapter Ten

I moved to Luke's house after work the next day. He hadn't pushed me on the subject, but I knew he preferred to be at his place.

"I can protect you better if I know the territory," he said as we ate dinner in his kitchen.

I set my napkin on the table. "If we're lucky, I won't need protection much longer." I waited until his gaze met mine. "Tomorrow's Wednesday. Let's decide what we're going to do about the ring."

He leaned back in his chair. "What's to decide?"

"We've debated staking out my condo, going to the police, and doing nothing. There's an option we haven't discussed."

"No." His closed expression told me he didn't want to talk about it. He put his silverware on his plate and stood.

When he held out his hand, I handed him my empty plate. "Just listen."

He placed the dishes in the dishwasher before turning to glare at me. "*No*. There's nothing to discuss. You are not giving away the ring. You are not endangering it or you by using it to lure the note writer out of hiding. We haven't discussed the option because it's not an option."

I shifted my gaze to the table, wishing the plate was still in front of me. I wasn't hungry, but pushing food around would give my hands something to do while I evaluated his words. "You won't even consider it. The ring is that important to you?"

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He returned to the table, resting his hands on the wood and leaning toward me. "Surely you don't have to ask. Of course it's important. You've seen and experienced what the ring can do. I know you believe it."

I nodded, still not looking at him.

"In that case, why would you want to give the ring away?"

"Why won't you consider it?" I swallowed and forced myself to meet his gaze. "Do you want it for yourself? Are you hoping I'll sell or give it to you?"

He stormed back to the kitchen, slammed the dishwasher door shut, and leaned against it, crossing his feet at the ankles. "Thanks for having faith in me, Erin."

I got up from the counter so fast I knocked the bar stool to the floor. "It's a reasonable question, Luke."

"Then why are you shouting?"

Hell. I lowered my voice. "You've supported me throughout this ordeal, and I'm grateful—"

"Yeah, you seem real appreciative."

"—but is it weird that I want to know why you're helping me? What do you get out of it? Why are you risking yourself when you've already been hurt trying to protect me?"

He said nothing as we stared at each other for a full minute. Finally he spoke. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"I'm here, aren't I? I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust you."

"You trust me to protect you, but you don't trust *me*."

I opened my mouth to speak but didn't know what to say. He continued to watch me with a solemn, unblinking stare, and I clamped my lips shut.

"That's what I thought." He turned and left the room.

I stood watching the doorway for several moments before I realized I was staring at it stupidly. He hadn't left the warehouse—he'd walked back toward the bedroom, not the staircase. Even now, after I'd lashed out at him, he stayed close so he could protect me.

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Was it true? Did I really not trust him? Bending down, I righted the tipped bar stool and sat on it. Of course I trusted him. Moving in with someone, even temporarily, wasn't a step I took lightly. Surely he knew it...but maybe not. He was right about one thing. I believed he would protect me. In fact, I believed he'd give his life to protect me.

But I didn't know why.

Why would a man put himself in danger to protect a woman he'd known less than a week? Sex was a great motivator, but Luke hadn't been getting any when he'd taken several blows for me on Sunday.

Then it hit me. Not roofing materials—although they might have helped clear my head before now—but the whole “What's Luke's motive” thing. I'd let it worry me for days, although it had been tucked in a small corner in the back of my mind. I still didn't know what his motive was, but I understood my motive. There was only one reason I considered giving up the ring.

I wanted to protect Luke.

It sounded silly—how was I supposed to protect a man who outweighed me and could certainly outfight me? He'd probably think I was insane if I mentioned the idea. Physically, of course, I couldn't do much to protect myself, let alone anyone else. I'd already seen I was no match for the thug who'd tried to attack me in the museum. Despite Luke's training, I didn't see myself becoming a martial arts expert anytime soon.

Knowing my physical weakness didn't change my protective feelings. He'd already been hurt because of me, although he dismissed the marks as unremarkable bruises, which seemed like a contradiction to me. Was it possible for bruises to be commonplace? At any rate, I didn't want him to be injured again—unremarkable or not—because of me, and I sensed something was going to happen soon.

“Listen to you,” I muttered. There'd never been a time when I relied this heavily on emotions, on hunches. I'd always scoffed at the idea of sensing things. I believed in luck, sure—in being at the right place at the



right time, or the wrong place at the wrong time. I believed in intuition, although I preferred to confirm it with solid facts.

All those beliefs changed the day I walked into an antique store and bought a ring. Now I was hearing voices, getting impressions, sensing danger. I'd moved in with a man who believed in mystical powers, legends, and faith. It was no wonder I was thrown off my stride. Hell, I wasn't only thrown—I'd been catapulted into a completely different world. It resembled the one I knew, but had some vital differences. I didn't dare think what might come next.

If I had this fabled seventh sense, why didn't it help me figure out the important stuff? Like who wanted the ring? What would they do if I didn't turn it over to them?

How could I make Luke less mad at me?

I took the ring off my finger and stared at the stones. Orange, purple and a combination of colors. "I need answers," I whispered.

*It doesn't work that way.*

It was an echo of my own words to Luke when we'd first talked about the ring. It was an annoying response, I realized. Luke had shown incredible patience—more than I had.

Before leaving the kitchen, he'd asked if I believed in the ring. I did, but knew I didn't need it to resolve things with Luke. I left the ring on the table and went to find him.

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I found him practicing karate in the workout room. He was concentrated and intent on what he was doing, and I didn't want to distract him. Instead, I stood outside the door and tried to remain out of sight.

God, he was beautiful. He'd tied his hair back with a band and wore only loose black sweats. This was a slower form of martial art than I'd seen him do before, interspersed with lightning-quick jabs and kicks. His sweat-slicked muscles rippled as he moved.

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This is how he works out frustration, I realized, delighted at this new glimpse of him. I was coming to know him little by little, but I believed I had a good understanding of who Luke Hunter was. I had focused so much on what I didn't know about him, that what I did know had been obscured. I saw him clearly now, and at last, I trusted him.

I continued to watch, fascinated by the fluid movements, the comfortable way his body moved. I knew the second he saw me because his whole body stiffened. He executed another series of kicks before turning to face me. The look in his eyes was inscrutable, and it made me feel sick that he no longer felt comfortable with me.

He bowed. "You can come in."

I took him at his word, leaning against the doorjamb. "That was terrific."

He said nothing, only turned and reached for a towel. He wiped the sweat off his face. "Did you need something?"

*You.* I'd needed him since the moment I looked into his eyes. I just hadn't known it. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I wanted to say I'm sorry. And that I do trust you."

"I don't think you do." The towel hung forgotten in his hand.

"I do. But it's...hard for me. I've never been the kind of person who believes in protective powers or legends or anything else. Before Friday, my life followed a certain order, which meant logic ruled. I have emotions like everyone else, but I didn't act on them—not without backing them up by facts. The only sensing I did was common sense."

The joke was pitiful, but it earned a small smile from him, and I felt encouraged to continue. "Then I buy a ring, nearly get hit on the head by a pile of roofing materials, and start hearing voices. My world changed. I wasn't hit on the head, but it felt as if my life had been shattered all the same. It left me scrambling, and I'm still scrambling."

A hint of warmth entered his eyes, and he walked toward me. "I can see how it would be tough."

"I didn't understand how you or any sane person could want to be involved in all this, why you'd want to get caught up in my problems

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when I'm essentially a stranger to you." I shrugged. "It didn't make sense to me."

"Erin—"

"Wait. Please, let me finish. It didn't make sense when I tried to apply rules of logic to it. Why would someone risk his life for a stranger?" I lifted a hand to cover his mouth when he began to speak.

He remained silent but frowned a little.

"I tossed the rules aside because I remembered something. I haven't known you any longer than you've known me, but I want to protect you. I would do almost anything to keep you from being hurt." I watched his body relax at my words. "If I feel that way about you, there's no reason you can't feel the same about me."

He kissed my fingers before reaching up to take my hand.

"Luke, you're the best thing to come out of this. You've listened to me, helped me, fought for me. Wanting to give the ring to the note writer has nothing to do with trusting you. The reason I want to talk about it—the only reason I want to discuss it—is to make this person go away before one of us is hurt. I couldn't stand it if you were hurt again because of me."

"That's not going to happen." He pulled me into his arms.

"You can't promise that. Neither one of us can guarantee that."

"Maybe not. But giving the ring away isn't the answer."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'll call the police tomorrow morning and talk to one of the detectives who came to the museum on Sunday. We'll give him the notes and see what they suggest."

"All right," I said against his chest. I felt good about taking this step. "They won't take the ring as evidence, will they?"

"No reason they should, unless you don't have the receipt."

I did, thank heavens. I'd found it tucked in my wallet between a few other receipts.

"You feel better?"

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Standing in his arms made me feel better, even more than knowing we would call the police the next day. I nodded.

“Good. Let me go shower, and —”

“Skip the shower.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You have something else in mind?”

“Yeah, something.” Taking his hand, I led him down the hall to his bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

He stripped me slowly, nuzzling each part of me as he unveiled it. He lavished as much attention to my arms as he did my breasts, and the sensation of his hands and face brushing me gently made me feel cherished as I’d never been before. By the time I was naked, I wanted to jump ahead to the finish line.

When I reached for his sweats, he tugged them and his briefs down and off before reaching to cradle me in his arms again. He ran his fingertips over my back as if he wanted to learn the shape of it through touch.

“I want you now.” My voice sounded hoarse, as if I hadn’t used it in days. When I opened my eyes, Luke smiled. It was the happiest smile I’d seen him wear, and the sight of it brought tears to my eyes. Despite everything, despite my doubt and fear, I was a lucky woman. I was in the arms of a man I...cared about, and simply holding me made him happy.

“No tears,” he said, before leaning in to kiss me.

He got his wish; my tears dried up quickly as I became caught up in the kiss, in the sheer pleasure of our open mouths meeting and tasting. Why had I thought we needed to rush to the end? It wasn’t a race. Our lovemaking was something to savor—it was worth taking time to explore it and each other. But I was ready to get horizontal with our exploration.

I tried to be subtle as I nudged him toward the bed.

He pulled away, eyes lit with humor. “In a hurry?” He nuzzled my neck as he allowed himself to be dragged.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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He knew me, I thought, blinking back more tears. "Only to lie down." Taking his face in my hands, I kissed him hard. "Once I've gotten you prone, we can go as fast or as slow as you want."

"Famous last words," he said, as we tumbled onto the bed. He took me up on my challenge by taking both my hands in his and using them to pin me to the bed. Our fingers linked as he kissed me. To test him, I moved my arms as if trying to get free. He retaliated by pressing his thick erection against me. I smiled. I'd take his brand of punishment anytime.

"Think that's funny, huh?" He began an assault on my breasts that left me gasping and wondering if it was possible to drown in the waves of pleasure that engulfed me.

Before I could catch my breath, he rolled until we were turned on our sides, facing each other. Our hands were free now, and his lifted to touch my hair. He really did love my hair. Although he'd said as much, it still surprised me, since it looked like a curly mop much of the time. His obvious appreciation for my hair melted my heart, and I kissed him again before the tears could come.

"Erin."

I shook my head. "I'm okay."

He said nothing as his gaze locked on mine. I'm not sure what he saw in my eyes. In his, I saw a combination of desire and tenderness that touched me deeply. Then he kissed me, and I stopped thinking.

I was awash in need, a need that only increased as he began to tease my breasts—lightly at first, running a thumb over the nipple. It rose and hardened at his touch until it resembled a small bead. Then he toyed with my other nipple until it did the same.

My entire body quivered when he shifted to kiss my breasts. His tongue circled one nipple until he took it into his mouth and sucked. I'd never felt anything like it. Luke's mouth and an overwhelming sense of rightness. My body knew him. *I* knew him. No ring was required; we had an unbreakable connection without it. What we had was better than any seventh sense.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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I was ready to have him inside me long before I felt the first brush of his fingers against my sex. He stroked my clitoris lightly, sending another wave of pleasure through me.

"Please." I reached between us for his cock, but he rolled away for a moment. When he returned, he sheathed himself with a condom, then sheathed himself in me. "I trust you," I said at his first thrust, and widened my legs so he could sink into me. Still on our sides, we stared into each other's eyes as his cock penetrated me more deeply with each stroke.

When his thrusts became harder, I gripped his arm to steady myself. His gaze stayed fixed on mine as if to watch for any sign of discomfort. What I saw in his eyes was gentle strength, and it was a better aphrodisiac than anything I'd known.

I whimpered as my body began to tighten around him, and I shuddered through a long climax.

Luke followed seconds later, his cock pulsing inside me as he came in seemingly endless spurts. My body was still clasped around him as he shifted me onto my back and buried his face in my hair. "Erin."

I kissed his cheek, wrapped my arms around him, and smiled.

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I woke up sometime after 2 a.m. with Luke wrapped around me. We hadn't spoken after making love the night before. We hadn't needed to. The experience had been too beautiful to mar with words, and I suspected I would feel that way forever.

At the moment, however, I felt vaguely unsettled and didn't know why. It was a little cold; the covers had slid down while we slept. I reached down to pull them over us when I remembered I wasn't wearing the ring.

The ring. Of course—what else would unsettle me? I'd left it on the kitchen table last night. I was glad I had, glad I felt a strong connection to

Luke even when I wasn't wearing it. But now I wanted it, and I began the slow process of extricating myself from Luke's arms and legs.

I'd barely moved when his arms locked around me. "Where are you going?"

"I left the ring in the kitchen. I want to get it."

His arms loosened enough for me to slip out of them. I started to get out of bed.

"No, I'll get it." He rolled out of bed and pulled on his sweatpants. "I'm familiar with the layout. You might crash into something."

"I could turn on the lights."

"It's too damn early for lights."

He had a point. "Okay. It's on the table."

"Stay here." He was gone before I had time to reply.

Within ten seconds unsettled had turned into worried. Why was I worried? I had nothing to worry about. Luke would get the ring and bring it back to me. End of story. It didn't change the feeling, though. Worry evolved into panic. I couldn't explain it, but I knew I couldn't wait here, despite Luke's request to remain. Feeling desperate and anxious, I pulled on a long T-shirt and went after him.

Although I wanted to run down the hall to the kitchen, I sensed I needed to be quiet. Luke was right—I wasn't confident enough about the position of the furniture to rush around in the dark. There were no furnishings to trip over in the hallway, but once I reached the kitchen I was likely to crash into something if I wasn't careful. I walked as quickly as I dared, hoping I was being paranoid. I almost convinced myself there was no reason for caution.

I was wrong. I heard scuffling sounds as I approached the end of the hallway leading to the kitchen. *Hell*. For a moment, I was terrified. He had to be struggling with someone, someone who was very determined to get the ring. They obviously didn't care if they hurt either one of us.

I stood there, frozen for several moments, trying to get my fear under control.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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Terror vanished as my fists clenched. Luke didn't deserve this. *I* didn't deserve this. All this was going to stop *today*. I knew it as surely as I knew the ring was mine, and that I wanted Luke in my life. I stepped into the kitchen.

It was as I'd feared. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, although I couldn't make out any features. Luke was fighting, and I had a sudden impression that he was being distracted to allow someone else to sneak in. This far, I'd gone unnoticed. I needed to keep it that way, and I crouched to stay below eye level as I raced to the counter. I grabbed two legs of a bar stool as a tall shadow entered the room.

I swung the stool at his torso. Hard. He fell to the ground and a stun gun slipped out of his hand. Even without the ring's insight, I knew he would have used this on Luke without a second thought. *Bastard*.

The bastard reached for the weapon, so I stomped his wrist. His pained shout echoed in the room.

Grabbing the stun gun, I put one foot on his stomach to keep him on the floor. I had no idea how to use the weapon, but it didn't stop me from lowering it to an inch of his chest. "Don't move."

He ignored me, trying to push my foot away and reach for the stun gun at the same time.

I pushed my foot down harder and shifted the stun gun until it was scant inches above his crotch. "I said, don't move."

He stopped moving.

I heard another crash and thud before someone raced over to me. I lifted the gun and held it out in front of me.

"It's me," Luke said. "I'm unarmed."

"No, you're not." I handed him the stun gun.

"You're okay?" When I nodded, he crouched next to the man. "I'll take care of this guy. You call the police."

My gaze darted to the spot where the crash had come from, trying to see what had happened to the man Luke had fought. All I could make out was a large lump on the floor. "What about the other one?"



## **The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian**

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"He's unconscious, but if he threatens you, feel free to hit him with a bar stool." I saw a quick flash of teeth as he smiled. "Good job, Erin."

I smiled back, although I wasn't sure if he could see it in the dark. "I'll take the stool with me."

## Chapter Eleven

By 6 p.m., we were driving to campus. The police had arrived, taken our statements, and taken the men away in handcuffs. Once the masks were removed, Luke recognized one of them as a graduate student at Woodson University, one of Miranda's favorite students. The second man I recognized as Bruce, the man who'd tried to lure me away at the museum.

"Don't know him," Luke had said. Neither man had talked, but Luke was convinced Miranda was involved in the assault and was behind the note campaign.

"Shouldn't we tell the police about her?" I asked as he parked outside the building.

"I want to talk to her first." He took my hand as we walked to the building.

He walked so fast I had to jog to keep up with him. "I thought you said the notes weren't in her handwriting."

"They weren't, but she could have had someone write them for her. In fact, she probably did. Since she hired two thugs, she obviously doesn't want to get her hands dirty."

"She's in love with you."

He stopped walking at my words, and turned his head to meet my gaze. "She'll have to deal with you and me being together some time." He opened the door.

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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Miranda was sitting at her desk when we arrived at her office. After a few seconds, she looked up. "Luke. How wonderful to see you." She stood. Her eyes narrowed before her gaze shifted to Luke and my joined hands. Her gaze slid up until our eyes met. Hers were expressionless.

"Erin, show her the ring." He gestured toward my hand.

She paled. "You're engaged?"

I held out my right hand. Morning light shined through the windows onto the ring, making the stones gleam.

She barely looked at the ring. "Shouldn't you be wearing it on your left..." Her head jerked as she did a double-take.

Ah. Now she'd noticed.

"It looks like..." Her gaze shot to Luke's. "May I see it more closely?"

I took a step forward, and Luke walked with me. I liked the feeling of unity, the sense that we were partners who were in this together.

"Oh, my God. It's the Ring of—"

"We know what it is." Luke gestured for me to lower my hand.

"Did you have it made, or—" The fierce look on his face stopped her from pursuing that train of thought. She swallowed. "May I see it? Maybe try it on?" Miranda's face beamed.

"No."

Her pretty pout emerged. "Why are you acting like this? You're being cold."

"I get that way when I've been attacked in my own home."

She gasped. "Attack—"

"Are you saying you don't know anything about it? Didn't have anything to do with it?"

"I don't know what you mean. I would never...have never...I don't even believe in the ring."

"If you don't believe in it, why do you want to try it on?"

Her face tightened. It was an expression I hadn't seen before, one that made her look severe. "Why won't you listen to me?"

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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"I'm listening, but you're not saying what I want to hear. I want to know why you wrote the notes, why you sent someone to go after Erin."

"I didn't—"

"Never mind. I don't have to ask." His voice was clipped. "You wanted the ring. You learned Erin had it. And you realized we were together."

Miranda's mouth had opened in an expression of shock. I almost pitied her, but I couldn't feel sorry for anyone who had tried to hurt Luke.

"When you arranged last night's break in, did you want them to hurt her or me?"

"I—" She shook her head, turning to face me again. "Erin, would you leave us alone for a minute?"

Luke's eyes narrowed. "Why?" I didn't blame him for being suspicious.

"If we're going to argue, I'd prefer to do it without an audience. We were lovers once. Please, let's talk about this privately."

I looked at him and shrugged. I didn't sense danger, and Miranda might be more open with him if I wasn't there. "I'll be right outside."

He squeezed my hand and kissed my temple before letting go.

I stepped into the hallway and heard Miranda's voice say, "How dare you think I—" as the door closed behind me. I walked to a chair, prepared for a long wait.

*She's waiting for you.*

I paused. I didn't know who was waiting, but I found myself walking down the corridor—past Miranda's office, past another four offices. I still felt no urgency, no alarm bells, nothing to suggest trouble was ahead. A door on the right was open about an inch. I slid the door open and walked inside.

The room was dark, but before I could find a light switch, the lights came on. The room was a small classroom about three times the size of Miranda's office. Chairs surrounded a long rectangular table. Jenna stood at the opposite end of the room.

Her hand was still on the switch. "Did I startle you?"

"No. I'm not surprised." It was true. I wasn't surprised to see Jenna here. I hadn't suspected her of anything until this moment, but surprise wasn't the word for what I felt.

She straightened her jacket. "What are you doing here?"

"You know why I'm here, Jenna."

Her gaze lifted to meet mine, and that's when I knew. As had once happened when I looked into Luke's eyes, images flooded me. Jenna starred in all of them—in one, she was researching the ring and arranging for it to be shipped from New York. I saw her anger when she realized I had bought the ring. I saw her copy my address from the mailing list of the antique shop. I saw her hearing about the roofing accident and writing the notes to scare me. I saw her arranging for the two museum confrontations and the attack on us at Luke's house.

I saw everything.

"I don't know what you mean." Her voice sounded flat.

"Yes. You do. More importantly, I know what you've done."

"What I've done?" She rocked back on her heels. "What are you talking about?"

She was a good bluffer, but not good enough to deceive the Ring of Custodia.

"I'm talking about this." I lifted my hand, turning my palm to face me, which gave her a good look at the ring. The ring shimmered even though there were no windows in the room, no sunlight that could cause it.

Her eyes widened, almost crossing as she focused on the piece of jewelry. She couldn't disguise her interest. Then she blinked as if remembering her role. "What—?"

"You know, Jenna. And I know. Stop pretending."

We stared at each other in an unspoken contest. She blinked first. "The Ring of Custodia isn't yours."

I lowered my hand before putting it in my pocket, noting how her gaze followed each movement. "I have a receipt saying otherwise."

Her eyes lit with anger. "A receipt means nothing—"

"Not in the eyes of the law."

"If it weren't for my research, you wouldn't have the ring. I found it. I ordered it through the store and had it shipped here."

Despite being on guard, I rested a hip on the conference room table as if settling in for a friendly chat. "Why didn't you have it shipped directly to you?"

"If I could find it, someone else could too. This way, I gave a fake name, would have paid in cash, and the ring would disappear forever."

"But I walked in the store and bought it out from under you. Too bad for you."

"You wouldn't have if the owner had been there." She pointed at me as if to assign blame. "She set it aside for *me*."

I learned something else—neither employee I'd met had been the owner. I had a pretty good guess about why the one employee had been fired. She'd sold me a ring meant for Jenna. "The ring's mine. The same way Luke is mine."

She laughed but the sound was a brittle echo in the room. "I don't want Luke. Why would I want Luke?"

Ah. The note warning me away was designed to shift blame to Miranda. It had almost worked. But I had another issue to discuss. "You're lying, Jenna. You did want Luke—you wanted him out of the way."

Her gaze skittered to the floor.

"He did nothing to hurt you—you should have left him out of it." My voice sounded almost level.

She sneered. "He involved himself by trying to protect you. He made his choice."

Choices. Which reminded me... "Why didn't you have someone hurt me? Or kill me?"

*One who sheds the blood of the bearer to win the ring will be rewarded with suffering tenfold.*

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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When I heard the words, I knew they were an integral part of the ring's abilities. And since she wanted to avoid shedding my blood, it gave me courage to continue goading her.

"All Luke did was protect me."

"He's not here to protect you now. I want the ring, and I'm not leaving until I get it."

"Really?" I stood.

She walked toward me. "I'll buy it from you. Pay double what you did."

She thought I was going to sell a two-thousand-year-old ring to a woman willing to intimidate me? Who would hire someone to harm innocent people? She'd better think again. "I don't think so." I headed for the door.

A moment later, she grabbed me from behind, wrapping her arms around my torso to keep me immobilized. "It's mine." Her fingers dug into my skin.

I tried to pull away, but she had a firm grip on me. "No, it's not. Let go of me. Right now."

Instead of releasing me, she clawed for my right hand.

"Stop it." I squirmed, but she held tight. I thought about everything that had happened since I bought the ring—all the fear I'd experienced, the worry I'd felt and the terror for Luke's safety. All because of Jenna, a woman who wouldn't accept the fact that the shop made a mistake. It was ironic; if she'd come to me and explained the mix up, I probably would have sold the ring to her at my cost.

But she hadn't. Instead, she'd hurt someone I cared for.

I lifted my foot and stabbed my heel hard into her instep. She screamed and her grip loosened. Once my right arm was free, I swung my elbow back, hitting her in the nose. She fell to the floor.

"It's mine," she whimpered with one hand covering her nose, making the words sound like *it's bine*.

"No, it's not."

## The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian

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The door crashed open behind me. Luke, of course, who'd gone looking for me when I hadn't returned.

"She did it." I pointed to Jenna, who lay on the floor, still holding her nose. "Call the police."

He did, and when they'd taken Jenna away, Luke took my hand. "Her nose is broken. How'd it happen?"

"I stomped her instep, then elbowed her face."

He smiled as if he'd never doubted I could. "Well done."

I smiled, appreciating the fact that he wasn't angry about me immobilizing Jenna. He was a protective kind of guy. "I did it to protect you."

He took me in his arms. "Really? Guess that means I owe you."

I kissed him. "Let's go back to your place and I'll let you pay up."



## Epilogue

One week after the first day we met, Luke suggested watching a movie. As we snuggled on the couch, I realized this was our first real date. It was nice and—thankfully—normal. Once the movie ended, he took my hand. “You haven’t talked about your lunch with Carly.”

I shrugged. Good thing I’d invited her over for lunch instead of eating out. It hadn’t gone well. “She’s still hurt about Tom.”

“Understandable.”

“Yeah.” Tom hadn’t been involved in Jenna’s plot, but he’d been planning to rob the museum on his own. “She took it hard, but she knows she’s better off without him.”

“As for you...” he began. “You’re safe now, you know.”

“Looks like it.” Jenna and her two minions were in jail. All three faced assorted charges including breaking and entering and assault. It was too early to know how long she’d be in prison, but I didn’t sense any more danger from her.

That was something else that had changed for me—trusting my senses. I’d led with my mind instead of my heart for a long time. Relying on emotions was new; I was still getting used to it.

“Yeah.” He shifted on the couch.

I tilted my head, trying to meet his eyes. He wasn’t usually at a loss for words. “What’s up?” Then it occurred to me. “Oh. You probably want

your place back, right? I can go back to my condo." I stood, thinking I should start packing before I overstayed my welcome.

Still holding my hand, he pulled me down, this time to sit on his lap. "That's not what I meant. That's not what I want."

"Oh?" My heart started to thud.

"Erin, I know you're not in any more danger. But I want you to stay." He traced a finger on my back in casual patterns. "I want you to move in here. Permanently."

Oh. Wow. When I met his eyes, I saw a hint of uncertainty, a rarity for him. "Are you worried I won't stay if I don't need you to protect me?"

He shrugged and looked away.

He *was* worried. I understood what he was going through—it was similar to the feelings I'd had when I wondered if I could trust him. I took a deep breath and tried to decide how to reassure him. I could show him a pro and con list of reasons we should be together. I could give him logical reasons to explain what made us good for each other. I could tell him he gave me the best sex I'd ever had—not because of his technique, although I had no complaints there, but because he cared. We both cared. These were all valid reasons, designed to appeal to logic and the mind.

I did none of those things. Luke had been brave enough to share his feelings and face possible rejection. I needed to do the same. It was time to lead with my heart.

"If you'd asked me last month whether I would move in with a man I'd known a week, I would have said no. I had logical reasons for my opinion, reasons that don't seem to apply when we've been through as much as we have. Still, aside from the ring, our beliefs are pretty different."

He nodded, although I couldn't read his expression.

"I'll never believe in ghosts, for instance. But there's one thing I believe in, that I'll always believe in. You. I believe in you and I appreciate everything you did to help me. And there's something else. I believe in us."

He kissed my shoulder before burying his face in my throat.

## **The Seventh Sense by Lia Sebastian**

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“I need you, Luke, for so many reasons that have nothing to do with protection. Yes, I’ll move in here. If you help me pack.”

He cupped the back of my neck, brought my face close, and kissed me. When his hand lifted to stroke my curls, I smiled.

I didn’t have to see the ring to know it was upstairs in its case, glowing.

**The End**

**Author's Bio**

When she's not writing, Lia Sebastian enjoys nothing more than sightseeing, whether at the beach, museum, or unusual locations such as the Winchester Mystery House. Her love of adventure and her lifelong affection for books sparked her interest in writing. Since she loves writing about relationships—and happy endings—romance was a natural choice. Lia enjoys the discovery process and adventure of each new story. She appreciates hearing from readers! Please visit her Web site at <http://www.liasebastian.com>.