

# THE RING

## Chapter 1

*Hidden in his papal ring, there lives a demon.*

Accusation against Pope Boniface VIII made by Philip IV of France, the executioner of the Templars.

## ONE

It's not often that a woman receives two engagement rings in just one day.

That's what made my twenty-seventh birthday so special.

The first ring was a stunning diamond solitaire from Mike, the man I'd been going out with for over a year. A real coup.

Mike's the perfect guy, the kind every girl dreams of. Or at least should be dreaming of, and if she's not, her Mom definitely is. Any mother would be thrilled to marry her daughter off to someone like Mike. He's not just a stockbroker, but also the son of the company's owner, with a future beyond promising. You could say that he was born with a silver bond in his mouth.

The other ring was a surprise. It also demanded a commitment from me, but it had nothing to do with wedding vows. Or did it? That second ring would engage me not to a man, but to an adventure, an unusual adventure.

Of course, when it arrived I didn't know that. I didn't even have a clue as to who could have sent it to me. And if someone had told me who it was, I wouldn't have believed it. The second engagement ring was a gift from a dead man.

Neither did I know at the time that the two rings, or I should say the two commitments, were incompatible. But I kept them both and started getting used to the idea of a wedding and changing my last name to Harding, although I was very intrigued by the other strange ring. I'm a very curious person, so mysteries really get to me. But I suppose I should just tell you how it all happened...

The party was in full swing when there was a knock on the door. My friend Jennifer, in her long dress with its plunging neckline, and Susan, in tight low-slung pants, had started to dance, challenging the men. The guys, some of whom already had a few drinks under their belts, followed them with their eyes. Those girls really love to tease! Then a couple of clowns joined them, drink in hand, and that got the dancing started all around.

I didn't mind that those two booty-shaking women were making the guys drool. I was an engaged woman and Mike, my gorgeous fiancé, held me by the waist. We kissed. We laughed. We sipped our drinks. I was flashing an awesome engagement ring with a hefty multi-carat diamond on my hand. Mike had given it to me a few hours earlier, in the elegant French restaurant, near my apartment in the East Side of Manhattan, where he had taken me out to lunch for my birthday.

"Let me choose the dessert today," he'd said.

The waiter brought me a magnificent chocolate soufflé. I'm crazy about chocolate so I dove in, but after the third or fourth mouthful, my spoon hit something hard.

"Life is like a chocolate soufflé," Mike said in his best Tom Hanks-as-Forrest Gump imitation. "You never know what you'll find inside." I think he was

trying to warn me. The way I was wolfing down the soufflé I might have swallowed whatever was in there.

As I pushed aside the soufflé, I got a glimpse of a sparkle inside the luscious dark chocolate. I'd been expecting that one of these days my stock market genius was going to present me with small fortune in the form of a diamond ring, wrapped in promises of eternal love.

"Happy birthday, Cristina," he said very seriously.

"But this is a...!" I screamed, sucking the chocolate off of the ring.

"Will you marry me?" He was down on bended knee.

"How romantic!" I thought to myself.

The waiters and patrons at nearby tables, whose attention had been drawn by my shriek, were watching us with curiosity. I became thoughtful and, enjoying the show, looked around—the Persian rug, the lavish crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, the drapes. I acted like I was mulling it over. Mike watched me anxiously.

"Of course I will!" I said when the suspense had reached its climax.

I jumped up from my chair and kissed him. He smiled and the elegant audience gave us an enthusiastic round of applause.

But let's get back to the party...

Amid the sound of clinking glasses, the music and the simultaneous conversations, I didn't hear the knocking on the door, but John and Linda did and opened the door. Instead of calling me to come to the door, they decided that the visitor was so interesting that everyone should get a look at him. So

they had him come in. I found myself facing a very tall man decked in black motorcycle gear, who hadn't even deigned to take off his helmet when he entered the apartment.

"Miss Cristina Wilson?" he asked.

I felt a chill run down my spine. There was something sinister about the man. It suddenly felt like he'd brought in all the darkness of the night outside. Someone had lowered the music and everyone was listening attentively.

"That's me." I replied. Then, a moment later, I smiled.

Of course! That guy was going to sing *Happy Birthday* and do a striptease! A little surprise gift from one of my girlfriends, probably Linda or Jennifer. It would be fun. He paused and unzipped his jacket. Just as I thought he was about to take it off to reveal his buff triceps, he pulled out a small package from an inside pocket. The guests gathered around us, exhilarated.

"This is for you," he said, handing it to me.

I took the package, but kept looking at him expectantly, waiting for the show to begin. But instead of bumping and grinding, he unzipped another pocket and took out a pen and a piece of paper.

"Can I see some ID?" he asked curtly.

That seemed a bit much, but I had to go along with the joke. So I searched for my driver's license and showed it to him. He calmly jotted down the information. He was a consummate actor; we were all glued to his words and slightest movements. Was he about to start singing?

"Sign here."

"Okay, are you going to get on with it or what?" I said once he had my signature; all this intro was too much.

He gave me a strange look, and tearing off a copy of the document, he gave it to me, and with a "see you later," he left.

I wasn't expecting that, and I shot Mike a puzzled look. He shrugged his shoulders. I looked at the paper he'd given me; the copy was almost illegible and I could only make out my name. There was no sender.

"Wait!" I shouted and ran out after him.

I couldn't find him on the hallway; he had taken the elevator.

I went back inside where Mike still had a puzzle look on his face. So he wasn't a birthday surprise; he was a real messenger. I was intrigued. Who could have sent me that package?

"Are you going to open the present or what?" asked Ruth.

"We want to see what it is!" said a man's voice.

I realized that I still had the package in my hands. I had forgotten about it because I was focused on the man dressed in black.

I sat down on the sofa and rested the small package on the glass coffee table. I tried unsuccessfully to remove the cord tied around the wrapping. Everyone crowded around me asking what it could be and who had sent it. Someone brought me the cake knife, and when I got it open I found a small box of dark wood with a metal clasp. You could see that it was very old.

And inside, nestled in a green velvet cushion, there was a gold ring inset with a deep red stone. It looked antique.

"A ring!" I exclaimed.

I tried it on and it fit loosely on my middle finger. And I left it there, next to the diamond that sparkled on my ring finger.

Everyone wanted to see it, and there was another round of oohs and aahs over the size of the first ring's diamond.

"It's a ruby," said Ruth, referring to the other ring.

She is an expert in antique jewelry. She works at Sotheby's and knows a lot about gemology.

"It's strange looking," mentioned Mike.

"That's because centuries ago they didn't cut stones the way they do now," replied Ruth. "The cutting was rudimentary and the gems were polished into round shapes, like this ruby."

"How mysterious!" exclaimed Jennifer, before washing her hands of the whole affair.

The music got turned back up and she started dancing. And the party revived to the beat of her shaking booty.

While Mike mixed some drinks, I took a closer look at the box and the ring. And the delivery slip. There it was, on the coffee table. I had trouble reading it because the carbon had barely left an impression on the paper, but I finally made out: Barcelona, Spain.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Barcelona!"

That name certainly brought back a lot of memories!