

**Crystal Creek Series**  
**With This Ring**

Sequel to  
Crystal Creek Christmas  
from the

Crystal Creek Series

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Ring of Love  
A Short Story  
from the  
Crystal Creek Series

## Ring of Love

Noelle Beaupré stood before the closed door of her late husband's office. She had entered the room of the Palm Beach company every day for the past week to run his import export business, but still needed courage to open the door, sit at his desk, begin her work. She inhaled a lungful of air. A chill seeped through her, a chill that made her shoulders tremble.

She was now president of her husband's company, a position she inherited when her husband's partner, Wayne, murdered him.

Clenching her teeth, she wished she could lock an iron safe around her mind. If only she could block thoughts of her husband, the man who had married her and then pushed his way into the presidency of her family's business.

Slipping the key into the lock, Noelle closed her eyes and listened for the click that exploded in her ears whenever she unlocked the door. The click wasn't quite the jolt it had been yesterday and the day before that. Maybe she was getting used to the sound. Still, it shook her.

She pushed the door open. With unseeing eyes, she moved across the room and set her briefcase on the burlled walnut desk. In the chair, she laid the bag where she carried Favorite Cat, the barn cat that had stowed away in her car when she left the Crystal Creek Ranch.

FC nosed her way out of the bag and leaped to the floor. She sat on her haunches, wrapped her tail around her feet and watched Noelle.

Noelle's heart pounded a stomach-churning rhythm. Since she'd returned from the ranch, she had changed everything in the office – removed the paintings, the bronze statues, the window coverings. She'd even asked her assistant to remove all the desk items down to the blue pens and tape dispenser, and order new supplies.

She shook her head trying to remove the haunting memory. She needed to think about the present.

Dr. Jake Whitloch.

He was the present.

The tall, blue-eyed doctor had rescued her from a snowbank on the Crystal Creek Ranch. She had collapsed there when she had driven cross country to escape her now deceased husband. After Christmas, Jake had driven her to Florida so she could prove her innocence in her husband's murder and testify against Wayne.

Jake had stood beside her when she testified during the hearings. He helped her settle into her new role as president of the company.

But Jake wasn't a business man. He was a doctor. He'd studied years to save lives, not sit behind a desk.

His restlessness showed in the way he moved about the office, spent mornings running along the beach, volunteered at a clinic serving migrant workers.

Yesterday, she knew he would be moving on. Over a causal dinner in her new apartment, he mentioned his telephone conversation with the Boston hospital where he'd worked as an ER doc. The hospital wanted him to continue working there.

She should've been happy for him. Instead, she felt hollow.

She shouldn't have. There was no commitment between her and Jake. What man would want to commit to a woman with her sordid past?

A cold spot throbbed in her chest. When she had thought her husband was still alive, she'd crushed the urge to set her emotions free. She wanted to love Jake, but she was married to another.

For now, she was grateful for the short time she'd had with Jake. He had his own life. She had hers.

She closed the door to her office. From her purse, she withdrew a case. In the velvet lining lay a key, which she inserted into a lock on the underside of her desk. The edge of the desk loosened, and she pulled out a hidden drawer. In the center of the drawer was a keypad. She entered a code. On the opposite wall of her office, a panel slid to the side. Imbedded behind the panel was a steel door. In the middle of the door was a small screen. Down the center of the screen flickered a green line, sometimes straight, sometimes jagged.

She pulled her cell phone from her purse and scrolled through the apps until she found one shaped like a maple leaf. She pressed it and waited. The screen on the steel door flashed.

Stepping to the door, she leaned forward aligning her eye with the screen. A light moved past the screen, a light that digitally read her retina. A sound like steel balls falling down metal gutters sounded from behind the door. After a moment's silence, the door edged open. She stepped into the vault lined with metal drawers. The cool air touched her skin, and she wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

Something soft and furry brushed past her ankles. She looked down to see Favorite Cat circling her legs in a figure eight.

"FC." She scooped the cat into her arms and nuzzled the cat's silky fur. FC was warm and her purr vibrated against Noelle's chest. "This could be a dangerous place for a kitty. I don't want you to be locked in here."

FC scrunched her face into a ball that seemed to pull her face into a sea of fur.

"You think I have secrets in here. I have no secrets from you. If you learn to talk, I'm in trouble." Noelle set the cat on the floor of the vault. "You can stay as long as I'm in here, but you have to leave when I do. There won't be any light. I don't want you to be frightened."

FC meowed as if she were agreeing. She curled into a corner and watched Noelle.

Noelle inserted a key into one of the drawers and slid it open. From it, she removed a flat case the size of a coffee table book. She lifted the lid. The brilliance of the diamonds laying in the black velvet bed illuminated the vault's interior.

FC leaped to the shelf above the drawers and stared down at the glistening jewels. Her tail twitched. Her head moved back and forth as if trying to capture the twinkling diamonds laying before her.

The intercom in Noelle's office buzzed. "Ms. Beaupré?"

Noelle leaned through the vault's doorway to get a view of her desk. "Just a moment."

FC jumped from the shelf and balanced herself on the edge of the drawer. Her chin jerked. Her gaze fastened to the brilliance glittering on the tray.

The movement startled Noelle, and she twisted her head to the tray. FC scooped her paw at the diamonds.

Noelle laughed. "I see what you like, but these would make very expensive toys. Tell you what. After my meeting today, I'll stop at the pet store and see if I can't find you a toy that glitters like a diamond. For now, I need to take this call. Let's get out of here so I can lock up."

FC tilted her head as if disappointed she couldn't play with the diamonds. She jumped to the floor and scampered out the vault door.

Noelle closed the lid to the black box and carried it out of the vault. She secured the door then moved to her desk.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Janelle. You can transfer the call now."

She looked around her office expecting to see FC waiting by the door. She would want to be let out of the office.

FC didn't sit by the door. She wasn't anywhere in the office. She had disappeared.

Noelle set the case on her desk and lifted the lid. She would have to look for FC later. For now, she had to take this call.

It was nearly noon when a knock sounded on her office door, and it opened. Jake leaned his head through the doorway.

He was tall and powerfully built with a chiseled face and blue eyes that made her breathless whenever she looked into them.

"Are you ready for some lunch?" he asked.

"Is it that time already?" She leaned back into her chair. "I have a one o'clock meeting so it will have to be quick."

His mouth set. "I was hoping you had a little more time."

Her nerves tightened. He had something important to tell her. She knew what it would be. He would be telling her that he would be returning to Boston. The hospital hadn't replaced him. She had no hope that she and Jake could maintain a long distance relationship.

There was another complication. Jake's former girlfriend also worked at the hospital. Once they worked side by side again, they'd have the opportunity to work through their differences, pursue their relationship. Endless thoughts poured through Noelle's mind.

"I'm sorry. If I'd known you wanted to go out to lunch, I'd have rescheduled the meeting," Noelle said.

"My fault. Asking you out for lunch this late was poor planning on my part. Tonight would be better. How about dinner?"

"Dinner would be fine." She had to pull each word out of the back of her throat.

What was it that relationship experts always said? End a relationship in a public place.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"A little place down by the beach."

"It's casual?"

"No, nice."

"So I should dress up."

His brows lifted as if he had never considered the attire. "Yeah. Wear something nice. I've got some calls to make. I'll pick you up at seven."

He shut the door hard.

A frightened meow pierced the air. FC leaped onto Noelle's desk. She stood on all four, her back arched. The hair along her spine stuck straight out. Her amber eyes glowed.

"Come here, FC." Noelle reached for the cat.

FC leaned away, her ears plastered against her head.

“No, no, I won’t hurt you.” FC’s frightened expression touched Noelle’s heart. “You did nothing wrong. I can understand why the closing door frightened you. It frightened me.”

FC backed away until she reached the edge of the desk. She leaped to the floor and disappeared into the conference room.

Noelle leaned back into her chair and shook her head. She never had seen the cat so jumpy. It was almost as if FC had a secret.

Noelle rolled the chair to her desk. For now, she had work to do. She’d ask Janelle to order sandwiches and chips for the office staff. After a quick lunch, she’d be ready for her one o’clock meeting. After that, she’d drive to the pet store and look for a toy that glittered like diamonds. Then she’d have an hour to finish paperwork before going home to change for her dinner date with Jake. By seven o’clock tonight, she would know Jake’s plan. She would know if Jake planned to stay in Palm Beach or return to Boston.

That carved out feeling in her chest throbbed. She took a sip of cold coffee from her mug and grimaced. She wasn’t ready for Jake’s decision.

That evening, Noelle sat at her vanity and twisted her hair into a chignon at the nape of her neck. She wore a strapless red cocktail dress, a dress she’d never had the nerve to wear and never understood why she bought it. Red seemed too flashy for her personality.

Tonight would be different. She wanted to make a memory for Jake before he left, one that he would carry with him when he strode through the halls of the Boston hospital.

With an atomizer, she touched Aventus to her wrists and at the base of her neck.

On the floor, FC stared at the glittering toy Noelle had purchased at the pet store that afternoon. At first, the cat had been intrigued by the toy, but now she looked bored as if she knew the sparkling stones weren’t real diamonds.

Noelle opened the front door of her jewelry box. Necklaces hung from hooks like dresses in a closet. FC leaped onto the vanity and stared at the dazzling ornaments.

“For a barn cat, you have expensive tastes, FC.” Noelle scooped up the cat and nestled her into her lap.

FC’s head switched back and forth as if making sure she didn’t miss a single twinkle sitting in the jewelry box.

Noelle lifted a diamond necklace with a teardrop pendant from the box, the necklace her father had given her mother on their twelfth anniversary.

She inhaled a shuddering breath, remembering. It was only a few months later that cancer had overtaken her mother’s body. Her mother had died a week before Noelle’s eleventh birthday, a week before Christmas.

“Ms. Beaupré?” The concierge’s voice sounded over the intercom.

Noelle gave a start. She inhaled deeply, praying a calming breath would soothe her nerves. It didn’t. She wished she could look into a crystal ball and know if by the end of the evening she would be happy or sad.

FC jumped to the floor. She curled her tail around her haunches and watched.

Noelle clutched the necklace and moved to her bedside. She pressed the keypad above the nightstand. “Yes, Henry?”

“Dr. Jake Whitloch is here to see you.”

Noelle swallowed trying to ease the tightening in her throat. "Please send him up." Her voice sounded steady and calm. That wasn't how she felt. Instead, she felt as if she were trapped in a boat and being tossed by waves. "Thank you, Henri."

She stepped to the cheval mirror and tried to fasten the necklace. It was no use. The clasp was delicate and small.

From the living room, she heard the elevator door open. She sighed, scooped up her stole and evening bag and walked down the hallway. FC scampered down the hall ahead of her and leaped onto the sofa.

Noelle entered the living room as Jake stepped out of the elevator.

He stopped. He wore an open collar polo shirt with tailored pants. One finger hooked his blazer over his shoulder. His gaze swept from her face to her open toed sandals.

Noelle felt the heat flood her cheeks, and she glanced away.

"You look incredible," Jake said, his voice husky.

"Thanks." Noelle looked at him through her lashes. "You look pretty wonderful yourself."

"Compared to you, I look like a derelict you rescued from the beach." She started to protest, but he continued. "You'll make me look good. Are you ready?"

"Yes." She lifted her stole to wrap it around her shoulders when she realized she still held her mother's diamond necklace. "Except I need help with this." She held up the necklace. "Do you mind?"

He draped his blazer over the back of the sofa. "Gladly."

She laid her stole and evening bag on an end table. Turning away, she positioned the necklace over her collar bone and held up the ends of the necklace for him to grasp.

His fingers touched hers sending a current of emotion through her. She shivered, not because she cold. She burned inside.

"You smell wonderful." His breath was warm against the back of her neck.

He locked the clasp at the nape of her neck, his movements touching the fine hair that curled at her nape. She tingled from his touch.

"That should do it." He stepped away.

The distance between them seemed like light years. Cool air settled over her shoulders. When she faced him, he was watching her with such an intensity it felt as if he'd touched her, smoothed his hands down her arms, pulled her to him. What thoughts were going through his mind? What was he going to tell her at dinner tonight?

She wanted the evening to be over. She wanted it to last forever.

He lifted her stole from the end table and held it open for her. She turned and stepped into the silky fabric. He draped it over her shoulders. He smoothed the garment into place, his hands lingering for a moment, then stepped away.

"Shall we?" He reached for his jacket.

FC had slipped a paw into the jacket's inside pocket. Her eyes widened as if feeling guilt for rummaging through Jake's jacket.

"Hey, FC, what are you looking for?" Jake scratched the cat beneath her chin.

She nuzzled his hand and purred. She looked up at him with round golden eyes.

"Hard to be mad at that face." He slipped on his jacket. "Shall we?"

"Let's." She moved toward the elevator.

Jake touched the small of her back and guided her across the floor.

He made small talk on the way to the restaurant. None of which she remembered. She couldn't even remember if she had responded to any of the conversation. At the restaurant, the valet opened her car door and offered her his hand. Jake stepped to her side. Taking her hand, he led her into the restaurant.

Several women looked at him, but he didn't seem to notice. Noelle did. She felt proud to be with him. He was handsome and looked intelligent. If only she could be on his arm forever.

In the foyer, a woman wearing a black halter dress greeted them and led them through tables covered with white table cloths and around stalwart pillars. The glass ceiling framed the moon and twinkling stars. A floor to ceiling fish tank stretched across one wall. The tinkling of crystal glasses and conversation filled the air.

The hostess stopped in front of a corner booth. "Is this acceptable?"

Jake looked around as if gaging the distance of the table from the other diners. "Yes, this is perfect."

Something squeezed in Noelle's chest. Perfect for what? For the news he was about to share with her?

A schefflera sat between them and the other diners. To hide her shock when Jake announced he was returning to Boston?

A few moments after the hostess left them, the waiter appeared with menus and a basket of freshly baked honey rolls. The sommelier set a bucket of iced champagne on the table. Another waiter placed two flutes in the table's center.

After presenting the label to Jake, the sommelier wrapped the bottle in a white cloth and removed the cork. Foam crested the bottle's opening. The young man poured a sampling into Jake's glass. After Jake's approval, the sommelier filled both glasses, set the bottle in the bucket and disappeared.

Jake lifted his glass. "Shall we toast?"

"We have to toast to something." Noelle picked up her glass.

"To the best reason in the entire world. To us." He touched his glass to hers.

The shiver she had felt earlier when Jake had clasped her necklace, ran down her spine. He toasted to them. Now she was more curious than ever to know his reason for planning this intimate dinner.

"Are you cold? Do you want to move to another table?" Jake tilted his chin at an angle where the light reflected in his eyes making the deep blue deeper and bluer.

Her lungs locked, letting no air in or out. She knew she should look away, but she couldn't resist those eyes filled with concern. Something else hid in those depths. Something she couldn't decipher but made her want to know him more, better, inside and out.

By some miracle, she exhaled. "No, I'm fine. This table is fine." She glanced around as if taking in the ambience. Nothing registered, not the finely dressed patrons, not the exquisitely arranged entrees, not the staff's efficient moves.

What she couldn't do was look into Jake's blue eyes. Not with the way he made her feel.

"I like this location. It's quiet, private," she said.

"If you want to move, let me know."

"Jake, everything's fine. Really."

"I'll take your word for it." He touched his glass to hers again. "Do agree to my toast?"



“You toasted to us. Yes, I agree.” What she wanted more than anything was to believe he saw a future for them. Together.

She sipped the sparkling liquid. She hardly felt the bubbles tickling her nose.

Jake looked at her over the edge of his goblet. His eyes intense and penetrating. She felt as if he were touching her, his powerful hands moving over her shoulders, down her arms, pulling her close.

He set his glass on the table. “Noelle, I feel as if I’ve known you my entire life. Every morning, I wake up and I think I can’t believe it’s been less than two weeks since we’ve met.”

Jake’s words exploded in her head. Had she heard correctly? Did he say he was glad to have her in his life?

Noelle’s goblet slipped in her fingers. She set it on the table. What he said didn’t sound like a plan to leave her. “It doesn’t make sense. I feel the same way.”

He wrapped his fingers around hers. She felt his warmth, his strength, his consuming masculinity. She felt a flush rising to her face. She didn’t want him to let go. The current of emotions rushing between them pulled her closer, closer still, as if she were melting into him.

Jake released her hand. His face looked serious, not hard or stern, but as if he had thought of something important.

“What is it?” The muscles in the back of her neck tensed.

He reached inside his jacket pocket. “I can’t believe I’m about to do this, but I want to ask you—.”

A frown creased between his brows. He patted his jacket across his chest, and at his waist. He tossed a meaningful glance across the restaurant.

He held up his index finger and slid out of the booth. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t . . .” She began, but he was halfway across the restaurant before she spoke.

Noelle watched him until he disappeared behind a barricade of pillars. She tapped her fingernails against the base of her champagne glass. She thought he was about to propose to her.

It felt as if liquid were pouring through her chest - as if a hot casement had cracked and broken.

I want to marry you.

It was as if she were hearing him speak those words. Now.

But he never said them. The tension in her shoulders sliced across her skin.

She didn’t know when Jake had approached the table. She didn’t see him. She didn’t hear him.

He held out his hand to her. “Let’s go.”

Noelle looked around herself, stupidly, as if trying to discern who Jake was talking to. She touched fingers to her chest. “We’re leaving?”

“We can’t stay.”

Noelle’s head moved slowly taking in the champagne bottle sitting in the ice bucket. Condensation collected on the side. Two champagne glasses still bubbled with the golden liquid. Her lip print was pressed to the brim of her glass.

She picked up her evening bag and moved to the edge of the booth. “I don’t understand.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

Jake shook his head as if trying to stop anything else she would say.

The return ride to her apartment building was quieter than death. The headlights from the passing cars seemed to press in on her like a bright light in an interrogation room.

What happened? What changed? Jake was ebullient when he picked her up. Now it seemed he couldn't get away from her quickly enough. Was he having second thoughts?

She had no answers.

He rode up the apartment elevator with her. His left leg jiggled as if he were tensing his kneecap. He tapped the fingers of his left hand against his thigh. He never spoke.

The elevator door slid open. He held out a hand indicating he would follow her.

In the apartment, he moved past her and stepped into the sunken living room. His gaze traveled from the living room to the dining room to the foyer. He stood by the sofa and scanned the cushions.

She remained in front of the elevator.

He looked at her, his face shuttered and hard. "I need to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

She spread her hands to him in question. "Jake, I –."

He strode up the steps and across the foyer. Taking her elbows in his hands. He pressed his lips to her forehead.

They felt cold.

She sucked in her breath.

He stepped into the elevator. She turned just as the doors closed. He wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the panel above the door where the floor numbers would be illuminated.

If she had looked into the crystal ball earlier that day, she would've seen what the crystal ball didn't want to tell her – the evening would be the worst night of her life.

In the living room, she tossed her evening bag to the sofa. She unwrapped the stole from her shoulders and draped it over a side chair.

FC leaped into the chair. Sitting back on her haunches, she batted the air.

Noelle scooped her into her arms. "I don't know why he had to leave. The evening was going wonderfully. The restaurant was divine. The champagne bubbling. Then everything changed."

She scratched FC behind the ears. Crossing the living room, she opened the sliding door to the lanai and stepped into the cool night air. She looked below.

Jake strode across the parking lot to his car. His hand on the door handle, he hesitated. He glanced over his shoulder to the apartment building, to Noelle.

His mouth seemed to curve, but not into a smile. It looked more like regret. He opened the door, climbed in and started the engine. The car crept out of the parking lot. When it reached the thoroughfare, it went full throttle and zipped into the dark.

In her bedroom, Noelle unclasped the diamond necklace and hung it in her jewelry box. She unzipped her dress and let it fall into a heap around her ankles. She slipped off her sandals and left them inside her dress.

At her bureau, she pulled on a camisole covered with hearts and silky pajama shorts. She climbed into bed. Laying on her side, she tucked her elbows to her chest. FC leaped to the mattress and curled into Noelle's curves.

Noelle willed sleep to come, but it dropped on her like stones being tossed by a bully. She wished morning would come quickly so she could go to the office and work, forget what happened tonight and breathe naturally again.

The clock rolled to three in the morning. A gentle rain fell outside her window. Lightning streaked across the sky.

She flung her arms to her side. Why waste her time trying to sleep, when sleep refused to come? She threw back the covers and stalked into the bathroom. Steam filled the tiled shower stall. She slipped out of her pajamas and climbed inside. She wouldn't waste anymore time trying to sleep when sleep refused to come. She'd go to the office and get some work done.

An hour later, she was dressed and checking the contents of her briefcase. Outside, thunder cracked. Flashes of light bolted into her apartment. The outside felt like her insides – gloomy, stark.

FC circled her ankles, looked up at her and meowed.

Noelle scooped her into her arms and felt the vibrating purr in the cat's chest.

"I'd take you to the office, but it's raining outside. If you got wet, you'd be very unhappy."

As if Noelle had annoyed her, FC shrugged out of Noelle's embrace and leapt to the floor. She sniffed at Noelle's tote bag and stepped inside.

Noelle laughed. The feeling felt good, and that surprised her. It seemed as if she hadn't laughed in eons.

"If you want to go that badly, I'll take you. You have to promise to be good."

It was still dark when Noelle unlocked her office. She brewed a pot of coffee then stepped into her office. From the safe, she removed a narrow box and carried it to her desk. She unlocked the cover and lifted the lid.

In the office light, the diamonds sparkled and glittered like a star-studded night.

FC jumped to the desk and peered down at the tray. She leaned so close to the diamonds, her nose almost touched them.

"I guess diamonds aren't just a girl's best friend. They can be a cat's best friend, too."

From the front office, Noelle heard the outside intercom buzz at the same time thunder cracked across the sky. The rain fell harder. Fear lodged in her throat. FC huddled against her.

Noelle drew the cat into her arms and nuzzled her face in the cat's fur. The pads of FC's feet felt rough. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I wasn't expecting anyone to come to the office at this hour."

She stared through her office door into the outer room, which was dark except for one ceiling light. The buzzer sounded again. She jumped and clutched FC. The cat huddled in her arms.

Noelle didn't want to go into the reception area. Whoever was at the door could look through the glass and see her. Her heart beat wildly. She looked at the phone. She wanted to call the police, but what if one of her employees had forgotten his key? She'd feel like a fool.

But what would one of her employees be doing at the office at this hour?

She reached for the phone.

"Noelle." Jake's voice sounded through the intercom.

She swallowed convulsively. How did he know she was here? Did he follow her? Had he gone to her apartment and discovered she'd left?

She pressed the intercom button. "Jake?"

"I need to talk to you. Can you let me in?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep. I went to your apartment, but you'd already left. I assumed you'd come here."

She waited. Not sure what to do. She trusted him. She loved him. That realization made her heart drop. She loved him.

"I'm sorry, Noelle." Humiliating silence followed. "I shouldn't have come. I didn't mean to frighten you. I'll come back later."

"It's okay, Jake. I'll let you in."

She reached to close the lid over the diamonds. Her glance at the tray was brief, but something didn't look right. She looked at the tray again. Fewer diamonds lay in the tray.

Something burned in her chest. How could the diamonds have disappeared? She hadn't counted them but she knew there were fewer. Earlier, she had seen a cluster of diamonds in the upper right-hand corner of the tray.

They were gone.

She closed the lid and flipped the latch, locking the case. Clutching FC to her chest, she rushed through the reception area and unlocked the office door.

Jake pushed through the door. He shook the rain out his hair spraying Noelle and FC.

The cat shrank in Noelle's arms.

"Sorry." Drops of water dripped from his hair that now sprang around his head in loose curls.

"It's okay, Jake. I'll dry. It might take a tuna fish soufflé before FC forgives you."

"I can manage that. What about you? Can you forgive me?"

She gave a broken laugh, a laugh that didn't hide the pain in her heart. "Forgive you for what?"

"For last night." Jake paced in a circle in front of her, his palms tipped to the ceiling. "Canceling the date. In the middle of the date."

"I admit that was a little odd."

"Downright weird." He cupped his hands around her elbows. "Can you forgive me?"

"Of course. Of course. What happened? You were talking about how we'd only known each other for such a short time. And then everything changed."

Shaking his head, Jake tucked his chin to his chest and then looked at the ceiling. He exhaled roughly. "I'll have to tell you sooner or later."

"I'm ready now." She tried to smile, but sadness was like a tattoo engraved on her heart.

"Maybe you already suspected. I had planned to propose to you last night. When I reached for the ring, it was gone. I know it was in my pocket when I was at your apartment. I checked my pocket before the elevator door opened."

"You think you lost it in my apartment?"

"Or at the restaurant. I didn't check again until we were seated at the booth."

"I don't mean to be catty, but was it a diamond ring?"

His face tightened, confusion lingering in his eyes. "An engagement ring is a diamond ring."

Noelle moved past him into her office. "I'm wondering if this is a coincidence."

"That I lost your engagement ring? What's coincidental about that?" Impatience laced his voice.

"Because I appear to be missing some diamonds." She unlocked the lid of the diamond case and lifted it.

The diamonds in the black velvet lining glittered and shimmered.

FC twisted in Noelle's arms. The pads of her feet scratched Noelle's skin.

Noelle held the cat away from herself. "FC, be careful."

FC went limp in Noelle's grasp, except for her eyes. Her eyes locked into the dazzling diamonds.

“Have you ever seen this before, Jake? Look at how intense FC is. She’s absolutely fascinated by these diamonds. She was like this yesterday and again this morning.”

“Noelle, look at your arms. You’re bleeding.”

Noelle looked down. A thin trail of blood crossed her forearm. “It’s FC. The pads of her paws are rough.”

Jake removed FC from Noelle’s arms and set the cat on the floor. FC leaped to the desk, her nose inches from the diamonds. Jake closed the lid to the box of diamonds. FC’s face seemed to droop, and she looked up at Jake.

He didn’t seem to notice her pitiful expression. Instead, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed it at the scratches on Noelle’s arm.

His touch was gentle and reassuring and sent a soothing warmth through her.

“Do you have a first aid kit here? I should put some antiseptic on the scratches,” he said.

“I’ll be fine, Jake. It’s just a scratch.”

“It’s many scratches.” He rotated her arm.

Irritated lines covered her skin.

FC paced circles around the diamond box. She nudged the lid with her nose. A strange tapping noise sounded whenever she stepped along the desk’s surface.

“Why are her feet so noisy?” Noelle lifted the cat and rolled her to her back.

FC’s legs straightened. Her claws extended.

“Relax, FC. I want to see what’s on your feet. I want to make sure you’re okay.” Noelle rubbed her thumb over the cat’s feet.

Her thumb caught on a sharp edge. She pressed the cat’s toes until they separated.

Lodged between the pads of FC’s feet were diamonds.

Noelle gasped.

“What is it?” Jake frowned and leaned his head close to hers. “What the —.” His gaze met Noelle’s. “How did that happen?”

“These are the diamonds that were sitting in the tray earlier. Something happened. I looked away for a moment. When I looked at the tray again, I could tell that some diamonds were missing, but couldn’t figure out where they had gone. FC must’ve placed her paw on the tray hard enough so that the stones lodged between the pads of her feet.” Noelle checked FC’s other feet. Each had diamonds lodged between the toes. “Jake, look at this.”

“I believe we found our jewel thief.” Jake scratched the cat’s ears.

FC purred and closed her eyes.

“FC isn’t all innocence,” Noelle said. “She’s using that pretty face of hers to fool us. Wait, Jake, I have an idea.”

“I’m getting the same idea. Let’s go back to your apartment.”

Inside Noelle’s apartment, she and Jake stepped out of the elevator.

“If FC stole the engagement ring, where do you think she would’ve put it?” Jake scanned the living room.

“You draped your jacket over the back of the sofa. Maybe it dropped onto one of the cushions.”

Noelle sat FC on the sofa. “Do you want to show us where you put the engagement ring, FC?”

The cat sniffed then sauntered into a corner of the sofa and curled herself into a ball. She had turned sulky when Noelle had removed the diamonds lodged between her toes. Now, she rested her head on her front paw, but she never stopped watching Noelle and Jake.

"I guess that means she's not going to help us," Jake said. "Shall we go through the sofa ourselves?"

"Let's get started." Noelle pulled a cushion out of the sofa.

FC sprang to her feet and leapt to the floor. She sat next to a grandfather's clock and curled her tail around her feet.

Jake and Noelle pulled all the cushions off the sofa and checked every crevice.

No ring.

Jake pushed the cushions back into the sofa. "Where else would she have put that ring? And don't tell me the litter box."

"You read my mind."

"Ugh. Tell me where it is. I'll look for it. You don't need to help."

"Before you start, I have another idea. Follow me."

Noelle led Jake into her room to the jewelry box standing in the corner. She opened the doors. "Last night when I was getting ready for our date, I noticed FC was very intrigued by the diamond necklace I chose to wear. I'm just wondering . . ."

Hoping.

She had no idea where FC would put a ring, nor how she would do it, but she had to check. Maybe just maybe . . .

Noelle looked through every cabinet in every drawer of the jewelry box. She lifted the lid on top of the box.

Lying in a jumble with other jewelry sat a diamond ring. Noelle lifted it from the drawer.

"I've never seen this before. I know this doesn't belong to my mother."

Jake covered her hand with his. "That's because this ring belongs to you. Thank God, you found it."

"Thank God, we don't have to pilfer the litter box." Noelle turned away.

"Where are you going?" Jake caught her arm and trailed his fingers down to her hand.

She frowned. "We found the ring."

"That's just the beginning." Still holding her hand, he dropped to one knee.

Noelle touched fingers to her throat. "Jake." Her voice was filled with emotion.

"Can you ever forgive me for ruining our date last night?"

"It wasn't you. FC's to blame."

"I should've been more careful. Noelle, you're the most wonderful woman I've ever met. Every day, I find out something new and different and better about you. As I was saying last night, I know we barely know each other, but I actually feel I've known you all my life. I don't want to spend another moment of my life without you. I love you, Noelle. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me? Would you allow me to put this ring on your finger?" He held the ring at the end her finger.

"Jake, I, yes, I'll marry you. I love you, too, as crazy as it sounds, since I barely know you."

He slipped the ring on her finger. Rising, he gathered her into his arms, pressed his lips to hers.

"Oh, Noelle." He breathed.

A loud crack sounded from the other side of the room.

Jake and Noelle jerked apart their stares riveted to her vanity.

As if feeling their stares, FC sat hard on the vanity glass top. Her head hunched into her shoulders, she looked at her two owners. Dangling from her mouth was the diamond necklace Noelle had worn the evening before.

“FC,” they both shouted.

FC backed away, the necklace anchored in her mouth. Her hind feet slipped over the edge of the vanity. Still, the cat never stopped watching her owners and never stopped moving away. She slipped over the edge, her front paws trying to cling to the slippery edge.

Noelle scooped her in her arms and nuzzled her face into the cat’s fur. “You little thief. What am I going to do with you?” She lifted the necklace from FC’s grasp and laid it on the dresser.

“I think we need to place this cat into therapy,” Jake said. He rubbed a knuckle behind the cat’s ear. “After that, she’s on probation until we can cure her of her thievery.”

He wrapped his arm around Noelle and pulled her close to him. With FC trapped between them, the cat purred loudly and closed her eyes.

“In the meantime, I’m enjoying this moment,” Jake said. “I’m with my two best girls. I’ll be with them for the rest of my life. I’m the happiest man alive.”