

IS THERE ANYTHING WORSE THAN
PLANNING YOUR SISTER'S CHRISTMAS WEDDING
AFTER BEING JILTED AT YOUR OWN?



A SWEET ROMANTIC
COMEDY

MALLARY MITCHELL

*Worst Christmas
Ever!*

Worst Christmas Ever

Mallory Mitchell

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Worst Christmas Ever

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Dedication

For Matthew and Addyson.

Prologue

The soft white fabric beckoned. Should she —

“Sara Jane?” Her five-year-old cousin called up the stairs.

“I’ll be down in a moment. Finish your movie.” In the privacy of her attic bedroom, Sara Jane Connolly wiped her tears and gave in to temptation. She pulled the wedding dress over her head covering her tank top and jeans. She wouldn’t be wearing the shimmering, bead-encrusted, perfectly-fitted fairytale dress tomorrow because her fiancé had dumped her yesterday.

So had her family, essentially. They’d gone to the Christmas village without her “because she’d just be a dampener on their trip to see the holiday lights.” Her heartache hadn’t stopped Mom from volunteering Sara Jane to babysit Sam. Evidently, she wouldn’t dampen the spirits of a five-year-old.

Sara Jane sighed. At least Brad hadn’t waited until she was walking down the aisle to drop the news. “Yo babe, I found someone else.”

OK, so Brad didn’t really talk like that. In reality, he hadn’t said anything at all. He’d texted her. Yesterday morning.

Her tears stopped falling as the dress’s progress came to a full stop. She tugged a bit more.

Had she gained weight? Memories of yesterday’s chocolate cake taunted her. Nope...this had fit

perfectly at her last fitting. Once she got it to pass the band of her bra it would be—

Stuck.

She couldn't breathe.

The dress had been roomy ten days ago. Now, she stared into the antique oval mirror as best she could through the neck of the dress. Sara Jane made a frantic turn, first right and then left, trying in vain to get a grip on something to pull. Her hands poked from the sleeves like the tiny limbs of a rampaging T-Rex.

Breathe, Sara Jane. Being slightly claustrophobic, her heart raced. Adrenaline surged through her veins. She tugged some more.

Sara Jane attempted to shimmy from the dress. She tried to pull it down farther. No luck. Maybe if she could back out... She tripped over a box and landed hard on her backside.

"Sara Jane what was that big boom?" Samuel's footfalls sounded.

"I fell." And the boom wasn't so big.

"Oh." Samuel answered. His voice louder now. "When are we going to eat?"

She tried to turn the dress. Maybe if she could get her elbow through the unzipped back...

She couldn't see but heard Sam padding toward her.

"I'm starvin'." The loud gurgle of his stomach punctuated the claim.

The dress turned slightly, but wouldn't budge up or down. She strained her neck and peered through the opened zipper portal with one eye.

"Mommy says its dinner time when my tummy growls."

Another loud gurgle followed.

"I'm starvin' again."

"I'll get your chicken fingers as soon as I get this dress off." Chicken fingers sounded disgusting. Who really wanted to eat fingers? Chickens didn't even have fingers. They had toes—

She stopped. What was it one was supposed to do to remain calm? Oh yeah, breathe deeply.

That wasn't going to happen.

Sam's gaze raked over her. His mouth hung open. His eyes were wide.

"Sam, can you grab the sleeves and pull?"

"Are you stuck?"

Calm. Exude calm. "Yes, I am."

At five years of age Sam wouldn't be much help, but maybe, just maybe, he could change the direction of the force, and her arms would be free of the shrink-wrapped sleeves. Then, maybe she could extricate herself from the constricting band of the bodice, and breathe.

That was a lot of maybes.

Sweat pooled in her armpits. Pressure built behind her eyes and made her temples throb. Her venture now had her trussed like tomorrow's celebratory turkey. She might as well be in a strait jacket...her breathing hitched up another notch. "Pull, Sammy!"

She whined and he grunted.

Her composure was failing. She now felt faint.

She was going to die in this dress. There would be urban legends years from now about a jilted bride who died so tragically that sometimes you could still see her on this very spot, wailing through an open slit in the dress that suffocated her. *Lord, help me out of this mess. I'm obviously losing my mind.*

Sara Jane spied her cellphone and jerked her

head—not just her head because one couldn't move just the head while wrapped up like a mummy in a bad 1950s B-movie—in the general direction. "Bring me the phone."

"I know just what to do." The light of discovery on Sam's little face gave her hope that she would not die this Christmas Eve eve from being squeezed to death by her own wedding gown.

Sam grabbed her phone, padded down, and then up the stairs. As he drew closer she made out that the muffled voice on the other end was male, but she couldn't catch his words, so she listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Yes, um, this is Samuel McKay." He paused and nodded. "Uh huh. Sure is. Sara Jane is in the attic and she's really, really stuck. We need the jaws of life."

"Sammy?" Sara Jane called. "Honey, what number did you dial?" Her tone dropped to one of utter horror...to whom was he speaking when he'd said she needed the "jaws of life"?

"Yes sir, that's her."

"Yep, it's just me and Sara Jane, 'cause everybody else went out to see the Christmas lights, and Aunt Augusta told Mama she didn't want me runnin' around that place like a wild little animal, and since Sara Jane said she'd rather walk on hot coals than go out, Aunt Augusta said Sara Jane could keep me here and we watched that movie you know the one about the dog who—" Sam nodded again. "Yes."

Obviously Uncle Brendan, the editor of a newspaper, hadn't taught his son the concept of a full stop in speech. Talk about a run on sentence.

Sara Jane made a Houdini-esque attempt to free herself.

Dear Lord, I know I've not been praying enough or going to church enough, but could You please help me? Help me get out of this. I need help here.

"Samuel Elijah McKay, who is that?"

"OK." Sammy hit the disconnect button on the phone. "He's on his way."

"Did you call your daddy?" Uncle Brendan would never let her forget this...ever.

Her little cousin began telling her about something or other, and she just smiled and tried to keep breathing. It was becoming increasingly difficult.

"Sara Jane, I'm here to save you." The sardonic soft male voice didn't belong to her sister or her uncle. "Sam?"

"Here. We're in the attic."

That was quick. The floor creaked with steps from someone much larger than Sam.

"Where is—Sara Jane?"

Max. His baritone voice washed over her. He must have been at his parents' house across the street. She felt the heat of his body as he stood close. She looked one-eyed through the open zipper again into familiar caramel eyes.

Lord, I'm ready to go now. Take me, please.

"I thought you'd fallen through the ceiling the way he was talking." He turned a three-sixty. "Wow, you made this into your room. It's really nice now. Did you plan the renovation?"

"Yeah. Mom gave me carte blanche. So I did a few updates. Are you home for Christmas?" She tried to ignore the fact her muscles were now starting to spasm and she was still stuck in a wedding dress. She truly wished the attic floor *would* open and swallow her.

Maxwell Dixon knelt. As if assessing her situation,

his dark eyes narrowed. His face held an unreadable expression. "Wow." He put his hand to his chin. "I'm assuming this is—*was* your wedding dress."

"You knew?"

"Of course, I knew."

"Can you get me out of this? Please."

"I don't know." Now the corners of his mouth tipped in an ever-so-slight smile. "This is such a picture-worthy moment."

A little smirk showed on the face she knew as well as her own, right down to the little scar above his lip where a baseball had hit him smack in the mouth when he was sixteen.

"If you're finished posting my humiliation, I'd like to breathe again."

"I didn't take a picture. I'm not that coldhearted."

"I know." She really did.

"I don't think we're going to get this off without ripping it." He sighed.

"It's not like I'm ever going to wear it."

Max circled her as if the engineer in him was trying to discern the best angle and pitch to remove her from the dress. Sam followed, mimicking Max's mannerisms. If she weren't at death's door, she would smile.

"Exactly how did this happen?" Max questioned.

"I bet it drew up when Alexa washed it for you this afternoon." Sam offered the tidbit of information.

"What?" Sara Jane nearly growled. Her evil little sister had struck again?

"Lexa said you wouldn't mind, and that I couldn't tell you she got makeup on it...or that she washed it." He scrunched up his face. "Man, I forgot the part about not telling."

The full skirt rose and fell as Sara Jane shrugged her shoulders and looked down. "Whatever."

Max put his index finger on her forehead and pushed up her head. He gazed into her eye and gave his cute, crooked smile. "Just hold on a minute. I got this."



Max removed his pocketknife and smiled inwardly at the thought of cutting through the soft fabric. While he didn't like Sara Jane being upset, the fact that she wasn't getting married tomorrow brought relief. He kept the smile from his face. They'd been best friends since his parents moved in across the street when he was ten. He'd loved her since. But to her he'd never been anything other than a good friend—except for a brief stint as her high school boyfriend—No, correction: he'd been her minion. The jester to her big-headed queen of hearts.

After graduation, he'd gone to NC State and she'd attended the University of Georgia—if he hadn't known that, the multiple bulldog pennants tacked to the walls would have clued him in. They grew apart. They broke up.

Then, she started hanging with Brad Myers's crowd.

"Max? I'm sorry I didn't invite you."

"Yeah, I get it. It's fine. I think tradition dictates that you generally don't invite old boyfriends to your wedding."

"Something like that."

She was deflated. He didn't want to cause her any more pain, and yes, teasing her about a picture had

been mean.

Her pain was palpable. He felt her despair. Why did she still affect him so? He gazed into those big baby blues of hers—correction: baby blue; only one eye was visible—and stopped. Her eyelid, rimmed with smudged liner, brimmed with tears.

“Oh, no. You are not going to cry.” He said with more force than he’d meant to.

She blinked rapidly.

“Can’t you get her out?” Sam had his mouth pulled to one side and his arms were crossed. “She shouldn’t have put that on. Daddy always says you can’t get ten pounds of taters in a five-pound bag.”

Sara Jane’s face flamed with red color.

“It fit before Lexa Luther got ahold of it. Just get me out of it. I can’t get my breath.”

Did that mean mouth-to-mouth was a possibility?

Max leaned in, close to her beautiful ear, unlike his, that stuck out like side mirrors on a car. At least now he had the good sense to let his hair cover them. He put his lips close to the pearl stud in her ear lobe. “You’ll owe me,” he whispered.

“Fine. Just get me free before the others get back.”

He waved the knife, and her eye rounded before squeezing shut.

“Just do it.” she said through clenched teeth.

After the initial cut, he ripped the fabric with both hands.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Thanks. I need a glass of tea.” She grabbed Sam, quite obviously happy to finally leave her room, and the dress, behind.

Max stopped her under the archway separating the dining and living room, and Sara Jane flung her

arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. *Nice.*

"Thank you Max. You're my hero."

Hero was a bit over-the-top, but sure, he'd be her hero.

The door opened and she pulled away from the hug. He kept an arm at her waist.

An elderly woman entered, crossed her arms, and frowned. "You must be the infamous text writer," she snapped. "Why are you here?"

"Uh, nope. That's not me." He'd never break up with someone via text message. He held Sara Jane tighter for support and tried to convince himself it wasn't because he still cared for her when she had obviously moved on.

"For heaven's sake, it's cold out here. Move from the doorway." Sara Jane cringed at her mother's dulcet tone.

Sara Jane's mother stopped short upon seeing Max.

"What's everyone staring at?" Lexa, pushed through a hole. "What did Sammy do now?"

"Nothin'." The kid protested.

"What is *he* doing here? Really, what will the neighbors say? You were just left at the altar and here you are with your high school sweetheart." Lexa dumped her bags on the bench seat in the foyer.

"He just came to take off her dress."

Everyone froze in place.

The white-haired woman pinned Max with a piercing stare. He didn't know who she was, but judging by the resemblance to Augusta—death glare included—she had to be some distant relation to Sara Jane's mother.

"Lexa, Lexa." Sam tugged on Lexa's sleeve as Jenna, Sara Jane's aunt, maneuvered around them both.

"I told her 'bout you trying on her dress and that you washed it for her because there was makeup on it and that's why she got stuck—"

"What were you doing in my room, trying on my wedding dress?" Sara Jane seemed to realize he still had his hand at her waist and stepped away slowly as if not wanting to draw attention to the embrace.

Lexa, scrolled on her cellphone and texted. "It's not like you were going to use it."

"I could have returned it."

Her mother gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Sara Jane, it was just an accident, and it's not like you're going to use it."

A jumble of voices followed.

Max squeezed Sara Jane's hand and pulled her onto the front porch.

"Sorry about Great-aunt Sophie."

"She was just defending you. No worries. See you tomorrow?"

"By all means, and thanks." She gave him another light hug and then pulled back with a sad shake of her head. "Worst. Christmas. Ever."

1

Five years later...

"So, how's that dress fitting? Good for Christmas Eve? You're not going to get stuck in it are you?" Alexa snorted.

After a groan, Sara Jane steeled herself. "Nice one, Lexa. Like I want *that* memory in my head today." She paused. "It's a bit loose. Maybe I'll put it in the *washer* and dryer."

Why couldn't she have gone to Athens for the holidays like she wanted? She'd attended college in Athens, Georgia, so she'd always wanted to visit Athens, Greece. What she *didn't* want was to be in this wedding. It was nearly five years to the day since her own Christmas debacle, and Christmases hadn't gotten better.

Four years ago, while helping her mother at the Miss Silver Belle contest, she had collided with a tray of eclairs. Dress ruined.

Three years ago, it had been grape juice on an ecru wool suit at the brunch celebrating her Masters degree in interior design.

Two years ago, a chocolate Santa had been left in the heated passenger seat of her mother's sedan on the way to the cantata. She'd sat on it, and didn't know until the church service was nearly over. Thank heaven the little foil wrapper was stuck on her taffeta-covered behind, too.

Sam had lovingly pointed it out during silent meditation before the morning prayer. She could still hear him. *"Is that chocolate candy on Sara Jane's butt or did she sit in poop?"*

She'd tried to muster her dignity as she swiped away the foil wrapper.

And one, *one*, short year ago, she had been wearing a lovely pair of platform pumps as she accepted an award for interior design. When her left heel had broken, the very kind presenter tried to stop her fall, but instead knocked over a poinsettia, freshly watered, and thus her gray pinstriped skirt and any remaining dignity had been lost.

Really, what could happen that would be worse than that? Sara Jane left the dressing room intent on inspecting the knee-length monstrosity that was her bridesmaid dress. What would you call it, guacamole green? She took two steps and tripped.

"Come on, Sara Jane. You can't do this." Lexa's snide comment sent a collective gasp among the bridesmaids hive.

Sara Jane did a wide armed reveal over Alexa's flip flops, which were haphazardly discarded on the floor of the bridal shop. "Lexa, are these *your* shoes?"

"Oh." Her sister bit her lip. "I am so, so sorry."

Contrition was most certainly not Lexa-like.

"Not to worry, ladies." Sara Jane smiled, flipped her long hair over her shoulder, and patted the fluffy overskirt. "No harm done." She stood with as much grace as she could muster and returned to change into her regular clothes. She had to meet Max at one, and it was already ten past twelve.

"See you tomorrow night." Sara Jane just wanted to get away from the bridal shop as quickly as possible.

"OK." Lexa's smile was a little too tight.

"You did tell her, didn't you?" The perky little maid of honor pursed her lips, waiting for Lexa's reply.

"Oh, no," her sister sighed the response. "Not yet. You go right ahead."

Classic Lexa avoiding something.

"Well," Mira cleared her throat. "I just wanted you to know that tomorrow night and for the wedding—you see I didn't know that my husband had any friends here. He's never mentioned...it's just—"

"She's married to Brad." Lexa rushed out the words, but like the pain in ripping off a bandage, it really didn't make it feel better.

Sara Jane didn't care about Brad, but to have him as a guest at her sister's wedding...*Oh, no* was understating it. "Brad...Myers?" Her mouth hung open, and she placed one hand on her hip. Her sister's maid of honor was married to Brad Myers, and Lexa hadn't thought to mention it?

"You're angry." Mira and her tiny little voice seemed injured. The woman who *hadn't* been left with a billion wedding gifts to return, florists to pay, and a catered reception dinner complete with a five-tiered wedding cake that her mother used as the holiday meal, acted as if *she* had been done a disservice.

"No, Mira, I am not angry." Sara Jane managed a saccharine smile at this logic-impaired woman. It wasn't her fault that her sorry excuse for a man had the audacity to show his face in Sara Jane's town. Nor was it Mira's fault that Lexa hadn't mentioned it.

"Oh, good." She put a hand to her throat for a moment. "I was sweating it." She ran a hand along her forehead in a pantomimed gesture. "Whew."

"Well, I really must be going. Really."

Lexa stood to hug her. "I'm sorry. So sorry. I didn't know how to tell you," she whispered.

"Why didn't you say anything before now?" Sara Jane hissed.

"Because he wasn't coming—until yesterday." Lexa replied.

"You could have warned me."

"Just wait to hate me 'til after the wedding," Alexa pleaded. Trust her sister to go all melodramatic.

"I don't know. That's an awful lot to ask." She paused. "It's kind of obvious that we're carrying on a conversation."

"Really?" Alexa had a panicked tone in her whisper.

"Yes. Let go of my neck. Now."

"And give Max my love." Lexa called as Sara Jane exited the shop.



Max's heart lightened the moment Alexa's car pulled into the driveway of the house he was building. They made a great team, and had for years. He was a contractor and she an interior designer. This was their eleventh house together, and they had the twelfth lined up already.

"So what have you got for me today?" he asked from the ladder where he was finishing the installation of a pendant light. Then, he saw her face.

Red and splotchy, tears would soon follow. He'd seen this before and nine times out of ten it involved her mother or her sister, or her mother *and* her sister.

Her sister was hardly the queen of sensitivity. He still didn't understand why Alexa had been insistent

on a Christmas-themed wedding. Certainly she could understand that this might be difficult for Sara Jane.

"Hey, hey." He put his hands on her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing really." She sighed. "It's just that Brad Myers is going to be a guest at my sister's wedding. His wife is Lexa's maid of honor. I guess that would actually make her a matron of honor."

He narrowed his eyes and assessed her expression. "You're serious."

She nodded. "But that's not what has me so irritated. Alexa didn't tell me. Granted, she supposedly just found out that he was coming, and I'm sure she's been very busy and all that. However, she didn't even mention that he was married to her maid of honor! The fact that he's now coming is just the cherry on top. I'm sure I could have found the time to call her if the roles were reversed. She waited until all her bridesmaids were around her, and then, *bam*."

He'd known Alexa as long as he'd known Sara Jane. And while Sara Jane asserted that Alexa wasn't mean, the girl *was* often thoughtless to the point of cruelty.

"And Riley is good with this?"

Now Sara Jane rolled her eyes. "Riley has had zero to do with the wedding planning. He could list Santa's reindeer quicker than Alexa's bridesmaids."

"Does your mom know?"

"Right. Like that would help the situation." She glanced up to him and gazed into his eyes. "It's not that I really care about Brad being there one way or the other; it's just the principle of the thing. That man left me two days before my wedding. I'm glad he did. Can you imagine what that marriage would have been like?"

Brad was self-centered, condescending, arrogant..."

"Now Sara Jane, you're just listing his finer points, stop being so generous."

It felt good when she laughed aloud.

"Why didn't Lexa just tell me?"

"I'll be there with you tomorrow and Saturday. And if he starts anything, I've got your back."

"I know you do." She hugged him. "I am so blessed to have you. I never could work with him like I work with you. Or talk to him like I talk to you." Then, she paused as if she didn't mean to say all that. "You're my hero. You're my best friend."

And there it was. *Friend*.

"I've already decided next year I'm definitely going away for Christmas. I'm going somewhere quiet, exotic, somewhere away from family and everyone else."

"Hey! What about me? I'm part of this generic 'everyone else.'" He was fishing. He'd always cared for Sara Jane, now it was more than just the casual attraction he'd felt in high school. Working with her on an almost daily basis had been amazing. He'd fallen in love with her.

"You aren't part of 'everyone.'" Her anger had dissipated into a teasing tone. "You can come with me."

"I'll mark my calendar." He removed his phone, scrolled, and typed. "Next Christmas travel with Sara Jane." Max winked her way, and she looked down with a pleased blush highlighting her cheeks. Could he interpret that as an "I'm interested?"

She glanced back and caught him staring. "I am so sorry to be so unprofessional. Ready to talk about the house?"

No. "Yeah."

Sara Jane walked over to examine the new flooring that had just gone in and then looked up at the installed light. He could tell she liked both.

"Did the tiles come in?"

"Not yet. They assure me the shipment is being delivered today. By the way, Chase says you're killing him with all these custom orders."

"He's complaining?" She ran her hand along the glassy granite countertop. She really loved design as much as he loved structure. When the Palmer family had offered him their renovation job it was contingent that he and Sara Jane were a package deal.

"No way. Chase says he likes the torture. He said thanks. He's had to hire another person, and it's all because of you."

"Me?" She gave a wry twist of her mouth. "Us. If you didn't do all this"—she gestured to the space—"I couldn't do all of this." She held her arms open to the kitchen. "The Palmers weren't so sure about these Shaker cabinets, but they loved the way the kitchen is shaping up. Mr. Palmer said to thank you for the photos." She ran her hand along his shoulder.

Max couldn't help but follow her as she walked around the island.

"I found some hardware that is going to be great in here. It's patterned after some vintage pulls from the twenties."

"You know the Palmers will love that."

She inspected the pendant light from her new vantage point.

"I love the way these pick up that tiny hint of green in the granite. And I can't wait to see how it comes together when they reflect on these tiles for the