

A romantic couple embracing in a city at night. The man is wearing a white shirt and the woman is wearing a white dress. They are smiling and looking at each other. In the background, there are Christmas lights, a red trolley, and a building. The scene is festive and celebratory.

MALLARY MITCHELL

A BORROWED RING & A FAKE ENGAGEMENT...

Step On Bride

A large red ribbon with a bow is draped across the bottom of the image. Several Christmas ornaments are hanging from the ribbon: a red one with gold patterns, a gold one, and a blue one with white patterns.

THIS CHRISTMAS MARLEY STEPS ONTO
MORE THAN JUST HER
TOUR TROLLEY

Step-on Bride

Mallary Mitchell

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Step-on Bride
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Dedication

In loving memory of Mom and Dad

And to all who read this.

1

IT'S NOT OVER...OH WAIT. YEAH, IT IS
MID NOVEMBER

"I'm sorry Wyatt. I really am. I had it yesterday, now I simply don't know where it is." Wyatt's extremely ex-fiancée, Emma, slowly repacked items in her purse. "I swear it was in here."

He and Emma had broken things off in August. Not that he'd really told anyone. How could he admit that not only was his cheating ex one of the reasons for his move back "home", if you could really call it that, but that his great-grandmother's beloved ring had yet to be returned. He was a fool. It was humiliating.

He shook his head slightly and attempted to smile. "You said you had that ring in your possession two days ago. Two days." He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Things had already started to deteriorate with his family. He couldn't keep up the charade much longer. Memom had dropped a few not so subtle hints that she wanted to meet the fiancée or get the ring back. And it had been within his grasp. So close.

This was worse than a fumble in the endzone.

"Give me a moment to process." Emma gave a *humph* accentuated with an eye roll, her signature

expression. Why hadn't he admitted that he hated it when she did that, and it was often. "I think you're more upset over the fact that I misplaced that ugly ring, than you are about our breakup."

"Well, I've had time to *process*"—her catchphrase slid from his lips as he gave a Gallic shrug—"and, you know, that family heirloom wasn't making out with its high school boyfriend on a park bench."

Her brow furrowed. Emma opened her mouth with a gasp and placed a hand to her chest.

She wanted *him* to feel badly for her indiscretion. Not today. Not anymore. Why hadn't he seen their incompatibility earlier? Maybe he hadn't wanted to.

Now Emma sniffed and batted her eyelids as if she were about to cry. "You hate me. It's just I saw him there, coming out of the hardware store looking so lost, and all those high school feelings came rushing back." She sighed.

He didn't bother to respond. Instead, he turned away and paced the length of the gazebo. The site of said incident. He put a hand to his forehead.

"You act as if I planned it!"

"Because planning would have made it *so* much worse." Nothing on earth could have stopped that retort.

She sniffed again. "How was I supposed to know someone would take our picture and forward it to you?"

"Yeah, Emma. That was the problem. *The picture.*" He put his hands in the pockets of his dark gray pants.

"We can still date, can't we?" She frowned and

pursed her lips.

Was she serious? “Thanks, but aren’t you with what’s his name?”

“We aren’t exclusive.”

“I can say with absolute certainty we will never date again. I’ve moved on.” Chalk this up to poor judgment. Why had he asked her to marry him? They hadn’t been dating that long, and he knew he’d rushed things. It was that old white-picket-fence-home-on-the-golf-course plan his parents and grandparents had force-fed him since birth. It was Mom who repeatedly asked if he would ever settle down. It was his commitment-o-phobic rep that he’d been desperate to disprove. Now, instead of a commitment-phobe, he was a dupe. He was pretty sure that was worse.

“Moved on? Who? Is it serious? I am hurt. You just moved along as if I never mattered at all?”

How could he respond to that? He kept his voice light and well moderated as he’d been trained to do in the courtroom. “Call me if you find the ring.”

“Not with *that* attitude.” She stood, pulled her jacket tighter and shoved her hands into her gloves.

“Wait. It’s not in your gloves, is it?” Could he dare hope?

“Like I haven’t already checked?” She gave another of her exaggerated eye rolls and walked toward the sidewalk, her stiletto heels clicking all the way. One spikey heel got caught between two planks in the decking. Her angry huff was muted. “Now my shoes are ruined. I’ll have you know they were Mia Madison originals.”

“Yeah, there’s a repair shop on Second Street. I’m sure they can fix them. Have a good evening.” He wanted to bang his head on one of the wooden posts.

In three weeks, his family would all meet for the Christmas festivities his sister, Stella, had arranged. It had been a quite a while since the last family gathering. His siblings, and apparently all his cousins, had arranged to be free for his great-grandmother’s birthday bash which was Christmas week. They would all be there with their spouses and offspring. And thanks to Memom, everyone just *knew* he was bringing his mystery fiancée. Instead, he would be there as he always was—alone.

Acid bubbled up his esophagus. When he’d finally taken the ring, his father had offered him a partnership. At the time, Wyatt had thought, why not? Now, he wanted to cut his losses and return to Blacksburg. Nobody cared if he was married there. Of course, he’d already sold his condo and moved here. And he’d taken a pay cut. Plus, the firm had replaced him, so he was basically stuck.

If he wasn’t disowned for losing Memom’s ring, he’d be set up with every single girl within sixty miles. He did not want that to happen—again—but there was no way to get out of this now.

He was suddenly remembering all Pineville had to offer and wanted none of it, even though the promise of home, family, a loving wife, and children, had brought him back not so long ago.

Maybe, just maybe, he could convince his old girlfriend from college to help him out. She could

pretend to be his fiancée for a while—if her husband didn't mind.

Nah. He could just tell his family. It wouldn't matter that he was a fool who'd lost a priceless family heirloom. They'd understand.

Who was he kidding? It would definitely be easier to find a new fiancée.

2

THE FINDING OF THE RING OF MEMOM

Marley Paige chewed her sandwich as her gaze followed the cars that slowly traversed the length of First Street. The perch in the mid-town gazebo allowed a fantastic view and a great way to get the proverbial pulse of the small municipality. She often came to eat lunch here.

Her brows knitted as she took in her store, correction, her *failing* store, the one she managed with her grandmother. Festive wreathes graced each window, yet there was little-to-no foot traffic. This holiday season hadn't been a lucrative one, but her step-on guide job was paying many of the bills. Thank God for small favors.

What could she do better? The front windows looked inviting and happy. Each boasted a tree decorated for a different decade. It was the best way to display all the unique ornaments she had. In the largest display window, a Moravian Christmas star hung just above a live Fraser fir. Under its drooping boughs were what she thought were ideal ideas for gifts. In the right front, a silver foil tree brimmed with an assortment of vintage decorations. It was the same tree her grandmother had ordered from a catalog many years

earlier.

While Grandmother had chatted with customers...or should she just say visitors, Marley had cleaned and polished until the whole shop sparkled and blinked with the colors of Christmas.

Paige Antiques had been a fixture in the town of Pineville for a long time. When her grandfather, Richard Paige, had opened the place, it had been a department store. Her dad and mom had then done their stint as proprietors and had turned it into an antique shop. Now it was almost time for her turn at the helm, and they had a little bit of everything from antiques to ornaments to porcelain dolls. The shop was the place to stop if one wanted something out of the ordinary. Maybe that was the problem. People wanted ordinary. Yet when people came in with odd lots of this or that, of course it was incorporated into their inventory.

Grandmother's willy-nilly buying and selling wasn't working, yet her grandmother didn't seem to worry. However, unlike her grandmother, Marley needed a steady paycheck.

Since the new highway had been completed, the store's revenue had been dwindling even more. Who was she kidding? Paige Antiques was on life support. Unless there was a miracle, the shop would close. Maybe Christmas would create a boost in sales. Christmas miracles did happen, right? Maybe...

Who was she kidding? Marley's entire life was a shambles. Not just the store. Tears surfaced as she recalled last night's phone call. Her boyfriend wouldn't

be coming to meet her grandmother for Christmas as planned because he no longer wanted to be her boyfriend. Again, failure. She dried her eyes, rubbed her nose with a tissue, and sniffed. Tears welled anew. So what if he wasn't the one she wanted marry. Now he was just another name on her long list of failed relationships. And she would be alone for Christmas.

That meant all her friends trying to give her a boost by setting her up with their cousins, and her family would offer up so-in-so's neighbor. So she would live through another holiday season of humiliating questions about her love life, awkward phone calls from guys who were about as disinterested in her as she was them...*argh*. Marley steeled herself and discarded her remaining food in a nearby bin. She had to stop the pity party. It was almost time for the afternoon trolley, and red, weepy looking eyes were not a good look for her.

Gird up your loins and be strong...AKA pull up those big girl panties and stop whining.

Her thoughts solidified into a whispered prayer.
"Please Lord, guide me."

As Marley opened her eyes, the sun peeked from behind a gravid cloud, and a momentary twinkle, a glint, under the wooden planks at her feet drew her attention. Never one to turn her back on shiny things she walked over. Her mother had often stated she was part magpie or something.

The object was most likely a soda can, or a bit of aluminum foil. Why people couldn't throw away their trash she didn't know. But she didn't need to get on

that soapbox. Wait. It looked like a ring. She braved the damp deck, knelt, and attempted to reach through the boards. No luck.

Her headband.

Quickly she removed the thin malleable metal and fashioned it into a hook. She fished the wire through the boards and brought up a ring.

She let her hand hover below the jewelry. Marley sighed and closed her fingers around the cold metal that had been partially covered by leaf litter.

My precious. The thought made her laugh.

She peered at the hunk of rocks set in an intricate art deco setting, which some—not her—might say was a tad gawdy. She loved it. She'd have to attempt to find the owner. While most likely costume, it appeared to be of fine quality. A large octagonal diamond-looking gem was surrounded by eight smaller baguettes, which were framed with five sapphire blue baguette-cut stones. One of the sapphire baguettes was missing. At the top and bottom were triangular diamonds reminiscent of the Egyptian papyrus motif so often seen in the nineteen twenties and thirties.

If this ring were indeed real, not costume as it had to be, it would be very valuable.

A sign? A guide? *The Lord works in mysterious ways.*
Would this ring set her on a path?

She'd seriously read Tolkien way too many times. She was not a hobbit, and this was not the ring of power—

The clock tower chimed and ended that train of thought. She needed to get back to Parkwood Station

quickly. If she wasn't early enough to be ready for the trip leaving at one sharp, Ted would have her nametag. She pushed from the wooden deck that wound around in a hexagon to match the shape of the gazebo and stuck her feet back in Gran's black patent pumps that matched the straight skirt she wore. It was so very straight it hampered her walking, but it was darling. She loved the little ruffle that surrounded the ridiculously small knee space. Once awkwardly upright, she pulled her phone from the pocket on her official tour guide jacket and dialed as she hurried.

"Parks and Recreation, this is Trudy." The phone was answered on the first ring.

"I'm on my way, but I want you to know I found a ring in the park." Marley dangled the treasure between her right index finger and her thumb.

"Really? I'll have to start going over there more often." Her best friend spoke in her normal bored tone. The clicking of a keyboard accentuated each word.

"I don't have time to drop by your office, but I'll do it on the way home. It's set in gold and has both diamonds and sapphires. Most likely costume." She put the ring on her middle finger and snapped a picture. "Sending you a pic."

She waited a moment.

"Definitely costume. But it also looks like something you'd pick out." Trudy's tastes ran more modern than her own. "You sure you didn't drop it?"

"I wish. I love it. It looks vintage." Marley arrived at the wrought iron stand where the trolley stopped to pick up tour guides. Her one o'clock bus was nowhere

in sight. Good. “If it were real it would be worth a small fortune.”

“Ummm.” Trudy responded. “I’ll write it up and hold onto the photo if someone decides to claim it.” A yawn came over the speaker. “Until then, just keep the thing. I don’t think anyone will claim it.” Trudy’s words ended with the sound of liquid being slurped through a straw from a nearly empty cup.

“It’s on my finger.”

“What were you doing at the park?” Trudy was too perceptive.

“Praying and thinking.”

“Yeah. You were staring at the store, weren’t you? Mar, stop stressing. You just need to get a business loan.”

“I really want to do this myself.” Marley wasn’t ready to give up, so she’d work as a step-on guide a bit longer, until the economy improved.

“Your mom and dad wouldn’t have wanted you to shoulder this on your own.”

“Again, I know. But—maybe the ring *is a sign*. You know that things are starting to get better?”

“The ring is a sign.” A *humpf* came from Trudy’s end of the phone.

“You know like in ‘Lord of the Rings’.”

“Marley, you need to get out more. You are such a nerd.” Trudy kept clicking away at the keyboard. “Hey, Ted has just gone in the bathroom with a magazine. You need to grab your clipboard while he’s in there. He’s ticked at you again because the morning tour was late returning. So I have to speak for Ted

now, and I quote: ‘Don’t you know this is the Christmas season—the time of year when we have to forget being kind or taking that little bit of extra time at the candy factory? It’s time to forget about the Reason for the season and embrace commercialism’.” Trudy’s sarcasm came over loud and clear. “And face it, he’s also ticked because you won’t go out with him.”

Marley did need a boyfriend, at least a man who was a friend, who would be willing to eat dinner at her grandmother’s house for Christmas...but not Ted. “Yeah, that ain’t happening. Love you. Bye.” She closed her phone.

Marley clocked in, and after retrieving her afternoon itinerary and clipboard, peeked into the hallway to ensure all was still clear. She sneaked past the bathrooms and out into the chill, late November air. Her tour was due soon, and hopefully, she’d avoid Ted for the rest of the afternoon.

For a moment, she admired how the ring looked on her hand. Her finger was the best place to keep it safe. She didn’t want to lose something this awesome.

She settled onto the bench, closed her eyes as she sighed, and tilted her face to the winter sunshine. Her reverie was short-lived as a frosty chill nipped at her through her tour guide blazer. The sun that warmed her face and cheeks went dark. Someone was blocking her light.

She hazarded a peek.

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you.” Ted Petit loomed over her.

Marley opened her mouth to comment, but he

stopped her.

“In five short minutes, another trolley full of tourists will arrive. You will step aboard and show them our lovely city. This time you will give them the Christmas tour they’ve paid for—*our* tour—not the Marley Paige extended version.” He crossed his arms. “Show them the museum, parade of homes, the gallery of trees, take them to the pavilion, allow them to enjoy the sights and sounds of our lovely historical district during the holidays, but follow our itinerary to the letter.”

“This morning—”

“The driver told me all about your extended stop at Belleview’s Candy Cupboard.”

That was hardly her fault. The senior citizen cashier had been very slow—and chatty.

Fred, the trolley driver, must have tattled about her slight pause at Mistletoe Mountain. As if a two-minute quip about the site threw the entire schedule akimbo! The absolute nerve of him—throwing her under the bus, rather trolley, that way. Really. The septuagenarian could have admitted his driving skills on the narrow historical district roads were a little on the rusty side. He hadn’t pulled around to the candy store on time. And she didn’t even want to think about that illegal right turn fiasco.

“Do not attempt to go on one of your tangents. Stick to the narration you memorized. Is that clear?”

“That extended stop at the Candy Cupboard was not my fault.”

“Spare me.”

“Please let me exp—”

“No, let me explain.” Ted leaned closer. “If you are more than five minutes late again, I will fire you on the spot. We have a schedule to keep, and we can’t do it if you aren’t keeping the tours on track. Is that clear?”

“Yes, but—”

He walked away.

She had wanted to point out he couldn’t keep the Christmas tours on schedule if he didn’t have Christmas tour guides, either. Probably better that he’d walked away before she’d had the chance to voice that opinion. While his threat was probably just bluster, she really needed this job.

Ted was a big meanie.

The internal attempt to deflate the situation didn’t work. Ever since she’d been a child, she’d hated it when people yelled at her for no valid reason. If she had done something, no problem, but if she hadn’t, like now, she got upset.

Marley rubbed the back of her neck, and then walked to the large plate glass windows to check her breathing and her appearance. The anger of being accused unjustly still smoldered under the surface. She turned back to the trolley stop and tried to regain her composure.

If she had any other options, she’d quit on principle alone. A step-on guide needed a bit of wiggle room. Who wanted some dry memorized speech? *No one.*

She made her way to one of the lovely, wrought iron railings and waited. This was where the trolley

would stop.

These four groups deserved an actual historian, someone who regaled a group with facts, tidbits, and juicy morsels of history. Someone who actually—

“For what it’s worth, you’re right to be angry. That was a bit harsh.”

Marley looked at the man who had sidled up beside her. She gazed into dark glasses that obscured his eyes.

He sipped from his coffee cup having apparently witnessed the entire exchange.

She swallowed hard. “Thank you.” That he had seen it was horrendous. Mortification filled every pore.

“You know there’s never any reason to speak to your employees like that. I’ll talk with the owners.”

“Not necessary. It’s really nothing.” She tried to not sneak a gaze at him again. That would be staring, but this guy with his tousled, sandy brown hair and kindhearted gesture rated a second look. Reluctantly, she warmed under his smile.

She longed to see his eyes but could only imagine their depths. Were they warm like his voice? And although his masculine lips were taut, she decided they were decidedly kiss-worthy.

It was her ex’s kiss that had softened the blow of their breakup. His kiss had been like one of those handshakes where the person’s hand was cold, and they barely touched your fingers, which simply yelled “No, I really don’t want to shake your hand.” A handshake and a kiss were meant to be undertaken with clear intention.

Maybe she had read too much Brontë and Austen as well. Perhaps she'd put all her preconceived notions of what a romantic relationship should be by creating some guy who'd be some amalgamation of Heathcliff and Darcy—with maybe a touch of Legolas...Could this be him? Her heart started a double time rhythm.

He'd been talking...what had he just said? She'd been too lost in the baritone of his voice, the sultry eyes she imagined were behind those sunglasses, his self-assured smile...and her own stupid romantic notions. Wait, were they still talking about Ted?

“—he shouldn't do that in public.”

Yeah. They were.

“You don't need to do that.” She hurried out the response and tried not to notice his eyes as he removed the sunglasses. They were a light brown. “Apparently, he's a friend of the owner.”

“Really?” He leaned forward and rocked his head as if digesting that bit of information was a bit difficult. He seemed to want to say more as the intense gaze raked over her. His lips lifted at the edges.

“Yeah. It's fine, really.” Her rushed response brought a smile back to his face. “Today has been pretty miserable. So that's just par for the course.” What was wrong with her? This was a pretty strong reaction to a guy she'd just met.

“If it's any consolation, I can totally relate. And now I get to take a forty-five-minute tour with my entire family, and some *apparently* really long-winded tour guide.”

“Yeah, so it will be more like an hour.” She

enjoyed his mirthless laugh that followed. "Why are you taking a tour with your family, if you don't want to?"

He outright grinned and that made him even cuter. "They're in town because my sister planned this over-the-top birthday-bash-slash-Christmas celebration for my great-grandmother. She'll be ninety-seven on her birthday."

"Oh. You must be one of the Shaw family, then."

"Yeah, one of the Shaw family." He paused at each word and leaned in again. "Yeah." He shook his head. "This will be a train wreck." He leaned closer.

She usually didn't like people all up in her personal space, but she was willing to make an exception today.

"I'm supposed to introduce my fiancée."

She scooted away. "Oh, wow. Congratulations."

He held up his hand. "No. Not congratulations. I don't have a fiancée." He plopped on the bench beside her. "I did. But we broke up over the summer. I just haven't had the heart to break it to my great-grandmother."

"You waited a bit." Marley shifted the hem of her black skirt and straightened her tour guide tie.

"Here let me get that for you." He frowned and turned to face her. "Your tie is really crooked. I mean...you still look really nice, even if it looks like a five-year-old tied that tie for you."

She straightened and held up her chin. Although why she was letting some stranger fix her tie she wasn't sure. She did know that if he was related to the