

Sir Manfred's Secret

Four gray walls and four gray towers. Like a dream springing to life, Castle Albion rose ahead, nestled among the trees of the Appalachian foothills. Crystal congratulated herself as she pulled up before its modern-medieval façade. After vowing to free her inner poet, even at work, she'd chosen this venue for an employee development retreat. *Achieve the Vision*—Castle Albion's motto—seemed possible here. Smiling, she relinquished her Pathfinder to the valet.

"We've been expecting you." The scarlet-uniformed doorman bowed and directed her to the concierge desk.

"Eric?" Crystal's jaw dropped when she read the concierge's name badge. "I thought you were the Event Planner."

"Ms. Sutton." He extended his white-gloved hand. "Guilty as charged."

While planning her conference by phone, she and Eric had clicked. He knew exactly what she was looking for, and their ideas meshed perfectly. As the conference date neared, she'd found herself inventing excuses to call him because he boosted her confidence with his kind words and compliments. Though she had wondered what he looked like, she suspected his appearance wouldn't live up to his personality. But it definitely did.

"You'll find I wear many hats around here." He nodded his full head of brownish-black hair streaked with suggestions of sunlight or gray. "I'm so pleased to meet you in person at last."

Crystal placed her hand in his, and he wrapped it with his other hand and squeezed, transmitting a warm tingle even through his gloves. His dazzling smile split his dark mustache and close-trimmed beard with a flash of white as his forehead wrinkled appealingly. His stunning blue eyes held hers.

Taking in his expressive face, she felt their connection deepen. She smiled back warmly. “Likewise.”

“Your meeting room—the Elizabethan—is on the third floor, and your team occupies the entire South Tower. I’ve upgraded you to the Rapunzel Suite on the fourth floor—with my compliments.”

Her face grew warm under his attentive gaze. “Thank you.”

“I have your paperwork—no need to go to registration.” He placed a printout on the counter in front of her. “Just sign here.”

Placing her left hand on the contract, she took the pen he offered. As she signed, his eyes rested on her wedding ring, and a flash of disappointment seemed to cross his face. Crystal’s heart sank. Why hadn’t she left her ring at home?

The Rapunzel Suite had soothing yellow-gold walls, tall arched windows, and a romantic canopy bed covered in maroon-and-gold fleur-de-lis. After the bellhop left, Crystal stood before the full-length mirror, viewing herself from different angles. Had Eric found her as attractive as she found him? She was shapely for forty-one, but she should have updated her hairstyle before coming. It really was too thin to wear long. The brown tresses with their fading red highlights scattered forlornly onto her shoulders. She was no Rapunzel. Smiling at that irony, she studied the enigmatic woman in the glass, whose fleshy rounded cheeks, narrow chin, and thin sloped nose complemented hazel eyes that sparkled with some hidden secret.

That was what had snagged Ronnie twenty years ago—a secret he could spend a lifetime unraveling. But that lifetime had turned out to be only nineteen years.

She kicked off her kitten heels, threw herself onto the velvet couch, and glared at her ring. Her stubborn commitment to a meaningless bauble had given Eric the wrong idea. But maybe she'd only imagined his crestfallen expression. Her wedding set often inspired looks and comments. The Celtic knotwork band of intertwined rose gold and palladium was unusual, and the large diamond guarded by four emeralds made it unique.

Unique but meaningless. She only wore it because she had promised herself she'd keep it on until the divorce was final. It was her way of asserting that she, unlike some people, kept her vows.

In fact, the decree was due any day now. She sat up and pulled out her phone. Excitement mixed with dread rose in her chest when she saw her lawyer's email. Holding her breath, she scanned the document. She was Crystal Beaudry again. She twisted the ring off her finger and laid it on the mahogany coffee table.

She actually cried. She hadn't expected to—she'd cried so much already. Then she dozed on the couch for a while—was it really half an hour? Quickly she dressed for the kick-off dinner. She wanted to arrive at the dining room early to set out the name cards. She slipped her ring into the zippered inside pocket of her clutch. As she rode the elevator down to the main floor, she rubbed the naked finger.

How surreal her ringless hand felt as she arranged the placards. Her ring's intrinsic value had suddenly plunged below zero. Naively she had clung to a sliver of hope that Ronnie would abandon the young seductress he'd moved in with. Would she have taken him back if he had?

She didn't know. But until the judge signed the decree, she had remained Mrs. Sutton, and the ring had meant something. What would she do with it now?

As the PR Director, Jenna Norton, arrived, Crystal switched Jenna's name card with the one to the left of her own. Jenna had gotten divorced last year.

During dinner, Crystal leaned toward her. Resting her palm on the table, she pointed out her bare ring finger. "The divorce just went through."

Jenna's eyes grew wide as she swallowed quickly and dabbed her lips with her napkin. "Congratulations! I'm so happy for you!" Squeezing Crystal's hand, she tossed her long blonde hair and winked. "You go, girl! Should I announce it? A toast?"

Crystal laughed but shook her head. "No, no! I don't want to make a big deal of it," she whispered. "I was just wondering: What did you do with your wedding ring?"

Jenna's grin spread mischievously as she jiggled her wrist a few inches above the table. Crystal eyed the silver charm bracelet that glittered with dangling figures. Confused, she squinted at Jenna for an explanation.

Jenna spun the bracelet around and pointed to a little diamond-studded silver donkey. "I had it melted down and recast. The best way to remember my Jack."

The two women giggled. That was certainly one solution, but Crystal couldn't see destroying her lovely set that way.

As desserts were being served, Crystal spotted Eric frantically signaling her from the doorway, so she slipped away from the table.

"Nothing's wrong," he assured her, guiding her into the hallway with a gentle touch on her back. "I just wanted to let you know that we start the mystery off with a bang. It's coming any time—"

BANG!

A gunshot rang out, and even though she'd just been warned, Crystal jumped in fright. Instinctively her left hand flew to Eric's elbow. Laughing, he placed his left hand over hers. Their eyes met. A question lingered in his as he settled his hand over her ring finger. He must have noticed it was bare. With surprise she saw for the first time the band on his left hand. Titanium etched with Celtic knots against an ebony background.

"That's my cue!" Eric patted her hand twice, then rushed to the stage at the front of the room in character, proclaiming that Duke McDougal had just been murdered.

Back in her chair, Crystal enjoyed Prince Eric's melodramatic spiel, but she flushed with embarrassment as she recalled that question in his eyes. Did he think she'd removed her ring so she could have a fling this weekend? That she was announcing her availability for a one-night stand? His own ring announced that if he was as interested in her as he seemed to be, he was a knave, just like Ronnie, and no prince. She'd better keep her distance.

After Eric finished his explanations to the guests, he released them to enjoy the rest of the evening on their own, but he challenged them to keep their eyes open for clues, which could be anywhere around Castle Albion, inside or out. They had tonight, tomorrow, and Saturday morning to discover who had shot the Duke.

Crystal sat in the lounge with a few others for a while, but she preferred to be alone—to imagine her new future. She excused herself and wandered aimlessly around the common spaces of the castle, deep in thought. She had to let her daughters know the divorce was final. In high school now, they knew it was coming, but they'd still be upset. Changing her name on her license and all her accounts—all those humdrum realities—would be such a hassle.

When she rounded a corner into the hall that led to the rear of the concierge desk, she met a six-foot knight. The full suit of armor stood next to a glass-fronted armoire displaying chrome reproductions of silver serving dishes. But the armor looked authentic. It wasn't the shiny metal she expected armor to be made of. The dull, burnished steel reminded her of Tik Tok from *Return to Oz*, a character she had dearly loved as a child. The solid visor came to a point at the nose and down to the chin, giving the appearance of a heavy beak.

The suit bent forward intently, and his broad shoulder plates and earnest dark eye slits seemed to say, "I'm here for you, my lady. I'll right your wrongs, defend your honor, and protect you from harm and betrayal."

"I believe you will, Sir—" Her eyes fell on the plaque explaining the piece.

Sir Manfred. Victorian Era replica of a sixteenth-century suit of armor. Made of heavy steel and fully articulated, this suit was created as home décor for an English country manor.

"Sir Manfred." She curtsied and whispered, "I accept your service." She looked over her shoulder to assure she hadn't been overheard. It was nearly midnight, and the halls were empty. "I wish I could take you home. They don't make men like you anymore, you know."

She sat across the narrow hallway on a tapestry bench where she could bask in Sir Manfred's reassurances. Again she recalled Eric's gentle hand on hers, his winsome smile, and his kind eyes. She sighed. Men weren't what they seemed. She had to remember that and not let her heart run away with her.

As she studied Sir Manfred, she noticed he wasn't parallel to the wall. He was angled toward the concierge desk with his dark eye slits transfixed on Eric's engraved nameplate that rested on the counter. Was that a clue?

“Are you telling me Eric’s the one?” She rose and aligned herself with Sir Manfred, matching her gaze to his, and nodded sagely. She moved to his side, stood on her tiptoes, and spoke toward the hinge of his visor. “Got it. Thanks for the tip.”

At breakfast, Crystal found a seat next to Lara, the Purchasing Manager, who had been divorced for a few years. When the others at their table returned to the buffet, Crystal showed Lara her bare finger. “I’m a free woman.”

Lara nodded solemnly. “I’m sorry? Or congratulations? Which do you prefer?”

Crystal shrugged. “Both, I guess. Can I ask you a question? What did you do with your wedding ring?”

Lara spread cream cheese on her bagel. “I sold it and donated the money to a battered women’s shelter.”

“Oh.” Crystal’s heart twisted as she grasped the situation. She had never heard Lara discuss her marriage or divorce. She only remembered Lara’s marital status changing to *D* on her personnel record. “That was a good idea.”

“I never questioned it. That was always my plan.”

Crystal appreciated the symbolism behind Lara’s choice. And Lara’s generosity. But she wouldn’t allow guilt-inspired altruism to goad her into a decision about her ring. It had witnessed twenty years of her life, with all its joys and miseries. To restore its lost meaning, she must dispose of it in a way that would resonate deep inside with a sense of poetic justice.

During the morning team-building session, led by a hired consultant, Crystal sat in the back of the room in case the hotel staff needed her. Since she had previewed the curriculum, she could discreetly view her phone while monitoring the meeting. Off and on she searched the internet for ideas for obsolete wedding rings.

Many women saved their rings for a son or daughter. Crystal's two girls were furious with their father for his affair and for abandoning their family. With those negative associations, they would never want the ring. Of course, many women sold their rings and spent the cash on necessities, but Crystal already lived comfortably without unloading her ring for half its purchase price.

Unlike many women, she wouldn't wear it on her other hand. Its intertwined Celtic knots once stood for undying love, but now they reminded her only of Ronnie's betrayal.

After lunch she returned to her room to dress for the ropes course outing. With a few minutes to spare, she skimmed another internet article. According to the author, many divorced women drove into the country, found an empty field, and hurled their rings into the weeds. For some, throwing the ring away meant casting off their bitterness and pain. Others hoped someone would come along with a metal detector and find the ring someday—so it would surprise and delight someone again.

The idea intrigued Crystal. Today when she was trekking through the hills she could fling her ring into a ravine for some lucky future hiker to find. She'd be paying it forward as a mystery benefactor. She retrieved it from her clutch and slipped it into the tiny coin pocket of her jeans. The stretchy jeans were tight enough to secure the ring.

Then again, if she lost it, she could file a claim and receive its full insured value. Wouldn't that look rather suspicious? Losing her wedding ring the day after her divorce? Picturing herself behind bars for insurance fraud, she shoved the ring deeper into the pocket and smoothed out the fabric to seal it in.

Hiking the wooded trail, Crystal laughed and joked with her team. As the sun, with new confidence, beat down on her bare arms, the spring air in her lungs felt intoxicating. Everywhere birds whistled their mating calls. A new day, a new season, had dawned.

She forgot about her ring until they reached their destination. Checking her pocket, she confirmed it was still safe. When she saw Eric, her heart fluttered. She hadn't realized he ran the ropes course, too.

Crystal had no intention of strapping up herself—she was merely the organizer. But her coworkers insisted that she take her turn going to the top of the pamper pole.

As assistants began buckling people into their harnesses, Eric drew close. “You're afraid of heights, aren't you?”

Was it that obvious? She had tried to put on a brave face, but yes, she was terrified. “A little.” To her chagrin, her voice quaked.

He placed his hand between her shoulder blades and spoke into her ear. “You can do this. I'll be here for you. You're completely safe.”

Warmth spread from her chest through her whole body, and as she lost herself in his blue eyes, she believed him.

Still, when it was her turn to climb the towering pole, she shook like the quivering leaves about her. Each step required more and more will. Only by refusing to look down could she keep breathing. She focused on the stripped tree trunk before her as she grasped each new handhold. Finally she reached the top.

Now she was supposed to stand atop the eighteen-inch disc at the pinnacle. Watching others attempt it before her, she had pictured herself maneuvering smoothly onto the disc and rising to her feet victoriously. But now that she was here, with the world spread out twenty-five

feet below and no one by her side, she froze. Her muscles simply refused to obey. She trembled uncontrollably, and her stomach churned.

“Crystal, look at me!” Eric called from below. He moved to the side of the pole where she could meet his eyes. “Keep going! You’re doing great!”

Far below, his encouraging smile gleamed through his beard. For a moment she focused only on him—his sturdy shoulders, his windblown mop of hair, his strong hands that gripped the belaying line connected to the harness that crisscrossed her heart. She moved upward. Soon—following Eric’s shouted instructions—she knelt on the wooden disc. She wrapped her fingers over the edge of the disc and clawed its underside.

Swaying, she felt as fluid as an amoeba, her bones and muscles merely cytoplasm.

“Crystal!” Eric’s voice reached her. He positioned himself where she could see him. “You are a strong woman! So powerful! You can achieve whatever you want to achieve. You can go as high as you want to go!”

No doubt he said those same words to every woman who made it this far. She swatted the thought away. If she was going to do this, she had to believe that he meant the words just for her. She absorbed them into every pore.

“You’re beautiful, Crystal! Look at you! Absolutely amazing. So courageous. So determined. Everything is possible for you. It’s all there for you, and you’re just the woman who can make it happen. This is your moment. This is your day to shine.”

Her coworkers urged her on, too, but it was Eric’s voice that gave her courage. *Beautiful.* Somehow, she positioned a foot under her. Then the other one. To rise felt like pushing against the hand of an invisible giant, but she strained upward, forcing her quaking knees to straighten.

She stood.

She was one with the sky and the eagles. Clouds floated within her grasp. One thing remained to seal this triumphant experience: to reach into her pocket and fling away her wedding band. She envisioned her fingers extracting the ring, then whizzing it across the treetops.

But her arms, outstretched airplane style, maintained her precarious balance. She couldn't force her hand to her side.

A second later she zipped down to the forest floor. Whipping off her helmet, she shook her hair out. She staggered. Immediately Eric enfolded her in his arms.

"You're amazing! I'm so proud of you," he whispered.

Shaking against his chest, she felt his soft beard on her cheek, breathed in his piney scent, and melted into his strength. What would it be like to feel his lips on hers?

She wobbled out of his embrace. "I couldn't have done it without you. Wow. That was quite a feeling."

He drew his hand down her arm and turned to the next climber.

At dinner everyone was relaxed and refreshed. As Crystal had hoped, the team-building routines had loosened everyone up. Showing off their deductive powers, they traded theories and clues about Duke McDougal's murder. No one suspected Eric, who had gained everyone's trust on the ropes course. Unable to restrain the smirk that crept to her lips, Crystal insisted she had no inside information. Admitting she had communicated with Sir Manfred might raise a few eyebrows.

She turned in early. Snuggling into the queen-sized canopy bed, she managed one more internet search on unwanted wedding rings. Up popped a story featuring a joyful couple backed by teal-blue ocean and white-sand beach. They had brought their rings from their previous

marriages on their honeymoon. On the count of three, she pitched his old ring into the waves and he pitched hers.

Crystal switched off the light. That was so sweet—her favorite idea so far—but she doubted she'd ever remarry. No real man could match the man she wished Eric was.

Hours later she punched down her pillow for the hundredth time. After a blissful series of dreams where she and Eric strolled Tahitian sands as newlyweds, she awoke and couldn't get back to sleep. He was married, for goodness' sake, and she had no intention of being a homewrecker. She had to stop thinking about him. She slipped on her jeans and t-shirt, pocketed her room key, and rode the elevator down to visit Sir Manfred.

In the dimly lit hallway she sat on the tapestry bench hugging her knees. "Sir Manfred," she began, her voice barely audible, "maybe Eric's a Lancelot wannabe, but I'm no Guinevere. Anyway, I'm probably imagining it all. Could be he liked my ring because he's Irish and it matched his. Maybe he was sorry to see me without it."

Sir Manfred seemed unconvinced. He required honesty, even from lonely women at three a.m. She studied the carpet, unable to meet the knight's penetrating gaze. The truth? Eric's expressive face, electrifying touch, and intense eyes spoke volumes. He was attracted to her, too.

"After tomorrow, we'll never see each other again, and I'll put him from my mind. Still, it's been nice to imagine a romance—here in this magical place." She raised her eyes. "But I won't forget you, my friend."

Her heart warmed for the faithful knight, leaning toward her with such zealous valor, ready to spring to her aid. She crossed the hallway to his side and grasped his cold steel fingers. She lifted her hand to his cheek and ran her fingers down his resolute jawline to the noble chin beneath the visor.

In a twinkling she knew what to do. With her left hand she reached up and lifted Sir Manfred's visor, and with her right she felt inside the helmet along the bottom of the chin. She was too short to see inside, but she felt a hollow that could cradle a jewel safely and, when the visor was lowered, invisibly. She withdrew her ring from her pocket, deposited it there, and lowered the visor back into place.

"I charge thee, Sir Manfred," she whispered solemnly, "to guard this treasure and deliver it to the chosen one alone, whether duster-wielding parlor maid or ladder-bearing maintenance man. I hereby bequeath it to your wisdom and justice."

At the wrap-up Saturday morning, Eric joined them to announce the solution to the murder mystery. To Crystal's surprise, fully half her coworkers had accused her, the Lady of the Crystal Lagoon, as the murderess. Eric's ruse of pulling her away from the dinner table moments before the gunshot had convinced them. Only Crystal had correctly accused Prince Eric. He summoned her up front to bestow her reward.

"A woman as brilliant as she is brave," he announced with a gallant sweep of his hands toward her and a deep bow. "In addition to this coveted basket of goodies from our gift shop, I also present you with the keys to the kingdom—a complimentary week at Castle Albion." He pressed the gift card into her hand with a lingering two-handed shake. Meeting her eyes, he spoke as if only to her, not to the crowd. "I hope to see you again soon."

As the audience applauded, she memorized his blue eyes and endearing smile for the last time.

After Castle Albion, Crystal's life returned to its new normal. Ronnie married his girlfriend a month after the divorce. Crystal's anger toward him gradually cooled, and she could speak to him civilly when necessary. Shortly after their second daughter graduated from high

school, Ronnie inexplicably turned kind and considerate. Over the summer his relationship with his daughters blossomed, and Crystal was finally able to remember her married years fondly.

When Ronnie's small plane crashed in Labrador where he was hunting caribou, the girls were devastated. Though they'd just started fall term, they came home for two weeks. The funeral was awkwardly poignant. Crystal, who wasn't the widow, grieved as if she was. Ronnie's relatives thanked her repeatedly for coming and reminisced with her about happier days. Making everyone cringe, Ronnie's widow attended on the arm of another man.

The girls spent a week going through their dad's things. Because of their prenuptial agreement, Ronnie's widow had inherited nothing. He left everything to his daughters, except for his Lexus, which, to her great surprise, he had willed to Crystal.

One day the girls came home from their dad's condo with a letter they'd found addressed to Crystal and dated four months previous. It was an apology of sorts, but apparently he'd never had the courage to send it. He confessed that when his second wife started cheating on him, he finally understood the pain he'd caused Crystal and the girls. He and Crystal had shared true love—but of course he'd found out too late.

Crystal read the letter repeatedly and wept afresh each time. Finally she stored it in a keepsake box in her room. Placing it there, she noticed the Castle Albion gift card—she'd never found time to go back. She pictured steadfast Sir Manfred. Had he foreseen what was to come? Might he have saved her wedding ring for her? Suddenly she craved that memento of Ronnie. If there was any possibility of retrieving it, she had to try. The girls were heading back to college in a few days. With the recent trauma, her boss would understand if she needed a getaway.

The following weekend she drove to the hill country, now ablaze with autumn colors, and pulled her Lexus up to the gray-towered castle, which looked exactly as it had eighteen months

ago. When she entered, the concierge stand was vacant, but a glance down the hall told her Sir Manfred was still on duty. At check-in she learned she had been upgraded to the Rapunzel suite, but no one could tell her why.

The room looked the same as it had last year, except that a handful of red-foil-wrapped chocolate hearts bound with netting and tied with a crimson ribbon rested on the pillow. She read the attached tag: *Welcome back, Ms. Beaudry. – Sir Manfred.*

She grinned. A clever marketing ploy—but so apropos. She ordered room service and watched a movie, biding her time until the hallways emptied.

After midnight, she slipped out of her room. On the main floor, she approached Sir Manfred from the back hallway. He still bent forward, eye slits aligned on the concierge's name plate. Was it still Eric's name? Her heart tugged her that direction, but if she ventured farther, she'd be visible to the night clerk. Never mind. A married man wasn't her mission.

She turned to face the armored knight. "Greetings, Sir Manfred," she whispered. "Thanks for the chocolates." The same faithful rapport she'd felt from him before warmed her to her toes. "I've returned to claim what's mine—that is, if I'm worthy. May I?"

She felt his consent, and a thrill rose to her throat. The ring was still there. She could sense it.

After looking around to assure their privacy, she reached up and raised the visor. With her right hand, she felt into the depression behind the chin. The prongs of a set jewel met her fingers, and relief rushed over her. Carefully she slid the ring upward along the bottom of the helmet and closed her fingers around it.

She crossed to the tapestry bench and sat. With a tremor of excitement she opened her fist.

A large diamond solitaire glittered in her hand.

She blinked twice, then raised her eyes to Sir Manfred. "You!" she scolded quietly. "Are you in the business of bewitching women's rings from them? I thought better of you!"

Unashamed, Sir Manfred maintained his innocence, and she knew by his valiant stance that she had falsely accused her loyal knight. She slipped the solitaire into her pocket, returned to his side, and once again raised the visor. Again she felt inside, this time sweeping her fingers over the entire area. She caught her breath as two rings clinked together in her hand.

Carefully she withdrew them, clasping them to her palm as soon as they reached the lip of the helmet. Squeezing them tightly, she returned to the bench. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer. "Let one of them be mine."

As she unfolded her fingers, she opened her eyes. In her palm lay her own Celtic knotwork band with its diamond and four emeralds.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, rather too loudly.

Nestled beside it was a titanium band etched with Celtic knots against a black background. Eric's.

She tilted her head at Sir Manfred. "What can it mean?"

Sir Manfred's lips were sealed. Whether Eric had found her ring there and added his to it after his own divorce, or whether Sir Manfred had enticed him to deposit it there as if no one had ever done so before, the knight would not divulge.

"Wait a minute!" The depths of Sir Manfred's wisdom slowly dawned. "When you told me Eric was *the one*, you weren't just helping me win the murder mystery game. You meant he was the one for me, didn't you?"

Sir Manfred seemed rather smug.

“Then I misjudged him! He’s not a knave—just a man whose wife was untrue.” Crystal smiled. “And the chocolates weren’t from you.”

Retrieving the solitaire from her pocket, she approached him. Gingerly she returned all three rings to their hiding place and closed the visor.

In one glorious moment she imagined herself in Eric’s arms, his beard brushing her cheek, and his lips finding hers. She saw their rings sinking to the bottom of the sea and an ecstatic little mermaid adding them to her collection.

She curtsied. “Sir Manfred, the Lady of the Crystal Lagoon salutes you. You have served me well.”

Behind her she heard footsteps, and a shiver of possibility rippled from her shoulders to her toes. She turned.

“Crystal.” Eric quickened his pace. “I knew you’d figure it out.”

She held out her hands, and he pulled her close—close enough to find her runaway heart in his true blue eyes.