

WHEN AN UNLIKELY PAIR PROMISE TO SAVE A HOLIDAY WEDDING
THEY REDISCOVER THE GOD OF CHRISTMAS MIRACLES

Mistletoe Mission

Stacey Weeks

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1

The curtain slipped from Emily's fingers as she turned from the window.

"Did you decide about the contest?" Melody leaned against the wall by the front door. Marriage looked good on her friend. Still a newlywed at six months, Melody wanted everyone to be as happy as she was with Quentin.

It had been a long time since Emily was that kind of happy.

Emily pulled her boots out of the front closet and tugged them on. "I'm gonna give it a go. I emailed my entry earlier today, but I'm not sure I can pull a full proposal together in time."

"If anyone can do it, it's you." Melody handed Emily her jacket and leaned back against the wall. "I'm glad you didn't lease that little storefront off Main Street. Winning a spot on the Mistletoe Mile is exactly what your business needs."

Winning a spot on the path that wound all around the quaint Christmassy town of Mistletoe Meadows would be amazing, but Emily couldn't bank on it. Several local businesses far more established than her destination-wedding venture had also entered the contest.

Emily pointedly looked at the front door. "If I don't get outside to greet Leah, I won't have a winter

wedding to highlight in my proposal.” Emily had photographs from Melody’s wedding the previous summer, but she needed to add images from Leah’s winter wedding to fill out her proposal.

“Oh, sorry!” Melody jumped out of the way to let Emily pass.

Emily descended the porch steps repeating the names of Leah’s mother and stepfather in her head. She followed deep crevices in the snow to an idling high-end sedan.

Alice and Bert. Alice and Bert. Alice and Bert.

She knew their names because she had been in constant communication with Leah during the weeks leading up to this day, but a history of forgetfulness in high-stress moments only amplified this as a high-stress moment. She hurried toward the vehicle. *Alice and Bert.*

Convincing Alice Woodgrow, Leah’s big-city, hoity-toity mother, to trade a huge, splashy wedding at her golf club for a smaller more intimate affair in the country had been a group effort. What really sealed the deal was Leah asking in front of Melody and Travis’s mom. The only thing that seemed to matter more to Alice than getting her way was appearing generous and kind in front of others.

Leah climbed out of the backseat. “We made it!”

The sunlight caught the diamond on her left hand as Leah exited the automobile, and Emily felt her bare left finger hidden inside her mittens. Even after all these months she still felt naked without the ring. “It’s great to see you again.”

Leah launched forward for a hug.

Emily staggered, but quickly found her footing. She couldn’t let her best client—her only client—fall to

the ground.

"I'm so thankful for all the work you've done on our wedding. I don't think I could have pulled it together on my own." Leah pulled back with her hands still clutching Emily's upper arms. Her wide eyes, rounded and hardly blinking, darted to her parents. "Come meet my mom and her husband, Bert."

Emily's stomach fluttered. She pasted on a big smile that she hoped looked more natural than it felt. Interesting, how Leah referred to Bert as her mother's husband. Bert was not her dad or even her stepdad.

"It's nice to meet you." Emily offered her hand, but Alice wasn't looking at her. Alice stared at the gingerbread-trim work, white clapboard siding, and dormer windows of Mistletoe Manor Bed and Breakfast.

"Wow," Alice exhaled the word.

Emily quickly hid her smile at the woman's slack jaw hanging open in the most unladylike way.

"Not much strikes my mom speechless." Leah bumped Emily's shoulder.

Leah stepped up behind Alice. "See, Mom, I told you it was nice. Nicer than that golf club with no character. This place has charm. It's like a Norman Rockwell painting."

"This is beyond nice." Bert unloaded the luggage and set it on the snow. "And it's cheaper than the club."

Alice glared at him before settling her gaze on Emily. "How long have you been planning weddings, Emily? Have you used this venue before?"

Emily hesitated. She believed in always telling the truth because the Lord commanded honesty, but somehow, she knew the whole truth would not sit well

with this woman. Who wanted a wedding planner that was struggling to believe in committed relationships? Despite her experiences, Emily *needed* to believe in love. If she didn't surround herself with positive optimistic people in love, she feared she'd grow bitter and hard.

"I've been in business for about six months. This isn't the ceremony and reception venue, although we will take some pictures here. We've booked a beautiful church in town. It holds the same nostalgic charm of the manor but on a grander scale. I think you will love the stained-glass windows, hardwood floors, and stunning view. You won't find a church like that in the city."

Alice *harrumphed*, latching onto the negative. "Six months? That's hardly long enough to handle an event like ours."

"Mom, remember Melody, Travis's sister? Emily planned her wedding. I showed you the pictures."

The corners of Alice's mouth turned down, and her cheeks flushed despite the cold air.

"Emily came from the city to arrange it," Leah continued, "and she loved it so much that she decided to stay and establish Magical Mistletoe Marriages here. She's already made solid connections with the businesses on the Mistletoe Mile. Travis and I walked the mile last year, and he proposed in the gazebo at the end."

Emily appreciated Leah's honesty and the thoughtful way she omitted the humiliating details of Emily's past.

The front door burst open and Carol, Melody's mom and Leah's soon to be mother-in-law, hurried down the steps. "You're here!" She pulled Leah into

her arms and rocked her back and forth. "I've been watching out the upstairs window on and off for the last hour." Carol stepped back and looked into Leah's eyes. "How are you, dear?"

Leah's entire frame and posture relaxed as she recapped their treacherous drive.

Alice stiffened at their warm interaction.

Carol prodded Leah toward the steps and waved Bert and Alice closer. "I'm so glad you're here. You're going to love Mistletoe Meadows." She linked arms with Leah's mom and ushered her up the stairs, across the threshold, and into the front room to stand in front of the rustic black woodstove that pumped heat from a red-bricked corner. "Warm yourself up. You must be freezing."

Daisy, the fat orange tabby cat, stood up and scowled. It lifted its tail high and sauntered out like snobby royalty.

Wayne, Carol's husband and Leah's soon-to-be father-in-law, descended the staircase and offered Bert his hand. "Good to see you again, Bert." Wayne took the suitcases from him and sat them inside the door and out of the way. Everyone looked to Emily for direction.

"There is coffee and tea in the next room," Emily said. "Janie, Melody's step-daughter, made cookies for everyone, and Leah, these flowers came for you." Emily gestured to a beautiful arrangement of yellow roses on the fireplace mantel.

Alice plucked the card from the three-pronged plastic holder, clucking her tongue. "Who would be so insensitive?" She ripped open the envelope. Her eyebrows shot upward. "Travis?"

Alice focused on Emily. "Isn't your job taking care

of this sort of thing? What are we paying you for if you're not on top of the details? We wouldn't see this incompetency in the city."

Emily searched her brain for some logical reason to explain Alice's unhappiness over the flowers.

"What's wrong with roses?" Carol asked. She gave Emily's shoulder a gentle squeeze. Her gaze landed on Leah. "Yellow is your favorite color, right?"

"Yes, it is." Leah extended her hand toward her mom and didn't drop her arm until her mom relinquished the card.

Leah's features softened, and the corners of her lips turned up in a smile at whatever message Travis had scrawled. "It's not a big deal, Mom." Leah slipped the card back into the three-pronged stick. "It was thoughtful. Travis is thoughtful."

Alice clucked her tongue again. "Yellow means jealousy. Why would a bridegroom send his bride flowers that represent jealousy? Someone needs to educate your young man on wedding etiquette."

There was no question as to whom Alice thought that 'someone' should be. Five minutes in, and any ground Emily had gained by stunning Alice with the beauty of Mistletoe Manor had been lost.

"You're here!" Travis swooped in from the back hall, breaking the tension. He dropped a chaste peck on Leah's cheek and gave an awkward side-hug to Alice.

Emily pressed her fingers to her upturned lips. All her bodily tension released as the attention diverted from her. She'd only known Alice for about five minutes, but even she could tell that the woman did not like to be touched.

"I'm glad you made it." Travis seemed undaunted

by Alice's stiffness. "The roads are getting slippery. Clive and Julie are also running late. Quentin, Melody, and Janie just slipped out, but they'll be back later tonight after dinner. Quentin's parents just left for a Christmas cruise, so Quentin and Melody are running the Manor for the next two-weeks. Oh, and Luca is on his way to discuss the ceremony details."

Emily's mind scrambled. Luca? Her Luca? No, not 'her Luca.' He was Steph's Luca now. She hadn't seen him since their awkward reunion at Melody's wedding. She reached out a hand to steady herself. No one had told her that Luca would be here.

2

Luca Wilson hesitated on the porch steps of Mistletoe Manor. Ever since Stephanie had broken off their engagement to marry her high school sweetheart, he'd avoided everything wedding related. But right now, Luca had nothing on his calendar except his cousin's wedding, and the irony rubbed him raw. The only job for this wannabe pastor who had lost faith in romance was to perform a wedding ceremony for two lovebirds. Fantastic.

As he lifted his hand to knock, angry voices drifted out. They were arguing about — flowers? He leaned in, so intent on listening, that the heavy footsteps leading up to the door failed to register until it was too late.

The door opened, and Luca fell in.

He landed on his knees. Hard.

"Luca!"

Luca's knee throbbed. He shifted, planting the sole of one foot on the ground so he could hoist himself up. As he lifted his head, he froze. Emily, the first girl he ever loved, the girl to whom he once promised forever, stood in front of him, pale-faced and trembling.

"This is the minister you secured?" A fussy woman with hair piled high and too much make-up glared down at him. "What kind of wedding planner did I hire?"

“Hey,” Travis laughed. “Down on one knee like that, it looks like you’re about to propo—”

Luca leaped up and silenced Travis with a glare.

Emily turned away, but not before a look of hurt flashed in her dark eyes.

His hypocrisy slammed into his gut like a fist. All these months he had been angry that Steph had broken her promise to him, but long before that he had broken his promise to Emily in a similar fashion. It didn’t matter that the circumstances had differed. The outcome had been the same.

Emily cleared her throat as she tucked a stray chunk of dark hair around her ear. She focused her attention on Alice. “I had nothing to do with hiring Luca.” The way she stumbled over his name and fidgeted with the tips of her shoulder length hair confirmed that she was as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

Luca brushed off his pants and surveyed the room. It wasn’t hard to recognize the key players in this drama. His Aunt Carol and Uncle Wayne unsuccessfully covered disappointed expressions. Leah stood to the side unable to mask a look of shame. An angry, larger-than-life woman loomed next to a sheepish-looking man. They must be Leah’s parents, Alice and Bert. Emily held her ground between the dominating woman and Leah, not budging, not flinching, unafraid.

Atta girl.

Mrs. Woodgrow leveled a glare that would have made Luca shrivel up and die had it been directed at him, but Emily didn’t even blink. She straightened her back. “Mrs. Woodgrow, you knew Travis was arranging the minister. And it’s important to clarify

that you didn't hire me. I work for Leah." She spoke with a kind but firm tone.

Emily subtly shifted her position toward Leah, which put her back to Alice, preventing her from seeing utter shock sweep over Alice's face. If he had to guess, he'd bet not too many people spoke to Alice Woodgrow like that.

He nodded in approval. This was the Emily he remembered, all firecracker and spunk. He sneaked a glance at her curiously empty left ring finger. Last he had heard, she and Ian had planned to wed.

Emily murmured indecipherable words to Leah oblivious to the daggers Alice threw her way.

Leah nodded, and moved closer to Travis, who slipped an arm around her shoulder.

"Man, it's cold, eh?" Luca cleared his throat and stepped farther into the room, rubbing his gloved hands together. He stomped his feet on the rug by the door.

"Yes," Emily agreed. She lifted her chin and held out a hand for Luca's coat. "The forecast says it is only going to get colder as the week goes on." Her lips twisted into a wry smile. She had understood that he was not referring to the outside temperature.

Luca surrendered his jacket, and he turned to extend his hand to the Ice Queen. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Woodgrow. I'm Luca Wilcox, and I'm performing the ceremony."

Alice looked at his hand for such a long time that he doubted she would accept it. Finally, she relented, and it seemed as if everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Wedding chatter soon filled the room.

"You are the last person I expected to fall through the doorway today." Emily hung his jacket in the

entryway closet.

“And I didn’t know you were the old friend of Melody’s who was planning the wedding.”

As Luca stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Emily and surveyed the room, he was careful not to touch her. Still, the energy in the minuscule space between them vibrated as they both fixed their attention on the happy couple.

Travis tightened his arm around Leah. She turned and rested her head on his shoulder as he folded his arms around her waist. They looked so intimate that Luca felt uncomfortably out of place standing beside the girl he had once failed.

“I, ah, hear there was a kerfuffle about flowers?”

Emily kept her eyes on the couple. Leah’s expression softened at whatever Travis whispered to her. The corners of her lips turned up, deepening a dimple in her left cheek.

“You could say that,” Emily’s voice thickened.

What an odd pair they made, a wounded event planner and a jilted minister. What was God thinking putting a Christmas Eve wedding in their hands?

3

Emily parked her car in the lot adjacent to Twelve Main Street. She pushed against the steering wheel to stretch her arms. The man she once thought she would marry was in Mistletoe Meadows to perform the ceremony.

She tapped her fingers against the steering wheel and mentally reviewed the menu for the reception. Then, she drafted her contest proposal in her mind. She banged her hands against the steering wheel. Nothing worked. Her mind kept replaying Luca's entrance to Mistletoe Manor.

Alice had freaked out because Alice freaked out about everything—the yellow flowers, the different church, the minister. And to top it off, Emily'd had to deal with Alice's temper tantrum while Luca had perched before her on one knee as if holding a ring.

Her airway grew thick.

She hurried out of the car and into the cold air, sucking in a deep breath. Her windpipe expanded and relaxed. Her exhale puffed out like the smoke wafting from the nearby chimney that carried the pleasant scent of burning cherry wood. On foot, she approached the two-and-a-half story brick building. At least she didn't need to worry about running into Luca tonight.

Someone had thoughtfully shoveled a path on the sidewalk leading to the front doors of the Town Hall.

Through the falling snow, she could barely make out the front-facing gable roof with its simple Romanesque Revival arch. If the Town Hall was as stunning on the inside as it was on the outside, it might be an excellent venue for events. It mirrored the old church Emily had booked for the wedding.

She pushed through the doors into a *whoosh* of warm air. Blowers from above blasted the hood off her head. She followed the drone of murmurs to a large meeting room and stood at the back. Every seat was taken.

Like a magnet, her gaze landed on familiar light blond hair, and her heart lurched. With a bright red scarf tucked into the collar of his buttoned wool jacket, Luca could have been posing for a men's clothing advertisement. His eyes twinkled at whatever he was saying to Melody and Quentin. He threw back his head and laughed.

She pressed a hand over her churning stomach. He looked like the same Luca, the same carefree guy who'd stolen her heart for all of high school. He looked like the same guy who'd secretly proposed in a gazebo one summer night in her parent's backyard. Instead of an engagement ring, he'd given her a promise ring that symbolized his intent to marry her.

Then, less than four weeks later, he broke her heart.

Melody caught her eye and waved her over. They had saved her a seat. *Great.*

Her lungs constricted. She forced a smile, breathing a slow inhalation that slowed the pulse throbbing in her neck. She could do this. She *would* do this. She loved Melody's family and wanted to bless Travis with a beautiful wedding. She would not let

Luca and his perfect blue eyes stop her from doing her job. She threaded her way toward the empty seat beside Luca.

"I didn't know you'd be here tonight." Luca grinned as if they were old friends... which they kind of were.

Right up until their last week together she would have called Luca her best friend. She sat beside him. Why couldn't the empty seat be beside Melody?

She pressed her legs together to camouflage their trembling. "Tonight is about the Mission Main Street promotion. What are you doing here?" she asked him.

He looked so eager, so much like the boy she had once loved that she almost softened.

"I dragged him along," Melody spoke around Luca. "He didn't have anything else to do."

"I hope you're OK with that." Luca offered her the confident smile that made her knees weak as a teen, but she was older and wiser now.

"Of course, she's OK, aren't you, Emily?" Melody answered for her. She grinned that maddening honeymooner grin.

"I'm OK." But she wasn't. Seeing Luca only brought back feelings of rejection, and that train traveled the tracks right to Ian, her two-timing ex-fiancé who shacked up with her former best friend one week before their wedding. None of that was what Emily would call OK, but she wasn't about to tell any of that to Luca.

"I thought you'd be married by now. Ian, was it?"

She stiffened. Was he sincere or poking fun?

Melody sat back in her seat, suddenly becoming very busy with Quentin.

"I could say the same thing about you," Emily

deflected. She didn't need to look at his left hand again to remember it lacked a ring.

"Steph got back together with her high school boyfriend shortly after she returned home. We called the wedding off."

So they were both two-time losers at love. Wonderful. That'd be good for business. She shifted in her seat to put a bit more space between them. "What are you doing now? I seem to remember something about missions."

His eyebrows popped upward. "You kept up with me?"

She yanked open her purse and pretended to look for something to avoid meeting his eyes. "Ahh, I've heard bits and pieces here and there."

"I work for One Village. It started as a short-term position, but now they want me fulltime."

"That sounds exciting."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it's the right fit. My official title is an educator. I teach the indigenous people about starting sustainable businesses. The goal is to wean them off dependence on North American aid. It's not quite the pastoral position I expected after graduation."

She victoriously pulled out a package of mints, validating her pretend search. "I don't know if any of us are doing what we thought we would after graduation." She offered one to Luca before popping one in her mouth. "When do you go back?"

He shrugged. "They'd like a long-term commitment from me, but I don't feel settled about it. I love it. I'm making a difference, but I don't have that peace from God that I need before moving forward. The wedding came at a good time. It gave me a reason

to return to the States and figure this out.”

“You always did have an adventurous streak. I’m glad you found a way to use it for the Lord.”

Mayor Wickfield tapped the microphone, and the room quieted. Behind him, members of the town council took a seat in a long row of chairs. The mayor pulled the cordless microphone off the stand and claimed the last remaining seat with the other council members.

“Welcome to Mistletoe Meadows Town Meeting. The topic tonight is Mission Main Street. As many of you are aware, the Main Street storefront previously known as Mistletoe Media has relocated to a smaller space better suited to their needs. This opens a vacancy on the Mistletoe Mile. Instead of renting it to the highest bidder, we are inviting all business, existing and start-ups, to submit a proposal that convinces the town council that your business not only belongs on the Mistletoe Mile but has a vision for promoting Mistletoe Meadows as a popular tourist destination. We are now open for questions.”

Teresa Wilcox, from MTM Florist, strode to a microphone on a stand in the center of the room facing the council. “I don’t think this is right. I was prepared to pay fair market value for that storefront. I’ve been waiting for a spot to open up on the mile for years, and now my store, *More Than Mistletoe*, might miss its chance.” She didn’t wait for a response. She scurried back to her seat and landed with a huff.

“You have the same chance as everyone else, Miss. Wilcox,” the mayor responded.

The Festive Fudge Shoppe owner, Gracie Day, stepped up to the mic. She spoke softly, “What if I can’t make a flashy presentation? Do you have to be up on

all that to enter?"

The mayor handed the microphone to the man on his left. "No, Miss Day. All the proposals come to me, and I will look at every proposal regardless of the format in which it is presented."

"It's not fair." Vic, from Vic's Variety, shot up from his seat and spoke from his place in the crowd. "We don't see you jumping through hoops to put our town name on the map. You're making us do all the work."

"Actually, we've arranged for a travel writer and photographer from a tourism magazine to cover the contest. Mr. Tim Johnson arrives tomorrow. He will be taking pictures and putting together a spread for his magazine. We are participating and investing as much into this town as anyone else."

"What about those of us off Main Street?"

Emily craned her neck to look behind her. The angry voice came from the back of the room.

Herbert Dexter stepped out from the shadows. "When are you going to do something to help us? That blasted mile has been killing my store ever since you started it."

Emily's gut twisted. She had been looking at renting a storefront off main before she decided to try the contest. The owner, Stan, was so kind, fatherly even. She felt awful for going another way, but if she had a chance to win a spot on the mile, she had to try.

"The town council is here to support all our business owners, on and off the Mistletoe Mile. This particular promotion highlights the mile; the next one might not."

Herbert's voice thickened. "You don't help me much."