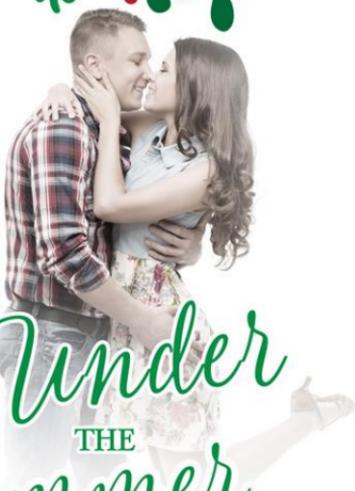


WHO KNEW THAT LOST LUGGAGE, LAUGHTER,  
AND BAD HAIR COULD INCITE ROMANCE?



Under  
THE  
Summer  
Mistletoe

A *free* CHRISTMAS-IN-JULY  
ROMANCE

Stacey Weeks

# Under the Summer Mistletoe

*A free story from Mistletoe Meadows*

Stacey Weeks

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

**Under the Summer Mistletoe**

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# 1

All Sebastian wanted to do was get through Quentin and Melody's wedding with his dignity intact.

Well, that's wasn't going to happen.

After enduring a disastrous international flight, during which the kid in the next seat spilled a full soda on his lap, he was forced to tolerate a body search at customs. To top it all off, the airline had lost his luggage. He was ready to turn back and declare the entire adventure a failure, but he couldn't do that to Quentin, not after all his friend had done for him.

Maybe he'd be more excited once his head stopped pounding. He'd packed painkillers somewhere in his carry-on backpack. Once he bought a bottle of water, he'd knock a couple back and pray for relief.

The cabbie let him off on Main Street in the heart of Mistletoe Meadows. It was strange to see a Christmas town in the summer months. Mistletoe vines filled with green berries, not red, hung from every lamppost. Posters advertising an upcoming event, Christmas in July, blanketed the billboards, and the stores all used Christmas wordplay in their names, except for the place he was looking — Vic's Variety.

Sebastian slipped through the doors and sent the jingle bells ringing.

The cashier, looking exceptionally pretty in a

femininely frilled pink top, looked up from her perch on a stool and slipped a bookmark into her novel. "Good afternoon."

He smiled but didn't respond. He meandered through the aisles, hitching his backpack higher on his shoulder. Thankfully, he'd squeezed the mandolin he was playing for Quentin's reception into his carry-on bag. The rest of his things could be easily replaced, but the old bluegrass band wouldn't have sounded the same without a mandolin.

"How are you today?" The clerk appeared at the end of the aisle, her short dark hair following the line of her chin in a soft wave. She tucked a chunk of it behind one ear, and her cheek dimpled.

He'd be better if she'd magically become his plus one at Quentin's wedding tonight and save him the embarrassment of being the only single guy at a wedding *again*. "Not so great, but my hair looks awesome... right?"

Her gaze flicked to his hair. She tilted her head to the side and then wandered back to the cash counter without a word. She looked as good leaving as she did coming. He quickly averted his gaze and repented. Only ignorant men ogled strange women, and only weirdoes invited total strangers to be a plus one wedding date. He didn't want to be *that guy*.

Besides, if he really wanted to impress her, he needed to come up with a better line than "my hair's great".

He was usually quicker with quips, but earlier when airport security asked him if he had any contraband, he'd replied, "Yeah, what do you need?" Clearly, he was off his game because airport security didn't find him any funnier than she did.

He peeked around the end of the aisle. Pretty-in-Pink was re-engrossed in her book. In his defense, he had always been unusually nervous around law enforcement and attractive women, and bad jokes happened when he was nervous.

He raked a hand over his hair, and it stuck in a patch of hardened soda. He groaned. He grabbed a handheld mirror from the shelf and looked past the clearance sticker to his stained and disheveled reflection. A great patch of sticky hair swayed with each movement. *Awesome hair, right.* No wonder she walked away.

He rummaged through the discount rack. Musicians didn't roll in the kind of money the media liked to imply. Having a few albums released and experiencing moderate success in the Christian music industry hardly kept his car fueled in gas, and he needed to buy everything from underwear to socks. Thank the Lord he'd rented the tux locally, or he'd be showing up in his ripped jeans and concert shirt.

He pulled a package off the shelf. Great, the only packet of underwear in his size was an old Valentine's Day reject. He shoved the red boxers with large pink hearts under his arm and perused the novelty socks. Doesn't anyone carry plain socks anymore? He grabbed a pair covered with cartoon characters and headed to the toothbrush aisle. He filled his shopping basket with toothpaste, a brush, deodorant, a razor, and bottled water. That should do it.

Before he fully rounded the corner, his phone sounded from deep inside his backpack. He set down his shopping basket and knelt to the ground to search for the phone as the melody of the Chicken Dance sounded out. After unloading everything onto the

floor, he found his cellular at the bottom. "Hello?" He glanced up. The cashier was watching with an amused smile — Chicken Dance for the win.

"Hey man, you made it! What's taking you so long? The rest of the band is already here." The joy in Quentin's voice lifted Sebastian's heaviness. No matter how hard the trip, it was nice to get the old band together and celebrate his friend's wedding. Quentin had had a difficult few years, and Melody had brought his laughter back.

"Sorry I've had a rough trip. Just getting a few things, and I'll be at the Manor ASAP."

"Great. I can't wait for you to meet Melody. I've told her all about you."

"Only the good stuff, right?" Sebastian balanced the phone between his neck and shoulder, restuffed his backpack, and hauled it, along with his shopping basket, toward the register.

If he wanted to, Quentin could tell some tales about Sebastian. After Quentin found the Lord, he'd led their bandmates to Christ one by one, except for Sebastian. For reasons he could never explain, Sebastian had resisted the Gospel and had resented how it had changed his friend, but Quentin had never given up.

A year after their bluegrass band transitioned to Christian music, they were playing at a youth event. Quentin had just given his testimony, sharing how Janie's birth and Ashley's disappearance had shaped his faith, and he gave an altar call. The band was supposed to play quietly in the background as he invited those who wanted to confess their sin and surrender their life to Christ to come forward, but Sebastian couldn't play. With his heart thudding

against his ribs, blood roaring in his ears, and pulse throbbing, he'd set down his mandolin, descended the stage steps, and responded to Jesus. It was the best day of his life.

"I'm telling Melody nothing but the best, man. Nothing but the best," Quentin assured him.

They disconnected, and Sebastian refocused on the potential plus-one ringing up his purchases.

"Is that everything?"

"Yup." He mentally calculated the time remaining before the evening wedding. If he got out of here in the next few minutes, he should be able to get to Mistletoe Manor within the hour giving the band plenty of time to rehearse before the ceremony.

"That'll be fifteen dollars." The woman's eyes focused just beyond him. Pretty-in-Pink was pretty much ignoring him.

"Wow, is it me or did the temperature in here drop at least fifteen degrees?" He handed her the cash expecting a smile.

Her lips tightened as she gave him his bag. "Have a good day." Her curt tone undercut her words.

He nodded. "You, too." He slung his backpack over one shoulder and headed out. Just as his hand rested on the door handle, she called him back.

"Sir?"

Had he forgotten something? He turned.

Trembling, her face pale, she straightened her back. "I need you to empty your backpack."

"What? Why?"

"I saw you," she said softly.

"Saw what?" He squinted against the throbbing in his head. He didn't have time for an unnecessary delay, unless, of course, it ended in a date.

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She lifted her chin. "I saw you put the underwear into your bag."

"What? I'd never—" Wait, did he? He couldn't have. He mentally replayed the moments he repacked his knapsack. He was so tired he couldn't remember what had happened here and what had happened earlier at the airport. It's a really bad day when you can't keep your underwear straight.

"If you'd open your bag, we can settle this right now." She moved from behind the counter and walked toward him.

He tightened his grip on the padded strap slung over his right shoulder. The pounding in his head increased. "I don't have to open anything. I haven't done anything wrong."

A woman hurrying down the sidewalk turned into the store. "Good afternoon, Holly. I need a few of those tiny hairsprays for the wedding party. Do you still have those?"

Holly. A pretty name for a sour woman.

She nodded smiling tightly. "Sure do, Mrs. Staff. Aisle four, top left, near the back."

The woman's gaze shifted from Holly to him, and back to Holly. "Everything OK?"

"It will be as soon as this man returns the underwear he stole."

His breath caught as her accusations landed like a fist to his gut. He unzipped his backpack. He'd show her.

He froze. Heat flooded his cheeks. There they were. Nothing says manly like shoplifting corner-store, heart-covered, hot-red underwear.

"Wait a minute. I can explain." He pulled the offending item out of his bag. "The airline lost my

luggage. I meant to pay for them, but my phone rang and..." He let his explanation trail off at the sight of Holly's toe-tapping. The guy at the airport was warmer than she was.

"Should I call the police?" Mrs. Staff asked.

"I already tried. There was no answer."

His first stroke of luck all day. Thank the Lord for small-town police forces with limited services. "I'll pay for everything. Do we need to involve the police?"

"I'll walk to the station and see what's going on unless you'd like me to stay here with you?" Mrs. Staff dragged her gaze up and down his frame in much the same way his mother had back when he was a kid. He fought the urge to squirm.

"Go ahead," Holly assured her. "We'll be fine. Take the hairspray. It's on the house."

"Thank you!" The woman scurried into aisle four, grabbed her items, and backed out the door chattering the entire way. "I'll send an officer right down. Melody and Carol said hello. See you at the wedding, dear." The door *whooshed* shut.

"The bride's mother?"

Holly snapped her attention back to him. "You know the bride?"

"Only her name. I'm Quentin's friend, Sebastian. I'm here for the wedding." He held out his hand.

Her features softened a little as she studied him. "So the plane really did lose your luggage?"

He dropped his hand when she didn't accept it. "Yes. And I'm playing at the ceremony, so I need to get going."

"Playing?"

"Quentin, me, and a few other guys had a band growing up. We all flew in for the wedding to play a

little bluegrass." He pulled his stringed instrument out of the bag. "I play the mandolin."

A tiny smile softened her expression. "I'll be at the wedding, too."

He opened his mouth to respond, but his stomach let out an exaggerated growl, and his face heated again.

Breakfast had been a good eight hours ago, and he'd missed the snack on the plane because he was in the bathroom trying to clean the spilled soda off his shirt. By the time he had returned to his seat, the kid next to him had eaten both of their cookies.

"Here, have this." Holly walked behind the counter and grabbed a granola bar from an opened box and handed it to him.

"Are you sure? I haven't paid for it, yet." *Please, Lord, let her have a sense of humor.*

The corners of her lips twitched.

"Is there a problem here, Holly? Mrs. Staff sent me." The responding officer seemed closer to teen than adulthood, yet he puffed out his chest like an alpha dog. He hitched his thumbs through his front belt loops and rocked onto the back of his heels.

The guy's eager smile soured Sebastian's gut. The man eyed Holly like she was dessert and he hadn't eaten all week.

"I think we're fine, Officer Holt, but thanks for checking. It was a misunderstanding."

"You sure?" Officer Hot-for-Holly gave Sebastian a slow disapproving once over that made him feel body searched all over again.

"I'm sure."

"Theft is a crime. You don't have to let him off."

It wouldn't matter to Hankering-for-Holly that the

theft was accidental. He had all the power, and he knew it. One thought raced through Sebastian's mind: this was not the time for a joke no matter how badly he wanted to ask him if he knew about the two peanuts walking down Main Street because one was assaulted.

As the guy eyeballed him, Sebastian got the feeling the cop would love nothing better than to display his male dominance by humiliating Sebastian with a pat down and cuffs.

"He never left the store with the items, so technically there was no theft."

Sebastian's breath *whooshed* out.

With a disappointed look, Holt tipped his hat and left.

Sebastian paid for his underwear and hightailed it out of there before Holly changed her mind. He popped a headache pill and downed the entire bottle of water, tipping his face upward into the sunshine. Thank you, Lord.

As he stuffed the receipt Holly had handed him into his front pocket, a handwritten note on the back caught his eye.

*I'm sorry your day has been so difficult. I hope I see you at the wedding.*

\*\*\*\*

The wedding was perfect. Even Mrs. Staff kindly avoided the topic of his near incarceration as Quentin formally introduced them. Melody's cousin, Luca, performed the ceremony, and the bride's childhood friend-turned-wedding-planner, Emily, was busy running around making sure all the mistletoe

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arrangements surrounding the bride and groom were covered in berries.

Emily stepped onto the stage and tapped the microphone. "If you want the bride and groom to kiss, you'll need to pluck a mistletoe berry from the arrangement on their table. They will honor the tradition and give one kiss per berry. But when the berries are gone, the kissing stops."

Before she even descended from the stage, Janie, Quentin's daughter, had plucked a berry and presented it to her dad.

Much to Janie's delight, Quentin pulled Melody to her feet, tipped her back, and took his sweet time kissing his bride.

Sebastian grabbed Emily's attention before she flitted off to take care of more reception details. "Do you have any extra berries?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Sure. Why?" She rummaged around in her tote bag. "I need them to refill the arrangement on the table."

"You're rigging the game." He laughed.

She gazed over at the couple smooching for a second time. "Oh, I don't think they'll mind. Who are you hoping to catch under the mistletoe?"

She followed his gaze to Holly, who was rejecting officer Hungry-for-Holly for the second time today.

"Vic's granddaughter? FYI, she's only here temporarily. Just until Vic recovers from his knee surgery, then she heads back to Cove Dale."

"It's more like I'm planning a rescue than stealing a kiss." At least rescuing Holly from the guy who couldn't seem to read her non-verbal cues to back off was all he had planned to do until Emily said Holly lived a short fifteen minutes from the place he called

home. Sebastian pocketed the berries and wove his way toward the lady in a soft pink dress, suddenly thankful for lost luggage.

He would have never met her had the airline been competent.

"Sebastian!" She waved as he neared. "How are you?"

"Not great, but my hair looks awesome, right?"

Her laughter warmed his insides. She turned ever so slightly toward him, presenting Officer Holt with her back. Two spots of color filled Holt's cheeks.

That's right. Who's the alpha now?

"Do you think you could join me in that archway." Sebastian pointed to the arched entrance to the reception hall.

She lifted her brow. "The archway under the mistletoe?"

"Do you know of a better place for me to steal a kiss?" He wandered away before she could answer. The ball was in her court now. Would she come, or would she lob another polite rejection and send him to join a sulking Officer Holt?

Holly wandered over, rubbing her forearm with a trembling hand. She glanced up at the mistletoe hanging above them. "Emily says that since mistletoe can bloom in the cold months, it is a reminder that love endures the harshest circumstances and those who persevere through the tough years will be rewarded with the winter bloom. Perfect for a wedding." Her words tumbled out like a nervous waterfall

His throat grew thick at her babbling. Pretty-in-Pink liked him. "And what does the legend say about an accused thief stealing a kiss in front of a rejected police officer?"

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Her expression softened, she pointed up and then shrugged her shoulders. “No berries. Sorry.”

He moved a little closer and opened his fist to expose a single berry in his palm. “I got a little help from Emily.”

She whipped around and caught Emily watching their exchange. Emily winked.

Sebastian stepped a little closer, and when Holly didn't move back to maintain the space between them his heart leapt. “I hear you're from Cove Dale. That happens to be where I live.”

“Really?” She tipped her head back to look up at him.

“You know,”—he pressed his palm on the wall just behind her head and dipped his head until he could look into Holly's beautiful brown eyes—“Emily told me some mistletoe facts. According to her, refusing a kiss under the mistletoe is bad luck. What do you think?”

A slow smile stretched across her face.

They stood there, locked in each other's gazes, considering all that God might have for them in the future. When her cheek dimpled, he knew.

She lifted one hand and rested it gently against his unshaven cheek. “I say it's your lucky day, Sebastian.”

*Don't miss out!*

Grab your copy of *Mistletoe Melody* and *Mistletoe Mission* today. Available wherever ebooks are sold.

### *Mistletoe Melody*

Former musician, Melody Staff, spends Christmas at a bed and breakfast in the village of Mistletoe Meadows. While everyone sings familiar carols of Christ drawing near, Melody stumbles over misplaced notes. Her recent diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis has scared off her fiancé and thrust her life into a grand pause. She's not sure her heart will ever sing again.

Quentin Oxford has endured a devastating year. His preteen daughter suffered a stroke, and they've grieved his wife's sudden death, but the Lord coaxes a surprising refrain from Quentin's heart as God rewrites his and Melody's score into a holiday love song that will last for Christmases to come.

### *Mistletoe Mission*

While her own relationships always end up doomed, Emily Colt is still determined to create happily-ever-afters through her wedding and event planning business. In hopes of expanding, she enters her latest project--staging the Christmas wedding of the year--into a town-wide contest. But between crossing paths with the first man to break her heart and dodging a saboteur, she doubts success is within her grasp.

Jilted pastor, Luca Wilson, fled to the mission field to escape a broken heart. All the hurt rushes back when he returns home to officiate his cousin's wedding, and he finds Emily--the girl to whom he once promised forever--organizing the celebration.

Despite Luca's lost faith in love, their unforeseen reunion rekindles a spark, and Luca vows to help Emily save her struggling business. But to succeed, they will have to learn what it means to trust each other and believe in the God of Christmas miracles.

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The Builder's Reluctant Bride  
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