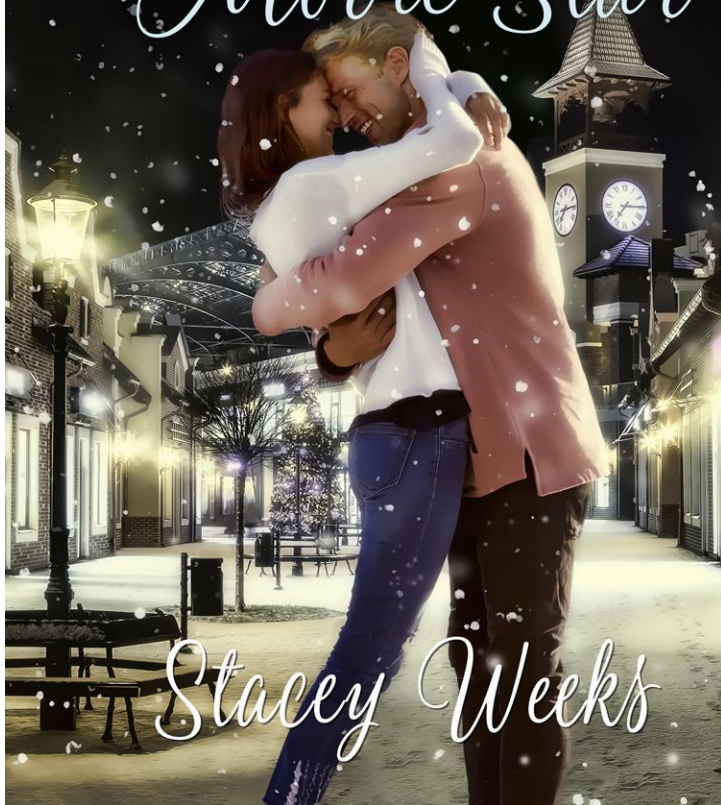


THIS CHRISTMAS, CAN HIS FAME AND HER TENACITY
ENSURE THE HOMELESS WILL HAVE A PLACE TO STAY?

Mistletoe Movie Star



Stacey Weeks

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are 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.

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2020
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0327-5
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

I dedicate this book to Erin. Your compassion toward others, your heart for ministry, and your love for the Lord are part of the pieces that make up Charlene's character. Your speech to our city council petitioning for the homeless community was the day I knew that I found Char. You are an amazing woman of God. It is a joy and a privilege to call you my friend.

What People are Saying

Praise for Mistletoe Melody:

Mistletoe Melody is such a delightful, tender-hearted Christian Christmas tale that warms the reader from the start. We are quickly enveloped in the Christmas traditions and atmosphere that will ignite the festive spirit in us all...Mistletoe Melody is so delightful. It will warm your heart and soul, bring a tear to your eye and leave you smiling knowing that God is faithful and will never leave us nor forsake us

~ Julia Wilson, Christian Bookaholic.

Mistletoe Melody is a charming, sweet story that would make a perfect Hallmark movie

~ Carrie, Reading is my Superpower.

Praise for Mistletoe Mission:

I like this author's ability to find real-life struggles that go beyond the typical formulas and weave them into an entertaining story

~ Carrie, Reading is my Superpower.

I loved Stacey Weeks' beautiful reminder that even when we can't see it, God is always working for our good

~ author Carol Wilson James.

1

The radio host's smooth timbre filled the car's interior, "It's getting slick out there, folks. Today is a good day to curl up at home with the Holiday Channel's latest movie, Countdown to Christmas, starring Jo—"

Jonas stabbed the off button just as the car's built-in warning system chimed. He twisted the steering wheel right, and the chiming stopped. Hopefully, no one took the announcer's advice. The last thing he needed was everyone in town rating his latest film.

The tires hit a patch of ice, and the vehicle's backend slid too far left. The warning chimed again. An early November storm had transformed a short and easy commute into a white-knuckled hazard. Gusty winds pushed and shoved the small vehicle, creating a sensation that he was moving sideways instead of forward. The wheels gripped pavement, and the car jolted as it caught traction. He flexed his fingers, stretched them, and flexed them again.

He squinted through the glare of the headlights reflecting off the falling snow. He could hardly see the sign for the service road leading to the back end of his grandfather's property. The back street would shave a few minutes off the drive, but it wouldn't be plowed.

It only took him a second to decide. He swerved right, corrected a fishtail, and flicked off the headlights

to reduce the glare. Lights were useless in weather like this anyway. Five minutes more. He rolled his shoulders, forcing them down to release the tension in his neck. Five minutes until he repeated the same conversation he had every time he visited Mistletoe Meadows. “Nope, not married yet... Yes, I know that the good girls are all taken, but that’s what I get for playing the field for so long... Yes, I’m still filming those holiday movies... No, I haven’t recommended Mistletoe Meadows to the producer... Yes, I still have that tattoo... No, you can’t see it.” The script never changed.

But this time, the script had to change because he was not visiting his grandparents. He was settling the estate his father inherited when his grandparents died because his dad couldn’t deal with it. One of them had to manage the estate, and the other had to care for Mom. Dad didn’t want to leave Mom when she was so unwell.

A glow from an oncoming car broke through the snow. He flipped his headlights back on, and they caught something reflective in the ditch. He carefully pressed the brakes. He pulled off to the side of the road and stabbed the hazard button before getting out. He zipped his jacket until the collar flipped up, covered the lower half of his face, and tugged up his hood. The thick fur trim extended beyond his profile, blocking the cutting wind. Hopefully, whoever ditched the car had been rescued hours ago. The engine wasn’t running, so the odds were strong that this was the remnants of an earlier accident, but he couldn’t just drive by in case someone was—

“Help!” the faint cry drifted upward.

His footsteps crunched as he slid down the edge of

the ditch and wedged his body between the cold snow bank and the driver's side window. The angle the vehicle had hit the trench would prevent either door from opening. He pounded on the glass. "Are you OK in there?"

The foggy windows concealed all but a faint outline of a red knit cap tugged over wildly curly, dark hair. A scarf covered her mouth. "Are you OK?" Cold seeped through the back of his pant legs as his body pressed against the channel walls.

"I'm f-f-fine, but the door is stuck. I c-c-can't get out." The pitch of the woman's voice rose with each word.

A yowl sounded from the back seat.

"Are you in there alone?"

"No."

His heart lurched. A baby—

"I have a box of kittens."

Kittens? He almost laughed.

"Are you guys OK?"

Jonas could make out a faint silhouette of someone waving down at them from the road.

"We're fine." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and held it up. No reception. "Can you call 9-1-1?"

"I don't have a cell." Her words grew louder as she approached.

"Here, take mine." He handed her his phone. She couldn't have been more than sixteen. She shouldn't be out driving in this. "You'll have to climb back up the bank. We can't get a signal down here."

She nodded and hurried away.

What sixteen-year-old didn't have a cell phone?

"C-c-can you g-g-g-et me out?" The question drew

his attention back.

"The doors are jammed. You're wedged in there good. If you're not hurt, it's probably better to wait for help to arrive."

She nodded.

"Help will be here soon." The girl returned with his phone, her heavy breath coming in short, fast bursts. She wrapped her arms around herself, retracting her bare hands into the sleeves of her jacket. Even with the wind whistling through the bare tree branches, he could hear her teeth chattering. She was underdressed for the weather, wearing no hat and sneakers instead of winter boots. She rounded her shoulders and dropped her chin onto her chest.

"I have an emergency kit in my car," Jonas said. "There's a blanket in it. The button for the trunk is on the driver's side door panel. It's unlocked."

She nodded. As she headed back up the bank, she lost her footing and fell to one knee. She brushed off her pants and kept clumsily trudging onward.

"Help will be here soon," he assured the woman in the car.

A palm swiped across the foggy condensation built on the interior window. A face partially covered with a chunky knit, multi-colored scarf pressed against the glass. "Are you leaving?"

He hunched down, ignored his tingling extremities, and forced his voice to stay even. "I'm not going anywhere."

She started to unroll the window.

"No." He lifted a hand to stop her. "You need to stay warm. Leave it up."

As she nodded, her scarf wiped away more condensation, and he got a better look at the inside of

the car. It appeared to be intact and she should be able to pull herself out once the first responders arrived.

"Tell me about yourself." In a previous movie, he had played the part of an emergency responder. He remembered the importance of keeping a victim in shock talking until help arrived. "Do you live in Mistletoe Meadows?"

Her wide, almond-shaped eyes softened a bit. "Yes. I'm a veterinarian." The scarf muffled her words.

"Ahhh, that explains the kittens."

She smiled. At least, he thought she smiled. The corners of her eyes crinkled and the tops of her cheeks lifted.

"What do you do?" she asked. "Are you visiting for the holidays?" She tucked her gloved hands under the armpits of her jacket and inhaled a quivering breath.

He didn't know whether he should feel thankful or annoyed that she failed to recognize him. His movies weren't blockbusters, and they might not be the serious acting he thought he'd do when he'd first headed to L.A., but her cluelessness stung.

"My grandparents are from Mistletoe Meadows," he evaded. "Are you a large or small animal vet?"

She emitted a shaky laugh, tipped her head back for a moment, and closed her eyes. "I'm an everything animal vet. The town only has one."

He found that he quite liked the sound of her laugh. It lacked the overt sexual tones that most actresses from California mastered. He shifted his weight against the vehicle, trying to pull away from the snow bank. "Do you like the small town?"

Some color returned to her olive skin. "I love it."

He had visited his grandparents in Mistletoe

Meadows every summer as a teen. He'd loved it back then, too, but he never wanted to stay. He had plans. He'd planned to change the world, but life didn't turn out the way he had imagined it would.

A siren wailed in the distance.

"I'm going to wave them down, so they don't miss us. It's hard to see in this snow." And he needed to check on the young girl. She hadn't returned with the emergency kit.

"OK." Her expressive eyes indicated that it wasn't OK, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

He hiked up the bank, ignoring the stabbing pains shooting through his calves. Had he pressed against the snow long enough to get frostbite? He stamped his feet beside his vehicle while curling and uncurling his toes to get the blood flowing.

As an ambulance and fire truck came into view, he waved his hands over his head. "Over here!"

The emergency vehicles pulled over, and a crew disembarked.

"Did you see another car stopped? A young woman was helping us," he asked one of the men hopping off the truck.

"Nope, only yours." The man heaved a stuffed bag off the truck and joined the team jogging down to the trapped woman.

Jonas could hear them talking with—he never got her name.

The remaining EMTs asked him a few questions and wrote down his number. He described the young woman who had called for help on his cellular, noting his emergency kit was missing from his vehicle, and he made sure the medic knew about the kittens in the back of the ditched vehicle.

A medic quickly looked over his legs and promised he'd be fine once he warmed up and got out of his wet jeans. They would call him if they needed anything else. That was his cue to leave.

He fell into the driver's seat and started the engine, but couldn't bring himself to leave until he knew the woman was OK. He peeled off his gloves and rubbed his hands together in front of the heat vent, which was blasting warm air. His extremities tingled as they thawed.

It took the medics less than fifteen minutes to free the woman and her kittens. They carried her up the bank in a scoop, transferring her and the litter into the back of the ambulance.

He should probably go. If he stayed, he would only be in the way. But there was something about her that prompted him to venture back into the cold and wait by the open ambulance door for an opportunity to speak. He stood to the side while they wrapped her in an emergency thermal blanket.

"I'm OK," she insisted. Yet, she pulled the foil wrap up over her head and ears like a cocoon. Between the blanket and the scarf still covering her mouth, all he could see was a strip of her light brown skin and her eyes, beautiful, warm, and expressive.

"You probably are OK," the medic agreed, "but we need to check you over."

Her demeanor softened as she met Jonas's gaze. "My hero."

Her words hit him like a fist to the gut. "These guys are the heroes." He gestured to the men and women on the scene. "I was just in the right place at the right time."

She reached out a hand, and he gave it a gentle

squeeze. A gust of wind blew his hood off his head, and a flash of recognition crossed her face.

He dropped her hand, flipped up his hood, and twisted his body away as if he was turning his back to the wind. "I'm glad you're going to be OK," he said while backing up. "Maybe I'll see you around." He lifted a hand in a farewell and pretended that he didn't hear her calling for him to come back. He retreated into his car as his phone dinged. He pulled it out of his pocket, and his agent's name popped up in a bubble.

Heads up. The paparazzi got wind of the tree farm in your family. Some may be headed your way for a few holiday shots.

Great. Just what he needed. His thumbs flew over the keypad typing his reply.

He put the vehicle in gear and pulled onto the road.

Because he was no hero.

2

It was like a scene from a holiday movie." Charlene's breath puffed out. "At just the right time, when I needed a hero, he showed up." The crowd of ice-skaters jostled for space on the liner that covered the cobblestone sidewalk to protect their skate blades. Just moments before, the outdoor ice rink in the heart of Mistletoe Meadows was flowing with skaters. But at 2:00 PM, Mistletoe Tea's outdoor vendor for cranberry wassail rang the bell to indicate they were open for business, and the rink emptied. Now, the hum of the ice resurfacing machine replaced the earlier happy shrieks, blades scraping to a stop, and the clatter of tangled limbs falling together in heaps of laughter. Mistletoe Tea only served the beverage for one hour before closing up the mobile station.

"Did you get this hero's name?" Char's friend, Melody, shuffled forward as the line surged. "Or even better, his phone number?"

"I was more focused on getting out of the car than getting his number."

Janie, Melody's step-daughter, gave a sigh and nudged her friend, Natalie. "Can you believe her?" She looked at Char. "You're supposed to get your hero's phone number. It's in all the movies."

"Are you sure wassail is worth it?" Thirteen-year-old Natalie ignored Janie's proclamation. She pulled

her limbs closer to her core and huddled in her jacket as the breeze blew off her hood. "The ice is finally empty, and I don't get to skate much." Natalie furrowed her brow as she shifted her weight from one skate to the other.

"It's totally worth it." Char resisted the urge to tug Natalie's hood back into place. The coat, like Natalie's borrowed skates, was a bit too big, but at least it looked warm.

"The rink emptied because everyone here knows it's worth it." Melody stuffed her hands into her coat pockets and stamped her feet.

This was the third time Melody had invited Char to join her, Janie, and Natalie on an outing. Char appreciated how Janie's new friend delighted in their simple adventures. Most teens she knew barely looked up from their phone screens let alone appreciate borrowing skates that only fit after layering several pairs of thick socks.

"You'll love wassail." Janie rubbed her mittened hands together, using friction to generate warmth.

Nat looked doubtful.

"Back to your hero," Melody said.

The girls giggled as Char squirmed. She had hoped they'd moved on.

"You know, if you focused on getting more names and numbers maybe you'd be here skating with a man and not us." Married only a year-and-a-half to Janie's father, Quentin, Melody was a hopeless romantic.

"Relationships don't bloom from a car wreck." Char looked pointedly at her friend.

"They do in the movies," Janie said.

Char flattened her lips to stop from smiling. It seemed that Janie had caught the love-bug from

Melody. "I'm not looking for a date. I'm busy enough with work." She'd long ago given up on the idea of marriage when she moved to Mistletoe Meadows and took over her aunt and uncle's veterinary clinic. Most men her age were already married, and the few unmarried men in town were far too young for her. She'd made her peace with the small town's limited dating scene and poured her mothering instincts into Janie and the other young girls in her church.

"Maybe if every night wasn't spent volunteering at the soup kitchen—" Melody started.

Natalie's head snapped up.

"I love my work at the kitchen," Char cut in. "I have no family here, and the only evening consistently booked is for small group at church. Why shouldn't I volunteer?" Char had always been a caregiver. It was why she had a three-legged cat called Pegs and a chipped-beak, one-winged parrot named Chatter.

A tiny smile crept across Natalie's face before Janie redirected Nat's attention to her phone screen.

Melody frowned and peered over Janie's shoulder. "What are you looking at?"

"Jonas Blade is in town!" Janie turned the screen toward her step-mother.

The only Jonas that Char knew was Jonas Gutteridge. He spent every summer in Mistletoe Meadows. He wasn't an actor. He was a philanthropist. Even back then, he was always giving money to charity or helping the needy in some way.

"I just got a text from Sarah. She and her mom saw him in Vic's Variety a few minutes ago," Janie said.

Melody scanned the crowd like an eager teenager. "I wonder why he came here?"

"Maybe he heard about these five-dollar cups of

wassail," Natalie voice thickened.

Char wrapped one arm around Janie's shoulder and with her other hand, she tapped Natalie's shoulder. "Wassail is expensive, but that doesn't need to bother you girls. Today is my treat."

Natalie lips curled into a smile. "Thank you."

Janie brightened. "Maybe they are filming one of his movies here!"

"Janie," Melody interjected, "thank Char for her offer."

"Oh, thanks." A tint of red flushed her cheeks.

"Who exactly is Jonas Blade?" Natalie's question smoothed over the awkwardness.

"Yeah," Char echoed. "What's the big deal?"

Janie's jaw went slack. "He's only the cutest actor ever. He stars in like every holiday movie. He's in Countdown to Christmas. Haven't you seen the commercials? It's on the Holiday Channel." Janie's head swung from her friend to Char. "You really don't know him?"

"We don't have a television." Nat focused on the toe of her skate.

Char shrugged. "I'm not much of a T.V. girl either."

"Let's all watch it tonight," Melody suggested. "Quentin is working late at the music store, and I promised Janie a movie night."

Char was about to refuse, but Natalie's expression stopped her. The girl bounced on her toes at the suggestion. Somehow, Char got the feeling that her family didn't have things like movie nights. "It sounds like fun. Maybe I can order us a pizza for dinner." She good-naturedly nudged Natalie's shoulder with her own. "If you can stand in line for wassail with me, I

can endure a cheesy storyline for you.”

Melody took Janie’s phone and turned the screen so Charlene could see it. “You’ll enjoy watching this guy,” she drawled. “He’s no Quentin, but he is nothing to sneeze at either.” Melody removed one of her gloves and swiped across several pictures featuring the actor under the caption *The Holiday Channel’s Hottest Hero*.

A tiny vertical crinkle between his eyes and small horizontal creases fanned out at the corners. Charlene liked that he wasn’t airbrushed to perfection. Wait. She bit the inside of her cheek. Those eyes.

Char snatched the phone. A shadow of stubble covered a strong jaw, but it was his slightly crooked nose that made her heart hiccough. She knew that crooked nose. “This is Jonas Blade?”

“He’s so dreamy.” Natalie took the phone from Char’s slack hand.

“He looks like someone I know.” Char hadn’t been able to clearly see the man who stayed with her while waiting for the paramedics. Between the foggy windows, the blowing snow, and his winter gear, all she remembered were his eyes and his voice. They had calmed her immediately because they had reminded her of her summer Jonas. She spent two glorious months with Jonas every year through high school, roaming around the town. As the only two outsiders, they had become fast friends. She hadn’t spoken to that Jonas in years. That Jonas had asked her out on a million dates but she had always turned him down because he had fit perfectly into the friend box, and she couldn’t risk losing his friendship. That Jonas had similar eyes, soft and warm. Happy. She’d often wondered what had become of him.

He also had a slightly crooked nose, the result of a