

SPEND CHRISTMAS IN MISTLETOE MEADOWS
AND DISCOVER A COMMUNITY BRIMMING WITH
CHRIST'S LOVE AND HOLIDAY CHEER

Mistletoe Meadows

ANTHOLOGY

*Stacey
Weeks*

INCLUDES

3
STORIES

MISTLETOE MELODY,
MISTLETOE MISSION,
&
MISTLETOE MOVIE
STAR

Mistletoe
Meadows
Anthology

Stacey Weeks

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What People are Saying

"A refreshing Christmas story."

"Years of reading holiday stories have made them all seem similar, but Mistletoe Melody stands out."

Mistletoe Melody

Stacey Weeks

Dedication

Dedicated to Larissa and Kyra—my Melody and Janie.
Your positive never-give-up attitudes are inspiring.
You deserve more than a character named after you.
Keep pressing into the Lord. He is good. Always.

1

“Incoming!”

Before Melody Staff could blink, her brother stooped down, landed a kiss on her cheek, and stole her suitcase from her hands in one gallant swoop.

“You better watch out. There’s mistletoe everywhere.” Clive swatted at a berry-filled vine that embellished the gingerbread-trimmed porch of the Mistletoe Manor bed and breakfast. A mischievous smile crept across his face—which reminded Melody of their younger days when he continuously hatched elaborate plans and schemes to entertain her and their younger brother, Travis. Clive nodded toward the red front door. “Everyone is inside. You’re late.”

“Hello to you, too.” She couldn’t help but grin at him. She didn’t see her brother and his family nearly often enough since his job had transferred him to a new city. She could hardly believe she was seeing him now. When her doctor had told her that she couldn’t make the six-hour trip to join the rest of her family at

Clive and Julie's home for the Christmas holidays, she never expected them to move the festivities here instead.

Her parents had arranged for them to take over this quaint Cape Cod establishment for the entire week leading up to Christmas. A classic black roof, white clapboard siding, and dormer windows made it easy to see why her parents accepted the offer from their old friends to host their reunion here.

The Oxford family had lived beside them for years until Walter had retired, and he and his wife, Helen, bought this Inn.

The wind caught hold of chimney smoke and whisked it away, but not before Melody caught the pleasant and fragrant scent of burning cherry wood. Charcoal shutters framed flickering orange and yellow shadows from inside the house. She followed Clive up the wide and weathered porch steps that swayed into a welcoming smile under their feet. She wasn't yet inside, and the homey atmosphere had already eased the chill in her bones.

"How worried is Mom?" Her poor mother must be wringing her hands over Melody's unavoidable delay. The snow-packed roads made travel from the highway exit into the tiny village of Mistletoe Meadows far slower than her GPS had estimated.

"She's worked up to a level seven. The usual." Clive smirked over his shoulder before giving the front door a gentle toe kick. "Look who I found outside," he bellowed.

Melody laboured behind him hoping his large

frame hid her struggle to climb the final stair. If her family saw her distress, they would never keep her secret as they had promised. She needed, for once, to be normal—especially around people like the Oxfords, who knew her from before she got sick. She forced a bright smile as she crossed the threshold.

A rustic black woodstove pumped heat from the red-bricked corner of the room. It was the source of the flickering oranges seen from outside. A cat lazily warmed itself by the fire, stretched out on a braided area rug. It lifted its head when she entered, and then returned to its snoozing. Exposed wooden beams and carefully arranged furniture encouraged conversation and left a clear path to a sizeable roll-top desk off to the side of a pair of French doors. A hand-painted welcome sign hung above the desk. It was the kind of room she had envisioned in her dream home when she still dreamed of fairy-tale endings.

A beautiful curved staircase reached a second level where a good-looking man with sandy hair, wide shoulders, and a prominent jaw watched her.

“Auntie Melody!” Three-year-old Ava wiggled from her mother’s arms and hurled herself across the room, ripping Melody’s attention from the man.

She stooped and braced herself as thirty pounds of squirming love hit her full force. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“Ava, dear, don’t be so hard on Auntie.” Clive’s wife, Julie, offered an apologetic smile and tried to pull Ava back.

“It’s OK.” Melody dipped her head and breathed

in the soft scent of innocence, and she stroked Ava's silky toddler curls. "That was the best hug I've had in months." The only hug, actually, but she wasn't about to say something so personal in mixed company.

She stood upright and shrugged out of her winter jacket. Who was the man shamelessly watching their family reunion? He leaned forward resting his forearms on the wooden banister and tilted his head to the side. He was far too young to be their former neighbour, Walter Oxford. Could he be Walter's son, Quentin? He looked about the right age.

All she remembered about Quentin was his wild grade twelve year when he impregnated his girlfriend.

A fair-skinned girl with chestnut curls hanging down her back limped to the man's side with the aid of a sparkly bedazzled cane. Quentin straightened up and curled a protective hand around the pre-teen's shoulder. He tugged her close. If he was Quentin, she must be his daughter. Melody scanned the empty hall behind them looking for Ashley, Quentin's high school sweetheart.

She smiled briefly at the pair and turned back to Clive, who had plunked her suitcase on the floor and then snagged a cookie from a tray with a small typed sign that read, *Help yourself*. "Am I the last to arrive?" she asked.

Julie scooped up Ava, who had also set her sights on the unmanned tray of cookies. Julie balanced the toddler onto her hip and handed her a biscuit. "Travis and Leah got here about twenty minutes ago. They are still upstairs."

Her younger brother and his long-time girlfriend were likely enjoying a few rare minutes alone in the upstairs hallway. Her parents had raised their boys to court, not date, meaning most time together was chaperoned. The intention of spending time together was to discern if the Lord was leading them toward marriage. The Staff children did not engage in casual dating.

"Melody!" Her mom burst out from the upstairs hallway and rushed toward the staircase. Quentin stepped out of the way so their mom could hurry unobstructed down the stairs. Her father, Travis, and Leah trailed behind.

"I was starting to worry." Her mother pulled her into a hug far gentler than the one Ava had given.

"Hi, Mom." She looked over her mother's shoulder and blew her dad a kiss. "Hi, Dad."

Quentin followed slowly, carefully helping his daughter navigate the steps with her cane. "I'll bring your bag up to your room." His deep voice carried a hint of gravel like he was fighting a cold or was overtired.

She sucked in her cheeks, hugged her jacket like a shield, and stepped back. She couldn't afford to get sick.

"Your bedroom is the first door on the right at the top of the stairs. You have an *en suite* bathroom." He smiled kindly before he turned to her mother. "If the entire family has arrived, Janie has made some more cookies and hot chocolate. It's waiting for you in the sitting room."

Everyone followed Janie, who lead the happy parade with a unique shuffle that didn't seem to dampen her spirits.

Travis indicated for Leah to go on ahead of him, and he paused by a display of pamphlets highlighting local events. He pocketed one labeled Mistletoe Mile.

Melody hid a smile. When she had looked up Mistletoe Meadows online, she read about the mile walk that wound all around the quaint Christmassy town. The trail led followers through stores and businesses decked out with various kinds of mistletoe and holiday decor. Each one offered some trivia on mistletoe, some samples to take home for Christmas decorating, or berries to plant in your own host tree. One even served Mistletoe Tea; something Melody had never heard of. The Mistletoe Mile ended at their bed and breakfast in a giant gazebo built from tree trunks covered in vines and mistletoe. The website claimed it was famous for Christmas proposals. She had suspected her little brother might propose to Leah this Christmas. They had been courting for nearly a year, and both sets of parents had indicated their blessing and approval of the obvious deepening love between the two.

Melody hung back from her family and let them go on ahead of her. She smoothed down the front of her blouse and settled her hand over her quivering stomach. She was happy for her brother. H. A. P. P. Y. This was not about her.

2

Quentin cleared his throat and extended his hand. "You probably don't remember me. I'm Quentin Oxford. My parents own the bed and breakfast, but Janie and I live here and help out. Mom and Dad are out of town this week, so you're stuck with us. You're the only guests for the week."

She accepted his offered hand and warmth swallowed her fingers. His firm grip tugged her a tiny bit closer to him. It would have thrown her off balance had he not reached with his other hand to steady her. He gently squeezed her upper arm before letting her go. He radiated safety and care, which was not the Quentin she remembered.

Heat rose to her cheeks, and she bit the inside of her lip. Awkwardness washed over her. "I'm—"

"Melody Staff." A hint of a dimple appeared in his unshaven cheek. His five o'clock shadow seemed to suit his plaid shirt and casual manner. "You're the sister from the city who couldn't make it home for the

holidays.” His blue eyes twinkled, putting her at ease. “I remember you from high school, but honestly, just a little bit.”

“That’s OK. We didn’t run in the same circles back then,” she said.

Red crept up his neck. Had she offended or embarrassed him? She didn’t know him well enough to guess.

Quentin scooped up her suitcase. “Can I help you with something else?” His gaze roamed up and down her as if he was looking for a need he might be able to meet.

She tingled at his attention. It had been a long time since a man outside of her family or team of physicians looked at her with such interest. She noticed a wedding band style ring on his right hand. Interesting.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot and swooped her long hair away from her face and over one shoulder. “I’m on a gluten-free diet. Are the cookies, by any chance, safe?” She hated having to ask, especially since it sounded as if his daughter had made them, but she couldn’t take the risk of accidentally ingesting gluten. She’d worked too hard to get into the drug trial, and she wasn’t going to blow it over a Christmas indulgence.

His smile tightened. “They’re safe.”

She straightened her shoulders at his stiffening. He probably thought she was some diet trend follower, jumping on the gluten-free wagon. She didn’t owe him an explanation. Her medical history was her business. “You won’t need to make any special arrangements for

me." She decided then and there to find the nearest store and buy her groceries. "I can cook for myself."

He shifted her suitcase to his other hand and lifted his chin. "I didn't mean to imply that—"

"Dad?" Janie stood in the doorway with a cell phone pressed against her ear. "Can I walk down the road to Jessica's?"

Quentin flicked his gaze toward the window to the gently falling snow covering the sidewalks. "It's too icy, honey. I'll drive you down in a few minutes."

"Dad, it's only a few blocks." Janie's exasperation reminded Melody of her junior youth girls at church.

Quentin quieted Janie with a look. The light left the girl's eyes, and her shoulders rounded forward. She turned away and mumbled something unintelligible into the phone.

"Sorry about that," Quentin's voice had thickened.

She pressed her lips together and softened inside. "I've had some experience with pre-teen drama, having been a dramatic teen myself. I get it." Although she didn't. Not really. Why couldn't the girl walk down the street?

"Phew." He wiped pretend sweat from his brow. "Although I don't remember pre-teen drama from your side of our shared backyard fence. I believe I provided the drama in our neighbourhood." His laugh dissipated any remaining tension. Quentin had grown into a kind and pleasant man. He stood about a foot taller than her five foot three frame, and his wavy hair folded over the collar of his buttoned-up shirt. His eyes twinkled.

“We are more than happy to accommodate your dietary needs. My mom made arrangements regarding your meals before she left.” He looked at this watch. “You have about an hour before we leave for Mistletoe Teas. They host Mistletoe Talks. Your parents signed everyone up.”

“Of course they did.” She groaned inwardly. It was going to be a long week.

Mistletoe Teas. Mistletoe Talks. Christmas tree cutting. The Mistletoe Mile. When Melody agreed to meet her family for Christmas, she had assumed the neutral location guaranteed their usual traditions would pause. She never considered they’d bring all their family traditions and add a whole bunch more.

Lord, give me the ability and strength to participate. She squared her shoulders, pasted a smile on her face, and with as much energy as she could muster, she joined her family for hot chocolate and cookies.

3

Quentin escorted the Staff family into Mistletoe Teas where several small tables were arranged to accommodate guests of two or four. Mrs. Staff had called ahead and booked their tables for the sold-out event. Wayne, Carol, Travis, and Leah settled at one table. Clive, Julie, Ava, and Janie filled another. That left Quentin and Melody. Carol indicated that they should enjoy the cozy table for two adjacent to the roaring fireplace with a picturesque view of the property.

Carol's eyes sparkled, and Janie smirked. Quentin rubbed the stubble covering his jaw. Were they matchmaking? He tipped his head back and looked up. *Lord, help me.*

Victim of matchmaking or not, he was raised to be a gentleman. He held out his hand to Melody and gestured to her jacket. "May I take your coat?"

"Thank you." Melody tugged off her gray leather gloves, unwound her matching thick scarf, and

surrendered them along with her pale pink wool coat.

Quentin hung the jacket on a hook near their table and folded her scarf over his arm like a waiter folds a serviette. He chivalrously pulled out her chair. “For the lady.”

Her musical laughter screeched off key when she stubbed her foot on the table leg. “Oh!” She lurched forward.

He caught her by the elbow and eased her gently to her seat. She felt surprisingly slight. He should have offered her something more than gluten-free cookies earlier. Somehow he didn’t peg her as a perpetual dieter striving for this extreme level of lean body mass.

“Thank you.” Her almond-shaped eyes, all soft and warm, widened. Then she caught her mother assessing them, and they narrowed. She gave her head a tiny shake and mouthed the words; *it’s fine*.

Carol’s lips pressed into a frown.

The fascinating interaction between the women made one thing clear. Whatever *it* was, *it* wasn’t fine.

Did Carol hope the charming view, a table for two, and time alone would kindle more than flames in the fireplace? He’d signed up to be a chauffeur slash tour guide, not a date. Had Melody planned this? The last thing he needed right now was a complicated relationship.

“Tell me about Janie.” Melody leaned into her seatback and tinkered with the flatware on the table. She avoided eye contact with her mom and fixed her attention on him. Nothing about her mannerisms suggested an interest beyond friendly conversation.

Relief thundered through him. If Carol Staff was scheming, she was scheming alone.

He shifted in his seat. His standard rule was to protect Janie's privacy from guests, but Melody wasn't a regular guest. She knew him. She remembered him. An embarrassing tingle swept up the back of his neck and across his face. She had witnessed his year of intense rebellion against his family's Christian beliefs, and his nightmare relationship with Ashley, who partook in heroin and other opiates. Melody's family had moved away shortly after Ashley had given birth to Janie, so they weren't around to witness her eventual abandonment of her daughter. The pull of drugs had proven stronger than the pull of motherhood. "I don't usually discuss my daughter with guests."

Melody didn't miss a beat. She tilted her head to the side in an inquisitive manner. "Then tell me what you do for a living, besides helping out your parents."

Quentin appreciated her attempt at polite table conversation, but the slight shadowing under her eyes and her pinched smile made him more interested in getting her home early than having a long and drawn out heart to heart conversation.

"I own a music store in town and teach lessons."

She lifted a brow. "Mistletoe Music?"

He laughed and settled back into his seat. She had an uncanny way of making him feel relaxed and at ease. "How did you guess?"

She lifted her water goblet and tipped it in his direction. "I'm beginning to sense a trend. Mistletoe

Manor, Mistletoe Tea—”

He clinked his glass to hers. “Your deductive skills are impressive. Tell me about you. Do you still like music?” Back in high school, she had always landed a role as a soloist in the annual school musical.

She swallowed hard and lowered her glass to the table with a *thunk*. “I used to play guitar, a bit of piano, and voice.”

“Not anymore?”

“No, I’m afraid I’ve lost the ability.” She turned her head toward the window as if appreciating the knotted tree bark on the closest tree, but he recognized the move as avoidance.

Their light-hearted banter thickened. Did a lack of practice cause her lost ability, or did misfortune steal her talent like the tragedy that stole Janie’s passion for music?

A waiter placed a tray of assorted desserts on the center of the table. Melody waited until he left to speak. “Does Janie play an instrument?”

His grip tightened around the stem of his water glass. “No.”

Before she could ask him to elaborate, Mavis, from the Mistletoe Meadows horticulture society, approached the podium. She tapped the microphone until the room quieted. She pushed her dark-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose with her index finger. A few wisps of white hair escaped the knot of hair at her neck.

“Welcome to Mistletoe Talks. We are happy that you have joined us tonight, and I believe that once this

evening is over, you'll all agree that mistletoe is an extraordinary plant with usages that go far beyond Christmas decorating. For example, did you know that mistletoe has been used to treat anxiety naturally? It is a preventative for diabetes; it soothes respiratory distress, lowers blood pressure, and promotes good sleep. Its medicinal usage makes it a fascinating plant to study."

As Mavis repeated the same facts she parroted at every welcome talk, Quentin studied Melody's profile. Her long dark hair fell in loose waves. Her green eyes lit up as she laughed in all the right places. She listened to the presentation with interest. She even asked a question or two. But her involvement in the discussion couldn't disguise her exhaustion and discomfort. There was something about her, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something wasn't right.

"Our students in the seventh grade art class have painted the different varieties of mistletoe that you see on display around the tea house tonight." Mavis gestured to the multiple art easels around the room. "We'll break for a few minutes so you can wander around and appreciate their work."

Quentin's gaze snapped to Janie, who was watching him pointedly. Right. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Excuse me," he leaned across the table so Melody could hear him above the rising chatter in the room. "I promised Janie that I would take a picture of her with her painting."

"Janie painted one?" Melody spun around in her seat to locate Janie, who stood proudly by a painting