



Mistletoe Season

Three
Christmas
Stories

*Bestselling
Authors*

**SHEILA
ROBERTS**

**KATHLEEN
FULLER**

**PEPPER
BASHAM**

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Three
Christmas
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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Mistletoe Season

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Say No to Mistletoe Sheila Roberts



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



**RETURN TO
MISTLETOE**



Kathleen Fuller

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



ONE

Emmy Banks hummed along to a cheery Christmas carol playing through the speakers as she hung a third sprig of mistletoe over the doorway of her antique shop, Mistletoe Antiques. She clasped her hands together and tilted her head. “Maybe one more—”

“Isn’t three enough, Mom?”

She glanced at Carina, who was standing behind a glass display case that doubled as a checkout counter. “There’s never enough mistletoe in Mistletoe, Missouri,” Emmy told her daughter.

Carina groaned. But she was smiling, her plum lipstick contrasting beautifully with her mahogany skin. She started unpacking a box of old books that had been dropped off earlier that morning. Emmy joined her, turning up the volume on her phone. Another Christmas hymn sang through the three Bluetooth speakers strategically placed around Emmy’s shop.

“Isn’t it too early for Christmas carols?” Carina asked.

“It’s December 1! Most places have been playing carols since before Thanksgiving.” Emmy slipped on her purple glasses with sparkly rhinestones on the arms, and picked up the pile of receipts next to the cash register. Just because she needed reading glasses at forty-one years old, those glasses didn’t have to be boring. She had several pairs in different colors and styles. “When did you become a scrooge, Carina?”

“I’m not a scrooge.” She pulled out a worn book with a brown frayed cover and brushed off the dust. “But by the time the Christ-

mas season is in full swing, I'm a little tired of hearing the music."

Emmy never was. She wouldn't mind listening to Christmas carols and enjoying holiday decorations year-round. In fact, she had a fully adorned fake tree in her apartment living room that she meant to take down two years ago, but she kept it displayed because it was so festive. Dusting the tree was a pain, but worth it. During the summer, she even organized holiday movie watch parties in the small café in the back of the store—one movie every Thursday night. She also sold quite a few early Christmas gifts on those nights.

"Don't forget, we're decorating the store tomorrow night after we close," she said to Carina.

Her daughter winced. "Sorry, Mom. I've got a date."

Emmy peered at her over her glasses. "With Jeremy?"

Carina smiled shyly. "Yes. We're going bowling."

"How *romantic*."

Emmy snickered and grabbed her accounting ledger and calculator. Ever since they opened the shop five years ago, Carina had tried to convince her to computerize the records. Emmy refused. She enjoyed the physical action of entering numbers on paper and tabulating them with her slim Sinclair Cambridge, a vintage calculator from the seventies she'd picked up at one of the many estate sales she loved to frequent.

Carina scoffed. "I think bowling is very romantic."

"But you're a terrible bowler," Emmy pointed out. "And I mean that in the best way."

"Oh, I'm awful, all right. But Jeremy doesn't know that." She sighed, hugging the book to her chest. "And when he finds out, he'll have to give me *personal* coaching."

Laughing, Emmy slid past Carina. "Just don't let him get too *personal*."

"Mom," Carina said, rolling her eyes. "I'm twenty-one years old. I can handle myself."

Emmy kissed her daughter's cheek. "I know you can. I should probably tell Jeremy to watch out."

Carina gave her a good-natured grin and looked at the front of the book. "Marshall Blankenship?"

"Author or title?" Emmy snatched a pencil off the counter and tucked it behind her ear.

"Author."

"Doesn't ring a bell," she said. "You'll have to look him up. I'll be in the café if you need me."

"Oh wait," Carina said, pulling out her phone. "We need today's selfie."

Emmy put her arm around Carina and pressed her cheek against her daughter's as Carina held up the camera and they both smiled. For split second Emmy saw their images on the phone screen—her own fair skin and short, straight blonde hair a stark contrast to Carina's dark complexion and short braids.

"Perfect!" Carina tapped on the screen to post the image on their social media platforms. Then she held out the phone to Emmy to show her the pic. "You look so cute, Mom."

"And you're gorgeous. I really should talk to Jeremy—"

"*Mom*," Carina warned.

"Just kidding." Emmy chuckled as she made her way down an aisle consisting mostly of décor items—baskets, metal signs, small lamps, and miscellaneous bric-a-brac—to the café area. There was a self-serve coffee and hot chocolate station on a long counter, along with snacks, all available for a voluntary donation. Near the station were several shelves of classic books, along with a few vintage volumes. Last year Emmy had set up the small book section and had started taking orders for both old and new books a few months ago. She set her things on one of the four round, blond oak wooden tables and fixed herself a cup of cinnamon hot chocolate.

As she toggled the hot water carafe and placed her cup under the

spout, an unexpected memory surfaced. Or rather, a person—her ex-boyfriend, Josh Whitfield. When they had started working together to bring Mistletoe Antiques to fruition, he had been against the idea of providing refreshments on the honor system, insisting no one would put money in the kitty for plain coffee and a cookie or pastry.

“Maybe not in the big city of St. Louis,” Emmy had said, getting in a friendly dig at his hometown. “But things are different in Mistletoe.” She brushed his carrot-colored bangs to the side and put her arms around his neck. “Trust me,” she whispered. “Everyone will pay their fair share.”

He drew her close. “We’re really going to do this, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” She started to smile but saw a flash of doubt in his sea-blue eyes. Their grand opening was the next day, and even though they were still bringing in antiques to sell, she was certain they had enough inventory to open their doors. But this was her dream, not his, even though he’d supported it one hundred percent . . . or at least he seemed to. “It’s what you want, right?”

“Right,” he said. Maybe a bit too quickly. Then he kissed her, and for several lingering moments of bliss, she forgot where she was.

And that had been her weakness—whenever she saw a red flag with Josh, he’d seemed to know what she was thinking. He would distract her with loving words, searing kisses, and promises of their future together. But none of it was true. Two weeks after the shop opened, he’d skipped town with most of her money and all her dignity.

Hot water stung her hand and dragged her out of her reverie. She quickly let go of the toggle. The cup had overflowed, and she quickly cleaned up the mess, salvaged what she could of her hot chocolate, and sat down at the table. Better to think about accounting than her catastrophic love life.

For the next hour she sipped hot chocolate, crunched numbers,

and balanced her ledger. Due to hard work and careful spending, she'd recouped some of what Josh had taken from her, but there wasn't much room for margin. Most months there wasn't any margin at all.

She finished calculating the last of the receipts when her phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and saw Sheryl Covington's name pop up. Emmy quickly answered it. "Hey," she said to her childhood friend and part-time employee, although Sheryl worked more from her love of antiques and people than for money. Her husband, Ben, made a comfortable living as an architect. "How's Cancún?"

"Tropical paradise. Not a snowflake in sight."

Emmy couldn't imagine Christmas without snow. "No Mistletoe either?"

"Oh, there's plenty of that, along with Christmas lights on palm trees. They even have little green and red umbrellas in the fruity drinks. Very festive. I can't believe today is our last day. We've had an amazing vacation."

"Uh-huh." Emmy glanced at her pitiful bottom line. She wouldn't be taking a vacation anytime soon.

"Uh-oh," Sheryl said.

"Uh-oh, what?"

"You're balancing the books, aren't you? I still think you should take Josh to court for stealing your money."

Emmy scowled. Not this again. "If I did, I'd have to admit to the world I have awful taste in men."

"No, you're just too kindhearted. And Josh is a grade-A jerk."

"It's not so bad. I'll earn everything back . . . in five or six years."

"But—"

"I'll be fine, Sheryl. Don't worry about me or the shop."

"You're my best friend," she said, speaking over her rowdy kids in the background. "I can't help but worry. But I do love your positive attitude."

Emmy smiled at the compliment. She was an eternal optimist, and that had helped her through some rough times, including Josh's deception and desertion.

"Boys," Sheryl said sternly to her children. "Settle down, or we're going back to the hotel room." After they quickly quieted, she said, "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"I've been trying to get ahold of the rental place so I can reserve tables and chairs. We keep missing each other. Do you mind taking care of that?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you." Sheryl's voice was heavy with relief. "That's one thing off my list, but I'm sure I'll add ten others later. There's so much to do between now and the party in two weeks. It's going to be a challenge keeping Mom's surprise party a secret from her. I still can't believe she's turning seventy."

"We all know Maggie is twenty-five at heart. Have you heard from Kieran yet?"

"My one and only brother who hasn't stepped foot in Mistletoe since he graduated? Of course not. I don't expect him to show up now. Oh, he sure does promise to, but something always comes up."

Emmy didn't miss the bitterness in her voice.

"Ben's waving me over. It's snorkel time. Gotta run, er, *swim*. Thanks again, Emmy. See you Thursday."

Smiling, Emmy shut off her phone. She and Carina were the shop's only full-time employees, and Sheryl typically worked one or two days a week. December was their busiest month of the year, and when Sheryl returned, she would work four days a week until Christmas.

Business was slow today, but it was Monday, and everyone was getting back into the groove of life after Thanksgiving and Black Friday shopping. It wouldn't be long before things picked up again,

especially after Jingle Fest next Saturday. The annual Christmas festival was in the larger town of Bird Valley about twenty minutes away from Mistletoe. Every year Emmy looked forward to the festival and took the opportunity to pass out 10 percent off coupons to her shop. She'd learned never to let a business opportunity go to waste.

She closed her ledger and shoved her pencil behind her ear, gathered up her paperwork and calculator, and went to the front counter. There were two customers browsing the aisles of antiques while Carina was helping another customer in the vintage book section of the shop. As Emmy knelt and tucked her accounting materials into a lockbox, she heard the bell above the front door jingle. Quickly she shoved the box on the shelf underneath the counter and stood as Cal the postman dropped off a package and a short stack of mail on the counter.

"Mornin', Emmy." Cal adjusted his mailbag over his shoulder, his nose and cheeks red from the cold. "How are you doing today?"

"Can't complain." She smiled and swiftly went through the envelopes. Two were bills she could deal with later, and the rest was junk mail she would shred and add to the large bag of shredded paper upstairs in her apartment. Once it was full, she would take the bag to the Mistletoe Animal Shelter. "Help yourself to some coffee," she said, setting down the mail and moving the package closer to her.

"Thanks, Emmy, but I gotta run. You know how it is during the holidays. Got a lot of Christmas cards to deliver." He nodded at her and disappeared out the door.

Emmy waved as Cal passed by the picture window, then checked the return address on the package. Oh good, the ornaments had arrived. She glanced at Carina, who was talking to Mrs. Beasley a few feet away, her back to her mother. Emmy grabbed the package and crouched down again, eagerly opening it.

She'd ordered several sets of wooden heart-shaped ornaments to sell at the shop, with classic book titles printed on them, along with three specialty ornaments that were decorated like Fabergé eggs for Carina, Sheryl, and Sheryl's mother, Maggie. She'd already sent her parents their present—a small photo album filled with pictures of her, Carina, and her parents' friends in Mistletoe, along with a written recap of the year. She had started creating the yearly photo album when her mother and father had moved to Tampa ten years ago. The warm, humid climate helped her mother's asthma, although they usually returned to Mistletoe at least once every other year.

Her grin faded as she pulled out the ornaments. The books were so tiny, she could barely read the titles on them. Definitely not what was advertised. And when she saw the Fabergé-inspired ones, her heart sank. All three were broken.

Emmy shut the box and checked her email receipt from the company on her cell. Fortunately, they had a return policy. She pressed the tape back onto the box and stood. "I'm running to the post office for a minute," she said to Carina as she put on her coat and gloves, grabbed the defective merchandise, and left the shop.

Crisp Ozark Mountain air chilled her cheeks as she stopped in front of the building next door to hers. The For Sale sign was still in the window and had been for the past six years. It was the only empty building on Chestnut Lane, Mistletoe's main downtown street.

She stared at the sign. Now that Mistletoe Antiques had been in business for a few years, she wanted to follow her other dream—to open a real café. Mistletoe hadn't had a coffee shop since Sips and Such on the next street over had closed its doors two years ago. This building would be perfect, but she didn't have the funds. *I would, if Josh hadn't . . .*

Shaking her head, she frowned. Bad enough she'd thought about him once today. Twice was too much. She spun around—and knocked into what felt like a solid wall.

“Whoa, lass.”

“I’m sor—” Emmy’s jaw dropped. In front of her was the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen. Thick midnight-black hair, deep-set brown eyes, salt and pepper whiskers . . . *sigh*. And was that an Irish accent she’d heard? Her stomach wigwagged. That was the only way she could define the odd sensation. It wasn’t a flutter. Or a flitter. Weird. She hadn’t experienced a wigwag since . . . no. It couldn’t be—

“Emmy?” he said, dropping his hands and taking a step back, surprise on his face. “Emmy Banks?”

“Kieran?”

He grinned and held out his arms.



When Emmy didn’t make a move to hug him, Kieran O’Neill wondered if he was being too familiar. After all, he hadn’t seen her since he left Mistletoe right after high school. She’d been a cute girl back then with her heart-shaped face, long, wavy blonde hair, and malachite-green eyes. Now it was cut in a short pixie style that really suited her.

Then he realized she was carrying a box and couldn’t hug him even if she wanted to. “Can I help you with that?”

She glanced at the box. “It’s not too heavy. I was just taking it to the post office.”

“Headin’ that way myself.” He reached for the box. “Let me give you a hand.”

Emmy hesitated, then gave him the package. She was right, it was fairly light. Still, he couldn’t abide her carrying it while his hands were empty.

“Thanks,” she said as they walked in step down the sidewalk. “I was just talking to Sheryl. She said you weren’t coming home.”

“She doesn’t know I’m here. I decided to surprise her and Mum. Can’t miss her seventieth birthday celebration.” Especially since he missed the fiftieth and sixtieth ones, and he felt plenty of guilt over those.

“Did you know Sheryl’s in Cancún?”

He nodded. “From her Instagram, it looks like they’re having a great time.”

“She’ll be so glad to see you.” Emmy put her hands in her pockets. “She’s always showing me pictures of your adventures. Have you finished renovating the castle?”

“Aye.”

Emmy glanced at him. “Nice Irish accent.”

“Twenty-two years in Ireland will do that to a lad.”

“I do detect some southern drawl mixed in.” She grinned. “It makes you sound a little exotic.”

“That would be a *wee* bit exotic, lass.” He chuckled as her smile widened and they continued walking. He glanced down at her again. He wasn’t all that tall, about five eight, but she barely reached his shoulder. “Anyway, back to the castle. Took me over fifteen years, but it’s finally done.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize you’d owned it that long,” she said. “What’s it like, living in a castle?”

He tapped his fingers against the box. “Well, for fourteen and a half years it was unlivable. The six months I did live there . . . let’s just say it wasn’t exactly cozy. So I sold it.”

Her head jerked toward him. “Why? It’s been in your family for four hundred years.”

“Four hundred and fifty, to be exact, although it’s changed hands over the last thirty.” Kieran shrugged. “Turned out there was a reason the O’Neills didn’t want it. Living in a castle isn’t practical, and it’s expensive. When I got an offer from a hotel chain, I didn’t

hesitate to sell.”

She sidestepped an uneven crack in the sidewalk. “But you put so much time and effort into it.”

“And money.” A whole lot of money, even though he did much of the work himself, which was why it had taken him so long to renovate it. He was proud of the restoration, but he didn’t regret unloading it. Actually, it felt like a huge burden was lifted off his shoulders.

“Do Sheryl and your mom know?”

“No . . . That would be another surprise.” He just hoped they wouldn’t be too upset about it. His mother in particular had been excited that Kieran had bought the castle, although she was a little less impressed when she had spent two drafty weeks living there last year. Castles certainly weren’t for everyone.

He and Emmy turned the corner onto Evergreen Way. Although it had been more than two decades since he’d last been here, the downtown area still looked the same at Christmas, with thousands of twinkling lights hanging on every building, window, and streetlamp. Wreaths were everywhere, and of course sprigs of mistletoe hung from all the doorways. As they passed the Mistletoe Diner, a couple stopped for a quick kiss before leaving the eatery. There was probably more kissing in Mistletoe during Christmas than in any other town in the country. *No, make that the world*, he thought as he spied another couple giving each other a peck.

“I wasn’t surprised when Sheryl told me about the castle,” Emmy continued. “Or that you moved to Ireland after backpacking through Europe for a year.”

“Two years, actually,” he said.

“That’s right.” She glanced at him. “You were always the adventurous type. Remember the time—”

“I got caught skinny-dipping in the Mistletoe water tank?” At

her nod, he gave her a sheepish grin. He would never live that down. “Number one on my wall of shame. I was such an idiot for taking that dare. I learned my lesson.”

“No more skinny-dipping?”

“Not in water tanks, anyway.”

She laughed. “Still naughty, I see.”

“I prefer *cheeky*.” They stopped in front of the post office.

“I can take it from here.” She lifted the box out of his hands. “Thanks for the help.”

Kieran looked at her. “It’s good to see you, Emmy.”

She smiled. “Good to see you too. I’m glad you were able to come for Maggie’s birthday. I know it’ll mean a lot to her.”

He nodded, although that didn’t help his guilt. What kind of son didn’t visit his mother for twenty-six years? Even though he’d flown his mum, along with Sheryl and her husband and kids, over to Ireland several times, he’d always been too busy to come back to Mistletoe. Correction—he’d never wanted to come back.

“See you around, Kieran.” Emmy wiggled her fingers at him and went inside the post office.

Even though she couldn’t see him, he waved back, then turned and walked in the opposite direction. In truth he hadn’t been heading her way, but the post office wasn’t that far—nothing in Mistletoe was *far*—and it was good to visit with her for a wee bit.

He turned onto Chestnut to finish his initial errand, picking up two poinsettia plants from Mistletoe Florist. When he was growing up here, he’d always thought it was cheesy that everything was named after the town or was Christmas themed. As an adult, though, he got it. Mistletoe was a charming Christmas destination for people visiting southern Missouri, and with very little industry in the area, tourism was important.

After picking up the flowers, he headed to his compact rental car and got inside, then drove to his mother’s, battling an attack of

nerves the entire way. He wasn't sure what to expect when he arrived at his childhood home. When his father passed away shortly before Kieran's fifteenth birthday, he remembered several good-intentioned people telling his mother she should sell the house and find something smaller. But she had steadfastly refused. Just as Kieran steadfastly chickened out at the last minute when he'd thought about returning to Mistletoe.

Fifteen minutes later he arrived, pulled into the driveway, and turned off the engine. The outside of the house hadn't changed much, except that the window shutters were now a warm brown instead of stone gray. His stomach churned as memories flooded him, mostly of his father—how they used to play catch in the front yard, how every spring he cleaned out the flower beds for Mum so she could focus on planting her flowers, how every month he and Kieran washed and waxed the cars. There were bad memories too, like the chewing out Dad gave him after the water tower stunt, and the two months' grounding he'd gotten for it. Three months after that, his father had died from lung cancer that was detected too late.

He took a deep breath and got out of the car, shoving down the painful thoughts as he went to the other side to get the poinsettias. He'd get his bag out of the trunk later. The red petals and green leaves rustled in their pots as he moved. Inhaling a deep breath, he rang the doorbell. It seemed odd not to just walk into the house. But it wasn't his house anymore.

The door opened and his mother appeared, her gray hair cut even shorter than Emmy's and dressed in a bright-red sweater and forest-green slacks. Her blue eyes widened. "Kieran?"

"Hi, Mum." He smiled.

She rushed to hug him, then noticed the poinsettias. "You remembered," she said as she took them from him, tears in her eyes and her smile growing larger. "I can't believe you're here."

A lump formed in his throat at seeing her joy.

“Let’s go inside where it’s warm.”

He followed, and when he stepped through the door, the spicy scent of fruitcake baking hit his nose. His mother was the only person he knew who enjoyed baking and eating it. “How many loaves of fruitcake are you making this year?” he asked as they walked into a modest living room filled to the brim with Christmas décor.

“Thirty. I’m just finishing up the last batch.” She set the poinsettias on the credenza. “There. Now the room is complete.” She turned and threw her arms around him. “I’m so glad you’re home, son.”

Kieran hugged her tight. When he let her go, he kept his arm around her shoulders as they looked at the pretty red flowers. “Dad never forgot, did he?”

“Not a single time. Since our first Christmas, he always brought me two poinsettias. I kept up the tradition after he passed, and now your sister does the same at her house.”

Kieran nodded, but he’d had no idea Sheryl bought poinsettias for her own home. He was so out of touch with his family’s rituals, and since he left Mistletoe, he’d been too busy to create any of his own.

Mum wiped her cheek with her fingers. “After so many years, I can’t believe both my children are home for Christmas. If only your father . . .”

He drew her close. “He’s here with us in spirit.”

“That he is.” She turned to him with a bright smile. “No need to be melancholy. How about a glass of warm apple cider?”

Glad for the reprieve, he said, “Sounds delicious.”

Soon they were seated at the kitchen table covered in a red, green, and black plaid tablecloth, mugs of sweet cinnamon cider in front of them. His mother put a Christmas-themed plate of sliced fruitcake in the middle of the table. Kieran tried not to blanch.

“When did you arrive?” Mum asked, sitting down across from him.

He took a sip of the cider. "I landed in St. Louis around midnight last night. I just stayed in one of the hotel airports, then rented a car and drove here this morning."

"You must be exhausted from all the traveling."

"The jet lag hasn't set in yet."

"Where did you get the poinsettias?" She tore off a corner of fruitcake and popped it into her mouth.

"Mistletoe Florist."

"So you've been downtown already." She smiled. "See anything interesting?"

"I ran into Emmy Banks."

Mum grinned. "Your senior prom date."

He recognized the gleam in his mother's eyes. She had the same look when she suggested he ask Emmy to prom after his date canceled three days before the event.

"It's wonderful she and Siobhan have been friends for so long."

"Still can't bring yourself to call her 'Sheryl'?"

She lifted her chin. "Her name is Siobhan."

"Not the easiest to spell. Or pronounce." He'd lucked out with "Kieran." Most people knew how to pronounce it, although he did have to spell it out quite often.

"But it's a lovely name, just like she is. Speaking of lovely . . ." She snuck another nibble of cake. "What did you and Emmy talk about?"

"She was running an errand, so we didn't have much time to catch up." In fact, he was realizing that he'd talked about himself the whole time. She hadn't said anything about herself.

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to talk to her."

Kieran shook his head, half-grinning. "Don't get any ideas, Mum."

"*Moi?* I never get ideas."

"You've been planning my future marriage since I was old

enough to date.”

“A pointless endeavor, thank you very much.” She leaned back in the chair. “At least I thought you’d meet a sweet lass in Ballyton.”

“Here we go.”

“And what’s wrong with wanting my son to be happily married? You’re nearing forty-four, Kieran. Are you ever going to settle down? Never mind, I already know the answer.”

“Which is?”

“My life is fine the way it is,” she said, her imitation of him startlingly accurate.

“Because it’s true.”

The landline phone on the wall near the fridge rang. “Hold that thought,” Mum said, getting up from her seat. “Wait, *change* that thought.” She grinned and answered the phone. “Oh, hello, Pearl! Merry Christmas to you too. How are things in Kansas City?”

His mother’s conversation with her friend disappeared as he thought about Emmy again. More particularly, prom night. He’d been irritated when his date had called and told him she had to cancel, mostly because he’d already bought the tickets, not because they were romantically involved. At first it had been a little awkward when his mother had suggested asking Emmy. She was a sophomore and his kid sister’s best friend. He was sure she’d say no. But to his surprise she’d said yes.

At first, he was just glad he had a date. Emmy had always been bookish and a little shy. But she was also nice, and they had a great time at the dance. Then the unexpected happened when he took her home and walked her to the front porch.

He suddenly, and inexplicably, had wanted to kiss her.

Thankfully he regained his senses and told her goodnight, quickly climbed into his mother’s Grand Cherokee, and peeled out of her driveway, bewildered by his sudden urge. He’d never thought of her as anything but Sheryl’s friend, and even during the prom the

thought of kissing her had never entered his mind. He chalked it up to two things—being grateful he didn't have to go to prom on his own and ending up having a blast with her at the dance. He kind of owed her for being such a good sport about being a last-minute replacement.

But he didn't feel obligated to kiss her. She had looked so pretty that night, especially under the soft glow of the porch light. Her long blond hair was loosely gathered up with clips and pins, and several long strands framed her face. The blue satin dress she wore had sheer short sleeves, a modest neckline, and flared out from the waist, the hem just touching her knee.

He'd wanted to kiss her, just like he'd wanted to ask her to slow dance, only to chicken out each time. Emmy was a friend, and she probably would have shoved him away if he had tried kissing her. He didn't want a great night to end on a sour note.

After the prom he didn't see her much, mostly because he was focused on school and working to save up for his trip to Europe. He'd only planned to stay abroad a year . . . and that had turned into twenty-five. When he left Mistletoe, he didn't give the town, or Emmy Branch, more than a second thought.

He sure was thinking about her now.



**A MISTLETOE
PRINCE**



Pepper Basham

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



ONE

Partially self-imposed exile.
What had his life come to?

Prince Arran St. Clare of Skymar sighed as he drove, staring out the window at the unfamiliar passing landscape. If only he'd known his parents' plans when he'd asked them for help, he may have chosen to continue his more entertaining, but less fulfilling, role of rogue prince. But the past few months, as the mounting tabloid and newspaper headlines continued to flaunt his ungoverned lifestyle, the shame he had for his behavior had intensified.

How could he have allowed a broken heart to lead him into utter madness for nearly two years?

Especially since he'd been making better choices over the past few months, only to become, quite unexpectedly, caught up in another mistake. A mistake that led him to using royal funds for a rather scandalous party aboard a yacht. Accidentally, of course.

His body drooped from the internal wrestling match between his pride, his need for change, and his towering list of mistakes.

Images of the most recent media photos rushed to mind. Famous women and superficial relationships. Parties with less-than-ideal outcomes. A video of Arran landing a punch on Lord Darrick.

He winced.

If he'd known Rachelle was the daughter of the overprotective and highly popular conservative leader in Skymar, Arran wouldn't have pursued a harmless moonlit swim with her.

Punching her father had been entirely provoked. And, unfortunately, captured on video for the whole world to see.

An uncomfortable twinge tightened his chest. Words from the most recent newsprints repeated in his head.

Playboy.

Troublemaker.

Embarrassment.

All arrows finally hitting their mark.

He couldn't continue on his present course. The disappointment on his parents' faces bled clearly into his mind. Perhaps he deserved his fate: eight weeks with his little sister and her new American husband, living as a commoner and working construction in a small, backward town in North Carolina . . . *without* royal funds.

Plus, part of the agreement with his parents meant Arran would assist with some Christmas charity.

Well, at least he knew how to navigate service projects, a skill for which he particularly excelled among his siblings.

A text popped up on the screen of the car.

Text from Ellie to Arran: Expect a feast for dinner. Luke is grilling steak.

Text from Ellie to Arran: And watch out for bears. You're coming in late, so there's a chance one might run along your path.

Arran stopped the car in the middle of the street and stared at the message. Bears? Seriously? Bears "along your path," as if it's the most normal remark in the world. He shook his head, a new twin wave of humiliation and annoyance rising in his chest.

He didn't need the oversight of his *little* sister or her country husband to reform. Oh no! He could manage his own reformation.

After all, he was twenty-eight years old.

Plus, bears? Where on earth had his parents sent him?

The GPS glitched and then turned him down a street with brick and stone buildings lining either side of the road. Only a few shops glowed with welcome in the dusk shadows. Most looked closed for the evening.

He brought the car to a stop at the next traffic light and waited for another GPS command. Nothing. Giving the phone a quick refresh, he tried again.

The connectivity-circle kept spinning.

Of course. Bears, exile, and no internet connection.

Perfect. Sounds like a regular modern fairy tale.

The interruption of a car horn brought him back to attention, a green traffic light lit above him. Arran sent a glance over his shoulder and pulled the car into a nearby parking spot to give himself time to gather his bearings.

Last time he checked the GPS, he was about twenty minutes from Ellie's house.

His attention shifted to his phone. He could text her for directions.

He groaned and pressed his head back against the headrest. Having to contact her for directions sent a double sting to his pride. For one, she was his little sister, and second, he revolted against asking for help *again*. After all, he'd be spending the next two months with her and her husband in all their happy honeymoon afterglow.

He cringed at the very idea. The last thing he wanted was to prove himself more inept than his sister or brother-in-law already thought he was.

A flicker of light to his right pulled his focus to a blinking sign in a nearby window reading "Murphy's Brew." The warm glow of welcome tugged his interest.

He glanced at the GPS.

Asking a local for directions should be simple enough, right?

Less painful on the pride in this particular situation.

After a moment's hesitation, he killed the engine and unfolded from the car.

A quick drink, an easy conversation, and he'd be back on the road with directions in a quarter of an hour or less.

Simple.

He pushed open the door of the bar and found the atmosphere not too different from a Skymarian village pub. Dimly lit, the space offered a blur of activity, from billiards on one side to darts on the other. Combating aromas of perfumes and colognes mingled with the hints of savory dishes.

A responsive growl erupted from Arran's stomach, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since flying out of Skymar early that morning.

The idea of Luke's steak sounded better and better.

A burly man stood behind the counter, his full beard and flannel shirt giving off a similar vibe as the Scots in the northern mountains of home "You look a little lost, stranger."

"A stranger, yes." Arran took a seat on an empty stool, unfurling his grin. "Lost? Not anymore. I was hoping to find a place like this one for a brief respite and a bit of direction."

"Respite?" The man's dark brow rose along with one corner of his mouth. "Sounds like you came a long way to stumble into my door." The man leaned an elbow onto the counter and studied Arran through narrowed eyes. "Tourist?"

Arran hesitated at the man's unreadable expression. Did the bartender have something against tourists? "I'm actually here to visit my sister." He unleashed a broad smile. "You may have heard of her. Princess Elliana St. Clare?"

So much for keeping to anonymity.

"Nope." The man gave a shake of his head before stretching back to stand upright. "Can't say we have much use for princesses around

here.” The man shared a smile with a nearby woman. “Now, if you were related to Andy Griffith or some famous sports player, that’d be different.”

The smile slid from Arran’s face, a sudden . . . discomfort squeezing in his chest. Even when he preferred anonymity at times, someone *always* recognized him. They had his entire life.

Prince Arran. Fourth child of King Aleksander and Queen Gabriella of Skymar. Fun-loving, formerly contentious, playboy royal. On the arm of the rich and famous.

Who else was he?

He stumbled around in his head for a response to this new epiphany. Did he even know anymore?

“My . . . my sister married a local. Luke Edgewood?”

The man’s gaze darted to Arran. “Luke Edgewood?”

Arran’s body tensed. “Yes?”

“You’re *Ellie’s* brother?” With a raised brow and a tip back on his heels, the man surveyed Arran anew, as if measuring him. “The fancy fella who’ll be working with Luke for the next few months?”

“Y . . . yes.” He drew out the word even more slowly than before. *Fancy* fellow?

“Well, why didn’t you say so from the start? Luke told us we ought to set you right if we saw you.”

Set him right? What could that mean? Especially from a brother-in-law? “Actually, I was hoping to get directions to Luke’s house, if you could . . . set me right with those.”

“Sure thing.” The man raised a brow, a mischievous twinkle lighting his pale eyes. “But first, we’re gonna give you a Mount Airy welcome.”

Arran had no time to ponder further because the man called to the room. “Hey, y’all!” The voices hushed, faces turned toward the bar.

“This here is Ellie Edgewood’s brother, and he’s in need of a

warm Mount Airy welcome.”

An eruption of voices rose in response, as men and women alike raised their glasses in salute.

“First things first, Ellie’s brother.” The man leaned back against the bar. “Let’s introduce those royal tastebuds of yours to the best brew this mountain’s got to give. That is, if you think you’re man enough to handle it.”

The glint in the bartender’s eye inspired a rise of caution in Arran’s stomach, but he shrugged it off. Though he’d rarely taken whiskey over the past month in an attempt to start cleaning up his life, Arran knew how to hold it.

And what better way to show the locals he meant to enjoy their comradery? “My home is known for some of the best brew around. You’ll have to work hard to impress me.”

“Oh, not to worry, Ellie’s brother.” The glint deepened in the man’s eyes. “We’re more than ready to meet the challenge. In fact, this stuff may knock you right off that royal seat of yours.”



“Sure.”

A single word propelled Charlotte Edgewood from her comfortable, introverted role as behind-the-scenes support person into the lead coordinator for The Mistletoe Wish Program.

And as the word slipped from her lips, she shuddered in shock. She was *not* a leader. How was she supposed to manage something as large as the annual Christmas fundraiser?

“I can’t thank you enough.” Lori Paxton sent an unadulterated look of appreciation as she placed a protective palm over her extended abdomen. Her gaze traveled down Charlie and back up. “And, I know it’s not your usual choice, but I’m sure you’ll . . . figure out how to manage everything. And the Christmas Gala too.”

Charlie's face went cold as she cast a look down at her work-worn jeans and faded T-shirt.

The Christmas Gala?

She gave her ball cap a tug, just to look a little less like the tom-boy she was, and a powdering of dust hit the floor. She bit back a whimper.

I can't do this.

Did she even own a pair of heels? And she'd never worn an evening gown.

"With the babies due any day, there's no way I can participate, let alone coordinate."

Charlie forced her lips into a smile.

Hopefully.

"But . . . but do you think maybe Diane would be the better option? I mean, she's been more involved at the party and hosting level than me."

Was that Charlie's own voice? All wobbly and breathless?

What had compelled her to volunteer in the first place? She was a *carpenter!* Not a presenter!

Her gaze dropped to Lori's middle, and her shoulders drooped. However, *someone* needed to help. But Charlie was the worst qualified *someone* for the job.

"Diane is tending to her mama after her surgery, remember?"

Hope withered to match the dust from Charlie's hat. "Of course." She drew in a breath, praying for courage.

Maybe she needed to do this.

This could be her chance to prove to everyone, including herself, that she could step beyond her fears and the mold she'd resigned herself to. That there was a brave woman living underneath her faded jeans and six-year-old work boots.

"I'm happy to do it," she finally said.

Which wasn't a lie. Completely. Charlie had assisted in the

Christmas fundraiser for years. She knew the schedule, the people, and how it worked.

Unfortunately, her smile must have not registered the appropriate holiday cheer.

“You’ll have support from our usual volunteers,” Lori rushed ahead. “Besides, isn’t that prince coming to help?”

That prince?

Charlie’s smile tensed at the reminder of her cousin Luke’s brother-in-law assisting in their little mountain service project. A rebel prince, from what she’d heard. She quelled an eye roll. How could *he* possibly help?

“Doesn’t that sound like the strangest thing to say?” Lori laughed. “A prince coming to our rescue.”

A memory rushed to Charlie’s mind: her eight-year-old self in full princess costume, dancing around the living room while watching copious amounts of princess-themed movies. Real-life disappointments had certainly redefined those childhood dreams. Besides, the last thing she needed was to babysit a maverick monarch while navigating such a daunting leadership role.

“I don’t really expect him to help,” Charlie offered. “There’s a good chance working for Luke will be enough to keep him busy.”

“It’s a wonder he’s offered to come at all.” Lori chuckled. “A prince! Building houses! In our little town?”

It didn’t make sense to Charlie either.

After Lori shared a few more suggestions, Charlie gathered her bag, scooped up the fundraiser’s files, and took the stairs down to the street. The lamps lining Main Street attempted to compete with some of the few shops still open after 7:00 p.m. on a weekday.

Charlie’s gaze landed on the little steeple rising above the other buildings at the end of town, and she sent a prayer heavenward. Surely God would help her through this. Even if it involved a hair-stylist and—she swallowed the lump in her throat—possibly wear-

ing . . . heels.

The sound of laughter pulled Charlie's attention next door to Murphy's Brew, one of the most popular nighttime spots in Mount Airy. Light blazed from the bar's windows, teasing passersby in for warmth, fellowship, and some of the best cheese pretzels on the planet.

She shook her head at the idea of Caine Murphy and the pride he took in his potent home brew, then made her way to her truck.

She'd just started the ignition when her phone buzzed to life.

Luke: Have you happened to see a prince in town?

Air burst from Charlie's crooked lips as she reread the note. *Interesting intro to a conversation.*

Charlie: I gave up that pursuit in grade school. Why do you need a prince, anyway? Don't you already have a princess living at your house?

Luke: My princess happens to have lost a brother. He was supposed to be here a couple hours ago.

Charlie's bottom lip dropped, and she sent another look down quiet Main Street. *How on earth could anybody get lost in Mount Airy, of all places?*

Charlie: Clearly, my skills at locating princes are pretty rusty. Does he resemble your wife? Blond hair, blue eyes, practically perfect in every way?

Luke: No one looks as good as my wife.

Charlie's grin stretched. Give the man a wife, and suddenly there's an influx of romantic talk.

Charlie: So, I'm looking for a slightly less perfect, male version of your wife?

A photo popped up on the screen to reveal a man who resembled Captain America a little too much for Charlie's peace of mind. Styled blond hair, pale blue eyes, perfect smile.

In a tux.

Have mercy!

She cleared her throat.

Luke: Before you fall in love with him, know that one of his ears is shorter than the other.

Charlie belted out a laugh before she typed out a reply.

Charlie: I've outgrown my infatuation with princes, so I think he's safe from me.

Luke: Well, since you're not going to marry him, at least shine some of that good heart in his direction. I think he could use it.

Charlie: Sounds like he could use some direction in the geographical sense, too, if he's lost in Mount Airy.

Luke: Clearly, looks don't equal smarts. Except in my case.

Charlie shook her head with a sigh. Rescue a troublemaking prince? That's exactly how she wanted to spend her evening.

Her gaze caught sight of her shadowed reflection in her rear-

view mirror. Large gray eyes stared back at her, highlighted by the glow of the streetlamps.

Her daddy had always said she looked like her mama, but, thankfully, he'd never held that against Charlie. He'd rarely spoken about the woman who married him, bore him a daughter, and then disappeared when Charlie was nine.

Without one look or note back.

In fact, last Charlie heard, her mama still had a few years left of her prison sentence for armed robbery.

Charlie pulled off her hat, and strands of her ash-brown hair fell around her pale face. Maybe the hair and face shape resembled her mom's, but the vulnerable eyes staring back didn't at all. One of the last memories of her mama flashed through her mind, the woman's expression tightened into a customary frown.

"I had hoped you'd be blond like my mama."

"Why don't you have the fine bone structure of some of the other girls?"

A dozen other phrases echoed from the past with a rush of condemnation.

"Your eyes are too large."

"Your nose is too small."

Charlie closed her mind to the memories, returning her cap and starting the truck.

Raised with boys.

Works with boys.

How on earth was she going to learn to dress and act like a lady?

She shifted the truck into gear and drove twenty minutes to the nearby town of Ransom to her somewhat-restored brick Victorian. Her dad had purchased it with a plan to renovate and sell it, but he'd only partially completed things before unexpectedly dying in a construction accident two years ago. Her heart twinged at the memory, as it always did.

Though her daddy had been no Prince Charming, he'd done his best to love her enough for two parents. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. What she wouldn't give for one of his hugs right now.

She blinked away the sting in her eyes and stared back at the massive house. She really ought to sell the place, but the idea of getting rid of it somehow felt like losing another piece of him.

The fancy sconces her daddy had placed on either side of the front door shone into the night as if a private "welcome home," so she nodded toward them in acknowledgment and stepped from the truck.

As soon as Charlie's feet hit the drive, she froze.

A low growl reverberated nearby, sending a chill from the base of her spine to the crown of her head. She took a slow turn and looked down the quiet street populated with old houses and flickering streetlamps.

Another growl.

A bear? Her face cooled. Wolf?

She pressed her back against the truck.

The growl came again.

Her head jerked in the direction of the sound. Whatever it was waited at the back of her truck.

She cast a glance to her front door. Should she make a run for it?

The growl sounded again, but this time it ended with a high-pitched whistle.

A whistle?

And, now that she thought about it, the growls sounded rather rhythmic.

She moved a few steps toward the sound, another "growl" turning into a . . . hum?

What in the world?

Flipping on the flashlight on her phone, Charlie peered over the

bed of her truck and nearly dropped her phone at the sight. Laying on his back, mouth open and hair erratic, slept Prince Captain America.

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798





**SAY NO
TO MISTLETOE**



Sheila Roberts

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



ONE

Of course, it was meant to be. Love was only a kiss away.

—Hailey Fairchild, *What the Heart Seeks*

Mistletoe is my kryptonite. One kiss under it, and I go weak in the head. My last three mistletoe kisses resulted in relationship disaster. Which is why I, Hailey Fairchild, am swearing off it.

You'd think after three love fails I'd hate cupid. I don't. I'm one of his loyal acolytes. I write romance novels. I'm a believer.

If you ask me, everyone should be. We need more love in the world. *I* need more love, but so far I'm only finding it on the pages of my computer screen.

On the screen is better than nothing. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

Consider this a public service announcement, a warning. Don't go under the mistletoe. It's hazardous to your heart. Here's what it did to me.

Mistletoe Disaster Number One:

Gregory, as in Gregory Peck, a.k.a. Atticus Finch in the classic movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tall and dark and noble-looking. My grandma made me watch the movie with her when I was a kid, and I was hypnotized by his deep voice.

Like the movie star, this Gregory was tall and lean with dark

hair and brown eyes, and he had an air of brooding mystery. Which was appropriate, since he wrote mysteries.

I met him at a party thrown by a friend of a friend. I spotted him across the room, surrounded by drooling women dressed to kill in body-hugging holiday dresses and heels high enough to give their arches cramps, and thought, *Don't even try*. I wasn't dressed to kill. *Dressed to maim*, I thought, in my black silk pants and red top with a black silk jacket.

I'm not so bad to look at anymore. I've shed some poundage. Lost the zits. And, hey, glasses are in style, and I have great frames. I think they make me look smart and glam. But I knew I couldn't compete with those women. I mean, they were beautiful. So I tried for aloofness, thinking it might make me look mysterious and unattainable.

I got my Christmas punch and strolled around the room, trying to pretend I belonged. And sort of nudged closer to Mr. Gorgeous and his fans.

"I think it's so rad that you're a writer," one gushed.

A writer! I was a writer. I'd just sold my first romance novel to Heartfelt, my publisher's romance line.

"It's not easy," Gregory said. "Everyone thinks they can write a book, but most people never do, and half the ones who do just write drek."

Hmm. A bit of a snob. What did he think of romance writers?

I had to know, so I abandoned my mysterious vibe and inserted myself into the conversation. "And what would you describe as 'drek'?" I challenged.

He shrugged and looked down his elegant nose at me. "I suppose you want to be a writer?"

I lifted my chin just a little. "I already am."

"Oh, who's your publisher?" he asked, and the other women drifted away.

I couldn't help feeling a little superior since I'd outshone them. (Outshining never happened to me when I was younger.)

"Herald Publishing," I said, and his eyebrows went up in surprise.

"Really?" He motioned to the sofa. "Sit down. Let's talk."

And so we did. He seemed perfect. I gave him my phone number.

Before I left, well, there was the mistletoe, hanging in the doorway. He caught my arm and gave me a little tug. It was so cute and romantic, I stepped right up and let him kiss me.

It was an impressive kiss, heady stuff for a girl whose first mistletoe kiss at the age of fourteen had about scarred her for life. This man wanted to be under there with me. Oh yes!

Except . . . Gregory whispered something creepy after our kiss that tarnished it a bit. *Ding, ding, ding!* went a little warning bell, but I was already lost in that heady mistletoe fog, so of course I ignored it and went out with him.

One time. By dessert I knew it wasn't going to work. I wanted sweetness and chivalry. I quickly caught on that Gregory wanted . . . well, not that.

Mistletoe Disaster Number Two:

That was Edmond, as in Edmond Dantès, the Count of Monte Cristo. Sigh. He worked in the art department at Herald Publishing, and I'd met him when I visited and got a tour of the offices. Lo and behold, there he was at the publisher's Christmas cocktail party, his dark hair flopped over one eye and dressed in gray suit. Ready for a *GQ* shoot.

My first book, *What the Heart Seeks*, had done well, and I'd just turned in my second novel, *What the Heart Needs*. Back then I was beginning to believe everything I wrote; I was sure I was starting to

figure out the ways of love. And Edmond, with his soft-spoken voice and sweet smile, fit the bill perfectly. I prefer strong alpha males in my books, but they can be problematic IRL, so it was points for Edmond that he didn't fall into that category. He also got points for being interested in my budding career.

At the time I thought that was hardly surprising. We were both in the business, after all. It was only natural that he would want to talk about how I was doing. I was happy to brag that I was doing fine and expected to keep on doing fine. The romance genre captures nearly a third of the book market and generates over a billion dollars a year. You've got to respect that. He did. And I respected him for appreciating what I do for a living . . . well, *almost* living. (I've finally been able to cut my barista hours down to half-time. Yay, me! Another few books, and maybe I can finally write full-time and still afford to eat.)

Edmond lured me under the mistletoe with a shy suggestion that we should get into the spirit of the season.

It was such a sweet kiss, with the promise of happily-ever-after. Oh yes. It erased the memory of him mentioning how you don't choose a career in publishing to get rich, followed by a little quip about finding the next Nora Roberts and marrying her. Set for life that way. Ha-ha. I thought it was a joke.

It wasn't. Edmond was a mooch. It's not cheap living in New York, even when you have roommates, and heaven knows my roommate, Ramona, and I did our share of scrimping, so I understood Edmond's need to pinch pennies. But in my novels, men pull their weight. I want the same thing in life. Edmond wasn't even going near his weight, let alone pulling it. I wasted a lot of money on that man. Thank you, mistletoe, for blinding me to what should have been obvious.

Mistletoe Disaster Number Three:

David. That's such a strong name, isn't it? I hear it and think of Michelangelo's famous statue. Sigh.

I met him last year, at yet another Christmas party. That had been a promising kiss and a promising relationship. Or so I'd thought. After I've turned in my work mess in progress—if I ever finish this mess in progress—my next book is going to be titled *Blind Love*. How's that for a great title? It was inspired by David.

That mistletoe mania night, he'd been flirting with women like he was auditioning to play Casanova in a movie. But when he got around to me, he said I was the most awesome woman there and, well, that's all it took for me to be put on the path to disaster. And when he got me under the mistletoe, kryptonite hit again. All my brain cells shut down.

I plunged into the relationship, a love diver going headfirst into shallow water, sure we were headed for an engagement by Christmas. I was ready. I was thirty-three and reaching the point where the snooze alarm on my biological clock refuses to be silenced.

It turned out his clock had a much later setting, and I wasn't the only one he was watching rom-coms with. We broke up on Halloween. How's that for scary?

So, there you have it. Now here I am, trying to finish this stupid book, *What the Heart Knows*, which, in my case, is nothing. Oh, and I'm dreading the holidays. I should have been coming home to Cascade, Washington, the mountain town in—wait for it—the Cascades, with a ring on my finger and Save the Date announcements in my purse. Instead, I'll be arriving with a bare finger and a chewed-up heart, all thanks to that love piranha. The dirty, rotten, cheating . . . never mind. I'm not going to think about it.

Or the mistletoe incident that started this sick cycle I've been trapped in—the one kiss that's lived in my heart since ninth grade

and haunted me like one of Scrooge's ghosts. It was terrifying, wonderful, and mortifying. It has kept me both entranced by and vulnerable to that stupid mistletoe ever since. And, to be honest, my heart still longs for the kind of ending I like to write, where the man who was my first love falls for me and becomes my forever love.

I'm not looking forward to coming home a love loser, even though I'll get to see my family and my old BFF Scarlet. There will be baking binges with Mom and parties. And there is bound to be mistletoe. I must avoid it at all costs.

And I must avoid Carwyn Davies, the great unrequited love of my young life.

Carwyn is the stuff a girl's dreams are made of. He was a junior in high school when he gave me my first-ever mistletoe kiss, already playing on the varsity basketball team. He looked like a Viking, with that golden hair and those intense eyes that were blue. No, green. No, both.

Of course, even though we lived right next to each other, even though he and my older brother Sam shot hoops in his driveway, he never saw me. He was three years older and too busy dating cheerleaders with perfect skin and flowing blond hair to notice a pudgy freshman girl with glasses and boring brown hair. Heck, I didn't even notice myself.

THE KISS happened at the neighborhood Christmas party at the Davies' house. Mrs. Davies had hung mistletoe right there in the living room archway. I'd paused under it, not because I wanted to be kissed—I was way too shy to go looking for something so public. I hadn't even seen it. I'd simply hesitated, looking around the room, searching for Scarlet and wondering where I could hide if she wasn't there to talk to. It was such a large gathering, and I felt conspicuous in the bulky red sweater my mother had knitted for me. I looked like a big, round Christmas ornament with legs.

My dopey brother had teased me about standing there. "Look-

ing for a lip-lock, Hailey?” he’d asked. Then, before I could reply, he summoned Carwyn. “Hey, Car, come give Hailey a zap.”

My heart went into overdrive, and the blood rushed to my head, setting my whole face on fire. I tried to back away, but there was Sam right behind me, and there came Carwyn. Gorgeous, smiling Carwyn. No glasses, not a zit to be seen anywhere on that perfect face of his. (I, on the other hand, had one blooming right on my chin.) He strolled up to me and, with a chuckle, pulled me up against him like we were going to start dirty dancing right there in his living room in front of his family and all our neighbors and God and all the angels on holiday patrol.

I still get hot and bothered thinking about it. He had the kind of hard body like those heroes in the romance novels I devoured. He touched my lips with his perfect masterful ones, and my world tilted. I could smell his spicy aftershave, and he tasted like peppermint.

My breath smelled like garlic and onions, thanks to the chips and dip I’d gotten into before we came to the party.

Of course, he wasn’t into it. I knew that. Who would be into kissing an onion-infested Christmas ornament? With zits. It was a joke, and it was all so humiliating.

I pulled away as fast as I could, pushing my glasses up my suddenly sweaty nose. My whole face was sizzling so hot you could have broiled a steak over it.

One of the older women said, “Isn’t that cute?”

No, it wasn’t cute. It was mortifying.

“Hey, what’s your hurry?” Carwyn teased as I bolted for the punch bowl.

I’d have liked nothing better than to crawl under the dining room table with its long, red tablecloth and stay there forever, but you can only pull that off when you’re five. So I tried to act cool and put out the fire burning my face with eggnog punch and pretend

that I didn't want to act like a five-year-old.

I kept my back to Carwyn and the party guests while the sizzle on my face died down. The sizzle on my lips subsided, too, and that was sad. Later that night, alone in my room, I put my fingers to my lips, trying to recapture that glorious sensational second. Kissed by Carwyn Davies—holiday magic!

I remained trapped in the throes of unrequited love clear through high school. To feed my sickness I read Jane Austen and the Brontës and every book Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer ever wrote. I devoured Debbie Macomber and Susan Wiggs and Susan Elizabeth Phillips. And sighed at the end of each book, envisioning myself and Carwyn as the hero and heroine of those stories. I went to every basketball game he played in, sitting in the bleachers with Scarlet and sighing longingly as I watched him in action, all muscled and gorgeous. I dreamed about him at night but hid in my room whenever he came over to game with Sam. I couldn't think of another guy, let alone date one.

Not that boys were banging on the door. Shy bookworms were not in high demand. Except as a cliché in a novel.

I know about clichés. My first stories were full of them—beautiful, snobby cheerleaders (I know there are nice ones out there, but I didn't know any, and I wasn't about to give a single one of my fictional cheerleaders a heart); handsome jocks who could never see when the perfect girl was right under their nose; mean girls who got what was coming to them in the end. And girls like me, who were always successful and beautiful by the end of the story. And wore contacts. Of course they got contacts.

Except I didn't. I've never been able to master sticking something in my eye. I tried. Heaven knows, I tried. Anyway, like I said, glasses are in style now. And I'm in better shape these days, thanks to regular visits to that torture chamber known as the gym. But here I am, still single.

It seems everyone else in Cascade is with someone now. Scarlet is engaged and living in LA. Her younger sister Billie, who never left town, is married and working on baby number two. And Mom tells me that even Sam has found a serious girlfriend.

I just learned this yesterday when we were talking on the phone. “*Maybe you know her,*” Mom said. “*Gwendolyn Payne?*”

Yes, I know Gwendolyn—snobby mean girl. I suddenly felt like someone whacked me in the face with a giant Christmas pickle. If there’s one person I don’t want to see ever again, it’s her. She was one of my nemeses when I was in high school. And Sam has fallen for her? Seriously? Did she hypnotize him?

Of course, she’ll be on the scene, all smooth and slick. And there I’ll be, all . . . alone.

Earlier in the year, when I thought I’d finally found true love, I’d been looking forward to coming home for Christmas with bling on my finger and a perfect man in tow. Revenge of the Nerd Girl. Career success, romance success—I’d have it all. I’m happy I still have my career (so far), but coming back as a love loser really stinks. And frankly, right now so does writing romance novels. Which doesn’t bode well for my career.

Part of me wants to hide here on the East Coast, but I wiggled out of going home last Christmas, and that got me in scalding-hot water. If I try it again, my parents will disown me, especially since they insisted on buying my ticket. Anyway, I do want to see my family. I just don’t want to run into any of the women who made me so miserable. I especially don’t want to see Gwendolyn. And then there’s Carwyn.

If I could just stay in the house, I’d be fine, but Mom has plans. She has plans upon plans.

Including an appearance at the local bookstore.

Mom is my number-one fan and has bought copies of my books and passed them out to all her friends. In honor of my return, she’s

talked Eloise Matthews, the owner of Mountain Books, into having me in for a book signing party. (That probably wasn't hard to do. After all, Mom's bought so many of my books there that I think she's single-handedly kept Mountain Books in business. Eloise owes her big-time.) I'm not wild about standing in front of a crowd and reading from my novels. I always find parts I could have written better, and it's sooo embarrassing to read those second-best sentences.

I'll have to smile and sign books and pretend I'm not a romance fraud who writes about love but can't get it right in real life.

I shouldn't have committed to coming home so early and staying clear through New Year's. That's too much time—too many opportunities for Christmas gremlins to get into my life and mess it all up even worse than it already is. I can only hope the Davies family won't host their annual Christmas party. If they do, there's bound to be mistletoe. My kryptonite. Santa, help me!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Photo by Robert Rabe



SHEILA ROBERTS

USA TODAY and *Publishers Weekly* best-selling author Sheila Roberts has seen her books translated into several different languages, included in *Readers Digest* compilations, and made into movies for the Hallmark and Lifetime channels. She's happily married and lives in the Pacific Northwest.

Website: sheilasplace.com
Facebook: [@funwithsheila](https://www.facebook.com/funwithsheila)
Twitter: [@_Sheila_Roberts](https://twitter.com/_Sheila_Roberts)
Instagram: [@sheilarobertswriter](https://www.instagram.com/sheilarobertswriter)

KATHLEEN FULLER



With over a million copies sold, Kathleen Fuller is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of several bestselling novels, including the Hearts of Middlefield novels, the Middlefield Family novels, the Amish of Birch Creek series, and the Amish Letters series as well as a middle-grade Amish series, the Mysteries of Middlefield.

Visit her online at KathleenFuller.com
Instagram: [@kf_booksandhooks](https://www.instagram.com/kf_booksandhooks)
Facebook: [@WriterKathleenFuller](https://www.facebook.com/WriterKathleenFuller)
Twitter: [@TheKatJam](https://twitter.com/TheKatJam)

PEPPER BASHAM

Pepper Basham is an award-winning author who writes romance “peppered” with grace and humor. Writing both historical and contemporary novels, she loves to incorporate her native Appalachian culture and/or her unabashed adoration of the UK into her stories. She currently resides in the lovely mountains of Asheville, NC, where she is the wife of a fantastic pastor, mom of five great kids, a speech-language pathologist, and a lover of chocolate, jazz, hats, and Jesus.



Michael Kaal @ Michael Kaal Photography

You can learn more about Pepper and her books on her website at www.pepperdbasham.com.

Facebook: @pepperbasham

Instagram: @pepperbasham

Twitter: @pepperbasham

BookBub: @pepperbasham