

Mistletoe  
*Make-believe*

A Novella by

Amy R. Anguish

*For Heather Greer and Erin Howard, my two crazy writing sisters. You keep me sane, are great at bouncing ideas around, and make me laugh more than just about anyone. Thanks so much for being my tribe-let. I love you both!*



Lying in the church building.

Such audacity. And yet the desperation Charlie Hill's family was fueling drove him on. He'd been raised to know better, but the very same people who'd equipped him with moral values had driven him to this brink.

He didn't even know her. Wasn't sure she'd be here long enough for this plan to work. But he had to try.

Charlie maneuvered his way down the aisle, past the confused glances of his relatives, and leaned over next to the pretty blonde—the only girl in the building who wasn't sitting beside someone. “This seat taken?”

Wide chocolate eyes met his. She blinked and gave a short nod before gathering her purse and scooting toward the middle of the pew. When she didn't stop until the center, he swallowed a grimace, hiked up his courage a bit more, and followed her in.

Before she could move again, he dropped the bulletin on her lap.

“Oh, I already have—”

His finger tapped the hastily scribbled request on the bottom. No need to look at the words. He'd rewritten them a

dozen times before giving up and hoping they conveyed enough of his misery that she'd take pity on him and agree.

To participate in his lie.

What was he doing? Dragging someone else into the deceit. On the Sunday before Christmas. It was not only sinful but probably sacrilegious.

Before he could reach over and snatch the paper back, the service began. She set her things aside and grabbed a songbook. Nothing in her expression indicated whether she'd even read his scribbles, if she agreed, if she might jump up and escape at any second.

Well, no worries there. An older couple occupied the far end, and another man had filled in her original spot. Without climbing over people and making a scene, she was trapped. And she hadn't moved any farther away. That was a good sign, right?

The song leader announced the first hymn. "Let's sing."

She held her hymnal between them so he could share.

He glanced her way. She raised an eyebrow, gave a tilt of the head, and then cut her gaze back to the front. Okay, then. Maybe he had a chance. He slid his arm across the pew behind her and forced his focus on the worship service. Time enough to figure out details later.

At least, he hoped so.



SAMANTHA ARWINE HAD NEVER BELIEVED in the muses before. Not really. And when Marcus suggested she take a vacation to get hers to work once more, she'd been skeptical. Yet here she sat in a church building on St. Simons Island, Georgia. And an idea for a romance novel literally dropped in her lap.

*I'm desperate. My family won't quit bugging me about dating someone, and I'm not ready. Is there any possible way you could pretend to be my girlfriend this week while we're on the island for Christmas?*

The fact that the man wasn't hard to look at, with his wavy

brown hair and hazel eyes, sweetened the proposal—if that’s what it could be called. What kind of family would drive a man to pick up a girl during a church service? If she agreed to this, what was she getting herself into?

‘Your deadline is looming, Sam, and you haven’t turned in a thing. Do you even have any plot ideas right now?’ Marcus’s words from the week before bounced around in her mind.

And she could honestly say she didn’t have a single concept for a new novel. Not that there weren’t stories to be found, but nothing that begged to be written. A block formed in her brain the moment her romance fell apart after Christmas last year.

If she hadn’t had two practically complete manuscripts in January, she would’ve been in a world of trouble. As it was, she had to drag the few pieces out of her very soul to finish those the way the editor wanted. And now Marcus demanded more. How was a girl supposed to write about romance when she couldn’t even maintain one of her own?

“Jesus is the reason for this season, yes.” The preacher grew louder as he wrapped up the message she’d barely even heard. “But He’s also the reason for all the other seasons too. We need to keep Him in our hearts all year long. If that means keeping your Christmas tree up ... or your nativity out, do it.”

Laughter tittered around the small auditorium. Sam shifted, and her Bible slipped from her lap. He caught it before it could *thunk* to the wooden floor but didn’t give it back right away. Instead, his fingers traced her name, embossed in gold.

He plucked the bulletin back out and grabbed a stubby pencil from the back of the pew in front of them. “Charlie Hill.”

Oh. He was exchanging names. With the service wrapping up, she needed to finalize her decision in a hurry. Could she do this—pretend to be his girlfriend for a week? She had no other story ideas, and it was only for seven days. How could she turn him down?

“Okay. I’ll do it.” She scrawled.

He relaxed as if a boulder-sized weight slipped from his

shoulders. When she glanced into his eyes, they crinkled at the edges, sending a fissure through her middle. Okay. With a smile like that, it should be no trouble at all convincing his family she was in love with him. She was halfway convinced herself.

The congregation stood, and she quickly hopped up, smoothing her creamy skirt. The last few songs flew by, and during the final prayer, his fingers twined through hers and held tight. Was he nervous too?

After the *amen*, most people headed for the doors, chatting and laughing, talking about plans for Christmas week. But one group moved against the flow, heading their way. Sam sat and gathered her things, willing her hands not to tremble.

“Sorry we won’t have time to work out a plan right now. Looks like my family wants to meet sooner rather than later.” Charlie whispered, leaning over to replace the pencil. “I’m staying at the resort. Are you?”

“Renting a small home near the beach.” She stuck a pen in her purse’s pocket.

“Here for the whole week?”

“I leave the twenty-sixth.”

He gave a nod right as an older woman placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Charlie, are you going to explain?” There were a few similarities in her face and his—same nose shape, same cowlick to the right side of their foreheads.

“Mama, this is Samantha, my girlfriend.” Charlie straightened to his full height, and Sam realized how tall he was—at least ten inches more than her five foot four.

Sam stuck out her hand. “Please call me Sam.”

The woman hesitated for only a second before grasping Sam’s fingers. “Sam. Amazing we haven’t heard about you before this.”

“It’s a fairly recent development.” Charlie hedged the truth nicely.

“And where did you meet?” Another woman asked.

“We met at church, Aunt Meg.”

“You’ll join us for lunch, won’t you ... Sam?” Charlie’s mom asked. “We’d love to get to know you better.”

“Sounds great.” Sam nodded, even though inside she braced herself for an inquisition like she’d never experienced before.

“We’ll grab Hailey from children’s worship and meet you at the restaurant.” Charlie pointed toward the west side of the building.

Hailey? Who was Hailey?

Sam followed Charlie toward a large classroom where several parents gathered their offspring. Charlie waved at a girl sitting sullenly near the door. She jumped up and smiled. Sam guessed her age to be around seven or eight as the girl wrapped herself around Charlie’s middle.

What had she agreed to? She was playing girlfriend to a guy with a daughter?

“Hailey, I want you to meet someone. This is Sam. She and I are dating, and we decided it would be fun for her to join some of our family events this week.” Charlie made it sound like no big deal, but the girl’s smile evaporated quicker than a drop of rain in an Atlanta August.

“What?” Hailey spun around and shot Sam a glare so sharp she could feel it in her forehead. “Dating? When did that happen, Daddy?”

“It hasn’t been long. This was all pretty ... sudden.”

“And you didn’t tell me before now?”

“I just found out that she could spend time with us this week.” Charlie walked his daughter toward the door. “Let’s go meet everyone at the restaurant.”

“Sure.” Sam fell in beside him and noticed Hailey kept Charlie between them.

Charlie glanced at Sam and worried his lower lip. “There are going to be a lot of questions at lunch.”

“I’ve no doubt.” Sam tucked her Bible under her arm. “I can probably come up with a few of my own.”

“Like?”

“Much planned this week? I’m actually supposed to be working while I’m here.”

“I’m so sorry. I should’ve asked—”

She held up a hand. “I agreed, didn’t I? Don’t worry about it.”

“We’ll probably do a few things every day, but the point of going away for Christmas is to relax, so I doubt we’ll stay too busy. Anything you need to miss, just let me know.”

“Okay. I can handle that.”

The church building was only a few blocks from the island’s main shopping area, so it didn’t take long to arrive at a seafood place. Charlie opened the door for Sam, and southern coastal smells surrounded her. She took a deep breath. If nothing else came from this meal, at least she’d be well fed.

Her eyes widened as she counted the heads of the group waiting. One, two, three ... twelve, thirteen. With her, fourteen total.

“That’s Grandma Hill. She’s the matriarch of the family, and my dad’s mom. His sister is the one standing there, Aunt Meg. She’s married to Uncle Jacob.” Charlie’s finger indicated each person as he whispered the names in Samantha’s ear. “Meg and Jacob have four kids, but only the two unmarried ones are here this week. Aunt Linda isn’t here today, but those three are her children. Her husband Paul is standing by Dad. I’m the oldest grandchild and Hailey is the oldest great-grand.”

His family gathering was bigger than she expected. The waitress pushed three tables together to accommodate them, and they spanned the full length of the restaurant. She, Charlie, and Hailey were right in the middle. A spot that felt more like a hot seat.

Right after they ordered, Charlie’s grandma leaned forward and yelled down the table. “Did you say your name is Sam? Like a boy?”

“Short for Samantha.” Sam took a quick sip of her water. “Samantha Arwine.”

“Sounds familiar, but I don’t recognize you.”



“Maybe you’ve read one of my books.”

Was it her imagination or did the table freeze for three seconds? Charlie didn’t meet her eyes. Had she said something wrong?

“Books?” Grandma Hill cocked an eyebrow.

“I write romance novels.”

Several shifted in their seats but seemed to be waiting for something now.

“Smut.” Grandma Hill made a spitting sound.

“I don’t write that kind.” Sam straightened her back. “I write Christian romance.”

Aunt Meg scoffed. “Get your ideas for all that romance from past boyfriends?”

Sam pursed her lips. “No. I haven’t dated much. My one real past relationship turned out to be one-sided.”

“Sam doesn’t have to tell you all her history.” Charlie cut off his aunt’s inquisition. “What matters is, she’s with me now.”

Evidently, his family disapproved. She was grateful when the waitress placed her crab cakes in front of her. Now the family could focus more on eating than questioning.

Would she change herself just to make this week easier? No. Lying about a relationship was more than enough deceit. Even if it gave her fodder for another story. She had to draw the line somewhere.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amy R Anguish grew up a preacher's kid, and in spite of having lived in seven different states that are all south of the Mason Dixon line, she is not a football fan. Currently, she resides in Tennessee with her husband, daughter, and son, and usually a bossy cat or two. Amy has an English degree from Freed-Hardeman University that she intends to use to glorify God, and she wants her stories to show that while Christians face real struggles, it can still work out for good.