

CHRISTMAS IN  
WINTER HILL



MELODY CARLSON



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**K**rista Galloway didn't usually second-guess herself, but as she slowed down the U-Haul truck on the outskirts of Winter Hill, she was assaulted with some serious doubts. Was this new job a mistake? Should she have researched this move more carefully? Had she agreed to the contract too easily? Too hastily? Being hired as a city manager would definitely improve her résumé, but the small-town salary was a letdown. And what about her daughter's new school? With less than two hundred students, what if its academic standards were disappointing? Why hadn't Krista given this whole thing more consideration?

"Look, Mama!" Emily pointed to the WELCOME TO WINTER HILL billboard. "That sign says HOME OF CHRISTMASVILLE—what does that mean? Does Santa Claus live here?" Emily giggled like she knew better.

"What do you think?" Krista grimaced at the plywood Christmas tree alongside the welcome sign. It could use a new coat of paint.

"I know, Santa isn't really real. But are we near the North

Pole now? You said it snowed a lot here.” Emily peered eagerly out the window, almost as if she expected to see snowflakes flying.

“It does snow here,” Krista confirmed. “But it’s still late autumn, Emily.” She pointed to where some orange and gold leaves still clung to a large tree, vibrating in the afternoon breeze.

“But why did that sign say HOME OF CHRISTMASVILLE?” Emily persisted.

“I’m not sure.” Krista vaguely remembered someone mentioning a Christmas festival during her second Skype interview with the hiring committee, but she’d been so caught up in impressing them that she’d barely registered the information. And, naturally, she didn’t admit that she had a general aversion to Christmas. What did that have to do with managing a small town anyway?

“Where is Christmasville? What is it?”

Krista felt a mixture of amusement and aggravation at her eight-year-old’s dogged determination. Her little apple hadn’t fallen far from the tree when it came to questioning things.

“I’m not completely sure what Christmasville is,” Krista admitted as she drove past a suburb on the edge of town. “But I do know that Winter Hill has an annual Christmas festival. That must be what Christmasville is. I suppose it could be related to the town’s name.”

“Winter Hill,” Emily said dreamily. “That does sound like a Christmassy place. I’m so glad we’re moving here.”

Krista turned the bulky truck onto a quiet side street, pausing to check the little hand-drawn map that Pauline Harris, a city assistant, had mailed her last week, along with a brass key. “It looks like our house is only a few blocks from here,” she told Emily. “We’re almost home.”

“We get to live in a *real* house,” Emily happily declared. “With a *real* backyard. And when it snows—because you said it’ll snow—I can go outside and make a *real* snowman.”

“This is going to be very different from Arizona.” Krista hadn’t been sorry to leave Phoenix or their high-rise apartment behind. Really, she was ready for a change. And although Winter Hill was very small, Krista was glad that Emily could walk to school from their house. Pauline had assured Krista that it was only three blocks away—with crossing guards. Not only that, but Krista could walk to work too. Perfect since she hadn’t owned a car for the last five years.

Like Emily, Krista was looking forward to a new life in the quaint eastern Washington town. She’d never lived anywhere but Phoenix, and the idea of snow and seasons was rather exciting. Krista slowed down the truck, looking for the right address. But seeing the numerals on a small sign in front of what appeared to be an apartment complex was not encouraging. Krista pulled over with a disappointed sigh.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

She pointed at the dismal concrete building. “I think that’s our new home.”

Emily leaned over to see it better. “It’s not a house?”

“Looks like it’s an apartment.” Krista surveyed the concrete one-story complex, trying to insert some hopefulness into her voice. “But it’s not very big. It looks like only about a dozen units. That’s sort of like a house.” She picked up the map that Pauline had mailed, noticing that next to the address was another number. “I think we must be in unit eight.”

“Eight?” Emily’s mouth twisted to one side. “Well, that’s a good number. I’m eight too. Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“Maybe not.” Krista eased the big truck into the parking

spot in front of unit eight, relieved to be finally done with this grueling journey. “At least we won’t have to lug our stuff up a bunch of stairs.” She turned off the engine. “Hopefully we can get the truck unloaded before dark and sleep in our own beds tonight.” She stepped outside the truck and stretched. After two nights in cheap roadside motels, she would welcome her own bed and nice sheets tonight.

“It’s cold.” Emily shivered with wide eyes. “Do you think it’s going to snow?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you put on your new parka?” Krista reached for her phone, searching for the number Pauline had told her to text upon arrival. Apparently Pauline’s son had promised to be available to help unload the U-Haul. Krista shot off a text then held up the brass key. “Ready to see our new home?” She tried to sound more enthused than she felt as she led the way to the apartment.

Pauline Harris had told Krista that available housing was an issue in Winter Hill. “That’s because people keep moving here from California,” she’d explained, promising to find something within Krista’s budget and near the grade school. But for some reason, when Pauline had sent the key and brief description of the small two-bedroom abode, Krista had assumed it was a house. She slid the key into the lock then opened the door.

“Welcome home,” she said brightly, trying not to frown at the stark white walls and dingy beige carpet. “I’m sure it’ll look better when we get our things in here.” She went through the living room into the compact kitchen and flipped on the overhead light to see shabby wood cabinets, mismatched appliances, and plastic countertops. Nothing like their sleek, modern Phoenix apartment with granite and stainless. Well,

hopefully they wouldn't be stuck here for too long. Although she regretted the six-month lease she'd signed.

"Which is my room?" Emily called from down the hallway.

Krista joined her to discover two identical bedrooms with a clean but dull-looking bathroom between them. "I don't know." She pursed her lips, trying to disguise her dismay. "You choose, honey."

Emily ran from room to room, finally deciding. "I can see big trees from this window," she declared. "Do you think they're in our backyard?"

Krista wondered if they even had a backyard but then remembered a door in the kitchen. "Let's go find out." She was disappointed to find the door opened to a windowless laundry room. Although appliances were in place, they were probably older than she was. Hopefully they worked.

Krista wrapped an arm around Emily. "Well, we'll just have to consider this a big adventure." She gave her a squeeze. "We will make the best of it."

"Hello?" a male voice called out. "Help has arrived."

"That must be Pauline's boy." Krista returned to the living room, expecting to find a teenager. But there was a man standing in the open doorway. Tall and sturdy looking, he wore jeans and a flannel shirt and was smiling. "Who are you?" she asked cautiously.

"I'm Conner Harris." His dark eyes brightened as he stuck out his hand. "My mom is Pauline Harris. You just texted me that—"

"Yes, yes." Krista shook his hand. "I'm Krista Galloway. For some reason I thought you'd be a kid. I mean Pauline said her boy would help me and I just assumed you'd—"

“Yes, I’ll always be my mom’s little boy.” He chuckled, then smiled at Emily. “And who is this young lady?”

“I’m Emily Galloway.” She politely extended her hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Emily Galloway.” He nodded toward the front door. “My daughter, Anna, is out there.”

“Is she my size?” Emily’s eyes lit up. She’d been obsessed with the idea of making new friends these past few days.

“Not anymore.” Conner sighed. “Anna’s fourteen now, but it seems like just yesterday she was your size.”

“Fourteen?” Emily’s eyes grew wide. “That’s old.”

“Anyway, we’re here to help.” He smiled at Krista. “Ready to get started?”

“Yes, I’m hoping to get it all unloaded before dark. We don’t have a lot of stuff. But some of it is bulky.”

As they went outside, a slender girl with thick dark hair and brown eyes climbed out of a big white pickup. “This is Anna.” Conner introduced the rest of them. Anna shyly greeted them, staying close to her father. “She might look delicate, but believe me, she’s strong as a horse.”

“You’re pretty.” Emily took Anna’s hand. “I like your tennis shoes.”

Anna glanced down at her red high-topped Converse shoes then smiled. “Thanks. They’re kind of old and beat up, but I like them too.”

“Do you wanna see my room?” Emily asked hopefully.

“Sure.” Anna nodded.

“Good idea,” Conner told Anna. “You go check out the lay of the land, and we’ll put together a plan for unloading.”

Before long, with Conner directing, all four of them were busily carrying furnishings, boxes, and bags into the apartment, trying to get the larger pieces into the right rooms. “It’s a

good thing we don't have too much stuff," Krista told him as the last load came in. "We wouldn't have room for it in this place."

"My mom was sorry she couldn't find you guys better accommodations," Conner said. "But good housing is scarce these days."

"Yes, I understand the town is growing." Krista pushed a strand of golden hair away from her eyes. She could hear the girls chattering in Emily's bedroom. It sounded like Anna was helping Emily make her bed. "That's probably why they decided to hire a city manager."

"I must admit that I'm surprised they hired such a young one." Conner studied her. "Have you had much experience?"

Krista stood up straighter, looking him directly in the eyes and realizing he was nearly a foot taller than her. Just one challenge of being petite. The biggest challenge was being treated like a child by some people. But she was used to it. "Apparently the hiring committee felt my experience was adequate. I went to work for the City of Phoenix straight out of college. After seven years, I was appointed to assist the city manager. I held the assistant position these past three years. And, in case you haven't heard, Phoenix has a population of more than one and a half million. It was a fairly demanding job, but I learned a lot."

"Well, that does sound impressive. I guess Winter Hill was lucky to get you." He looked amused. "And I hope you and Emily are happy here in our little town."

"Dad?" Anna called from Emily's room. "Can they come to the house moving with us?"

"House moving?" Krista frowned. "What's that?"

"We're relocating an old house to a new location," he explained. "It has to be done on a Sunday evening because there's

less traffic.” He checked his watch. “We’re scheduled to start the move in about half an hour. And I need to be there.”

“You’re moving a house?” she asked. “A *whole* house?”

“I’m not actually moving it myself,” he told her. “A moving crew is handling it. I just need to supervise.”

Emily came out, tugging on Krista’s arm. “Can we go see it? Anna said it’s a Christmas House.” Emily looked up with wide-eyed enthusiasm. “Please, Mama. I’ve never seen a Christmas House before.”

“And I’ve never seen anyone move a house before,” Krista admitted. “It sounds like fun.”

“Then let’s go.” Conner pulled out his keys. “I promised Anna we’d swing by Comet’s Drive-In to grab something to eat while we watch. You ladies care to join us for dinner and a show?”

As Emily jumped up and down, squealing with delight, Krista turned to Conner. “It does sound like fun, but I need to turn in the U-Haul truck before they close—”

“That’s right down the street from Comet’s,” he told her. “We can meet up with you there.” He explained that the U-Haul place would already be closed, but that she could park the truck and put the keys into a drop box by the door. “Just follow me and we’ll pick you up there.”

It took less than ten minutes to drop off the truck. Then Krista and Emily climbed into Conner’s big white pickup. “Emily can sit with me.” Anna helped Emily into the back.

“Your truck is awesome,” Emily declared sweetly. “Lots nicer than our moving truck. And it even has a backseat. Your family is lucky.”

As Krista fastened her seat belt, she wondered about Anna’s mother . . . Conner’s wife. She’d discreetly observed the plain

gold band on Conner's left hand. What would Mrs. Harris think of him taking a divorcée and her daughter to "dinner and a show"? Not that this was a date—it certainly was not—but some wives could get rather irate over something like this. Krista had been upset when her husband had stepped out with another woman several years ago. Of course, that was different. This was perfectly innocent. It was silly to even think like that.

As Conner pulled into a brightly lit drive-in restaurant that looked straight out of an old fifties movie, Krista bristled at being reminded of her ex just now. Why give him a second thought? Garth Galloway, currently living a carefree life with his new wife on the other side of the country, didn't deserve that kind of attention.