

  
Hallmark  
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# A Heavenly Christmas

Based on the Hallmark Hall of Fame Movie



Rhonda Merwarth

  
Hallmark  
PUBLISHING  


*A Heavenly Christmas*

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## Chapter One

**E**VE MORGAN SIGHED AS THE Christmas song blaring through her alarm clock pulled her out of a deep sleep. “Wasn’t it just Thanksgiving?” she murmured to herself. The days were passing faster than she’d realized. She changed the station to a financial report program and slid out of bed.

Though it was clearly cold out with a thick layer of snow covering the trees and ground outside her apartment complex, Eve was cozy in her silky gray pajamas. She padded her way across her smooth tile floor and started her day. Shower, dress, makeup, hair: all finished right on time. She had her schedule down to a science, and she prided herself on it.

Her brain was already running down the massive list of things she needed to accomplish that day. New client cold calls, stocks review for existing clients, meetings... It would all get done, and she’d stay as late as it took to ensure that.

When she got into her kitchen, she saw her cat perched on the countertop and shook her head. That doggone cat was so stubborn, refusing to stay on the ground where she kept trying to move him, but oh well. She could indulge him. “Good morning, Forbes,” she said lightly, putting down her cell phone on the granite counter and shifting to the drawer where she stored the cat’s food. “We need to look at your portfolio,” she teased the animal. “I think it’s time to diversify.”

The cat meowed its opinion on the topic. At least her clients showed more enthusiasm for her suggestions. She’d helped them make a lot of money, and they appreciated that—and her.

She slid the bowl across the counter to the cat. “There ya go.” With a smile, she grabbed her phone, taking a peek at the stock app she’d pulled up. “Catnip is trading up, ooh!” Eve grabbed a bottle of water from her stainless steel fridge then added to the cat, “All right, text me if you need me.”

Forbes ignored her teasing comments, focusing on his meal.

Eve stepped out her front door, locking it behind her, then headed to the elevator. Before the doors could shut, her neighbor Ruth slipped in, dressed in what could only be described as a garish green Christmas sweater. Her Yorkie was curled up in her arm, as cozy as a bug. The dog was rather yippy and not that friendly to anyone but Ruth.

“Hello, Eve,” Ruth said with a smile. Her dark skin was glowing with her happy mood, and she hummed under her breath—probably a Christmas song. The woman had been singing them since early November.

“Hey, Ruth.” She could see the red and green lights on the sweater blinking in the elevator door reflection. “Wow, that is some sweater,” she said as tactfully as possible.

“Well, thanks!” She could hear the perkiness in Ruth’s voice. Her neighbor loved the holidays and was always inviting Eve to participate in this or that Christmas celebration in her apartment next door. Eve always declined, not really one for parties—or holidays, to be truthful. Thankfully, the walls were thick enough that she barely heard the ruckus. “I could pick you up one. There are quite a few left.”

Oh, heavens no, Eve thought with a mental shudder. Totally not her style. She replied to a client’s text, confirming their upcoming meeting time later today. “That’s okay,” she said to Ruth in what she hoped was a non-horrified tone. “I think that is a one-sweater-per-building sweater.”

She stepped out onto the sidewalk and made her way to her office, scrolling through her phone at her emails. Her heels clacked solidly on the concrete. The morning air was crisp. It felt like winter even though it was technically still a few days away. Christmas decorations covered all of downtown Chicago in preparation for the

holiday festivities. People were bundled up in their warmest gear as she strolled past them, barely glancing up from her phone.

Her brain was already whirring with the day's tasks and the potential clients she wanted to reach out to. One in particular would be a sweet success to acquire. She dug up his office number and dialed him, mentally prepping herself and getting into saleswoman mode.

But it didn't matter. The client was already on vacation for the holidays, diving in the Caymans. Fighting back her surprise and disappointment, she left a message asking him to call her back when he returned to work.

A Santa ringing a bell caught her attention for a moment, and she grabbed a few bucks from her pocket, dropping them into the Santa's cup. There, her good deed for the day. She dialed the next call in line.

As she entered her building and walked back to her office, she continued chatting on the phone with her current client, briefly noting that the office was decorated for the holidays, too. Bright lights were strung across cubicles, along with sparkling garland and wreaths filling every visible surface. Well, not in her office—she didn't have time for such things. Her apartment wasn't decorated, either.

Why bother when you were just going to take it down a couple of weeks later? It seemed like a waste of time.

Eve ended the call, tucked her phone into her pocket, and went to the coffee station, greeting her coworker Carter as he prepared a fresh, steaming cup of java for himself. The thick smell filled her nose, and she could almost taste the concoction.

"Coming to the party tomorrow?" he asked, pouring a dollop of creamer into his holiday mug.

She chose a plain one for herself and grabbed the coffee decanter. "What party?"

He looked over at her in disbelief. "The...office Christmas party."

"Oh. Right." Yet again, she realized how fast December was flying by—and how much work she still had to get done before the end of the year to meet her personal goals. These Christmas events took up important business hours when she could be doing more for the

company. Who had time for those kinds of distractions? She poured her coffee mug to almost full.

“Tell me you’re not working,” he said.

This was their typical conversation every holiday season—okay, not just Christmas time. The company liked to throw parties for everything, and she never went to any of them. “Well, while you’re drinking egg nog, I’m going to be improving our bottom line,” she tossed over her shoulder as she headed toward her office, clutching her mug.

“I remember being like you once,” he said lightly.

“Mm-hmm,” she said with a smile. Carter teased her, but he knew her dedication was to Crestlane Financial, to getting things done and making the company prosper. And she was a success at that.

The morning passed in a fury of calls. As a financial consultant, Eve excelled at her job. She kept detailed notes of personal information about her existing clients, and potential clients, to make them feel important. Small things like that could make a difference. She kicked up her heels on her desk and rang up a potential client she’d been wooing, chatting with him for a few minutes. She asked about his daughter and her dressage lessons.

“Yes, of course I remember,” she said, chuckling at his disbelief over her recalling something so minute. Okay, enough chitchat. Time to get down to brass tacks and make this happen. She plopped her feet down on the ground and straightened her spine. “Look, I am just gonna say it and let the chips fall where they may.” A hooky line she’d perfected over the years that worked wonders on clients she was pursuing. “Apex East is a solid firm. But what are they doing for you, three percent?” She paused then dropped her bombshell. “I can double it.”

There was a moment of silence, then he said in his rumbling voice, “Okay, I’m interested in hearing your spiel. Let’s get together soon.”

A warmth filled her chest. She had him! “Drinks tonight?” she said with a smile, then her grin got bigger when he agreed. “Yes, of course, très bien! I’ll have my assistant set it up.”

“Fantastic,” he replied.

“Okay. Bye!” She couldn’t hold back her giddiness now. This was

going to be a good catch for them. Fontaine Fowler was a reputable pharmaceuticals company, and taking them from Apex East would be a solid victory.

Her assistant, Liz, came through the glass door and paused. “You bought a tree?” she asked in shock, staring with large brown eyes at the scrawny, plastic green tree sitting against Eve’s far wall.

“A client gift,” Eve corrected.

“What color is that?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Celery?” Anyway, enough of that nonsense. Eve couldn’t keep the pride out of her voice as she said, “We need to set up and print a new client signature pack because I’m going to sign Fontaine Fowler.”

“That’s fantastic!” her assistant declared, beaming. “I thought they were with Apex East?”

“Yeah, but not for long,” she said in a singsong voice, getting out of her chair.

Liz clutched a pack of folders to her chest. “That’s why you’re my idol.”

She knew the woman admired her, but hearing words of affirmation along that vein gave her a flush of pleasure. Eve had fought hard to get where she was, and it made her feel good to have her successes recognized by those around her.

“I’m going to sign one new client before the new year, and I’m going to beat out Carter for that partnership.” This was finally hers, the goal she’d worked long hours day after day for. Victory was on the horizon, and her dreams were about to come true.

Not that she would be content to sit back and rest. No, after she became partner, she had big ideas to help the company be even more aggressive in finding new clients and maintaining their existing ones. Eve lived and breathed her job.

Leaning over to check something on her computer, she instructed her assistant to book a table for the City Club at six and to note that she had a conference call at twelve-thirty with Gibson so she’d get him on the line.

“Conflict,” the assistant said plainly. “You have lunch with your brother today.”

Eve closed her eyes and groaned. Crud. “That’s today?” Apparently,

the refrain for the day was going to be about how fast time was flying and how she couldn't squeeze in non-work distractions—not when there was so much to do before the end of the year. Every second counted. The pressure of looming deadlines made her chest tighten.

Seeming to predict her next thought, Liz added, “And you told me to not let you cancel again since you have three times already.”

Eve shook her head, scrambling to figure out a plan to squeeze it in and still make her meeting. “You know what? We'll book the conference room for noon. That way, I can have half an hour and catch up with him.”

“Okay,” Liz said briskly.

“Thank you!” she hollered as her assistant left.

A half hour would suffice. Her brother would understand. This really was a crazy time of year for them. He knew how it went—she'd explained it to him enough, anyway. Eve pushed the thoughts from her mind and focused on the rest of her morning tasks. Emails had to be answered, and they'd wait for no one.

“Hey!” Eve said cheerily as she walked into the glass-walled conference room. Her brother, Tyler, and his two sons were there waiting on her. “I didn't know you were bringing the boys!” She waved them toward her and gave them big hugs. “What a great surprise!”

“We wanted to make sure you're real,” Caleb, the oldest boy, said.

Her brother laughed at the flippant comment.

“Where were you hiding?” Bobby, the younger, asked, peering up at her.

“Hey,” Tyler said in a sterner tone, clenching the boy's shoulders. “Manners.”

All right, the comments from the boys stung her a bit; her smile wavered. She fought off the flare of negative emotion and said lightly, in an effort to change the subject, “Hmm. Okay, so big question. What do you want for Christmas?”

“You already gave us something,” Bobby said.

“What?” She frowned. She hadn't done any holiday shopping yet; she never had the time.

Not that she did it—Liz helped out with those things. But

she liked to give Liz the ideas for gifts, and that had to count for something.

“A company fruit basket.” Bobby’s voice was flat.

She winced. Big, big fail. She loved her nephews and couldn’t believe she’d done something so bone-headed. How had that happened? Lines must have gotten crossed somehow. She’d have to pull Liz aside and see where things went wrong. “Oh. Okay, so uh, what do you think about...bikes?”

The boys gasped and yelled in unison, “Bikes? That’s awesome!”

At their pleased expressions, some of her guilt faded. She’d make it up to them. This year’s present would blow it out of the water.

“That’s...that’s too much,” her brother protested.

“No, it’s fine!” she said, patting his arm to try to convince him. The more she thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Bikes were the perfect gifts for the boys—they loved being outside whenever the weather was good. At least, that was what her brother had told her, anyway. “It’s for Christmas. It only comes once a year. Thank goodness,” she added under her breath. “Come on,” she said to her nephews, guiding them toward the table. “Look what I got for you. Let’s have some cookies. Yum-yum.”

As she poured them drinks, she apologized to Tyler about the change in lunch plans, explaining she had a conference call she couldn’t move.

“Please tell me you’re still coming for Christmas,” Tyler said instead, not addressing her apology.

Eve froze for a moment.

“Sherry’s making your favorite. It’s the, uh, special green beans,” he continued.

Eve grimaced and purposely didn’t look at her brother. That familiar guilt came back, hot and heavy and sitting in a lump in her stomach. Every year, he nagged her about coming to the house, and she often did. Why, she was just there last...no wait, was it two years ago? Maybe three? Anyway, it was pretty recently.

Her brother thrust his hands into his pockets, disbelief ringing in his voice as he scoffed. He always could read her. “It’s Oak Park. It’s a half-hour cab ride.”

She finally turned to him, shaking her head with regret. She had to make him understand. “But I’m just so busy.”

Tyler sighed. “Eve...”

“I’m about to make partner,” she emphasized as she poured herself some coffee. The boys were chatting at the table about what cookies they wanted to try. “I mean, I’m this close. You know, Chris Lane hasn’t even nominated someone for partner in ten years.” She was going to be the one nominated. Then Tyler would support her in this.

Tyler sipped his own coffee and gave her a cursory glance. “That’s great, sis.” His voice was chilly.

She hated letting him down, having their old, familiar argument crop back up again. The one where he called her a workaholic and she protested that she wasn’t, that she was just as passionate about her work as he was about his family. “But?”

He sighed again. “Look. I know we didn’t have a lot when we were kids, but we had each other.”

She rolled her eyes. Here it comes. So predictable. Tyler didn’t understand her drive, never had. And to bring their past into it? Okay, yeah, their family had always been tight on money. So?

“Now you’re working all the time,” he continued. “I mean, what about the rest of your life?” He waved in the direction of her nephews, the gesture saying more than words could.

She didn’t have a family of her own. Not like he did.

“I’ll get to it,” she protested. And she would. On her schedule, not because people were pressuring her. She wasn’t like Tyler, who lived for his kids and wife and didn’t have bigger aspirations for himself. She wanted more. At least, for right now. There would be time later for all of that stuff—the house and kids and white picket fence.

“When?” His voice warmed up with the strength of his convictions. “You never see your family. You put all your relationships on the back burner.”

“No, that’s not true,” she lobbed back. Irritation at his words festered in her. And she did see her family, when she could. Truth be told, maybe it wasn’t as much as they wanted her to, but she made the effort.

“Really? When was the last time you let anyone in?” Tyler took a sip of his coffee.

Ugh, and here we go, she thought with a wry smile. Moving on to the fact that she didn’t have a significant other. The argument pattern was as familiar as it was tiring.

“Well...actually, I have a relationship,” she declared, putting her mug on the table. Time to end this argument. She wanted to enjoy their remaining minutes together, not bicker. “My relationship is a long-distance relationship, because...my boyfriend is in the future.” She slugged his upper arm, and he groaned, but a peek of a smile warmed his face.

Tension leaked from her shoulders, and she relaxed. Crisis averted. She knew the topic wasn’t dropped, and he’d be back to poking at her about it soon enough. But for now, she could just enjoy their company.

“Eve,” Liz said, entering the room. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Yes,” she said, spinning to face her assistant. “Definitely. But first, go get my nephews some bikes.”

Liz just eyed her, and Tyler gave a heavy sigh.

“Eve,” he started, but she waved Liz away to go on her errand.

“They’re going to love them,” Eve assured her brother when the woman left. See? She could do this—have family time and do some personal shopping. She’d picked out the gift idea on her own. What did it matter who bought it?

Wasn’t he always telling her it was the thought that counted?

The rest of the day flew by in a flurry of meetings, and before Eve knew it, it was time to meet the doctor for drinks. She shut down her computer and exited her office. The whole building was dark. When had everyone left? She’d been too busy to notice.

“Taxi!” Eve hollered with a frantic wave as she stepped out of the building into the bitter-cold night, striding across the snow-sloshed sidewalk toward the street. One cab slowed down, so she rushed across the asphalt to catch it.

Only to have a man reach for the door handle at the same time.

“Oh, sorry,” she said to him on reflex, pulling back.

“Sorry,” he echoed and did the same.

Taking his apology as affirmation that the cab was hers, she reached for the handle again—at the same time he did.

She eyed him. Snow coated his thick black hair and dotted his eyelashes. He was striking with a strong jaw and piercing, dark eyes. Still, she didn't have time for this. "I was here first."

"Well, I'm pretty sure we were here at the same time," he answered smoothly. His voice was warm and rumbling. After a moment, he said, "Uh, are you going north?"

She nodded. "Yeah, north side."

He smiled, and the gesture made her stomach flip for some odd reason. "Me, too. Wanna share?"

She glanced down for a moment, pondering it, then shrugged. "Okay." Why not? She could be magnanimous. So long as she made her meeting on time.

They got in and rode down the street, him tucking a guitar case between his legs, resting the bottom on the floor. She flipped through her email notifications on her phone and made brief, idle chitchat with the stranger. But the Christmas music playing was irritating and distracting. She asked the driver to change the station.

"You don't like Christmas music?" the guy beside her said.

She snorted. "Oh, it goes on and on and on." And every Christmas season, all the stations were inundated with it. Nonstop. How was no one else but her burned out on hearing it so much? Ugh.

He started to sing a Christmas song, and she side-eyed him. He stopped.

"Partridges in trees," she said, leaning toward him and waving a hand. "What do those words even mean?"

"I'm pretty sure they're called 'lyrics,'" he said evenly. Funny guy.

"But...they're non-migratory birds. If they did make a nest, it wouldn't even be in a pear tree." The stranger didn't say anything, just stared at her. Whatever. She knew she had a rational point.

When she realized they were close to Madison, she directed the taxi driver to turn onto it.

Funny Guy quickly protested that they should stay on this road because of traffic.

"Yeah, but my stop is first," she retorted.

He tightened his arms around his chest, eyeing her. “Well, you’re going to make me late.”

“You’re going to make me late for a very important meeting.” She tried to maintain her patience even though frustration was welling in her at his presumption. First, he’d tried to take her cab, and now he was going to possibly ruin her drinks with her hopeful client.

No way. So much was riding on this.

“Life-or-death important?” he asked her, brows raised, clearly not believing it was.

“Actually, yes.” Her words were firm. She knew this was more important than whatever he was doing. Some kind of open-mic night thing? It could wait.

“Okay,” he murmured, giving in.

Thank heavens. She returned her attention back to the driver and instructed him to turn right.

Into a thick batch of traffic.

“Aaaand jingle all the way,” her ride partner said flatly.

She sighed. Crud. No way could she wait in this traffic. She’d never make it in time. “Well, I’m going to walk.” She grabbed a handful of cash and handed it to the driver. “Here. Thank you. Um, good luck with your...guitar thing,” she said to the passenger.

“Happy holidays,” he told her with a slight wave of one hand.

When the woman exited the cab, Max Wingford told the driver, “Um, you can turn the music back on.”

What an odd encounter. Yes, it had left him a touch bristly over being left in terrible traffic...but he was also curious about who the mysterious woman was. Who argued logistics about Christmas songs? Strange, cab-commanding women, he supposed. Ah, well. Time to focus and get his head in the game. His audition needed all of his attention. And he knew Lauren would be grilling him about it tomorrow when she returned from her sleepover at her grandparents’. He didn’t want to let her down.

Max finally arrived at the auditorium and stared at the marquee declaring auditions tonight for the Christmas Eve concert being held there. No one seemed to be entering or exiting the building, but he was pretty sure that, even though he was late, he could probably slip

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in. His guitar case, as heavy as a rock, rested against his back, his hands shaking as he clenched the strap.

Passersby wandered down the sidewalk in the thickening snow, and he stood there for a moment, willing himself to go in. He could do this. Yeah, it had been a long time, and yeah, he was solo now. And okay, he was pretty out of practice, and his original songs weren't all that great anymore without his sister's help...

He couldn't do this. Couldn't make himself step inside. His feet felt glued down, his heart frozen behind his ribcage.

His throat was tight as he turned and walked down the sidewalk. Away from the audition.

It was probably better this way.



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