



CATHRYN PARRY

CHRISTMAS
AT PRESCOTT
INN



MILLS & BOON
Heartwarming

Cathryn Parry

Christmas At Prescott Inn

Аннотация

She's back in his life...But will they end up under the mistletoe? Emilie O'Shea and her figure-skating troupe find themselves homeless...until a Christmas miracle lands them at a quaint inn in New Hampshire. Emilie is excited—then she discovers the inn's Scrooge-like owner is her ex-fiancé, Nathan Prescott. With help from a little boy, an adorable cat and her skaters, Emilie helps Nathan find hope in the season...and hope in their future



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Emilie O'Shea and her figure-skating troupe find themselves homeless...until a Christmas miracle lands them at a quaint inn in New Hampshire. Emilie is excited—then she discovers the inn's scrooge-like owner is her ex-fiancé, Nathan Prescott. With assistance from a little boy, an adorable cat and her skaters, Emilie helps Nathan find hope in the season...and hope in their future.

Cathryn Parry writes contemporary romance from her home in Massachusetts. Her Mills & Boon novels have received such honors as a Booksellers' Best Award, HOLT Medallion Awards of Merit and several Readers' Choice Award nominations. In her free time, she loves figure skating, planning as many vacations as possible and pursuing her genealogy hobby. For more information about upcoming releases and to sign up for a new-book-alert email, please visit her website at cathrynparry.com.

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Christmas at Prescott Inn

Cathryn Parry

MILLS & BOON

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She gazed at him softly, shaking her head. “Nathan, what’s become of you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve turned cold.”

Had he? Well, she didn’t know what had been going on with

him since they'd parted, either in his life or in his heart.

There was so much he couldn't tell her. About his inn failing, about the fact that his finances were on the ropes, about the feelings he still carried for her...

"I was concerned," he admitted, "when I saw on the news that your cruise ship had hit a reef. In fact, I checked my phone that day to see if you'd called me."

Shoot. He hadn't wanted to admit that.

"I thought of you that day, too," she said softly.

She had?

"Thank you for your thoughts," she continued. "But the best you can do for me is to help us be successful with our show. Come on, Nathan, it's Christmas. Think about the kids."

He was thinking about the kids. She had no idea.

[Dear Reader,](#)

Welcome to Christmas in New England!

For my first Heartwarming novel I wanted to write a holiday story about hope, healing and second chances at love.

Emilie O'Shea is a professional figure skater who's left homeless just before Christmas. Concerned about the young cast of international performers in her care, Emilie takes the only offer of employment she can find: travel to wintry New Hampshire to present their holiday spectacle at a resort in the mountains. The catch? The resort is owned by Nathan Prescott, the man who broke her heart two Christmases ago.

Nathan Prescott has put his unlikely romance with Emilie

behind him. Nathan, a consulting accountant, never expected to fall for a free-spirited performer with few family roots. He shouldn't have been surprised when she refused to accompany him home when his life's goal finally came to fruition: he was able to buy back Prescott Inn, the resort founded by his grandfather.

But the hotel has too many empty rooms this holiday season, and finances are tight. Nathan's cost-cutting endeavors have earned him the nickname Mr. Scrooge. Only Emilie seems to be able to lighten his heart, even as her figure-skating troupe upends his staid plans and breathes life into his world again.

Can he prove to her that she's worth more than his business to him? Dare he hope that this time, she'll choose to stay?

Enjoy the show!

All the best,

Cathryn Parry

To Otis, who sat with me through every book, every late-night session, every sunny afternoon on the back porch.

You were a very special cat, and a true member of our family. You'll be forever missed.

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EXCERPT FROM *FAMILY BY DESIGN* BY CALLIE

ENDICOTT

CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTMAS ARRIVED AT Prescott Inn the day after

Thanksgiving.

Nathan Prescott stepped into the lobby just in time to see two workers erecting a large blue spruce tree. The sharp smell of pine needles wafted to his nose. The annoyingly upbeat jingle of seasonal music—Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas”—met his ears.

Nathan frowned. He didn’t mind if Christmas never came this year.

The inn’s rooms weren’t filling up. Expenses were excessive. He was worried about his investors’ meeting tomorrow and what they would decide. They’d already threatened once to shut down his line of credit.

Nothing could be worse than that.

Gloom descended over his heart.

“A cup of warm spiced cider, Mr. Prescott?” His front desk clerk held out a mug that steamed with the scent of apple and cinnamon. She gave him a tentative smile.

Nathan just shook his head and continued walking toward his office.

As he strode past the stone fireplace, the commotion of tree-decorating and decking-the-halls continued around him unabated. He scowled as a worker brought in a crate of red poinsettia plants.

More money spent—expenses his investors expected him to be cutting. But as he opened his mouth to refuse the delivery, a movement behind the lobby couch caught his eye.

Nathan paused. A dark-haired boy, about six or seven years old, popped up his head. A look of terror appeared in his hazel eyes.

He recognized the boy as one of the kids from the homeless shelter. During the winter months, Nathan housed some families with young children from the shelter. This particular boy had moved in with his mother the week before Thanksgiving. His mother never seemed to be around—working, Nathan supposed. He'd noticed the boy because he always seemed interested in what was happening around the inn.

As I was at his age, Nathan thought.

Nathan should have kept walking. But the small portrait of his grandfather, Philip Prescott, seemed to wink down at him and ask him to stay.

The boy flushed and pointed to a round, red Christmas ornament. "It fell down," he stammered to Nathan, retrieving the delicate antique and carefully placing its metal hook around a sturdy branch of the spruce tree, cut down from a forest on the mountain. Both Nathan and the boy stared at the partially decorated tree. It still needed lights. And a star for the top, but the decorators would get to that.

Nathan balled his fists in his pocket. The kid seemed so lonely, always hanging around by himself and watching whatever activity was going on in the lobby. "You like Christmas?" Nathan asked gruffly.

The boy dipped his head, but he nodded. There was a short

silence between them.

“Well...” Nathan wasn’t great with kids. And he was usually so busy doing the best he could for his employees and for the shelter families, which to his mind meant putting a roof over their heads and food on the table.

“Where are the stockings?” the boy suddenly asked. He stared directly at Nathan.

“Ah...”

The boy glanced at the stone fireplace, the centerpiece of the inn’s lobby. “The stockings,” he repeated. “For Santa Claus.”

Nathan’s heart sank. The boy still believed in Santa. He was so young. Nathan couldn’t bear to see the kid’s heart get crushed with the truth. “Well, those don’t go up until Christmas Eve.” Nathan coughed, remembering his own childhood here, and added, “That’s the tradition at Prescott Inn.” He nodded to his grandfather’s portrait.

The boy chewed his lip, looking thoughtful. “Is there an extra one I can borrow?” he asked in a small voice. “We didn’t bring our Christmas things with us.”

Nathan’s heart was in his throat. He waited for more from the boy, but he just gazed at Nathan with his huge brown eyes.

The boy’s situation reminded Nathan so much of his own childhood—of himself and his sister as children—left alone by their parents and living here in Prescott Inn, which was still owned in those days by their grandfather. Nathan’s grandfather had been the person who’d given them stability. A place to set

down roots. A refuge amid all the confusion.

“I’ll get you a stocking,” Nathan promised. “With your name on it.”

“Jason,” the boy said.

Nathan nodded. “Jason,” he repeated.

Jason smiled and then darted over to the crate of multicolored ornaments. Nathan realized that they’d made a deal, the two of them. And now he had to honor it.

More cuts. I can think of more cuts to make. More ways to slash the budget and increase revenue for the holiday season.

Head down, Nathan changed course away from his office and descended the stairs that led to the newly designed breakfast lounge. Yes, they’d paid entirely too much money for this renovation, but that was water under the bridge. Right now, the important thing was to prepare an action plan for tomorrow’s meeting.

Nathan pushed through the swinging doors to the kitchen. One of the waitresses jerked her head up and glanced at him with a worried expression.

“Have you seen Nell?” he asked. Nell was his marketing manager. Actually, she was his niece. Just a dozen years his junior—Nathan’s sister, his only sibling, was eight years older than Nathan—Nell was fresh out of college. But she was the best he could afford for the inn on a shoestring budget. And he had an important job that he needed Nell to do.

“No, sir. I haven’t seen her.” The waitress smiled wanly at him

and nodded before hurrying off.

Nathan glanced around at the empty dining room and buffet area.

The chef wasn't at his station. Neither was the under-chef.

Nell, who usually met him each morning to sit down and review the front desk reports, wasn't present, either.

"Hello!" he called out. He had a right to be upset. Was he the only one concerned about keeping the inn up and running?

Two years ago, it had been a miracle when he'd managed to assemble a group of investors to buy the sprawling resort complex at auction. The previous owner had bought it from Nathan's father after he'd squandered his inheritance. Between the two of them, they'd run the place into the ground.

Prescott was Nathan's family name. Prescott Inn had been started by his grandfather. Nathan had a lot of work ahead to bring it back to the stable business that it was in his grandfather's day. But first he had to keep it open through Christmas.

"Hello?" he called once more.

No one answered him.

Was something wrong?

Cocking his ear, he pushed open the kitchen door and heard the telltale sound of a television news show coming from the direction of the bar. Following the trail, Nathan headed past the near-empty breakfast lounge and walked into the bar alcove beside the lower-level portion of the great stone fireplace. There was a slight chill in late November, but he'd told the staff to wait

before ordering the wood for the fireplace, as the price of wood was astronomical.

There was his kitchen staff, standing around the wall-mounted television set intended for guests. The morning chef, the morning under-chef, and one of his waitresses.

And Nell.

“What’s going on?” he asked quietly.

“Oh!” Nell started. The two chefs in their clogs and white uniforms cast their eyes down sheepishly and quickly headed back toward the kitchen.

“Look what’s happened, Uncle Nathan,” Nell said, pointing at the television. “It’s a real disaster!”

“No, *this* is the disaster.” Nathan crossed his arms. “Our inn. By the way, how is your marketing assignment going? It’s almost Christmas and we have to figure out how to fill the rooms for the holiday. The investors are going to ask me tomorrow for specifics, and I want to give them some results from the plan we discussed.”

Nell stared at him as if not comprehending. Then she turned back to the television. “Didn’t you work on a cruise ship once, Uncle?”

“A... *Why?*” Blinking, Nathan followed her gaze. On the television screen, he saw what appeared to be a bird’s-eye view of a large ship lying tilted at an angle—half sunk—in a postcard-perfect, azure-blue sea.

He blinked in disbelief. “Is that a *cruise* ship?”

“Yes, it is. Last night it hit a reef in the Caribbean and flooded. They had to evacuate almost eight thousand people in the darkness. Can you imagine? It’s horrible. All those people facing that trauma.”

Emilie! Does she still work on a cruise ship?

He swallowed, staring at the television screen. Nothing seemed to be happening now, from what he could see. “Is everyone safely off?”

Nell tilted her head at him. “They think so, but they’re not sure. What was the name of the ship you were on, Uncle? You were on one for several months, right?”

Yes, he’d been a staff accountant on the *Empress Caribbean*. But it had been longer than several months—just over a year. “Doesn’t matter,” he murmured. He’d left that job two Christmases ago, when he’d bought Prescott Inn. He rarely spoke of his onboard experience to anyone.

“What ship is that?” he asked Nell, gesturing toward the television. He squinted at the screen, but the shot from the news station’s helicopter was too far away for him to see the name on the side. But the red-and-blue logo looked awfully familiar.

“Um, they said it’s the *Empress Caribbean*. What’s wrong?” Nell blinked and then stepped toward him. He must have gone pale. He certainly felt light-headed. “Oh, Uncle. Is *that* where you worked? The *Empress Caribbean*?”

He dragged in a breath, not wanting to answer her.

He swallowed instead, staring at the television screen. *What if*

Emilie still works on board? Fear coursed through his blood.

A Coast Guard ship was parked near the vessel. His mind flashed back to the safety drills he'd practiced with the crew and passengers. One per week. Nathan hadn't technically been part of the crew—his job had been to prepare a report on how the company could cut onboard costs. Ironic, considering the situation he found himself in now.

A newscaster in the background droned on about the specifications of the ship. Year launched, tonnage, number of crew, passenger capacity. Nathan could have recited all that himself.

“When will they know if everyone got off all right?” he asked Nell.

“They didn't say.” Nell stared at him in curiosity. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine.” His stomach felt as if it was turning inside out as he took out his phone to check his messages.

Nothing. No calls or texts.

Emilie's contact number was still in his phone, but she hadn't called him. She'd never called him in the two years since he'd left the ship. He didn't even know why he kept her name in his phone.

She'd left *him*, and it had been years since he'd last seen her. Ironically, again, she'd accused him of choosing the inn over her.

She'd been wrong. And it had hurt.

He swallowed, not wanting to think about those days. There was no reason to expect she would ever call him again, even in

an emergency. He needed to focus on his inn's survival, which should be his top concern.

"Uncle," Nell said gently. "They're reporting that, so far, there are no major casualties."

"That's a relief."

"Are you *sure* you don't have any friends there?"

He stiffened. He'd purposely never spoken of the year he'd spent at sea as an accountant—never mind the show skater he'd fallen in love with and had wanted to marry.

It had been insanity on his part, and he was no longer insane.

Two curious faces stared back at him—Nell's and the waitress's. Nathan just shook his head at them. "No. That wasn't my ship."

Still, he was irritated with himself for opening this can of worms with his staff in the first place. Wishing to deflect any further questions, he asked sharply, "Nell, I'd like that update on the competitive analysis of other resorts I asked for. How far have you progressed?"

"Um..." Nell said. "About that..."

"Please take more initiative," he instructed her, disliking that he was speaking so brusquely. But since Nell had no information for him, he would have to fudge those details at tomorrow's investors' meeting. "You and I will discuss this further tomorrow after my meeting. Clear?"

Nell visibly sighed at him. But she nodded.

A pang went through him. She looked so much like his sister.

He wanted to be good to her, but he was helping her the only way he knew how. He'd reopened Prescott Inn and had given her a job when she hadn't any prospects.

That was how he could help people. Through business. Nathan took care of business.

Even if he didn't seem to be doing such a great job of it at the moment.

Without a word, he turned and walked back through the empty dining room and toward his private office, which was on the second floor of the lodge, overlooking the lobby.

Usually, numbers were his friends. But of late, they didn't have anything positive to say to him. He knew before he even checked them what tale they would tell.

His business was in the red. It was bleeding money. And for the first time in his life, he couldn't seem to stanch it.

I can't fail, he reminded himself, the sweat breaking out on his forehead even though the room was still cold.

He put his head in his hands as his mind flashed backed to the kid. Jason.

Nathan might not be able to give him long-term security, but if Nathan could just keep the inn open long enough to provide refuge for the boy through Christmas, then maybe he wouldn't feel like he had failed.

He'd been so proud when Prescott Inn had first reopened. The local newspaper had compared Nathan to his grandfather, Philip Prescott, and touted the renewed hope Nathan was bringing to

their depressed mountain town. Nathan had believed he could do that. After all, he'd had a successful career advising companies on how to cut costs and balance their books.

Now Nathan had to live up to the promises he'd given everyone two years ago. He had to figure out a story to sell to his investors to keep the money coming in, and before tomorrow's meeting, in order to turn this disaster around.

As for Emilie...well, he shouldn't worry about her. He had no reason to believe that she still sailed aboard the *Empress Caribbean*. She could have left that job and gone anywhere.

She wouldn't be thinking of him, that was for certain. She'd made that much clear the last time they had spoken.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO THOUSAND MILES south of Nathan, on a small island in the Caribbean Sea, Emilie O'Shea hurried across the beach, toward the medical station.

Streaks of orange ran across a beautiful azure sky as morning broke over the horizon.

Nature's beauty contrasted sharply with the semiorganized chaos on the tropical island, where ship's officers and crew from the *Empress Caribbean* had led the passengers after the evacuation. The ship was now disabled, lying on its side about a mile offshore.

Emilie had spent ten years living on Empress Cruise Line's ships, and she'd never heard of such a thing happening, to any of the company's vessels. The whole night had felt surreal.

Since they'd landed on the beach ten hours ago, the ship's crew had been herding the passengers, group by group, to boats ferrying them to an adjoining island, which had an airport. Emilie and her troupe of nine other figure skaters had been part of that process, but thankfully Emilie had been able to send the troupe for a much-needed break to a gym across the island, where they were bedded down in cots.

But Emilie herself couldn't rest yet. Hurrying across the open beach, the morning sand cool on her feet, she found the doctor's tent. Dr. David was on duty. Emilie knew him because there was always a member of the medical staff stationed backstage during their figure skating shows, just as a precaution.

At the moment, Dr. David seemed to be finishing up splinting a child's sprained wrist. Emilie waited until the child and her parents had departed and Dr. David motioned her inside the tent.

"I never thought I'd see the day," he murmured, shaking his head. "We're actually shipwrecked!"

"At least everybody's safe and accounted for." She shivered, thinking of all the passengers who'd been in the skating rink when the alarm had sounded. Luckily, they'd all escaped safely. The skaters in her troupe were safe, too, and that's what Emilie felt most responsible for. She got to the point of her visit and pulled out her phone. "I'm here because I'm worried about Katya. She fell when the ship hit the sandbar, and I want to show you the footage."

"I already checked her shoulder, Emilie," Dr. David said

gently. “She’ll have a big bruise, but as long as she takes care of it with ice and rest, Katya will be fine in a few days.”

Emilie had thought so, too, but... “Now she’s complaining about a really bad headache. She said it hurt too much to walk over with me to see you. What if she struck her head when she fell?”

Dr. David gave her a look of concern. “When did the headache start?”

“About an hour ago. I asked her if she hit her head, but she says she can’t remember.” Emilie took a breath. Katya seemed so fragile and distraught that it was scaring Emilie. “I have a video from last night’s performance, but it was so dark inside the ice theater, I can’t really tell what happened to Katya. I’d like you to look at it, if you don’t mind. And maybe you could come to the gym and check on her again?”

Dr. David held out his hand for the phone. “Let me see the video.” He eyed Emilie curiously. “Where did you get the footage, anyway? I thought no one was supposed to tape the shows.”

“I got it from a passenger,” she admitted. “And no, they’re not supposed to tape our shows. But when the guy showed it to me, I wheedled a copy from him.”

Dr. David laughed. “You’re always the charmer where the passengers are concerned,” he teased. He knew she had a large email list of former audience members who followed her upbeat online blog postings.

Unfortunately, that would have to be curtailed, at least until she got another laptop. Hers was currently underwater, along with all her other things.

Clothes, photos, memorabilia...and a certain gold necklace.

Emilie blinked away the moisture in her eyes. *Stay positive*, she chided herself. She brought up the video on her phone—thankfully *that* had been collected by one of her quick-thinking skaters—and settled beside Dr. David to view the scene once again.

The recording was shaky and also dark because the house lights were down. Taken by an audience member, it showed the tops of people's heads mostly. They'd had a full show last night—every seat on three sides of the rectangular ice stage had been filled. The ice surface, just one third the size of the indoor rink Emilie had skated on during her childhood in Florida, was lit with colorful spotlights, moving fast over the ice. A theatrical fog machine gave the appearance that the skaters were stepping from a festive holiday dream.

Emilie fast-forwarded the video to the end of the second number of the troupe's new Christmas spectacular. It was a high-energy number involving all the members of her company—five males and five females. The troupe consisted of two pairs teams, an ice dance team, two mixed singles skaters who sometimes paired off for dance numbers, plus two more spotlight soloists.

Watching them perform the familiar choreography, Emilie felt a quick burst of pride. They'd been hitting all their marks in

the new show. The transitions had been moving smoothly, and up to that point, the performance had been going off without a hitch.

Gasps of awe went up from the audience as the show segued to a solo from Katya and her partner, Sergei—the star pairs team originally from Russia. They entered the ice with a majestic lift and throw.

At that moment, Emilie had been helping Julie, her champion singles skater, change from her snowflake headdress and into the costume for her next number. But she couldn't help pausing to watch the pairs team, peeking through the curtains to check that all was well with the new number, the first time Katya and Sergei had ever performed it live.

Emilie was the group's ice captain. At twenty-eight, she was the ancient member of the troupe, affectionately nicknamed the "Ice Mom," because she took care of the others. She considered the role a privilege. Along with skating in the shows, she was also the liaison with the ship's production manager and the skaters' production company, who employed them. But Emilie took her duties even further than that. She considered the troupe her own little family, and did whatever she could to make them happy.

Last night, all the skaters had been nervous because it was their first time performing the show in front of an audience. They were the only troupe in the fleet performing this particular number, and Emilie was on the line for its success.

She'd been eager for the opportunity to prove herself. Performers on cruise ships were usually required to retire by

their early thirties, so Emilie had to think about her next steps. She hoped to be hired as a choreographer by the production company that put together the shows for the cruise line. And if her troupe succeeded, so would she. If they didn't...well, the business was cutthroat. There were extremely few openings for choreographers.

And until the accident, the audience had been loving the show. There'd been lots of kids present, which was always great. Their enthusiasm fed Emilie. If not for the pleasure she gave to the audience, she probably would never have picked skating as her career. The audience *had* to be happy.

Squinting at the screen, Emilie focused on Katya. The petite pairs skater with the intricate blond braids looked the part of the ice princess she was playing. Delicately, Katya stepped into a spin.

"There! Stop the video!" Emilie said. She jabbed her finger at the screen of her phone, but she wasn't quick enough—Dr. David moved the phone away from her.

"Not yet, I want to see this," he said.

On the video, the ship shuddered and gasps rang out from the audience.

Katya tumbled from her spin, and before Sergei could catch her, she slammed sideways into the boards.

Dr. David paused the video and then backed it up, moving it forward in slow motion. "Katya doesn't hit her head," he murmured. "See? No part of her head ever touches a hard

surface. Maybe she experienced some whiplash, though. Are her pupils dilated?”

“No,” Emilie answered, thinking back to her own examination of Katya. Dr. David had taught Emilie the basics of checking for concussions. “She just says she has a headache. I want to be sure it isn’t anything serious.”

“Once my replacement shows up—hopefully in the next twenty minutes—I’ll head over to the gym to take another look at her.”

“Thank you,” Emilie said quietly.

“I’m sure she’s fine, but until I get there, I’ll send you back with more ice. First, though, do you mind if I watch the rest of this video?”

Emilie winced. She’d only been able to watch the rest of the video once. It was far too painful for her to see again. “It’s just chaos,” she murmured. But it was more than that. It was the end of her troupe.

“You guys should be proud,” Dr. David remarked. “I heard from the security officer that your team evacuated the ice studio much faster than anyone expected.”

Yes, the troupe had done an exceptional job under horrible circumstances.

Dr. David touched her phone to start the video again.

Katya lay on the ice for only a moment. As her troupe had often practiced, Gary, their other male pairs skater, dashed forward and escorted Katya behind the curtain.

At the time, Emilie had checked her natural instinct to run over and check on Katya herself—that was a nasty fall—but she was too well-trained to actually do so. There were other professionals on hand for that. They handled such falls fairly often, unfortunately, due to the rocking of the ship at sea. The show must go on.

But she'd known this wasn't just choppy seas. The ship had shuddered again, and Emilie had grabbed the railing. The overhead lights started flashing. Not a good sign.

"Hey, Emilie," Gary, the big ice dancer, had said in her ear. "Which emergency signal is this one?"

"I don't remember," she'd answered. There were so many to keep track of. She'd had to think for a minute. Different blasts and codes meant different things. There were signals for cardiac arrests and "man overboard" crises and general security warnings. They'd even turned back to port once or twice during her years at sea, but this...

Seven short drones on the ship's horn sounded, followed by one long blast.

"Crew and guests assemble at muster stations," Bill, their cruise ship director spoke over the ship-wide intercom.

"It's the evacuate ship signal!" Emilie realized.

"No way!" Gary said. "That's only for drills!"

"Trust me, this is no drill." Emilie slammed on her plastic skate guards so she could run off to assist passengers.

"Everyone to the muster station!" she shouted to the audience

as loud as she could. She leaped over the rink's railing, still in her glittery elf costume, and began to usher the audience out of the auditorium.

Incredibly, the startled passengers paid heed to her.

Emilie gave silent thanks for all the evacuation drills she'd been forced to endure over the years. She and her skaters knew exactly what to do.

"Is everyone cleared from the area?" she asked Gary once the room was nearly empty. He'd nodded, expression tight with the urgency of the situation.

"I scoured the seats one last time—we're clear up top. The security officers are scanning passenger keycards, so they'll know if anyone is missing. The rest of the troupe is already at our muster station. They're starting to launch the boats. It's time to go, Emilie."

The ship had begun to list, so she let Gary grip her wrist and pull her down the hallway, toward the stairwell.

The ship made another jerky pitch, and Emilie bumped into a corner rail. Gary tumbled against her. The two were in a crazy position, tangled as if they were lovers, and for several seconds, they'd been stuck there, suspended in time.

They both laughed nervously.

She'd never had any romantic thoughts about Gary—he was like a brother to her. But her mind shifted to Nathan Prescott in an instant. The only man who'd held her and kissed her on this romantic cruise ship. And for a moment, she felt as if he was

right there with her again. But her months with Nathan had been a crazy time of happy infatuation. They'd been in love with each other, and maybe a little bit in love with love itself. Then he'd left.

Gary pulled her to her feet, as the evacuation announcement sounded again. They made it above deck and waded through the crowd to their muster station.

The video ended abruptly, and Emilie shook herself out of her own memories.

They were all safe now. This issue with Katya was hopefully surmountable, with Dr. David's help. She needed to trust in him and be grateful.

Dr. David stared at the still shot for a moment, and then handed her the phone back.

"I hope you and your skaters land on your feet after this, Emilie," Dr. David said.

"We will," she answered, though inwardly she was less certain.

Her troupe's home, possessions and performance venue were now a hundred feet below water. The ship was damaged enough that it wouldn't be repaired anytime soon, if it was repaired at all. Yes, there were ten other ships in the fleet, but all of them were fully staffed with ice-skaters. Emilie and her troupe were homeless. They had no prospects—they were jobless. At best, the cruise line would probably want to send the entertainers back to their far-flung hometowns and terminate their contracts.

Realistically, Emilie's performance career would likely be over. She was nearing retirement age, and was the oldest of

her troupe. And with no way to prove herself, she didn't have a hope of advancing to her dream job as an entertainment choreographer.

Dr. David patted her shoulder and handed her an ice pack to give to Katya. "Something will come along. Be thankful it wasn't worse." Another little girl was stumbling across the beach toward the medical tent, crying, accompanied by what looked to be her grandmother. A reporter tried to catch the grandmother for a comment, but the woman waved him off. Emilie had seen a few camera crews on the island trying to get the story. "I'll be along to see Katya as soon as I can," Dr. David promised.

Nodding mechanically, Emilie gathered herself to return to the gym and her troupe. She did her best to put a smile on her face.

"Take care of yourself, Emilie," Dr. David called after her. "If for some reason I don't see you again, enjoy Christmas!"

Yes, she reminded herself. Christmas was a time of hope.

And nothing was more important than hope.

"SO, HAVE WE lost our jobs?" Katya asked. She lay beneath a thin blanket on a rickety metal cot, looking distraught and frail.

Emilie passed Katya the ice pack she'd received from Dr. David and sat beside her on an empty cot. "Honestly? Probably, yes. But it's just for the moment until I think of an idea to keep us all together," she said in a soothing tone.

"Do you really believe you can find us something else?"

"I do." Emilie checked Katya's shoulder. Her bruise seemed

to be looking angrier.

She gave Katya her brightest smile. Years of practice hid her doubts.

Katya seemed to relax. The lines of her forehead smoothed out, and her breathing seemed less shallow.

On the inside, though, Emilie was worried. She'd heard word on the walk back to their little camp that she and her troupe would have to stay inside this gym for at least another day. Emilie could think of worse places to be marooned, but her troupe was getting restless. They'd want answers soon.

Emilie gazed into her wounded skater's eyes, checking again for dilated pupils, but didn't see anything wrong. "Dr. David said he'll be over as soon as he can."

Katya closed her eyes and sighed.

"The diving performers are being flown home to Australia this afternoon," Gary murmured beside Emilie, his voice matter-of-fact.

"How do you know that?" Emilie whispered, standing to face him so that Katya couldn't see.

Gary shrugged. "Their booking agent called the dive captain and told him," he murmured back.

Emilie nodded and subconsciously patted the pocket of her jacket, where her phone was zipped. She'd already spoken to Lynn, their manager at the production company, just to let her know that everyone on the team was safe and accounted for. Lynn hadn't said a word about the future, though, and Emilie had

been too traumatized to think of asking at the time.

At least Curtis, the male half of their ice dance team, had kept his wits and remembered to gather up the skaters' phones, jackets and street shoes. They may not have clothes—indeed, Emilie still wore her Santa's elf costume—but at least they weren't still in skates, and they'd been able to use their phones to contact loved ones.

“Hey, what are you two whispering about?” Katya asked. “If you know something, tell us!”

The other skaters gathered around her, too, pressing for details.

She explained what Gary had said about the divers. “But, guys, the other entertainers are in a different situation. They work for a different production company.” She made a mental note to call Lynn again in Colorado Springs, where their production company was located. She didn't want to do it within hearing of her team, though.

“My parents were supposed to visit me on the Christmas sailing,” Curtis remarked. The rugged ice dancer was from a small town in Nova Scotia and hadn't seen his family in nearly six months. Curtis sat on a nearby cot, put his elbows on his knees and gazed up at Emilie. “Do you think Empress Cruises will let them change their booking to whatever ship we're on next?”

Emilie doubted they'd be assigned to another ship, but she didn't want Curtis to worry.

“We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Emilie reassured

him. “Wherever we end up, we’ll work to get your parents there for Christmas with us, too.”

“They’re going to dismiss us all and send us home, aren’t they?” Lynette turned to Emilie. Lynette was Curtis’s dance partner. “There *are* no other ships to put us on. Think of it, guys. Every ship is already staffed for the season.”

“I cannot go home!” Katya sat up and looked at Emilie in alarm. “Please! We have to find a place *somewhere*.”

Emilie swallowed. Katya had confided to Emilie that she desperately needed this job to help her family at home. She sent money every month to her mother and grandmother.

Katya’s skating partner, Sergei, said something to her in Russian, which Emilie didn’t understand. The two held a quiet conversation.

Emilie touched Katya’s arm. “What’s he saying?”

“That he doesn’t want to go home, either. He wants to stay with me. You must do something for us, Emilie. Please.”

Sergei was usually the one to keep Katya calm and happy. It had always surprised Emilie that they didn’t have more than a platonic relationship.

Katya gave a soft cry and put her hand on her mouth. “All my papers are in the safe in the room!” She stared wildly at Emilie. “All our things are gone—at the bottom of the ocean! What will we do?”

“It’s all right. I’ve kept copies of your paperwork in my computer.” Emilie felt Katya’s forehead. Thankfully, she didn’t

seem to have a fever. “You should get some rest. I’ll help you work it out once we get off the island.”

“But your computer is at the bottom of the ocean, too!”

“Electronic backups for all our files are in the cloud.” Emilie gestured upward. “It’s safe.” Saved were copies of everyone’s information—visas and paperwork and even costume measurements. Skate sizes, too—not that that mattered since they had all evacuated the ship wearing their skates.

“So, you can help us find a new ship?” Katya asked, her face hopeful. “Yes?”

“You’re the Ice Mom.” Gary rose a brow at her.

“Yes, I certainly am.” Emilie smiled. “Don’t listen to the gossip from the diving team or the dancers, either. Listen to me. I’ll call our production company right now and see what they can do for us.”

“Thank you, Emilie.” Katya leaned back in her cot. She seemed pale. Emilie made a mental note to be here when Dr. David showed up.

She turned to Gary, her *de facto* assistant. “Gary, you’re in charge while I’m gone. Please make sure that everyone sticks together. I’ll be back shortly.”

She headed again for the beach, this time to make her call.

She *would* keep them together. Last year had been a depressing Christmas because it had been the anniversary of her breakup with Nathan. She had vowed that this season would be different.

She *would* keep her skaters together, at least through Christmas. She didn't know how, but she would make it happen.

Then she caught sight of the reporter she'd seen earlier. He was still trying to record eyewitness accounts of the accident.

Maybe he'd like to see an eyewitness video...

"Hello!" She waved to the young man.

Immediately he trotted across the sand to her. "You're a skater!" he remarked.

"Yes." She smoothed the skirt of her elf costume. "We haven't had time to change yet." She held out her hand. "I'm Emilie."

"Joseph." He shook her hand vigorously, then fiddled with his phone screen. "Would you mind if I asked you some questions? I've heard about you all in the troupe. One of the passengers was raving about you—said you were heroes. Her family was at the skating show."

"We just did what we were trained to do," Emilie said.

"Yes, but you made sure everyone was evacuated quickly and safely. And you were calm."

"The passengers were great." Emilie dug out her phone. "Would you like to see video of it? A passenger shared it with me. He said he planned to put it online when he gets home. I can give you the link once it's up."

"That would be fabulous." Joseph smiled gratefully. "I promise I won't record it."

Ten minutes later, after he'd seen the video for himself, he prodded Emilie to speak to him for a recorded interview.

She talked about her troupe's dilemma. She did the best she could to pitch their need for a home for Christmas. Or at least a job.

It was the best she could think of to do for her skaters. She hoped it was enough.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, Nathan met with his investors at his local savings and loan.

Rob, his principal investor and also the bank's director, didn't mince words. "Nathan, unless you can turn the cash flow around in the next two weeks, we'll be putting Prescott Inn on the market at the end of December."

No!

"Take a look at my plans before you discuss that step," Nathan said, gazing from face to face at the four men seated around the table. He wouldn't give up without a fight. "There's no need to make any drastic decisions just yet. Let me walk you through the numbers." He passed out the reports he'd prepared for each investor. "Start with the expenses I've earmarked to cut."

Rob reluctantly reached for his copy and flipped to the table that bulleted the list of Nathan's proposed tactics.

"It's a start," Rob remarked. "But you have to keep going. And you also need marketing ideas that don't cost money. The rooms don't fill themselves."

"We do have ideas, great ones," Nathan assured him. He thought of Nell and the marketing research he'd assigned her.

For now, though, he held up a second bound report, which he'd received from his property consultant this past summer. "This study describes all of our winter facilities and their state of repair as well as future maintenance needs. My team is currently looking into targeted promotion and free publicity for the low-expense venues as appropriate. These efforts will increase bookings for the holiday season."

"Ah. You're talking about the sleigh rides and such." B.G. Richards, one of the minor investors, reached for the report, smiling with nostalgia at the photo on the cover. "My kids are looking forward to using the ice rink this Christmas. Will it be open to the community?"

Finally, Nathan had an ally. He directed his attention on B.G.—a local construction manager and family man who supported the homeless shelter and had a pretty big heart when it came to kids. "As you know, B.G., that's a big part of the reason I led this effort to purchase the inn—to keep the use of the facilities in the community and allow access to the local children."

B.G. nodded, but of the five of them present at the meeting, Rob was the majority investor, and he was scowling at Nathan. Nathan modified his approach. "Of course, we will close the rink if necessary—and any other facility—if it helps the short-term cash flow. At least until we get back on our feet." He stared hard at Rob. "Rest assured, I'm prepared to do whatever is fiscally necessary to turn this crisis around."

Rob nodded with satisfaction. He seemed to like that Nathan

had used the word *crisis*.

“That ice rink B.G. mentioned is expensive to keep up,” Rob remarked, closing the cover of his report. “As the property consultant noted, there are maintenance costs. Electricity.” He crossed his arms and stared at Nathan. “I think you should take a look at that expense first.”

“All right,” Nathan said. “But I’m asking for your continued patience with my overall plans. Right now, we’re performing an analysis of the winter programs our competitors are offering so we can better gauge which facilities Prescott Inn should keep open.” He glanced around the table. “My plan for the turnaround is good. It will bear fruit.”

“Very well. We’ll meet again next week and review your progress.” Rob stood, signaling the end of the discussion. “It goes without saying that any mention of Prescott Inn’s financial precariousness will not be discussed outside of this room.”

They all nodded. The group of five disbanded.

Nathan raked his hand through his hair as he left the savings and loan and headed to the inn’s Jeep, the resort’s logo emblazoned on the side of the vehicle.

He felt as if he’d been body-slammed. He tried not to show it outwardly, but this meeting was official notification of his worst nightmare come true. All that Nathan had earned today was a reprieve. And a warning to prepare himself for the worst.

All he’d wanted had been to buy and reopen his grandfather’s inn. For two years, he’d managed to hold on to that dream. He

still hoped he could keep it going. But time was running out.

As Nathan drove through town, people waved at him from the sidewalk.

I can still stop Rob from closing the inn. I have until Christmas. Like Rob said, I can come up with even more programs to cut.

Nathan pulled his Jeep in front of the inn's entrance and left the engine idling as he reached into his briefcase and again pulled out the report from the property consultant.

Frank, their valet parking attendant who was also their bellhop, came up to the window. "Park the car for you, Mr. Prescott?"

"No, thanks, Frank. Could you please go inside and tell Nell to come out and join me? I'm moving our meeting from the conference room into the Jeep."

He wanted to personally check out the outdoor winter facilities. Maybe a drive into the mountains and fresh air would clear his head.

Should he shut the skating rink or not? That was his biggest outdoor activity expense.

"Sure thing, Mr. Prescott. I'll let Nell know right away."

Frank backed away and then turned sharply before he headed inside. Nathan half expected Frank to give him a smart salute. Frank had been so happy to have his job back from the old days that he'd shaken Nathan's hand every morning since then.

It made Nathan sad to think of it now.

Nathan took the bound property consultant's report and then

got out of the Jeep to circle around to the passenger seat. Once there, he flipped through the pages again while he waited for Nell.

Finally, she came running through the inn door and headed toward him, zipping up her winter coat and swinging her purse over her shoulder as if it was the best morning of her life.

He was glad someone was happy.

“What’s going on?” she asked, out of breath.

“You drive,” he directed. “We’re heading up the mountain road. We have to make some cuts, so the skating rink is the first item on the list to consider. If necessary we’ll put up a Closed sign in front of the entrance. We can pick it up from the facilities shed.”

Her eyes widened at the news. Seeming hesitant, she got inside and then adjusted the driver’s seat, pushing it forward. “Um, I thought we were going to have a strategy session about my marketing research?” she asked nervously.

“We are. We’ll talk about your findings and your ideas for promotion while we drive. Just make sure they’re low-cost.” He fidgeted with his report, impatient. He loved his niece, but at such a critical moment for the inn, he wished he could also afford a marketing manager with experience. Still, Nell had energy and enthusiasm, and she was family. She had just graduated with a degree in hotel and hospitality management. So maybe she had some ideas for him. He *needed* good ideas.

He held up the bound report that he’d shown his investor team.

“After we visit the skating rink, we’ll swing by the base of the cross-country ski trail. I want to assess the current condition of the fencing. Plus, I want to see the sleigh and make sure the barn where it’s housed is still in good condition.”

Nell wiped her hair from her eyes and pressed her lips together. Without a word, she adjusted her seat belt and flicked on her seat warmer. It was cold in the Jeep. Their breath made steamy puffs in the frigid air.

Still no snow outside, though. Not even a flake.

She turned the Jeep out of the parking lot and toward the main road. “Can we, um, talk about the importance of the outdoor skating rink?” Nell asked, hesitant.

“Why?” he said, cautious. Rob had specifically pointed it out as an item to consider cutting.

“Because...I think we should.” She nodded decisively. “You know how the local kids loved the rink last winter.”

“Did they?” he said blandly. He didn’t want to remember that. His mind flashed to the boy, Jason. Did he like to skate?

“Yes.” She nodded and stepped on the accelerator as the SUV started up the steep mountain road. “The ice rink also sets us apart from our competitors in the hotel market.”

That was what he needed to hear about. “How so? Tell me about your research. What did you find out about our competitors’ activities? What are their plans for the Christmas season?”

“Well...” Nell smiled enthusiastically, clearing her throat. “I

checked our closest competitors, the resorts you suggested I look at.” She paused while they waited for a logging truck to go rumbling past. When it was safe to do so, she cautiously turned right. The road wound a short way up the mountainside.

“And?” he murmured, paging through the consultant’s report to the end, where all the maintenance numbers were located.

“And...they all provide shuttle-bus access to the local downhill ski resorts. But we don’t do that.”

“We can’t,” he said. They had offered the service last year, and the cost hadn’t justified the benefit. Besides, in Nathan’s experience, their guests didn’t ask about skiing until after the New Year.

“Yes, I know.” Nell curled a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “We have to cut expenses.” She glanced sideways at him. “However, Uncle, while the two top resorts offer sleigh rides for the kids, they also set up portable outdoor skating rinks in the winter.”

He remained silent. He would ignore the skating rink reference for now. Rob was right—it was an excellent place for him to cut electricity and insurance costs. “Tell me, do our competitor resorts charge extra fees for the sleigh rides, or is the access inclusive with the room fee?”

Nell’s cheeks reddened.

“You didn’t check?” he guessed.

“Well...” They drove past a vista with a spectacular view. At the top of the mountain, near the pathway that led to his family’s

ancient, dilapidated outdoor skating rink, Nell suddenly pulled over.

He sighed. “What *is* it, Nell?”

“I have a confession,” she blurted. “Actually, I have something I really need to show you.” She turned around and reached for the purse she’d tossed in the back seat.

Surprises were never good. Nathan could feel the muscles in his neck tensing.

She pulled a folder from her gigantic purse, and then turned back around. From the folder, she plucked out a few pieces of paper and handed them to him. “Uncle,” she said, taking a deep breath, “As your marketing manager, I suggest you read and then sign this contract.”

He stared at her. “What is this?”

“Well...after yesterday morning and the discussion we had, I made an inquiry. I knew that if I didn’t act fast, then the opportunity would be gone. You were at the bank all morning, so I made an executive decision.”

His temple throbbed. She was his niece—he couldn’t get angry at her. “I’m the one who makes the executive decisions,” he said in measured tones.

“You told me to take the initiative,” she pointed out. “So I did. And it’s not going to cost us anything.”

What initiative? he thought, irritated. “Nothing is free, Nell.”

“Just listen. You know how we were watching that cruise ship accident on TV? Well,” she said proudly, “it gave me an idea. So

I called Empress Cruises.”

“You called Empress Cruises?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded and set her chin. “I want us to hire the show skaters, Uncle.”

“The...”

“Yes. The figure skaters who give ice shows on the cruise ship. I told the lady from Empress Cruises that I was interested in hiring them, and she gave me the number of their production company. They’re the ones that handle their contracts, you see,” she said proudly.

He knew all that. He knew way too much about how the skaters’ business worked, in fact. He gritted his teeth. He was dying to ask about Emilie, but he could not.

“Uncle Nathan,” Nell said, “please don’t get mad at me. Hear me out.”

Obviously, she was flustered that he wasn’t as enthusiastic as she was, but for the moment, he couldn’t even speak. She had no idea of the pressure he was under, or the danger that their inn would be shuttered before the end of the year. She chattered on, pushing her outrageous, unformed idea.

“Those top two resorts you told me to study for competitive analysis? Well, they both have skating rinks, like us. But what they *don’t* have are shows or skaters to entertain their guests. It’s something we could have that they don’t—a competitive advantage, if you will. So I pitched the production company my idea to send the troupe from the sunken ship here to perform.

It's a win for us because these skaters have media attention right now. *Huge* media attention. Have you seen the television interviews they've been getting? It's gone national! And we could get publicity by helping them out. Just think of the headlines—"Prescott Inn saves shipwrecked skaters' Christmas!"

His head was swimming. Assuming all this was true... "But they're cruise ship performers, Nell. The rinks are so much smaller."

"Oh, no, Uncle. You're thinking of this the wrong way. The skaters have a family-friendly Christmas show ready to be performed anywhere, even on land. I checked that part out."

"We can't," he said softly. They couldn't afford to hire them at all. Not in the remotest possibility. Rob had told Nathan to keep the truth of their financial precariousness a secret from everyone outside the circle of investors. And he understood why—if word got out that the inn might be put up for sale, then who in their right mind would call to book a room? And bookings were what they most needed.

He shook his head and thrust the contract forward. Emilie was an entirely separate issue. She'd been the love of his life, and Nell didn't know about her, either. But that was his private pain.

Nell's face reddened. "Uncle, this is a really good idea."

"Fiscally," he said gently, "it isn't."

"It is! We need to bring in revenue. People will come to the inn to see these skaters perform. We'll fill up rooms for the winter."

"For *Christmas*," he interjected. The investors had made it

clear that the holiday season was his immediate concern. The inn wouldn't even last the winter if they didn't have a successful Christmas first.

"Yes." Nell nodded. "And as your marketing manager, I believe this will make us stand out. It will attract people to come and spend money and fill our rooms. Once the skaters are settled, there will be a show every day until Christmas, with the biggest finale on December 24. And as for costs, yes, there will be room-and-board expenses, but they're minimal. There are ten figure skaters in the troupe and they're used to berthing two to a room. Our rooms are bigger than cruise ship rooms, so they should like that. I figured we have the older, un-renovated rooms in the west wing that we rarely rent anyway. We can give them a good cleaning, and they'll be set to go. We can give the skaters a standardized menu to order from in the dining room, so that will streamline costs, plus, we have a gym they can work out in, too, at no cost and—"

"Stop." He held up his hand. He didn't even want to listen to the idea anymore. It was making him remember Emilie and their life together on the ship. They'd worked out together in the ship's gym every morning. He'd lifted weights, and she had worked on her stretches. She'd smile at him in her yoga pants and sports bra, with her hair in a carefree ponytail.

"Uncle, we can't lose with this deal!" Nell insisted.

"What about their salaries?" he asked, forcing himself to think logically. "That's a huge expense right there."

“The cruise line is covering their contracts through Christmas,” she said, excited.

“Why would they do that?”

“I told you, there’s been attention in the national media. Haven’t you seen the video?”

“What video?” Nathan had been too busy preparing for his investors’ meeting to watch news or check social media. That was Nell’s job.

“A passenger was recording the ice show just as the ship hit the sandbar,” Nell said. “And he kept filming as the skating team evacuated everyone. The skaters were heroes. They kept their cool and got all the passengers out. The ice captain—a skater named Emilie—was interviewed on the chat shows last night and this morning through Skype. She’s a really great spokeswoman. So now everybody is super concerned about her troupe—they’re calling them ‘the homeless figure skaters.’ Maybe it’s embarrassing for the cruise line. In any case, the cruise line has offered to pay their salaries through Christmas if we agree to cover room and board. Then they won’t be homeless for Christmas, will they?” Nell smiled brightly at him.

Nathan’s head was spinning. Nell had lost him at the word *Emilie*. Was she really talking about *his* Emilie?

He couldn’t stand it anymore—he had to satisfy his curiosity. Ignoring Nell chattering beside him, he scanned through the contract to the end, where the skaters’ names were listed...

And there she was. *Emilie O’Shea, Ice Captain*. Nathan’s hand

shook slightly. She'd been promoted to the job two years ago, just before their breakup. She'd been so proud of her promotion that day—so much so that she'd chosen her job and her skaters over being with him.

He still felt sick over the way it had ended. How could he relive the pain of that day again? He passed the contract back to Nell. “No,” he said firmly.

Nell frowned at him and crossed her arms. And then with renewed vigor, she kept pressing. “Did I tell you the skaters will come with their own costumes and props for the show, which has already been choreographed?”

“There are insurance fees and other expenses,” he said with tight lips. Whatever Nell could think to throw at him, he would counter. The truth was, he *couldn't* evaluate the opportunity from a neutral perspective because the proposal involved Emilie.

“*Read* the contract, Uncle. It comes with insurance from the production company. Besides, that's a minor detail. Look at the big picture. We need to fill rooms in order to have a financially viable Christmas. Am I right?”

More than she realized.

But Emilie had hurt him. And he had said things he later regretted. He had enough on his plate right now keeping his resort open without having to deal with the pain from his past personal life.

Plus the skating troupe would require him to keep the rink open, adding to his expenses.

On the other hand, Nell believed the troupe could be a solution to their financial woes. If skaters brought in enough income to offset the costs of their room and board, she could be right.

Still, he pushed back. “There are other considerations,” he said in a quiet voice. “I’ve sailed on a cruise ship with entertainment staff. You haven’t. Believe me when I tell you that, in my experience, they bring drama. And commotion. Plus, they’re used to eating all day long. They bounce in and out of the facilities as they please. They interact with the guests—”

“So, let them! Maybe they could give impromptu skating lessons.” Nell’s eyes were lit with excitement. “Uncle Nathan, you’re always telling me to buckle down and get serious, and I have. This is a *good* idea. Everyone loves outdoor skating at a New England inn at Christmastime.”

Maybe so. But bottom line, he couldn’t cope with seeing Emilie again.

He looked out over the path that led to the old ice rink. He’d skated here as a boy himself, when his grandparents had been alive and the inn was thriving. Those had been wonderful days...

But he shook his head. There were so many costs associated with this plan. “No, Nell.”

“Uncle, I don’t have anything else to recommend to you.” Nell threw up her hands. “I’ve been brainstorming ideas for days, and I don’t have any other decent ones. But this one’s a winner—I *know* it. I understand you’re concerned about cutting costs because you’re an accountant at heart. Well, I’m a marketing person. We

think of unique ways to bring in money. And the show skaters will give us the promotional ability to attract clients. We'll have a unique story to tell about them—”

“The fact that we are a family-owned business, not part of a national chain, *is* our unique story,” he said in a harsher voice than he'd intended. “Don't lose sight of what we're really doing here, Nell,” he warned.

She crossed her arms. “Then I'm not sure I can help you anymore.”

He stared at her. “What do you mean?”

“You don't listen to what other people say. You're too closed off.” She gazed steadily at him. “Do you know that some of the staff are afraid of you? There's been talk.”

He stiffened. “About what?”

“You're too focused on cost cutting. We're worried that you're turning into Ebenezer Scrooge.”

He laughed and shook his head. *Ridiculous*. He couldn't worry *enough* about cost cutting. Not after that meeting with his investors this morning. That was his all-consuming purpose for the next several weeks at least.

“Nell,” he said in his most serious voice, “I'm going to be honest with you. But this is strictly confidential. No one else can learn what I'm going to tell you. Can I count on you to keep it secret?”

She bit her lip, but she nodded. “Yes. You know that you can, Uncle Nathan.”

He hoped he was doing the right thing in trusting her. She was his family, so she had a right to the facts. “We’re having financial problems,” he said grimly. “Bad ones. My investors have given me a directive to turn around our cash flow by Christmas. If I don’t make the numbers they’ve given me, they’ll shut us down—finished and sold—at the end of the month.”

“Shut us down?” The blood drained from her face. “You mean close the inn?”

“Yes, Nell.”

Her mouth gaped.

“We have to keep it extremely low-key that we’re having these financial problems,” he warned. “Because if it becomes public knowledge, it could further damage the business. Can I trust you to support me on this?”

She nodded, swallowing.

He nodded, too. *Case closed. No more talk of bringing in Emilie and her show skaters here, no matter what it would do for us.*

“But that’s all the more reason to bring in Emilie and her skaters. I can get us lots of positive publicity if we bring them in,” Nell stubbornly repeated. “Look. Here’s the interview Emilie did this morning. The recording is from a Miami station, but they played it on the national morning shows, too.”

He stared at Nell. It appeared she really didn’t understand the seriousness of what they were going through.

“Nell,” he said patiently, “As I said, we can’t put money into

a venture like this, so please stop suggesting it.”

“The contract doesn’t require us to put in any money. They *have* to find a place for Emilie or it would be bad publicity for them. Just *read* the contract, Uncle. You haven’t even looked at it yet. How can you make a blanket statement that we can’t afford it if you won’t even read it? Don’t you trust me? *Me*. I’m your family, Uncle.”

Her face was red with passion. And yeah, it killed him when she put it that way. He *would* like to indulge her. Nell was his closest family left in the area. Nathan’s sister—Nell’s mother—lived out in California. She’d been his sole ally as a kid. Only she really understood what pain their chaotic childhood had been.

Plus, Nell did have some good ideas.

Without a word, he picked up the contract and examined it. He read it line by line, paragraph by paragraph, because that was prudent business sense. It was practical.

It read exactly as Nell said it would.

Interestingly, he noted a paragraph that gave him an out if he was in any way dissatisfied with the troupe’s performance. He could cancel the agreement at any time, for any reason, and they would have to leave.

“How did this get in there?” he asked Nell, tapping the paragraph. From the production company’s perspective, it made terrible business sense.

“I asked for it,” she said proudly.

“You?”

“I knew you’d be a tough sell. I knew that clause would help to convince you.”

“They really, really want those skaters to find a home, don’t they?”

She smiled at him. But she hadn’t won yet.

He leaned his head back on the seat.

Nell waited patiently.

He sat up and scratched some figures, in pencil, on the side of the contract. If the inn’s maintenance manager, Guy, took care of the physical upkeep of the rink, and if they didn’t spend money on outside vendors, and if the publicity Nell was talking about came through...

“The skaters can have the rink,” he murmured. “But only half of it. The front half, where the floodlights still work.”

“All right,” Nell said cautiously. “Yes, I suppose they’re used to skating on smaller surfaces.”

“Guy will run the Zamboni once a day only, in the early morning, before work.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“And put it in the contract that they’re definitely to bring their own music, props, costumes, equipment and stage curtains. They have to be prepared to use our facilities as is. We’re not responsible for any big improvements or outlays of investment. I mean it, Nell.”

“Of course! Oh, yes! I’m sure they’ll agree to all that!”

He nodded, thinking grimly of Emilie. If this project went

forward, he would have to face her again.

He didn't relish that confrontation.

Then again, Emilie might not want to deal with him, either. They hadn't parted ways on the best of terms. It had been abrupt, really.

"You would be the point person in dealing with this project," he said.

"Great! Thank you for the opportunity, Uncle."

The inn was a big place. He and Emilie might not even cross paths with one another. They could each pretend that the other didn't exist, as they had been doing for the past two years.

Yes, Nell was capable of doing her job, and so was Emilie. The two of them could handle the shows without his input or interference.

And maybe Emilie wouldn't want to come to Prescott Inn. She was the one who'd rejected him, after all. He would just have to see...

"So will you sign it, Uncle?" Nell said eagerly.

He gazed into his niece's anxious brown eyes.

"Please, Uncle?"

EMILIE PAUSED AT the end of the hallway, phone glued to her ear, on hold with her boss, Lynn Bladewell.

Three days had passed since the *Empress Caribbean* had sunk. The production company had finally moved them off the island and into a hotel in Miami. It was still early in the day. The other skaters were in their rooms, exhausted from the ordeal.

After two days of living on cots in the school gym and assisting the cruise line with evacuating the last of the passengers from the tiny island and back to the mainland, they were now officially in limbo. Below Emilie, the Florida sun shone brightly on the Atlantic Ocean. Blue skies spread across the horizon as far as the eye could see. Gentle, perfect waves rolled in along the sparkling water.

Home. Or at least where her family lived. But Emilie hadn't truly called Florida home since she started working for the cruise line.

Emilie's mom, older sister and niece had met her at the hotel yesterday, when she'd first arrived with her troupe. They'd all cried and hugged each other. The ship's sinking had scared everyone, but it was okay, Emilie had told them; they were all safe. She kept reassuring them of that over and over.

"Stay with us for Christmas, honey?" her mom had asked.

"I *have* to stay with my team, Mom." And she did. That's where her heart and her purpose was. The team needed her, and she felt responsible for them. Besides, she *liked* helping them. "Sergei and Katya are from Russia, and we have Gary and Rosie from Canada. Then there's Lars from Norway. I can't just abandon my people, who are so far from home, and at Christmastime."

"Well...they can certainly spend Christmas with us," her mom offered.

Emilie had smiled sadly at them. "Thanks for offering. I really

do appreciate it.” But the thought of ten more people crammed into Mom’s tiny Fort Myers condo just didn’t make sense.

“So, what are you going to do, honey?”

“Well, the production company told me they’re working on a deal to get us into a land-based resort for the holiday season at least. If the deal goes through, the cruise ship has promised to honor our salary arrangement at least through Christmas, even though they don’t have to.” Emilie had been well aware that the media coverage she’d received had given her leverage with her bosses.

“So, where will you be working?” her sister had asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll find out tomorrow.”

And now here she was, waiting on the phone with Lynn. Still on hold. Nervous, she paced the hotel corridor. She was just *so* hoping that whatever Lynn arranged would enable them to stay together for Christmas. *And* keep their paychecks coming in. Frankly, she was still worried about Katya. She was rooming with Julie in the hotel, and Julie had confided to Emilie that she’d heard Katya tossing and turning in her sleep last night.

“Emilie?”

She jumped to attention. “Yes!” she said to Lynn. “I’m here!” She turned away from the window with the sand and the sun and the beach outside. After two days on a hot, sandy island she was just a little bit sick of the heat. “Do you have something for us?” she asked, praying with all her heart that they did.

“Yes, actually. The contract is being processed.”

“For all of us? We can *all* stay together? Because that’s really important to me.”

“Well...I’m not sure we can do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Emilie, I’m not sure all of the skaters have visas to work in the States,” Lynn said gently.

That would mean Katya. And Sergei. Possibly half Emilie’s team, if she counted all her international skaters.

“Well, can you check, please?” Emilie said firmly. “I don’t want to leave anyone behind.”

“Emilie, we may have to.”

“In all my interviews, I talked about how the troupe sticks together. How would it look if that only meant the skaters with paperwork?”

Lynn sighed. Emilie knew Lynn was worried about bad publicity.

“Let me call you back,” Lynn said. “I need to speak with Donnie.”

Donnie. The president of their production company.

“Thank you.” Emilie hung up the phone and sat down to wait at the end of the quiet corridor, arms curled around her knees. She didn’t have to wait long—just ten minutes until her phone buzzed.

“Yes, Lynn?”

“Emilie. Congratulations. We’re fortunate that all your skaters are covered. Your team has a contract.”

“That’s fantastic!” Emilie leaped to her feet.

“Don’t celebrate quite yet. Because here’s the thing—this job is going to be a lot more responsibility for you personally. We don’t have any support teams to send you. You might have to reconfigure the show choreography somewhat depending upon the size of the local facilities.”

“But that’s perfect for me! You know that I want to be a choreographer with the company someday!”

“Yes, we know. But you’re aware we don’t often have openings. That said, if you can make a really great show that a lot of people are excited to come see, then I’ll keep you in mind for further opportunities. Donnie would prefer two separate shows, if you can swing it. It could be a big deal for us if you’re successful. Donnie’s eyes are on this project.”

Emilie swallowed. The phone was actually shaking in her hand, Lynn’s promise was so exciting to her. She would get to keep her team’s jobs for Christmas *and* have the opportunity to audition for her own dream job.

“Don’t worry,” Emilie promised. “I’ll make it a success. What’s the next step?”

“We’ll arrange for a van to take you to the airport. I’ll email you your tickets and itinerary shortly, so keep checking your inbox. From Miami International, I imagine you’ll be flying to Boston’s Logan Airport and then driving up to New Hampshire by shuttle bus.”

“Wait? We’re going to New Hampshire?” Emilie suddenly felt

nervous. *Nathan Prescott* lived in New Hampshire.

But he would never... She shook her head.

“Yes,” Lynn was saying, “New Hampshire. Is that a problem?”

“No, no,” Emilie said quickly. “Sorry. I just assumed we were going to a rink someplace sunny. With artificial ice.”

“I’m told it’s a seasonal rink with natural ice. Rather old-school.”

“Okay.” She could adapt to that.

Scratch that, she *had* to adapt to that. Whatever it took to keep the team together and to secure their new jobs.

“Emilie, are you still on board with us?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Then the van will meet you at the arrival gate and take you all to the resort in the mountains. The place is called Prescott Inn.”

Prescott Inn! It was Nathan who’d hired them.

Emilie felt as if the wind had been knocked from her. She slid down the wall until she was sitting on the carpet. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Or maybe she was hyperventilating.

“Are you there, Emilie? I heard a strange noise.”

Emilie nodded. “I’m here,” she managed to croak, hand over her chest.

Her mind was whirling. She was going to Nathan Prescott’s inn!

But why? Thoughts of him made tears spring to her eyes. He’d chosen his *inn* over her. Why would he want to see her now? And at the same inn that he’d shown her was more important to him

than she was.

Did this mean he was second-guessing his decision? Did it mean he still cared about her?

They really had been in love, she thought wistfully.

Or maybe she was jumping to conclusions. His contract with them could just mean that Nathan simply wanted to help them out. He'd been on the cruise ship once, too, so he understood their predicament. Even if he'd only been a consulting accountant for the cruise line, he knew what the cruising life entailed. He *got* how serious a ship sinking was. It was a terrible, frightening experience, and even though they'd been lucky enough that no one had been seriously hurt—

“Hello? Emilie? Can you hear me? I think I’ve lost you.”

Emilie cleared her throat. “I’m still here.”

Sort of. She was having trouble processing her own scrambled and upset reactions. Honestly, though, what did it matter where the opportunity came from? Her team was being kept together and employed, if only for the short term. She was grateful for that. It was what she'd wanted. They would all feel better when they heard the news.

And the chance to prove herself to Lynn was just icing on the cake.

“So,” Lynn continued. “That’s it, then. I’ll process your contracts from our end and take care of the final details.”

“Okay...” If she could think of any other terms, now was the time to state them.

“Um. Lynn,” Emilie said, “what about a clothing allowance? We’ve lost everything in the sinking. Our rooms are underwater, and nothing is salvageable.” She assumed that to be true, anyway. “And none of us have warm coats or boots to wear in New Hampshire.”

“You’re right,” Lynn agreed. “Since this will be such good PR for us, I’ll see if I can authorize an advance for you. Let me get back to you on the amount, okay?”

“That would be great.” Emilie would organize a shopping expedition to a local mall here in Miami. That would lift everyone’s spirits. “I can’t think of anything else right now, but if I do, I’ll let you know.”

“Please don’t ask for anything else! I’m out on a limb for you as it is.”

“We’ll make you look good, I promise!”

Lynn sighed. “Just make a great new show and reconfigure the ship’s Christmas show for the new ice. I’ll talk with you soon.” She ended the call.

Emilie stood from her position on the carpet and dusted herself off.

Things were looking up.

And as for Nathan, well...

She checked her phone. He hadn’t called her. But somehow, she had hope in her heart. He’d reached out and offered them this lifeline, hadn’t he?

She would show him her honest appreciation for that when

she saw him. He had broken her heart once, but in the spirit of Christmas, maybe it was time for forgiveness.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN EMILIE WALKED inside Prescott Inn, she found a lobby decorated for Christmas, with a fully trimmed tree, pine wreaths that smelled of the north woods and garlands atop every doorway.

She took a deep breath and appreciated the Christmas spirit. This boded well.

But as she waited for someone to come out and greet them, she wondered why the inn felt so empty. And where was Nathan?

“Oh! Here you are!” A young woman with a big smile and dark hair came out from an office behind the front desk. She helped Emilie load her bags—meager as they were—onto a rolling brass luggage cart.

“Did you have a pleasant flight?” the woman asked sweetly.

“Yes.” Emilie touched her hand to her throat. “May I speak with Nathan Prescott, please?”

A blush crept over the woman’s cheeks. “I can answer any questions you might have. My name is Nell Lewis. I’m his marketing manager.”

“Oh! Well, does Nathan still work in this building?” She already knew the answer—the night before, she’d done an internet search. It had pained her, but in his official photos, Nathan Prescott was as handsome as ever. He looked just as he had the day he’d walked off the *Empress Caribbean*.

Reluctantly, Nell nodded. “Yes, and I am sorry, but Mr. Prescott is occupied at the moment. He’s put me in charge of helping you settle in.” She smiled brightly at Emilie. “How are your skaters? You’re Emilie O’Shea, right? I saw your interviews on TV.”

“Yes, I’m Emilie, thank you. And my skaters are outside, in the van.” Emilie forced a smile at Nell, still wondering if Nathan’s marketing manager knew about Emilie and Nathan’s romance.

From the blank way Nell looked back at her, though, Emilie was willing to bet that she knew nothing at all.

“Well, will Nathan be down later, then?” Emilie asked.

“He...would rather I handle all the details, simply because he’s so busy.” Nell shifted her feet, clearly uncomfortable with the message she was meant to deliver. “He’s given me instructions for managing the ice-skating project, as we’ve taken to calling it, so tomorrow, once you’re settled, you and I will take a drive up to the ice rink, yes?”

“You mean the ice rink isn’t part of this building?”

“Oh, no.” Nell shook her head, still smiling. “It’s an off-site facility.”

“So...Mr. Prescott isn’t going to be involved with us *at all*?”

“I’m afraid not,” Nell said apologetically. “No.”

Emilie got the message—Nathan didn’t want to see her. She quickly blinked away the moisture in her eyes. She could handle working with Nell—the young marketing manager seemed kind

enough—but Nathan’s outright rejection of her?

It hurt. More than she’d realized it would. She’d never expected that he wouldn’t want to see her at all.

Her heart heavy, she retreated across the room to the stone fireplace and faced it, determined to compose herself while Nell went outside to greet Emilie’s team.

The cold fireplace she stared into seemed like a metaphor for her life—for the next month, at least.

Couldn’t Nathan even *pretend* to greet her kindly, even for old times’ sake?

They’d *loved* each other once.

Her gaze followed the long track of the chimney. Up, up, up. Near the top, just to the right, she noticed a picture window covered with wooden blinds. An office or a conference room on the second level. Shielding her eyes and squinting to guard from the glare of the sun, Emilie peered inside that window as best she could through the slats of blinds where *someone*—a man—watched them gathering below.

It was Nathan. She recognized his dark hair and the outline of his familiar broad shoulders. And besides, she *sensed* his presence by the grim stillness of his large form. Even from all this distance away, she could feel the coolness in his eyes as he gazed down at her.

She put her hand to her mouth, swallowing a gasp.

Nathan stepped away. Slowly, the window shuttered.

Quickly, Emilie headed for the lobby restroom. She couldn’t

face anyone just now.

She'd cried over Nathan Prescott for a long time after they'd broken up. She'd huddled in her cruise ship cabin at the end of the working day, trying to forget him. She'd attempted instead to focus on the mundane rhythms of her schedule. Discussions of the new choreography. The challenges of learning to be a good ice captain, and the dreams of how one day she might graduate into becoming a professional choreographer.

It had been hard to put the broken relationship with Nathan behind her, but each week, it got a little easier. The reality of a show performer meant that one got used to people—important people—coming and going in one's life like a never-ending parade. There wasn't time for pain or longing, because the routine moved fast. New friends came. Old friends returned.

But now, as Emilie huddled—hiding, really—in the public washroom of the country inn that he'd thrown her over for, Emilie couldn't stop the wave of grief that overwhelmed her. She was no longer Emilie O'Shea, seasoned performer and ice captain. She was Emilie O'Shea, jilted lover.

She *had* loved him. Nathan Prescott had snuck into her heart, bit by bit, until she'd embraced him wholeheartedly.

She'd first met him during a public skating session at the ice studio. Nathan had been hanging around behind the counter. He'd been holding a clipboard, and he'd looked so handsomely official. Bored with her own task of checking in passengers, she'd set about trying to get him to crack a smile. He'd been a

challenge, but she'd persisted.

"What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?" she'd asked lightly, teasing him because his green eyes appeared so serious.

He'd given her a half smile. But then he'd ignored her again, instead frowning at the papers on his clipboard.

Everyone had flirted with her in those days. Even Bart, the Zamboni driver. He called her Emmy-em. And gave her M&M'S that he scooped from the cafeteria up on deck.

But Nathan was different. He was always serious, and always working.

"What are you doing?" she'd asked him seriously, giving up on flirtation.

"I'm cutting costs."

She'd laughed, thinking that he was joking.

"What's so funny?" he'd asked her.

"There are no costs here," she'd said. The skaters never dealt with money or even shipboard charges. That was the province of bartenders, or the workers in the retail shops and onboard spa. She loved their huge, happy cruise ship—with fun things to do and music always playing somewhere. She loved that the delicious smell of food—burgers sizzling or fresh-baked bread—and the fresh salty breeze of the sea were never far from her nose. The warm Caribbean sun shone nearly every day. And hundreds of joyous people, all on vacation, were always up for happiness.

So how could this guy be so grim?

Just then, a passenger had shown up before her desk, requesting two pairs of skates for himself and his girlfriend to take a twirl around the on-ship ice rink.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Emilie had informed him in her sympathetic tone. “Before I can lend you the skates, you’ll need to change into long pants and a pair of socks.” She’d pointed to the sign before the desk. “It’s Captain’s rules for skating. But I’ll make sure to hold your skates aside for you when you return.” She’d smiled at them, making it seem as if the ship might possibly run out of skates if she didn’t set theirs aside—it wouldn’t, but making it seem like a special favor to the guests usually appeased their irritation of having to go back to their rooms.

As the couple left, Nathan had asked her, “Why isn’t there a shop here in the ice studio where they can buy pants and socks?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask the captain that question.”

“Right.” Nathan had nodded. His face had lit up as he scribbled a note on his clipboard. That was the secret to what made Nathan tick—he enjoyed business. All aspects of it were interesting to him. She’d never met anyone quite like him.

But one of her specialties was shopping, so she had given him her honest opinion. “You know, if I *was* to put a store here, I would also stock it with yoga pants and cute tops that give the skating logo for the ship’s rink.”

“Or the cruise line logo,” Nathan had suggested.

“Better yet, the ship’s logo intertwined with a skate. Something you could only buy here, on ship.”

Nathan had cocked his head. “That’s a good idea.” He’d glanced around her studio as if with new eyes. And she did consider it hers; she’d been here so long, she’d had a hand in designing it. The walls were jazzy and exciting, with blown-up photos of the skaters performing. Throughout the day, she changed the soundtracks, alternating between pop, classical and rock music, depending upon her mood. “This is a really appealing place you have here,” he’d said.

“Thank you.” She’d grinned at him, but Nathan hadn’t reacted other than to continue assessing her.

Then the old classic “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” had come over the speakers, and Emilie could only sigh. The yearning, crooning voice of Perry Como always put her in the Christmas spirit. Como was way before Emilie’s time, but she enjoyed this soundtrack because her Italian grandmother had adored the singer. Her grandmother had played his Christmas album over and over in Emilie’s youth.

Thinking of her grandmother, Emilie had suddenly felt very sad. And a disquieting feeling—nostalgia mingled with guilt.

Stay hopeful, Emilie, she’d chided herself. It was always important to keep hope up, both in herself and in others.

But Nathan had peered at her, as if seeing into her heart. As if needing an answer into what bothered her.

“My grandmother used to play that album,” she’d said softly. “She lived with us when I was young. When she passed away, I...” She swallowed. *Let’s just skip that part.* She took a deep breath.

“I really miss her.”

Nathan had looked directly into her eyes. “The song makes me sad, too,” he’d said softly. “My grandfather played that album. He owned an inn in the mountains when I was a kid. I miss him.” He gave her a sad smile.

At the time, she hadn’t picked up on his mention of the inn. In fact, he’d never talked to her about it again.

Instead, after that first beginning, he’d included her in his shipboard life and routine. And more and more, with each passing day, she’d found herself looking forward to seeing Nathan Prescott. He’d let her bring his mood “up,” so he was as smiling and relaxed as she was. He’d let her infuse her enthusiasm into him so he wasn’t so stoic and serious.

In turn, he’d hung around during her practices. During all her performances. And on their days off, they’d explored islands together. They’d taken advantage of the cruise ship adventure, both on ship and in port. It had been magical. The past had fallen away. There was only the perpetual present. For almost a glorious year...

And then, on the anniversary of the first day that they’d met, he’d arranged a dinner for them at the fancy French restaurant on the ship. She’d dressed in her best formal gown and strappy sandals. Her roommate had helped her put up her hair. Like Cinderella, the members of her troupe had helped with her makeup. A borrowed shawl. A festive purse...

Nathan was going to ask her to marry him. Everyone said so.

Dinner had been lovely. A bottle of champagne had been popped open. Nathan's eyes had been so bright. His smile was infectious. A lock of dark hair had curled over his forehead, and he'd smiled with that dimple in his cheek. She was head over heels in love with him. Not the kind of love that burned out quickly, but a love that really felt like it could last a lifetime.

He *did* have an engagement ring for her—a gorgeous one-carat solitaire. She had never held a more beautiful piece of jewelry. But the commitment and the happiness it symbolized was the most important thing.

And then, he'd ruined everything.

Instead of bending to one knee and expressing his undying love for her, promising to be with her always, Nathan Prescott had suddenly started talking about an inn in New Hampshire.

"I'm buying it, Emilie," he'd said with excitement in his voice. "I've been waiting to tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise. We can move up there as soon as your contract is finished next month."

Her mouth had dropped open in shock. *New Hampshire? An inn? Where had this come from?*

But Nathan hadn't seemed to notice her distress. "You and I can work to bring back my grandfather's inn to what it once was. I know you'll love it up there."

"But I'm a show skater, Nathan," she'd tried to explain. "I work here, out of Florida, on cruise ships. And I just got promoted."

"Wait, what are you saying?"

“That I’m renewing my contract in a month,” she said patiently. “You know this.”

Frankly, she’d felt blindsided by this inn thing, and she was fighting tears. Just weeks ago, they’d talked about maybe finding a condo together locally. “What about us renting a place down here and me skating and you working for the cruise line? Like we discussed?”

“Emilie,” he’d said, his voice taking on a tone as if he was trying to be patient with her, “this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It just came up, and I had to act fast. It’s what I’ve always wanted. What I’ve *really* wanted.” He’d looked at her quizzically. “I thought I told you about my dreams for the inn.”

“No, you didn’t.” Her throat felt raw, and it was becoming difficult to speak. “Not at all.”

“But I’ve talked to you about Prescott Inn. About my grandfather. And when I was a boy.”

But beyond the basics, he hadn’t told her much about his past. Not really.

In his defense, she hadn’t opened up about her childhood, either. She hadn’t wanted to. She’d preferred to live in their never-ending cruise ship present. It had seemed happier that way.

With sadness in his eyes, he’d nodded to the ring he’d bought her, resplendent in its jewel box. “Will you come with me to New Hampshire to build a life with me? Please, Emilie.” His voice had caught. “I love you.”

She loved him, too. But no—she couldn’t move to an inn

in New Hampshire. “I need to stay here, Nathan,” she’d said helplessly. “I’m an ice captain now. I have responsibilities.”

His face had clouded over. “Is that what’s important to you?” he’d said shortly, in a tone that indicated he was dismissing the importance of the role to her.

She’d suddenly been angry. He wasn’t thinking of her point of view at all. “Nathan, it *is* important to me.” Her voice had cracked, embarrassingly, with the emotion that she’d felt.

He’d shaken his head. “But you can skate and choreograph in New Hampshire, Em. I can’t move the inn to the cruise ship—don’t you see our problem?”

That wasn’t their problem. “It’s not the *fact* of the position for me, Nathan. It’s the *people* that I’m helping here. I’m important to them.”

“On the cruise ship?” He’d outright laughed at her.

He’d shaken his head again. “Em, it’s a fantasy life out here on the ocean. I mean, it’s fun for the short term, but it’s like living in Neverland. We’re not building anything of lasting value that will provide for people in the future.”

“Of course we are!” she’d said. “My team is an all-new cast. We have an all-new show to implement.” And she was responsible for them. That was crucial to her.

That he didn’t see it as she did hurt. “This *isn’t* a fantasy,” she said. “This is us being real. How can you feel that way about the life we’ve been living together?” She’d dug her nails into her palms, trying so hard not to get too upset in the middle of the

fancy restaurant.

He'd set his chin stubbornly. "The inn is important to me, and to a lot of other people, too. It's a chance to build something in my community. To get back what my grandfather made. To grow *roots*."

"Why haven't I heard this before now?"

He shook his head sadly. "Maybe I was under your spell."

That had hurt her cruelly.

There had been pain in his eyes, too. "I'm trying to say, Emilie—not very well, I realize—but please try to understand what I mean. Working at sea isn't *permanent*, at least not to me. I need to go back home and make something concrete of my life."

"I don't agree with you that our life here can't be permanent," she'd said, equally stubborn. "After I finish performing, I hope to choreograph. That *is* a concrete goal. You've made a huge, wrong assumption about me. It's as if you've never even met me before."

"So, that's what you want to do in your future?" he'd asked, looking miserable. "Choreograph cruise ship shows?"

"Yes, Nathan."

"Can you at least come and spend a year with me and see how you like it?"

"I can't." Wasn't he hearing her? "I just got promoted. People are counting on me. I can't leave them."

"They'll be fine without you."

"No, they won't." Her voice was rising.

"So, when does it end?"

“When everyone is happy and taken care of.”

His jaw had hardened. A subtle movement, but it was there.

He was impatient with her.

And it had *hurt*. Because he was belittling her and discounting her needs.

“You care more about your inn than you care about us,” she realized.

He’d stared at her, but Emilie knew that it was true.

And suddenly, the bubble had popped. There was such a fundamental difference in what they each wanted, and there was no talking this out.

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