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THE CHRISTMAS COIN: An Enchanting New England Holiday Romance

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PROLOGUE



CHRISTMAS EVE, 1870

White Bridge, Connecticut Ellen O'Shea

llen O'Shea wrapped the long strand of red holly berries, threaded like beads along a cord, around the tabletop evergreen and stood back with a smile, admiring her work. Extra berries on prickly sprigs lay across the fire mantel, tucked close to the wall. She had just enough left for a wreath she planned to craft later. First, it was time to begin the tedious task of securing the small candles to the branches on the tree. As she picked up one of the candlesticks, she heard her baby boy, Joseph, whimper in the cradle by the fireplace. Placing the candle on the table, she fetched her baby.

Settling Joseph against her to feed him as she sat in the rocking chair, she closed her eyes, humming a familiar tune to soothe her little one. Below the sound of her humming, she could hear the wind howling outside against the falling snow. The storm promised a white Christmas morning, a far cry from the near constant rain Irish holidays always brought. She began the tune again, remembering her mother's soft voice singing the same melody.

The ocean that separated her from her family in Glengarriff felt wider during the holiday season. Ellen's loved ones were mostly likely sleeping, since it was the middle of the night in Ireland, but the thought of the Christmas feast that would occur in her parents' home the following day brought her solace during this lonely night. Her mother would surely serve her famous spiced beef with loaves of homemade bread, and potatoes accompanied by sliced broiled ham—all Ellen's favorites. She missed it all so dearly.

Gently rocking back and forth while Joseph nuzzled his tiny face into her chest, tears built in her eyes. The separation from her family was heartbreaking, but nothing like experiencing her first Christmas in America without her James.

Joseph fell asleep again, and Ellen continued rocking, the comforting motion lulling her into a trance. As she slipped into a light doze, her mind drifted into memory, and with each push of the chair she was taken back to the rocky movement of the ship one year ago, holding James as he took his final breaths.

Crossing the Atlantic had its risks, but losing her beloved husband had not been at the forefront of her mind when they got the tickets to sail to America only two weeks after their wedding. All they'd seen were visions of building a new life in America, something so many still only dreamed of. Knowing how hard their lives would be in Ireland, with remnants of the famine still holding its grip, both their parents had saved for their crossing. When they set sail, they were young, healthy, and strong, full of confidence for a smooth journey, never thinking typhus would find its way to James. She could still see his face as he stared longingly into her eyes during those last few minutes... as if he already missed her.

"Never forget the coin," he breathed out. "You will prosper, my love. And... the letter."

"I won't." Ellen kissed his forehead as tears slid down her cheeks and whispered, "I love you." Squeezing her eyes shut, she laid him gently back onto the pillow—clutching in her hand the coin he had given her on their wedding day, the one that stood as a token of him sharing with her all he

possessed. It was meant to bring them luck. But when she landed in America, widowed and alone in a place where everything was unfamiliar and strange, lucky was the last thing she felt herself to be.

Yet even in that darkness, there had been a glimmer of hope waiting for her. Two weeks after arriving in America, she'd found herself with child. A piece of James to keep and cherish. Someone to force her out of her grief and make her focus on the future and all the joy it might hold.

A knock at the door startled her, waking Joseph for a moment, but she managed to shift him to the cradle and back to sleep before answering it. When she opened the door, the icy wind blew across her face and Michael Barnett stood before her, holding a pile of logs.

"Michael, you shouldn't have. The wind is roaring too harshly for you to come all this way. Please come in." Ellen ushered him inside and quickly closed the door.

"Of course I should've. Better that I take a risk in this weather than you with that little one of yours." Michael looked over at the cradle. "How's the young lad?"

"He's doing well, feeding around the clock as he should."

"This pile should last you till morning, and I will be over then with more." Michael hesitated, keeping his eyes on her, making Ellen shift on her feet. "Granted the wagon can get here. Hopefully it won't snow too much more overnight."

Since the day she arrived in White Bridge, Connecticut, after learning there was work she could do as a seamstress, Michael had been right by her side, helping her adjust to her new surroundings. He was one of the first to welcome her to town and, with the townspeople alongside him, had built the farmhouse for her and Joseph. Michael hadn't married yet and it made her wonder if interest in her was why he hung around so often. It was still painful to look at another man that way, but her year of mourning was complete, and she knew James would want her to find happiness again.

Michael was a good man, kind and thoughtful, and so gentle with Joseph. And when she was with him she felt happier. Lighter. More hopeful for the future. What she felt wasn't love yet, but maybe with a little luck it could be someday.

"There's a new bundle of hay and wood shavings coming the day after tomorrow. It should be enough to enclose the gaps where the cold could still be getting in, making it much warmer in here for the remainder of the winter. If the snow keeps up at this rate, it will be a long and cold one."

"That is so kind of you. Joseph and I will be well-off in here."

They both fell quiet, Michael fixing to say something more, but little Joseph began to stir, filling the awkward silence.

"Well, I will leave you to him." Michael headed toward the door, but turned once more. "I also wanted to extend an invitation to my parents' house tomorrow for Christmas dinner. If I can get here, that is, I will collect you and drive you two over, if you'd like?"

Ellen let her gaze linger on his eyes a bit longer than usual. "That would be lovely."

Joseph began to cry, breaking their stare.

"Merry Christmas, Ellen," Michael said as he let himself out.

"Same to you, dear Michael," she called out, picking up Joseph. She shifted him over her shoulder to soothe him, listening to the crunch of Michael's boots against the newly fallen snow outside. The wheels of his wagon pulled away and she was alone with her sweet boy once again. Being on her own was hard enough, but raising her son would pose an even greater challenge, especially if the winters in Connecticut were this rough—yet Michael was always there with answers to what she'd needed before she had time to think it through.

Her mother's voice came to her as clear as if she were right there next to her, and Ellen knew exactly what she'd tell her: *Follow your heart, my cushla*. Oh, how she'd missed her, and no matter how vast the sea was

between them, Ellen would always be her darling. She stood and slid Joseph to her other shoulder, cradling him. His eyes were now fully open, watching her as if he'd been able to read her thoughts.

"Don't worry, wee one. Mummy has you."

Joseph kept his eyes locked with hers, melting her heart as he cooed in response. As he became more animated, his tiny noises replaced the silence in her home and slowly began to fill her heart with happiness again.

"How about a change, yes?"

After carrying him to her dresser, she opened the drawer to fetch a fresh cloth nappy, and in the corner of the drawer, the small felt bag holding the coin caught her attention. As she ran her fingertips along the coin inside, she thought about the exchange it represented between her and her James: a love that would never die. From the moment she'd learned her child was on the way, she realized that *she* hadn't died. There was still so much life to live, a healthy son to raise, and there was Michael.

Picking up a nappy, she glanced at her little Christmas tree, the berries popping in color next to the warm, crackling fire. Like Christmas magic, her home suddenly drew her in. The light from the soft candles burning, the smell of pine wafting through the air, the logs burning in the fireplace. Michael's graciousness and a town that had held her up since she arrived showed her all she'd gained amid all she'd lost since leaving for America.

The coin hadn't lost its luck yet.

CHAPTER 1



PRESENT DAY

" \mathcal{U} melia... there isn't an easy way to tell you this," her orthopedist began.

Amelia gripped the chair, bracing for what he was about to say. For nearly five years he'd worked hard to keep her on the stage as he carefully repaired her fragile ankle multiple times. But no ballerina's career lasted forever, and they'd both known this day would come eventually.

"I'm afraid it's time to hang up your pointe shoes."

"But, Dr. Reed..." She tried to remain calm against her thudding heart. "Even with limitations?"

There was a knock at the door and they both looked up to see one of his medical assistants pop her head in.

"So sorry to disturb your appointment with Miss Collins, but you have an urgent call on line two. A patient from the surgery yesterday has some complications."

"Thank you, Michelle. I'll just be a few more minutes." Dr. Reed looked back at Amelia when the assistant shut the door. "The limitations were already set before the last surgery, but we're past that point now. As we discussed a few months ago, I had wanted to see how rehabilitation would go this summer but after reevaluating you, the injury last spring was just too much for your ankle."

Amelia dropped her gaze to her hands as the room spun, and her vision blurred behind a veil of tears. Even though she'd been half expecting this news, it still hit her hard. Ballet had been her life for as long as she could remember. She didn't know who she was if she wasn't a dancer anymore.

"I just can't believe it's over. I thought I had at least five more years in me."

Dr. Reed nodded. "You're in your early thirties, so I can understand the determination to push the career longer. But remember, every dancer is different and, for you, that ankle is just not able to endure dancing anymore. A stage-three tear of both the anterior talofibular *and* calcaneofibular is rare and serious."

"But this year's performance is *The Nutcracker*," she said, as if it would change her doctor's mind. "My brother hasn't seen me perform in it." In all the years she'd danced in the classic ballet, her twin brother, Andrew, had missed it. School, travel, work, and his diagnosis of leukemia three years prior, had gotten in the way. He was home sick from treatment the last time she took the stage as the Sugar Plum Fairy. But Andrew had been doing better all spring and summer and could finally see her perform.

"Amelia, I know this is almost impossible to hear, but you deserve my honesty. I can't clear you. After two other injuries on those ligaments, it's just not repairable and not safe to dance again."

Despair rose in her. "I really tried hard with rehab."

"I know you did, and you did everything correctly."

"I followed every exercise, never missed appointments with physical therapy, and rested fully. I can do it again."

Dr. Reed only looked at her with sad eyes, shaking his head.

When management at the theater announced last summer that they were performing *The Nutcracker* that year, she was thrilled. It had only prompted her to work harder with her rehabilitation.

But it had all been for nothing.

HER DOCTOR STOOD TO ESCORT HER OUT, AND SHE KNEW THERE WAS NO more discussion. All she could think about was being carried onto the stage last spring after that tragic fall to take a bow, not knowing it was her last. It was over. She couldn't believe it. Her ballet career had come to a close.

Back outside, the scent of winter lingered in the air, a hushed stillness seeming to permeate New Haven's usual busy vibes as everyone awaited the first snowfall. It was only the end of October, but the city was already putting up festive décor, yet she'd hardly noticed. Her anxiety from the crushing blow of her ballet career ending grabbed hold of her, and she walked over to a nearby bench and sat down—completely missing the wonder of the first light flakes that danced gracefully down from the gray clouds. Closing her eyes amid the angst of the devastating news, she leaned forward to steady her breathing.

A city bus pulled up nearby, the sound of its brakes snapping her upright, and she finally noticed the snow—now falling at full speed. A cold gust of wind prompted her to stand and hail a taxi. Her apartment wasn't far, but she wanted to get home as quickly as possible. She couldn't bear to be in public any longer in her present state of mind.

Relieved when a taxi pulled up with her first wave, she got inside the warm cab.

"Nineteen High Street please," she instructed the driver.

Within a few minutes she'd opened the door to her small apartment and immediately felt a push against her legs, followed by deep purrs from below. Looking down, she saw her cat, Mocha, rubbing between her ankles as if she knew her owner was sad. After taking off her coat, Amelia bent over and scooped up the cat to snuggle her on the couch. She stroked the cat's soft brown fur, trying to collect her thoughts. The comfort of Mocha's

purring helped her relax, until her phone buzzed from the front hallway. She got up, knowing exactly who was calling.

"Hey, Sam," Amelia answered, her pulse picking up again. "You have perfect timing. I just got home from the appointment." Making her way back to the couch, she tried to prepare for this difficult discussion with her lead director of production.

"I have Ms. Higgens here with me and you're on speaker," Sam said.

"The snow is picking up. Snow this early means a rough winter ahead of us. Glad you made it home safely," Ms. Higgens said in the background.

She was the theater's ballet master, but she always looked out for her dancers with her strong motherly instincts. Amelia had danced under her instruction for nearly eight years, which would only make this news even harder to share. Amelia swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and sank onto the couch.

"I know you've been waiting all day, so I'm just going to say it—"

"Amelia, please remember we are both here for you," Ms. Higgens said.

"Dr. Reed said..." she started but couldn't get the words out. This was going to be the hardest moment in her entire career, even worse than the appointment earlier that day. These two women had held her up through everything—challenging roles, conflicts with other dancers, a string of less serious injuries, and even personal traumas, like when she first got the news of her twin's illness. They had helped her grow and shaped her into the professional ballerina she was today. How could she say goodbye?

"Deep breaths, dear, and take your time," Ms. Higgens said.

"Thank you. This is so hard." Amelia inhaled sharply before resuming. "Dr. Reed confirmed today that the tears were too intense to rebuild and return to the stage." She squeezed her eyes shut against the brief silence on the other end.

"Oh, Amelia..." Sam said.

"We can always get a second opinion," Ms. Higgens suggested, her voice getting louder as she picked up the phone. "There's a doctor in New York City who—"

"Dr. Reed is at the top. He's the absolute best there is at what he does," Sam reminded them. "His wait list is nearly two years long and he specializes in athletes and dancers. Amelia, you could certainly get a second opinion, though, if you'd like."

Amelia appreciated Ms. Higgens's suggestion, but Sam was right. There was no one better than Dr. Reed. Dancers flew in from all over the country to see him. If he said her career was over, that meant it was over. Getting a second opinion wouldn't do anything but give her false hope.

"I trust Dr. Reed fully, and..." Amelia paused with a sigh. "And something in my heart knows he's right. It's time to hang up my dancing shoes."

"Do you need us to come over?" Sam asked.

"I could pick up your favorite red curry chicken soup from that Thai market," Ms. Higgens added.

Amelia hesitated, not wanting to be rude, but she just wanted to sit with Mocha alone and think. "Thank you, but I don't want you heading out in this weather. I think I'm going to take a hot shower and relax. I kind of need to be by myself with this news tonight. I also need to break the news to Lucy." Lucy, a dance partner and her closest friend since beginning with Northeast Performing Arts, was going to be heartbroken.

"Good luck with Lucy, I know how close you two are. And we understand, honey. Just have a quiet night in and watch a good Christmas movie," Ms. Higgens said. "Are all your decorations up? Christmas lights always make me happy."

Amelia looked around her blank apartment. "November is still a week away."

"Which means Christmas is practically here," Ms. Higgens responded.

Amelia chuckled, knowing how much her teacher loved the holidays. She'd never forget that first Christmas season she was contracted, and Ms. Higgens began stringing lights throughout the studio before Halloween was over.

"I'm getting there," she lied to appease the woman.

"Both our phones are on if you need to call us at any point tonight. Remember, I'm only a few blocks from you," Sam said.

"I'm so grateful for your support. This has been so tough," Amelia said, leaning back on the couch, feeling fatigue begin to wash over her. The intensity of the day had finally caught up to her.

"And there's absolutely no rush, but we will need to meet with you to sign some paperwork," Sam said gently. "I'm sorry to even bring that up, but the theater management will have my head if I don't."

"I know. Don't apologize. I'll be in on Friday."

After hanging up, Amelia searched for Lucy's number and hit call. When she got her voicemail, she slowly exhaled in relief. She knew her friend was waiting on the update, but Lucy was also in Florida visiting her parents before the busy holiday season officially began and she would be caught at the theater for endless hours of practice. Amelia hated the idea of bringing such bad news to her while she was spending time with her family.

After leaving a message, Amelia looked up at the ceiling, not knowing what would happen next. Her ballet career was *over*. Thankfully, she had more than enough money to give her plenty of time to figure out her next step. Not that she danced for the money—she danced because she couldn't imagine doing anything else. She had goals she'd still wanted to meet and leading roles she strived to get. But none of that would happen now. Luckily, after taking on extra modeling jobs in her twenties, growing a large social media following as a dance influencer, and gaining many sponsorships, she had built up a hefty savings—not to mention money her

grandparents had left her and Andrew when they both passed a few years prior.

Her grandfather had owned a successful commercial and residential building company and had always told her that he and her grandmother wanted to make sure she and her brother had "nest egg" money. Owning a home had not been at the forefront of her mind during all those years of dancing, but she invested the money well for her future, knowing ballet wouldn't be forever. Suddenly, that future was now...

Her eyes began to sting all over again. As she sat up to get a tissue, her door buzzed.

She went to the intercom, hoping it was just someone at the wrong apartment buzzer, which happened often.

"Hello?"

"Amelia? It's me, Mom," Kimberly Collins said through the speaker.

"Mom? Come on up," Amelia said, quickly pressing the button to open the front door so her mother could get out of the cold snow. So much for being alone for the night...

Glancing at the mirror in the hallway, she wiped her swollen eyes and used her fingers to comb out her long brown hair that was matted from laying on the couch, but gave up. There was no hiding this from her mother.

When she opened the door, her mother took one look at her, and Amelia lost control, her emotions overtaking her. Her whole body shook with sobs as she fell into her mother's arms. She held Amelia the same way she always had when she was a child.

After a long moment, Amelia stepped back from the embrace so her mother could come inside. Kimberly set down an overnight bag and unwrapped her scarf, which had freshly fallen snowflakes all over the black fabric, and unzipped her coat.

"I can't believe how much snow we're already getting," Kimberly said, shrugging out of her coat.

"Here, let me take your things." Amelia took the coat and hung it up in the front closet. "I should've known you would have already suspected before I had a chance to call." She mustered up a weak smile. It always brought her comfort that her mother somehow knew things, even before they were on her own radar.

Kimberly stood in the living room. "Well, this is the most un-Christmasy apartment in all of New Haven. I'll help you fix that."

Amelia's smile widened, and she suddenly longed for her childhood home in Northampton, Massachusetts, that she knew her mother had already decorated to the max by now. Kimberly Collins topped even Ms. Higgens with Christmas decorating.

"I know you will, Mom. Let's go have a seat on the couch."

"Let me make you some tea first. Do you have chamomile?"

"Top-right cupboard next to the stove," Amelia said.

Her mother headed into the kitchen, her expression seeming a bit off, but Amelia figured she was just worried about her. A few minutes later, she returned with two steaming cups of tea and placed them on the coffee table in front of them.

"Now, tell me what Dr. Reed said."

Kimberly crossed her legs, shifting toward her daughter. Amelia filled her in on everything. By the end, both women were crying, and Amelia fell onto her mother's lap just as she had when she was six years old and found out she didn't get the lead role in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. It had taken her mother hours to convince her that it didn't mean she was a failure.

Amelia sat back up. "I don't know what to do now, Mom."

"Amelia"—her mother reached for her hand—"remember that nasty ballet teacher you had growing up?"

Amelia rolled her eyes. "Ms. Ruth? How could I forget. The woman's words still haunt me to this day."

"Well, they shouldn't. Know why?"

"Why?"

"Because you made it. All that woman did was bring you down. And you became one of the best ballet dancers the theater has ever had. I still wish you'd told me she had been treating you so badly well before you did."

"I know. Keeping that from you and Dad was silly."

"I would have had her fired in seconds. Oh, that woman still makes me mad." Her mom held up a clenched fist with her free hand.

Ms. Ruth *had* been vicious and mean—no one should treat children the way she had—but that didn't mean the things she'd told Amelia had been totally wrong. "Pay attention, Amelia! There's no room for laziness or distraction in ballet. I'm not going to let you waste my time by giving me anything less than perfection."

"If only she could see me now... ruining my career by getting distracted at the wrong moment." All it had taken was a second of her thoughts wandering—but that had been enough to make her fall. And now she had to live with the consequences.

"Oh, sweetheart, it was just bad luck. You're human and not built like a robot. Injuries happen." Her mother squeezed her hand.

Amelia forced a smile. She didn't believe in luck and, like Ms. Ruth always said, "Bad luck is the excuse people use when they know they didn't try hard enough"—but she'd had this argument with her mother before, and she didn't want to have it again. Not now.

"You'll overcome this," Kimberly insisted. "And your father and I are here every step of the way. You don't need to have all the answers right this minute, but they will come. Your professional dancing days may be done, but your life is far from over."

Amelia took in her mother's words, wanting to believe them, but she struggled with the idea. What could there be for her other than ballet?

But she nodded, appreciating having her mom with her. "I thought I wanted to be alone tonight, but having you here is really helping. Thank you for driving the two hours in this weather to be here." The silence caught her attention and she noticed her mother looking down on her lap. "You okay, Mom?"

Her mother looked up toward the window, watching the snow dance around the streetlight. "I knew today's doctor's appointment was going to be tough, so I'd already planned to come. But..."

"But what?" Amelia felt her nerves pick up all over again. "Is something wrong with you or Dad?"

"No, we're both just fine," her mother assured her. "It's... your brother, Amelia."

A familiar knot in her stomach began to form and from the look on her mother's face—she knew.

"Andrew..." She could barely get his name out.

"I'm afraid he took a turn for the worse..." Her mother's eyes brimmed with tears again. "The doctors haven't given up hope, but they're unsure at this point how treatment will go this time."

Amelia felt as if she couldn't draw in enough air. Andrew was not just her brother, but her closest friend. Even though he'd been sick for a while, and they had been fully informed and prepped by his team of doctors that anything could happen, every day she'd held hope that he would fully recover.

Standing up, she looked toward her bedroom. "Okay, I need to go pack and we will leave first thing in the morning. Did he start treatment yet?"

"Amelia..." Her mother patted the couch. "Sit down."

"But I need to be with him." Amelia hesitated, but dropped back down. "Where is Dad? Is he with him? What about Diana?" Andrew's wife, Diana, was his college sweetheart, and she couldn't imagine what she must have been feeling. She needed to get to both of them.

"Andrew is home. Where your father and I, along with Diana, can take care of him. They decided that moving in with us was the best thing for him right now so we can all be there."

Shaking her head, Amelia tried to stay calm. First the news from Dr. Reed and now this? How could this all be happening in one single day?

"But *I'm* not there. Let me just go pack. Diana has her fourth graders to teach all day, and you both need help. I can—"

"Amelia. When I told him I was coming to see you after your appointment today, he had one request."

"So he knows?" she asked with a heavy heart. The last thing she'd want was for her brother to have the stress of her career-ending injury on his mind. But she should have known he'd sense how it would go because, deep down, *she* had sensed how it would go. They could always read each other like no one else. They called it their "twintuition."

"Of course he does," her mother said. "He knows you better than anyone and could see right through the countless times you told us all not to worry."

A memory of them as children popped into Amelia's head. They were only eight and she'd been practicing around the clock for her upcoming summer performance. Andrew had sat with her for hours watching and clapping. He'd never been jealous of the attention she got as a dancer. On the contrary, he'd always been her biggest fan. As the years went by, he had continued to cheer her on at as many performances as he could—front and center. Even after he fell ill a couple years back and he couldn't attend like he'd used to, his support never faltered.

"What was his request?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

"That you don't come rushing home. Because he's still waiting on *The Nutcracker*."

Her mother held up her hand when Amelia began to protest. How could she do that now her days on the stage were over? "I know," Kimberly said. "I was confused, too, but he was adamant."

"I wish I'd never told him about the company's pick of *The Nutcracker* this year. I got his hopes up—"

"And you kept your head up with a positive mindset all the way until this appointment. You did nothing wrong."

Amelia stood and began searching the living room. "I need to find my phone so I can at least call him."

"Amelia, just breathe. Give yourself some time tonight to digest everything." Her mother went over and took her hand to guide her back to the couch. "He also said he knew your career in dance wasn't over because of his—"

"Twintuition," Amelia filled in for her.

Her mother nodded. "I haven't heard that in a long time."

Their connection as twins had always been hard to describe, but at the base of it was the sense that whenever one was in doubt, the other knew it would be okay. And, for the most part, they'd been right. But for the first time in her life, she wasn't so sure Andrew's words would amount to anything.

"I don't know."

"Well, who can really say what the future might hold? Things look bleak right now, but tomorrow could be your lucky day. Come on, let's get some sleep."

Luck. That word again. Mocha followed Amelia to her room and curled up beside her when she lay across the bed. Pure exhaustion pushed against how wired she felt, despite how much her body screamed for sleep. Her thoughts were swirling as she turned to her side, stroking Mocha while her conversation with Andrew from the day she told him about *The Nutcracker* played in her mind. They'd both been so happy at the thought of him finally getting to see her perform in that show. Later that day she had ordered a

Nutcracker ballet ornament she'd found online and sent it to him with a note.

Something to add to your tree and remind you of all there is to look forward to while you continue your recovery. Can't wait for the performance!

Fresh tears spilled from her eyes. It looked like neither one of them had anything to look forward to. Not anymore.

Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of The Christmas Coin! You can continue reading Amelia and Ben's story in paperback, ebook or audiobook.



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