

Christmas Charms

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UNCLE HUGH WINKS AT ME. “I heard you were in town for the holidays.”

I’m sure you did. I paste on a smile and try not to think about my absolute certainty that everyone in Owl Lake is talking about my ride through town earlier in Aidan’s truck. It was *not* a rescue, despite how it looked.

Hugh’s grin widens, and he tries to hug me, but it’s difficult with my platter of mortifying gingerbread firemen stuck between us. I pray for fate to be kind and intervene just enough for my cookies to slide to the floor and immediately get trampled underfoot so no one will ever see them, but alas, no such luck.

“Who’s this?” Hugh asks, ruffling the fur on Fruitcake’s head.

The dog’s entire back end wiggles with delight.

“Oh, that’s Fruitcake. Ashley’s dog,” my mom says.

Uncle Hugh straightens and rests his hands on his hips. “That makes perfect sense.”

“It does?” I say, before I can stop myself. I can’t help it because so far, nothing about Fruitcake has made sense.

“Sure. When you were just five or six, you said you wanted a big yellow dog for Christmas. You asked Santa for that very thing at the Firefighters’ Toy Parade.

All this furry guy needs is a shiny red bow around his neck.” Uncle Hugh laughs. “As I recall, that was an important detail in your Christmas wish.”

“Oh, that’s right!” My mom nods. “I’d forgotten that you specifically wanted a yellow dog with a fancy red bow. You were so earnest and so certain about what you wanted—but you were also so little at the time. We weren’t sure you were ready to take care of a pet.”

I nod as if in a daze.

A big yellow dog with shiny red bow.

I’d forgotten the specifics of that particular Christmas wish, but now they feel strangely significant because the wish seems to have inexplicably come true.

Or not. There’s got to be a rational explanation. I glance down at Fruitcake. If only he could talk, then I could demand one.

“Come on in.” Uncle Hugh opens the door wider and waves us inside. “The guys are going to be thrilled to see you two. Your cookies are always one of the highlights of Christmas around here, Martha.”

He leads us through the dispatch area, toward the large common room where two rows of plush leather recliners embroidered with the OLF D crest face a big flat-screen television. A long, rustic table sits just past the TV area, and I know from experience that this is where the on-duty firemen share their meals and where the big communal dinners are held on holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, when the firehouse is full of the OLF D’s family members. It’s the same table where I sat, year after year, before I moved away from Owl Lake. Somewhere on its worn chestnut surface, it probably still has marks from my old crayons.

Firefighters are milling about the station—most I recognize, but a few I don’t. Word spreads quickly that

there are cookies on the premises, and soon we're surrounded by a group of men and women in dark blue OLF D sweatshirts. I'm immediately swept up in a wave of hugs and introductions. Fruitcake is showered with pats and adoration, while I nod and make polite conversation. But all the while, I'm hopelessly distracted, waiting for Aidan to make an appearance.

His absence should be a relief. After all, it's exactly what I'd hoped for. Instead, I'm hit with a nonsensical tug of disappointment.

I inhale a steadying breath, but then Aidan strolls toward our group from the direction of the locker room and sleeping quarters. Fruitcake bounds toward him, wagging a greeting, and I'm suddenly overly aware of the sound of my own heartbeat.

He's here.

Of course he is. He *works* here, what did I expect? Still, I have an urge to pitch my sad little cookies into the nearest trash can before he can see them. This is like our high school home economics class all over again.

Aidan greets my mom with a friendly hug but gives me a wide berth after waving and saying hello. The space between us seems infinite.

"Hi," I say back.

The rest of the group clusters around the platters of cookies my mom made, gushing over her artistry and her commitment to the annual cookie tradition. I'm hoping no one notices my lone tray of gingerbread firemen. Maybe they'll get overlooked in the mix.

But of course Aidan notices them straightaway, and his lips quirk into a grin.

"Sure, *those* you smile at," I mutter. I understand why he doesn't seem happy to see me, I really do,

but I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me sad. I never wanted to hurt Aidan.

He looks up, blue eyes dancing with amusement. "You made these yourself, didn't you?"

I feel impossibly warm all of a sudden, despite the snowflakes swirling outside. "How could you tell?"

He picks up one of the cookies and squints at it. "They look great, but I'm trying to figure out why the gingerbread man is holding a giant spaghetti noodle."

"That's a firehose," I say flatly.

Matt, one of the firefighters I met a few minutes ago, reaches for a gingerbread man, and Aidan shakes his head. "You might not want to do that if these are anything like the cookies Ashley made back in high school. As I recall, she started a fire in the home economics lab."

"It wasn't a fire," I protest. "Just a minor smoke incident."

Matt laughs. "Thanks for the warning, but I'm sure they're delicious."

He bites into the gingerbread man's leg and his eyes widen with something that really doesn't look like delight. He chews for a ridiculously long time before slipping the rest of the cookie to Fruitcake when he thinks I'm not looking. Fruitcake wolfs it down, and then promptly spits it out.

Aidan notices, of course, and I long for the floor of the fire house to open up and swallow me whole.

But then Aidan reaches for one of my cookies, pops it into his mouth and swallows it after a few quick chews. Then he eats another and another, holding my gaze the entire time.