

Christmas Charms

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TBLINK AS HARD AS I possibly can. Is there an ex-boyfriend firefighter charm on Betty's bracelet that I somehow failed to notice? This can't possibly be real.

Then he scowls at me, and I know that I'm really standing face-to-face with Aidan in full hero mode. Because there's nothing at all imaginary about his cranky expression.

Nice to see you too, Firefighter Grumpy Pants.

Ugh, why does he have to be a firefighter? He looks like he's on his way to pose for one of those fireman bachelor calendars. So strong. So *heroic*.

"Ashley." He clears his throat.

There's a slight tremor of surprise to his voice, and the fact that he seems as shocked as I am makes me feel a tiny bit better—the smallest possible amount. He's clearly more rattled to see me here in Owl Lake than he was back in Rockefeller Plaza.

"Aidan," I manage to say, and wow, why on earth do I sound so...so....*breathless*?

He arches a brow, and I wish I could melt away and vanish like Frosty the Snowman. "You've come home."

Finally. The word floats between us, unspoken but very much there.

He's judging me—for all the Christmases I've

missed in Owl Lake, for leaving the way I did all those years ago, for so many things. Or maybe he's not. Maybe I'm judging myself.

I lift my chin to fully meet his gaze. When did he get so tall? He seems even bigger than he had just a few days ago. "Yes, but what are you doing here? You told me you worked in the city."

"No, I didn't," he counters.

Didn't he?

His frown deepens. "I said I was working. I was there to collect a donation for the Firefighters' Toy Parade."

So he really, truly *is* a fireman—right here in Owl Lake at the station where my dad used to be the chief. I can't believe Dad failed to mention this significant fact. We're definitely having a chat about that when I get back from the city.

Right...the city...where I'm supposed to be heading right now instead of shivering on the platform in Owl Lake, thinking about how handsome my high school sweetheart looks in his OLF D uniform, glowering expression and all.

"Okay, well." I swallow hard. There's an annoying lump in my throat all of a sudden, for reasons I don't even want to begin to contemplate. "It was nice seeing you again. I have a train to catch."

The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize there's not another traveler in sight. While I was right about there being plenty of people in the station, I'm the only person in the vicinity who's not wearing either fire-retardant clothing or some sort of railway uniform, and the train itself is nowhere to be seen.

"No, you don't." Aidan shakes his head. "The storm

shut down the station. The tracks are iced over, and we're out here supervising the de-icing efforts. Everything should be back up and running in forty-eight hours."

"Forty-eight hours?" My jaw drops.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." A muscle in Aidan's jaw flexes. Still, his expression is a blank slate. He's as stiff and unyielding as a robot.

He didn't used to be this way. I don't like it. I'd almost prefer more glowering.

"But I can't wait that long," I say. "I need to get back to Manhattan right away."

He narrows his gaze at me. His eyes are the same striking shade of blue they've always been. *Forget-me-not blue*. The lump in my throat grows threefold. I could never, ever forget Aidan Flynn, not if I tried.

Nor would I want to. I just wish he would smile at me again, for old times' sake. Aidan always had the best smile. It never failed to make me weak in the knees.

"I just saw you two days ago in the city. You have to have just gotten here," he says stonily.

"I got in late last night." Not that it's any of his business.

"So you've been home all of twelve hours, and you're already itching to go back." He shakes his head and looks about as thrilled as a kid who just found a lump of coal in his stocking on Christmas morning. "Sounds about right."

I've changed my mind about the glowering. I definitely prefer the robot treatment. But at least with this last comment, his standoffishness suddenly seems more understandable. To him, I'm just the girl who

broke his heart and turned her back on her small town for a new life in the big city.

But that's not who I am.

Is it?

My chest grows tight as I realize all available evidence supports his theory. Here I am—back for my first Christmas in Owl Lake in years—and all I can think about is finding a way to get back to Manhattan.

“It's not what you think,” I say, blinking against a sudden whirlwind of snow flurries. “This is just a day trip. I'm coming right back.”

He goes silent for a beat. After a long, painfully awkward pause, his blue eyes soften—ever so slightly. He clears his throat. “Not today, you're not. All trains have been cancelled.”

Oh yeah. He already mentioned that, didn't he?

“That's unfortunate.” I try my best not to sound like a snobbish big city princess, and to be honest, I'm not sure I'm successful. What would Aidan think if he knew I was supposed to be in Paris right now? And why does his opinion still matter after all this time? “I guess I'll call the cab to come back.”

Aidan gives me a slow nod, then squints against the snowfall and glances around at his fellow firemen.

“No need. I can take you home,” he finally says. He zips his jacket the remaining two inches until it's snug against the base of his throat. His neck is thicker than it used to be—corded with muscle.

The Aidan I used to know was a boy; the person standing in front of me right now is very much a man.

“You don't have to do that,” I say softly. For some reason, his kindness is more difficult for me to accept than his earlier crankiness.

He shrugs one shoulder. "I know."

And then he strides toward a shiny red fire truck parked parallel to the railway tracks, leaving me no choice but to follow.

My high school sweetheart is giving me a ride home. In a fire truck.