

Christmas Charms

Teri Wilson

“*A*SHLEY, HEY.” HIS WHOLE FACE lights up at the sight of me. Heat radiates through my chest in spite of the snowflakes drifting through the air. “I think we’re about ready, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I have something for you first.” I’m holding a small wrapped package behind my back, and when I present it to him, he tips his head to the side and regards me thoughtfully. My breath catches in my throat, and I feel bashful all of a sudden. Vulnerable, like Fruitcake would probably feel if he accidentally broke free from his leash.

“Merry Christmas,” I say, and it comes out far more breathy than I intended. Why is this so difficult? It’s only a Christmas gift.

Probably because it’s more than just a simple gift. It means something. My hands start to tremble, so once he takes the wrapped package, I shove them into my coat pockets, out of view. Aidan means something.

“Thank you.” His eyes fill with warmth. “You want me to open it now?”

I nod, because I don’t quite trust myself to speak.

He removes the shiny giftwrap with care, and when he lifts the lid from the box, the pocket watch rests face-down on a bed of tissue paper. He glances up at me, and I smile. Our gazes stay locked for a

quiet, breathless moment, and the tender look in his gaze seems to wrap itself around me like a blanket. He knows this gift isn't something I've bought from a store. It's a tiny piece of my heart, wrapped up in red paper. Just for him.

The parade is set to wind its way through Owl Lake any minute, but it feels like time has somehow come to a standstill. We're caught in a tremulous moment, a sublime season that's no longer part of our past, but isn't quite the future either. It's just us, Aidan and me, in the here and now. And I realize if I had one more Christmas wish, it would be to stay here where things are simple and uncomplicated for as long as we possibly can. But I don't even know what a wish or a charm like that would look like. I only know how it feels—like a gift from a Secret Santa, like snowfall on Christmas morning, like midnight on New Year's Eve.

Like every sort of holiday magic all rolled into one.

Aidan smiles into my eyes, and my head spins like it did when he turned me in circles on the ice at the Santa Skate. Then he slowly turns his attention back to his gift. When he turns the pocket watch over, his gaze goes painfully wistful at what he sees.

"It's my dad's old firefighter badge," I say, although that's obvious. It's light gold, with the seal of the OLF D etched onto its center in deep red enamel. An axe, a ladder, a helmet and a fire hydrant are positioned in each corner, and my dad's badge number—seventy-one—is engraved at the top. "From when he was a rookie. He used to let me play with it when I was a kid. The pocket watch was missing its cover and I wanted to find something special to replace it with. Something just for you."

The air around us is filled with lacy snowflakes and crackling anticipation. Now, more than ever, I wish I could tell what Aidan was thinking.

He shakes his head, and his Adam's apple bobs in his throat. "Ashley, I don't know what to say."

But I do. I've been practicing the words for hours in my head.

"You know how much my dad loves you. He wants you to have it. I talked to him about it and he adored the idea—especially when I told him how important it was to me. The past few days have meant a lot to me, Aidan. More than I can put into words, really." I feel more self-conscious right now than if I were standing on Main Street dressed as one of Santa's elves. "I wanted to give you something special. I hope that's okay."

Aidan's eyes sparkle, and I feel warm all over.

"Of course it's okay." He presses the watch to his heart, and the gesture is so poignant that I can't bear it. "Thank you."

"Merry Christmas," I say, and my voice goes all wobbly. I've never been great at hiding my emotions, but being back in Owl Lake has reduced me to a raw nerve of feelings and hope, want and expectation, too rich and sharp to keep under wraps. Or maybe it's not Owl Lake. Maybe it's just me, remembering what it feels like to want to kiss someone so badly that I can barely think straight.

"Merry Christmas," he says, and as he takes a step closer, his gaze drops to my lips.

He feels it too, then—this heady, glittering pull between us. It's not just me. It's us—Ashley and Aidan.

Years are slipping away, one by one, and this time, neither one of us is doing a thing to stop it.

This is it. This is the moment when we're finally going to kiss, and it's perfect. It's the exact right time. Just like the watch, we're making something new out of something lost and forgotten.

My pulse is racing, and I'm so happy I could cry. Visions of mistletoe dance in my head as I lean toward him, welcoming his warmth, his evergreen scent and the years of shared memories that dance in his eyes. This is where I belong...right here. Always and forever.

But just as Aidan lowers his head to mine, someone in the periphery calls my name.

"Ashley!"

Then my perfect Christmas kiss ends before it even begins as I realize who's walking toward me.