

NEWS

'THE WISHING TREE'

SYNOPSIS

Professor Evan Farnsworth, an English teacher at a picturesque boarding school in Maine, is driving through the countryside when he sees a car in distress. The driver, Madelyn Gurthrie, asks for a ride into town. Late for class, Farnsworth hurriedly drops Madelyn off in town and she walks up a hill to the Wishing Tree, an ancient tree in town that has survived hundreds of years and works as a non-profit to help needy families. As Chairperson of the Wish Foundation, Madelyn oversees as people write wishes on beautiful scraps of paper and tie them to the branches in hopes the magic will make their wish come true around Christmas each year.

At school, Farnsworth's students get a unique lesson about Dickens' "Great Expectations." His students, including nerdy Albert and scholarship student Juliet, are all eagerly discussing their own life's great expectations and wishes when privileged bad boy Drew Breen suddenly announces he doesn't believe in it, thinking the Wishing Tree in town is ridiculous. Discouraged by Drew's behavior, Farnsworth ends class and walks across campus and runs into Clarissa, the beautiful new drama teacher. Clarissa clearly has a crush on Farnsworth and encourages him to come to a faculty Christmas party that night at Headmaster Fitz's home. Farnsworth agrees, but is still suffering severe heartbreak after losing his wife, Elizabeth, and doesn't return Clarissa's advances. That night, he has a dream about his late wife returning home with arms full of Christmas gifts, and when he suddenly wakes up, he fights back tears.

The next morning, Drew is woken with a call from his mother, Amanda, who tells him she and his father are staying on vacation in Paris and he must stay at St. Marks for the holiday. Hurt, Drew ditches class and walks into town, where he visits the Wishing Tree. He starts shouting at everyone hanging their wishes on the branches, telling them wishes don't come true. Madelyn scolds Drew for scaring people away, and he crashes the volunteer table in anger.

Drew is taken to the police station, where Madelyn threatens to press charges. Farnsworth rushes in, immediately embarrassed when he recognizes Madelyn as the woman he helped. He tries to apologize for Drew, and encourages Madelyn not to press charges. The police release him into Farnsworth's care, with the condition he will complete 20 hours of community service at the Wishing Tree each week.

When Christmas break arrives, Farnsworth is put in charge of watching over the students who aren't going home, including Juliet, Albert and Drew. Drew begins his community service at the Wishing Tree, and is surprised when Albert and Juliet arrive to help him, realizing even though he seems like a bad kid, he just needs a friend. The unusual threesome start to get along and start to make the Wishing Tree a bigger success, and Madelyn is thankful for their hard work.

Visiting the orphans at the tree, Farnsworth runs into Clarissa, who invites him out to dinner.

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He hesitates, not wanting to open up just yet. As he prepares to meet her that night, he gets distressed, unsure of himself and missing Elizabeth. Over dinner, he is nervous but Clarissa finally gets him to relax when she asks about his days as a student there. Farnsworth admits he was an even bigger troublemaker than Drew until he met Elizabeth. When she got sick, Farnsworth stayed by her side until her death two years ago. Then, he took the teaching job at the academy, and his students are the only thing that keeps him going.

The next day, Drew's icy mother, Amanda Breen, immaculate in her designer clothes, arrives unexpectedly and demands Farnsworth be fired, believing he is responsible for her son's bad behavior. With the Breen family funding much of the academy's buildings and programs, Amanda has the power to get Farnsworth terminated, and there is nothing the headmaster can do. Meanwhile, at the Wishing Tree, Albert's new hot chocolate recipe and donations from local bakeries are generating tons of donations. As the kids excitedly sell concessions, their fun is cut short when Drew notices his mother arrive. Amanda takes Drew back to campus, very upset at Farnsworth. Drew defends his favorite teacher, saying he has learned a lot from Farnsworth, and even made new friends. Amanda dismisses him and tells him to pack his bags. They are leaving in the morning and Drew is being sent to military school.

Back on campus, Farnsworth packs his boxes, feeling like a failure. Drew, also devastated, waits in the chapel for his friends, and Juliet arrives first. They are both torn up Drew has to leave, admitting they each have feelings for each other. Just before they can share a kiss, Albert arrives and the three decide they have to do something to stop Farnsworth from leaving, quickly hatching a plan. Soon, Farnsworth can't find any of the kids, and he starts to panic. Forced together to search the dorms, Amanda and Farnsworth argue, and Farnsworth informs her Drew only acts out to get his parents attention. Amanda coldly turns away.

As they search Drew's room, Amanda is surprised to learn Drew won an essay contest. Farnsworth tells her he wrote about his favorite family memory, and as Amanda reads the framed essay on her son's dorm wall, she is brought to tears, realizing she hasn't been the best mother. She's known all along Drew doesn't look up to her—he looks up to Farnsworth. Farnsworth tries to comfort her, before noticing Drew's sheets are missing. He discovers Albert's are too, and the paint from the art studio is gone. He starts putting clues together.

The kids are running toward town to an old abandoned house off the highway where they plan to hang their makeshift banners from the roof for everyone passing into town to see. Juliet and Drew sneak into the old, creaky house. Climbing up to the roof, they anchor the sheet with bricks and let it fall, proclaiming "SAVE PROFESSOR FARNSWORTH!" Drew is pleased with their work, believing Farnsworth would be proud, until suddenly, the roof gives way and Drew plummets two floors below, covered in debris and unconscious.

Juliet immediately calls Farnsworth, who is with Amanda. They hurry to the old house and Farnsworth rushes inside and starts to dig Drew out of the debris. He is able to get Drew out just in time as the building falls apart. Police and paramedics surround them as they emerge

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from the collapsing house. Seeing all Farnsworth has done for her son, Amanda apologizes to him and promises to get him rehired. As Drew is taken into an ambulance, he confesses to Farnsworth he made a wish at the Wishing Tree that day—that he could come back to St. Marks next semester, and that Farnsworth could keep his job. Farnsworth is grateful.

While resting at home on Christmas Eve, Farnsworth is visited again by Elizabeth in a dream, where she tells him to move on with his life, and give things with Clarissa a chance. Inspired by his dream, Farnsworth calls Clarissa, inviting her to be his date to the Wishing Tree lighting ceremony that night. She is delighted.

Dozens of people show up for the lighting, including the orphans, Amanda and Headmaster Fitz. Madelyn starts the ceremony off by introducing the Headmaster, who then calls the orphans up on stage. Fitz proudly announces the orphans have helped the Wish Foundation raise \$10,000 this year, more than ever. Everyone is happy as they mill around after the ceremony, Clarissa close to Farnsworth. She tells him he has one last chance to write a wish, and he says his wish has already come true, before kissing her and wishing her a merry Christmas. The whole group gathers under the tree as snow begins to fall, the branches glistening with a thousand wishes.

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