



A Perfectly Splendid Christmas (On the Way to Christmas)

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Category: Romance

Description: Kacey adores the metropolitan life, but when she gets away to help her sister during a family crisis and run her bakery, she falls in love with former classmate Drew.

The problem: hes a small-town man, and shes a big-city woman. Is their love big enough to overcome such a major difference?

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Kacey Williams watched as her sister wrung her hands and glanced around the counter at the Morningside Bakery. “So, what am

I forgetting?” Danielle Donahue asked, blowing out a puff of air and examining the cash register before turning toward Kacey.

“You know how to work the register, right?”

“Yes, Dani. Don’t you remember last summer when I came for a week and helped you out? I also know that the price list is right

there.” Kacey pointed to the laminated list beside the register while working to keep exasperation out of her tone.

After all, her older sister and her family were going through a tough time, and the last thing she needed was sarcasm from

Kacey. Instead, she would do her best to support her.

Dani frowned. “Sorry. I’m just so stressed out. Without my part-time help, I would have had to close in the afternoons if

you hadn’t come back home to Splendid Lake and offered to help me. Travis’s mother can only watch Kelly in the mornings, so

I would have had to bring her here in the afternoon. And how could I possibly run a bakery with a four-year-old running around?”

Kacey rubbed her older sister's shoulder. "You know I'd do anything for you, Travis, and the girls. I'm just glad I'm teleworking

right now, so I can be here to help you. I don't know how long it'll be before I find someone to split the rent with me in

Charlotte, but I'll stay as long as I can."

Dani sniffed and cleared her throat. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. I've put my heart and soul into this place.

When Travis got laid off, I never imagined it would take this long for him to find another job. I can't believe it's been

almost four months. We've nearly run through our savings. Plus, we've borrowed money from Travis's parents, but I have no

idea how we'll ever pay them back."

"Didn't you say he has an interview today?"

"Yes, but none of the interviews have worked out so far. I'm trying to stay positive, but I don't know what we're going to

do. The bakery isn't enough to keep us afloat."

"Hey, it's okay." Kacey gave her sister's shoulder another squeeze. "Now that we're in November, you're going to have plenty

of orders for Thanksgiving desserts and even more for Christmas parties. It's going to get busier." She smiled. "Soon you're

going to be complaining that I'm not a good enough baker to help you with the orders. I'm sure one of the interviews will

work out for Travis soon. In fact, one of these companies might offer him a job on the spot. In the meantime, I'm here for

you."

"You're the best." Dani picked up a napkin from the counter and wiped at the tears flooding her pale-blue eyes. "I know I

have to be strong, but sometimes it's all I can do to keep it together."

"I have the bakery under control. You go pick up Kelly. I'm sure all these shelves will be empty before I close at six." She

gestured toward the glass-front case filled with delicious-looking and smelling treats—a variety of cupcakes, pies, cakes,

tarts, and breads.

"Thank you." Dani untied her bright-blue apron and removed her matching baseball cap with the Morningside Bakery logo from

her long, light-brown hair. She stepped into the back of the bakery, where a line of ovens, a sink, a large table, and lines

of cabinets made up the kitchen. Beyond it was Dani's office, a walk-in freezer, a stockroom, and a restroom.

"Oh, and please don't forget that Riley is going to walk from school to the

community center next door for the children's

choir practice." Dani placed her apron and hat on the counter.

Kacey leaned on the doorway. "You're letting her walk from the school to downtown with her friends?"

"It's only a few blocks, and she'll be with a big group of kids. Their practice ends at six. She knows to come here after."

She gathered up her purse and pulled out her keys, which jingled in her hand. "Do you mind giving her friend Colleen a ride

home? She only lives a block away from me."

"Of course I don't mind. I remember where she lives. They're starting practices now for the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival?"

"That's right."

"Halloween was only a few days ago. Isn't it a little early?"

"Not really. The festival is only a little over a month away, and they're practicing on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school.

Today is the first session." Dani glanced at the clock on the wall above the industrial-size refrigerator. "Oh no. I have

to run. Peggy will be late for work if I don't hurry. Thanks a million, baby sis. See you later!" With a wave of her hand

she rushed out the back door to her waiting Honda Odyssey.

Kacey waved and then returned to the front of the bakery. She glanced around the store, taking in the sea of wooden tables

and chairs where customers liked to enjoy their pastries and the photos of all kinds of goodies that adorned the baby-blue

walls.

The bakery sat in the heart of downtown Splendid Lake on Main Street. The quaint little downtown shopping area was one of

the many reasons she loved her hometown, even though she had chosen to stay in Charlotte after college.

Dani had always dreamed of owning a bakery on Main Street since she and Kacey had both grown up enjoying the town's seasonal

festivals and loved visiting the little stores there.

Moving to the window, Kacey looked out toward the stores that had been the backdrop of her childhood memories. The Christmas

Shop was open year-round, and there was the Warner—Splendid Lake's single-screen movie theater—the Flower Shoppe, the Coffee

Bean, and Scoops, the local ice cream parlor. The town's longtime family restaurant, the Splendid Kitchen, was known for its

delicious and versatile menu. Like all the shops, it was owned and operated by local

residents. The town hall, library, fire

station, and police station all encircled the town square.

She hugged her chest as memories of the times she'd spent downtown with her family flooded her mind. They had attended all

the seasonal festivals together. She recalled sitting on her father's shoulders while watching the Fourth of July Parade and

holding his hand and singing "Jingle Bells" during the Christmas Tree Lighting.

Her chest ached with missing him. A massive heart attack had stolen him from their family sixteen years ago when Kacey was

ten and Dani was sixteen. Their lives were never the same.

Kacey turned her attention back to the bakery. After spotting a few crumbs on the floor, she grabbed a dustpan and broom and

began sweeping the dining area.

She was so proud of her older sister when she made her lifelong dream come true and opened the bakery six years ago. For as

long as Kacey could remember, Dani had always loved to bake. She recalled the hours Dani spent in the kitchen with their mother—baking

cakes, cookies, breads, brownies, and pies. Although Dani frequently invited Kacey to join them in the kitchen, Kacey was

more interested in drawing and playing with her dolls than creating delectable masterpieces. But baking seemed to be in Dani's blood, stamped on her DNA.

After high school, Dani went to work at a bakery located a few towns away from Splendid Lake where she learned everything

she needed to know about opening her own bakery in her hometown. And Dani's bakery had been a success despite her family's

recent financial troubles when her husband was laid off from his IT job at a nearby bank. Kacey hoped she could help her sister

keep that dream going for many more years.

The bell above the door chimed, and Kacey looked up as a middle-aged couple came in, both dressed in heavy parkas and stocking

caps and bringing with them a gust of crisp early November air.

"Welcome to Morningside Bakery." Kacey stowed the broom and dustpan before slipping behind the counter to wash her hands and

pull on a pair of plastic gloves.

The couple smiled and greeted her as they approached the display case.

Kacey stood up straight and pushed her thick blonde braid off her shoulder. "Is there something in particular you'd like?"

The woman pointed to the cupcakes. “Those carrot cake cupcakes look divine.”

“They’re one of my favorites too.”

“How about we make that two? Along with two cups of coffee,” the man said as he pulled his wallet from his back pocket.

“Coming right up.”

Kacey was busy serving a line of customers at four o’clock when she peeked toward the front windows and spotted her eight-year-old

niece and her best friend waving. Kacey waved in response before Riley and Colleen hurried next door. Riley’s light-brown

braids fluttered behind her bright-pink backpack as the two girls disappeared from the window.

Kacey turned her attention back to her customers and rang up a pink sheet cake decorated with a colorful unicorn and the words

“Happy Birthday, Corinne.” She tucked it inside one of her sister’s signature bright-blue boxes.

“Is this your sister’s cake?” she asked the teenage boy who frowned as he held up his wallet.

“How could you tell?” the young man deadpanned as he gave her the money.

She shrugged. “Lucky guess.” She handed him change and a receipt. “Tell your sister happy birthday for me.”

He grunted before sauntering toward the exit, passing tables of customers drinking coffee and eating treats as the murmur

of conversations wafted over Kacey.

She continued working her way down the line selling cookies, pastries, cakes, and breads that her sister had baked earlier

that day.

Once the customers were served, she made her way around the dining area, wiping down empty tables. Then she headed to the

kitchen and stowed the paper towels and cleaning spray.

After washing her hands, Kacey returned to the counter just as her phone vibrated in her pocket. She retrieved it from her

back pocket and found a text message from her sister:

Stay for supper tonight. Mom is coming too.

Kacey quickly shot back a response: Sounds great. Thanks!

The bell above the door rang and a line of customers walked in just as a chorus of young voices belted out “Joy to the World,”

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the sound reverberating through the wall from the community center next door.

“Welcome to Morningside Bakery,” Kacey called above the children’s chorus.

During the next two hours, she chatted with customers and filled orders as the children next door continued to sing sections

of “Joy to the World” over and over again.

By the time she locked the bakery door at six, she was certain she’d have the hymn stuck in her head on repeat for the next

week.

After cleaning up the dining area and the counters, she quickly packed up the few leftover goodies in a blue box, left her

apron and hat on the counter, and then retrieved her coat, purse, and keys.

Kacey headed toward the front door, expecting to find Riley and Colleen waiting for her, but they weren’t on the sidewalk.

Perhaps Mrs.Hansen, the community choir director, had kept the kids late to share details about the Christmas Tree Lighting.

She slipped out the front door, locking it behind her, and then traipsed down the short length of sidewalk to the community

center as the cold evening air nipped at her nose. Above her the sun had begun to set, sending a beautiful explosion of colors

across the clear November sky.

Kacey nodded greetings to a few familiar faces passing by. As she approached the door, she recalled her mother telling her

the building had once been home to a Blockbuster and then a children's clothing consignment shop. A few years later, the town

council voted to buy the property and convert it into a small community center that offered a variety of classes from karate

and art to yoga and dance.

Kacey pulled on the handle and stepped into the lobby, where a young woman sporting purple highlights in her blonde hair looked

up from a desk while smacking her gum. "Hi. Where is the children's chorus?"

"Last room on the left." The woman pointed before blowing a pink bubble and then popping it with her tongue.

"Thanks." Kacey headed down the hallway, dodging kids running past clad in white karate uniforms.

When she reached the open doorway at the end of the hall, she slipped into the room, where kids and mothers were gathered

in small groups talking, kids were playing, and adults were ferrying kids toward the

door.

Kacey scanned the crowd in search of Riley and Colleen. When she found them standing at the far end of the room behind the

piano, the girls were frowning as a man spoke to them with his back facing Kacey and the rest of the room. Concern filled

Kacey and her eyes narrowed. The community children's choir was supposed to be fun, not a place for children to be reprimanded.

And she couldn't imagine Riley doing anything to warrant a scolding.

She tried to keep her expression friendly as she wove through the noisy crowd, nodding at familiar faces until she arrived

at the piano.

When the girls glanced toward her, Riley grimaced, and Colleen looked down at her feet.

Kacey cleared her throat. "Excuse me. Is there a problem?" The choir director pivoted toward her, and when her gaze met his,

Kacey gasped as she took in Drew Murphy, one of her best friends from school, standing in front of her. "Drew?"

"Kacey?" Drew let out a chuckle as his handsome face broke out into a smile.

Riley's nose scrunched, and she divided a look between Kacey and Drew. "You know my aunt Kacey?"

“We were friends a long time ago,” Kacey said as she drank in the sight of him.

He looked good— really good. He was taller than she remembered, causing her to wonder if he’d had a growth spurt during college, and he looked more

mature and possibly even handsomer too. His dark-brown hair was cut short and gone were the shaggy bangs that had once hung

in his gorgeous green eyes. His angular jaw was clean-shaven and his wide chest and muscular arms filled his gray, long-sleeved

collared shirt well.

She tried to stop the swell of memories that crashed through her mind like waves pounding against the shoreline—their laughter

during study hall, sharing a banana split at Scoops, sitting on the pier at his parents’ enormous lakefront house and watching

the sunset, holding her breath and hoping that he’d finally kiss her while watching a movie. They’d become instant friends

in middle school when they shared a table in art class, and deep in her heart, she’d always craved to be so much more.

But that was a long time ago, and they were older now.

“I thought you were in Charlotte.” He tilted his head as his brow puckered.

“My roommate got married, so I had to give up my apartment until I can find a new roommate. I’m able to work remotely for

a graphic design company for now.” She held up the bakery box. “And I’m also working part-time at the bakery to help my sister

out. I’m saving money for a down payment on a condo—unless I find another roommate first.” She gestured around the room with

her free hand. “I thought Mrs.Hansen was the children’s community choir director.”

Drew nodded. “Technically, she is. I’m filling in this year. Her mother had to have surgery last week, and she had to rush

off to Florida to care for her. She called me last minute and asked me to fill in.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She studied him. “Are you still a music teacher?”

“Yes, at Splendid Lake Middle School.”

“That’s so amazing. I couldn’t imagine standing in front of a classroom every day and teaching. I used to freeze up with stage

fright just giving presentations and speeches in school. The idea of speaking in front of a group is just terrifying!” Kacey’s

eyes wandered down to his left hand, and she was surprised to find it naked. She had assumed that by now some beautiful young

woman would have stolen his heart and convinced him to settle down. Although she and Drew had found each other on social media

a few years ago and shared a few brief conversations, she wasn’t good at keeping up with old friends.

And, if she were honest with herself, there was a part of her that still cared for him and couldn't bear the thought of watching

his life through social media posts—falling in love, getting married, having kids.

She quickly tore her eyes away from his hand and back to his face, hoping he didn't notice where her stare was focused. "You

were having a pretty intense conversation with Riley and Colleen when I walked in. Did they get in some sort of trouble?"

Drew's dark eyebrows rose as he looked at the girls. "What were we discussing when Riley's aunt walked over?"

Riley wound one of her long braids around her finger. "You were telling us not to talk during choir practice," she mumbled

while Colleen gave a solemn nod.

"That's right." Drew turned his emerald eyes back to Kacey. "Riley and Colleen seemed to want to chat and giggle more than

sing."

Kacey turned her best stern look onto her niece. "Is that true?"

Riley's cheeks blushed bright crimson as she nodded.

"You know better than that, Riley Jean," Kacey said, and her niece cast her eyes down toward the toes of her purple sneakers.

“I’ll talk to them in the car,” she told Drew. “I do have a question for you.”

“Okay...”

“So, the bakery is right on the other side of that wall,” she said, pointing in that direction. “And it’s so loud that I feel

like I’m here at choir practice with you. Are you planning to sing more than just ‘Joy to the World’? I think I’m going to

have that song stuck in my head until at least June.”

Drew’s lips twitched. “Well, maybe you should come over and help us learn the song faster so we can move on to something else.”

Kacey laughed, and Drew joined her. She hadn’t realized till now how much she’d missed that sound.

“You really don’t want me helping with choir practice.” Kacey smiled and suddenly realized she was there for a reason. “Well,

we better get going before Colleen’s mom starts to worry.” Kacey motioned toward the exit. “Get your backpacks and coats,

girls.”

The girls scurried across the room.

Kacey faced Drew, and more memories filled her mind. “It was good seeing you.”

“You too. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

Kacey nodded, and Riley and Colleen zipped toward the exit as if their backpacks were jet packs. “I better catch up with them.”

“Take care, Kace.”

As Kacey hurried after them, her heart danced at the idea of spending more time with Drew Murphy.

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“Have a good night,” Kacey called when Colleen climbed out of the back seat of her mint-green Prius.

Colleen waved. “Thank you, MissKacey. Bye, Riley!” The little girl bolted toward the front door of her house with her wavy

black ponytail flowing behind her sparkly purple backpack and her yellow coat.

Kacey turned toward her niece. “So, how are you going to behave at choir next week?”

“I won’t chat or giggle.”

“Promise?”

Riley held up her pinky, and Kacey linked hers with it. “Pinky promise, Aunt Kacey.”

“Perfect.” Kacey smiled. “I’ll make you a deal. If you behave, I won’t tell your parents that Mr.Murphy had to talk to you

and Colleen.”

Her niece’s expression brightened. “You promise?”

“Cross my heart.” Kacey drew an X over her chest.

“Deal!” Riley shook Kacey’s hand.

Kacey backed her car out of the Parker family's driveway and headed down the street.

"Was Mr. Murphy your boyfriend?"

Kacey gave her niece a sideways glance. "No. We were just friends." Unfortunately .
"Why?"

"You seemed really happy to see each other."

Kacey stared out the windshield, pondering her niece's observation. At one point, she had been certain Drew cared for her

in high school, and she was sure he'd ask her to prom. But he never asked her, and only a week before, his best friend, Bennett,

asked, which seemed better than staying home or going alone. To her surprise, Bennett also asked her to be his girlfriend,

and she said yes, even though her heart still belonged to Drew. Soon after, her friendship with Drew was strained, and they

barely spoke until graduation when they said good-bye and wished each other luck at college.

"Aunt Kacey..." Riley sang. "Did you hear me?"

Kacey slowed to a stop at an intersection and faced her niece, who was studying her, her blue eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

“I asked if you saved me any of those strawberry frosted cookies.”

“Actually, yes, there were two left, so I brought them home for you.” She reached back and touched Riley’s nose.

“Thank you.”

Kacey turned left onto Maple Avenue and then steered her Prius into Dani’s driveway, parking behind her mother’s burgundy

Subaru Outback. She gathered up her purse and the bakery box while Riley shouldered her backpack.

They walked up the short driveway to the front porch of her sister’s modest, three-bedroom brick ranch home.

When they reached the door, Riley pulled it open and rushed inside, announcing, “I’m home!”

Kacey chuckled to herself while following her into the family room, where Travis sat on a recliner. The delicious aroma of

garlic bread filled the room and her stomach growled with delight at the thought of her sister’s scrumptious spaghetti and

meatballs.

“Hi, Mommy! Hi, Daddy!” Riley yelled as she sprinted toward her room.

Dani appeared in the kitchen doorway. “Hi, Riley! I made your favorite.”

“Yay!” Riley called before disappearing into her bedroom.

Travis shook his head and smiled at Kacey. “I wish I had half her energy.”

“Me too. How was your day?” Kacey set her purse on the sofa.

Travis shrugged, his smile fading. “It was about the same as all the other days lately. Disappointing. The interview didn’t

go that great.” He picked up a can of Coke from the end table beside him and took a long gulp.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened?” Kacey set the bakery box on the coffee table, shucked her teal coat, and set it on

the sofa beside her purse.

He raked his hand through his short, light-brown hair. “I think I’m overqualified. Everyone is looking to fill entry-level

positions that they can pay less for these days.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I know Dani is going crazy with

worry, and I’ve been telling her it’s going to work out. But honestly, I’m starting to lose hope. I just feel like such a

failure. I’ve let her down.”

“No, you haven’t.” Kacey walked over to him and sat on a love seat beside his recliner. “You’re doing the best you can, and

she knows that. It will work out. Until then I'll help you as much I can."

His smile was sad. "We're both so grateful."

Kacey's heart broke for her sister and brother-in-law and their situation. Travis had been a part of her life for as long

she could remember.

Dani and Travis met their first year of high school when he and his parents moved to Splendid Lake, and they'd been inseparable

since. They even weathered a long-distance relationship when he attended Appalachian State University, and then they married

soon after he graduated.

Kacey was grateful her sister had married such a good man. He always worked hard for his family, and his love for his wife

and daughters was apparent in the gleam of his hazel eyes when he gazed at them.

"How was your day?" he asked before taking another sip of his drink.

"Busy. Dani is going to have a lot of baking to do tomorrow morning."

"Well, at least there's some good news today."

"Auntie!" Kelly came romping down the hallway, her curly blonde pigtails bouncing and her arms up in the air, waving above

her head.

Kacey's mother followed her younger granddaughter, grinning down at the little girl. "Slow down, Kelly. You're going to trip

and go boom."

Mom's light-brown hair was threaded with gray, and her beautiful pale-blue eyes sparkled with love for her children and grandchildren.

Mom seemed much younger than her true age of fifty-seven. Kacey had always thought Dani resembled a younger version of Mom

since they shared the same eye and hair color, while Kacey's hair was blonde and her eyes a deeper shade of blue, like her

father's.

Scooping her four-year-old niece into her arms, Kacey kissed her little head. "Hey, snuggle bug!" Then she smiled at her mother.

"How were things at the elementary school today?"

"The front office was busy as usual," Mom said. "I heard you tell Travis that the bakery kept you hopping too."

"Kace," Dani called from the kitchen, "could you please help me?"

"Of course." Kacey handed Kelly to her mother and then slipped into the kitchen, where Dani stood at the sink, pouring a large

pot of spaghetti into a colander. “Put me to work.”

Dani shook the colander and then poured the pasta into a large bowl. “So the bakery was busy today?”

“I ran out of cupcakes, most of the cookies, and almost all the cakes.” Kacey scrubbed her hands at the sink.

Dani handed her a large bowl of salad and the bowl of pasta. “Can you take these to the table?”

Kacey walked into the dining room, where Travis and the girls had gathered around the table. Then she returned to the kitchen

and found Mom scooping meatballs and tomato sauce from a double boiler into a large serving bowl, and Dani standing at the

refrigerator retrieving a can of Parmesan cheese.

Kacey leaned against the counter next to her sister. “Why didn’t you tell me that Drew Murphy was the choir director?”

“Drew Murphy?” Mom spun toward her with her blue eyes wide.

Dani’s brow puckered. “I thought Mrs.Hansen was the director.”

“Apparently her mother had emergency surgery, and she had to go to Florida to take care of her,” Kacey said, folding her arms

over her waist. “Since Drew is the music teacher at the middle school, Mrs.Hansen asked him to fill in this year.”

“Oh dear,” Mom said. “I hope Dana’s mother is okay.”

Dani nodded. “Me too.”

“I’m sure he’s a wonderful teacher.” Mom smiled. “I remember how talented he was. Couldn’t he play several instruments?”

“That’s right. He could figure out any song on the piano. Then he also learned how to play clarinet, trumpet, and French horn.

He was like a one-man band.” Kacey pushed off the counter and picked up the basket of garlic bread. She couldn’t help but

wonder if he was single, but she shook off her curiosity. After all, she was planning to go back to her life in Charlotte,

and he had built a life here.

Dani touched Kacey’s arm, a smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “What did he say to you?”

“Not a whole lot.” Kacey gave a brief overview of her conversation with Drew, leaving out the part about Riley and Colleen’s

behavior.

Mom’s smile was wide. “I think he’s still single.”

“Ooooh,” Dani sang. “That’s right. You two were always so close. I’m surprised you never dated.”

Me too. “That was a long time ago.”

“But you’re here now,” her sister continued.

Kacey waved her off and carried the bread to the dining room, where she placed it in the center of the long oak table. “It

would never work out between us. His life is here, and mine is in Charlotte.”

“You don’t have to go back to Charlotte.” Mom set four bottles of salad dressing next to the salad. “You’re teleworking here

now. Why not continue to do it?”

“Exactly.” Dani set the Parmesan cheese beside the bowl of meatballs and then took her usual spot across from Travis.

Kacey sank down on a chair beside Riley. “Because I love Charlotte.”

“What’s wrong with Splendid Lake?” Dani’s expression matched her challenge.

Travis looked back and forth between his wife and Kacey. “What are we talking about?”

“There’s nothing wrong with Splendid Lake,” Kacey said. “I love it here, and it will always be my home. But I’ve always dreamed

of owning a place in a city.”

“Would someone please clue me in on what we’re discussing?” Travis asked.

“Hang on. I need to make a point,” Dani told Travis, and he blew out a puff of air. “But what if Drew is your future?”

“Drew who? Murphy?” Travis asked.

Mom wagged a finger. “Or your Christmas miracle.”

“Christmas miracle?” Kacey snorted. “Seriously, Mom? My love life is so pathetic that I need a miracle? Thanks so much.”

Riley yanked the sleeve of Kacey’s long-sleeved white blouse. “May I please have a piece of bread and some spaghetti and meatballs?”

“Bread, peeease!” Kelly announced from her booster seat beside Mom.

Kacey lifted Riley’s plate and added a small pile of spaghetti, a couple of meatballs and sauce, and a piece of garlic bread

to it before handing it back to her. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Riley smiled up at her.

Across the table, Mom made a small plate for Kelly.

Dani added some salad to a bowl and then passed it Kacey. “Well, you’re going to be seeing Drew on Tuesdays and Thursdays

after Riley’s choir practice.” Her expression was smug.

“So Drew is the choir director?” Travis began putting the pieces of the conversation together. “And he’s the same Drew that

Kacey was friends with in school.”

Kacey forked some salad into a bowl before passing it to her mother. “Yes. Now let’s change the subject. Riley needs to tell

you about choir practice.”

Her niece shot her a panicked expression.

“Tell them what song you sang,” Kacey said, her words measured.

“Oh.” Riley’s expression relaxed. “‘Joy to the World.’”

Kacey shook her head. “Yes, over and over again. I heard every word in the bakery.”

“Oh, I know what you mean.” Dani swirled her fork in the air. “You should have been there when the Zumba class was going on

last spring. I was dancing around the bakery along with the pop music.”

Travis snickered. “I’m sorry I missed that.”

All the adults laughed, and Kacey glanced around the table as her heart warmed. She simply adored her family.

“So you like choir?” Mom asked.

Riley nodded while eating a meatball. “It’s fun.”

“I can’t believe the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival is only a month away,” Mom said. “Before you know it Christmas will

be here. Where has the year gone?"

"That means Santa will be coming soon, Kelly." Riley grinned at her baby sister.

"I like Santa," Kelly announced, and everyone laughed.

Dani lifted her glass of water. "Thanksgiving is three weeks from today."

"That's right," Kacey said, forking more salad. "I feel like we were just at church for Easter."

Dani looked at Mom. "Are we going to your house for Thanksgiving again this year?"

Mom nodded. "Sure."

"I'll help cook," Kacey volunteered.

"Oh, don't do us any favors." Travis held his hands up in mock horror.

Kacey pointed her fork at her brother-in-law. "That's not nice."

"But it's true," Mom said as everyone laughed.

Kacey settled back in her chair and laughed along with them.

Yes, it was great to be back in Splendid Lake.

Later, Kacey parked behind her mother's Subaru at the small house her mother had purchased shortly after her father passed

away. While it was painful for Mom, Dani, and Kacey to say good-bye to the four-bedroom, two-story home closer to the lake,

Mom had explained that they needed to downsize so she could manage the bills without Dad's income.

Located a few blocks from Dani's home, the house had a similar floor plan to her sister's house with its moderate-size primary

bedroom, two small bedrooms, two bathrooms, and small kitchen, family room, and dining room.

Once inside, Mom went to take a shower while Kacey retired to the guest bedroom, which had once been Dani's bedroom since

Kacey's bedroom was now Mom's craft and sewing room.

Kacey sat at the desk, powered up her computer, and perused her work email. She clicked through messages from her supervisor,

coworkers, and customers, responding when necessary. Then she checked her calendar and created a list of projects she needed

to address tomorrow.

While she worked, her mind replayed her brief conversation with Drew, and his face filled her mind. She pondered what her

mother and sister had said about her and Drew—that perhaps their time together would happen now, so many years after they'd

last spoken in person. Yet, it seemed impossible that Drew would suddenly be interested after so many years. If he hadn't

liked her as more than a friend back in high school, it seemed preposterous that he would now.

Against her better judgment, Kacey popped over to Facebook and found his profile. She browsed photos of him conducting the

middle school band in the auditorium, smiling with students holding their instruments, laughing with friends, and then photos

of two cats—one fat orange tabby and a gray cat that seemed to always have a look of disdain.

Her eyes flitted to where he'd listed himself as single, and her pulse fluttered.

She dropped her head into her hands and groaned. Who was she kidding? Drew Murphy was handsome, single, outgoing, friendly,

and funny. There was no way he'd ever want to get involved with Kacey, his buddy from school. If they hadn't had a spark back

then, why would they have one now?

But they had both grown and matured. Things might be different. What if Drew's feelings for her changed? What would she do

about it when her life and her career were back in Charlotte?

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Drew set two bowls of wet, stinky, tuna-flavored cat food on the kitchen floor in front of his two yowling cats. “It smells

horrendous, guys. Bon appétit.”

He leaned against the counter and shook his head as Thor, his large orange tabby, and Loki, his gray-and-white feline, scarfed

up the food as if they hadn’t eaten in a week. Then he crossed to the kitchen table and sifted through the pile of mail he’d

carried in from the box at the street, finding a couple of bills, a catalog, and a few advertisements.

After opening his refrigerator and studying the contents for a few moments, Drew pulled out a container of leftover chili

he had cooked over the weekend, and he sighed.

“Chili again,” he mumbled before pulling out a piece of wax paper, covering the container, and slipping it into the microwave.

He pushed a few buttons on the microwave and it hummed to life.

Drew retrieved a bowl, spoon, and a bag of shredded cheese while contemplating his day. It had started out ordinary, with

a typical day at school before rushing to the community center for the first choir practice. And the first practice was also

typical, with a mix of serious students and a few chatty students, but then his day took an unexpected turn when Kacey Williams

popped in out of nowhere.

Kacey Williams.

Never in a million years had he expected to see Kacey again. He smiled as he envisioned her. She was still one of the most

beautiful women he'd ever known with her hair the color of sunshine, deep-blue eyes that reminded him of the ocean, high cheekbones,

pink lips, a long neck, and that smile and laugh that seemed to always go straight to his heart.

That familiar longing and regret that had followed him around since his senior year in high school welled up inside of him.

Drew felt himself falling for Kacey when they were in middle school, but fear of losing her friendship had kept him from asking

her to be his girlfriend.

Then in high school they grew even closer, and he was certain he loved her. As senior year approached, he'd planned to ask

her to prom and declare his feelings for her. Then his nerves caused him to wait too

long, and his so-called best friend,

Bennett Clark, beat him to it and asked her first. To make matters worse, Bennett not only asked her to prom but also asked

her out, and she accepted. Her relationship with Bennett not only shattered Drew's heart, but it also came between them, leaving

their friendship awkward and strained, which was a clear sign she'd chosen Bennett over him.

If only he'd found the courage to be honest with her about his feelings, then maybe they could have been more than friends.

The beeping microwave pierced through his thoughts, and he fetched two pot holders before carrying the container to the table.

The cats, who had both licked their plates clean, sauntered toward his small family room, where Drew was certain they would

return to their favorite spots on the sofa and sleep away the evening.

Drew scooped chili into his bowl, added shredded cheese, and then began to eat while his mind continued to swirl with thoughts

of Kacey.

A few years ago, he looked her up on social media and was shocked to find that she was still single. He had always imagined

that she'd followed her dreams to Charlotte, settled down, and started a family. They

shared a few short messages and then

their communication stopped when it seemed they had each run out of things to say.

And now Kacey was back in Splendid Lake. He noticed her left hand was free of jewelry, and he couldn't stop the what-ifs from

rolling through his mind.

At the same time, Kacey had made it clear that she planned to go back to Charlotte. Still, renewing a friendship with her

would be a gift. In fact, just having her as a part of his life would be a blessing.

Drew's phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket and found a message from his coworker, Garrett Douglas.

How was choir practice?

Instead of typing a response, Drew dialed Garrett's number, and he answered on the first ring.

"Was it that bad?" Garrett asked. Children's voices sounded behind him, and Drew imagined Garrett's wife wrangling their two-

and four-year-old toward the bathtub.

Drew chuckled. "No, it was fine. I thought it would be easier to talk instead of typing. I had a full room. It was the usual

mix of serious singers and kids who were more interested in their own

conversations.”

“Sounds like my math classes,” Garrett joked. “Did you apply for that music department head job in Newton?”

Drew scrubbed his hand down his face. “I’m considering it.”

“You should do it.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“You know I’m not, but it’s a great opportunity. You should give it a try and see what happens. It’s a nice pay raise.”

“I’ll check out the job post again.”

“Good. You’re a great candidate.” A voice sounded behind Garrett. “I’d better go. Duty calls.”

“See you tomorrow.” Drew disconnected the call.

After cleaning up the kitchen, he moved through the small family room, where his two fat cats snored on the sofa, and continued

down the short hallway past the one bathroom and toward the two bedrooms. While his little cottage could fit into the four-car

garage attached to his parents’ sprawling colonial, this little house was his. Well, technically it belonged to the bank until

he paid off the mortgage, but Drew had earned this home himself without his father’s

help.

He stepped into the first bedroom, which he had converted into his office, and sat at the desk before powering up his laptop.

He clicked on the link he'd saved for the job and settled back in his chair as he folded his arms over his chest.

His mind spun as he perused the job post. Newton was nearly two hours away from Splendid Lake, so he would have to sell his

little cottage and move there. And by doubling his salary, it would give him the opportunity to buy a larger home—not that

it was important to him.

Drew rubbed the stubble on his chin. Applying for a job wasn't necessarily a commitment. There were no guarantees he'd even

be considered for the position. So, it really couldn't hurt to try.

He began searching through his files for his résumé. Garrett was right. He should at least apply and see how it turned out.

Saturday morning Kacey pushed open the door to the Coffee Bean, which was located across the street from the bakery, the bell

above her announcing her presence. While she enjoyed the coffee offered at the bakery, her sister only sold regular and decaf.

This morning she was in the mood for a vanilla latte, and she offered to pick them up

for her mother, sister, and herself.

The shop was buzzing with activity as customers sat at the tables or in booths enjoying their coffee and pastries. A few others

stood in line at the counter, where the sisters and co-owners, Ava Burns and Brooklyn Waller, took and filled their orders.

Kacey stood in line behind a group of women who looked to be in their midtwenties and then slipped her phone and keys into

the pockets of her coat.

She took in the sisters working behind the counter and couldn't help but think that they looked exactly the same as they did

when they were all in high school together. Brooklyn was twenty-three to Ava's twenty-six, and although they had physical

similarities, those were hard to spot at first glance. They shared the same petite frame, warm smile, and friendly personality,

yet Brooklyn had her mother's dirty-blond hair and baby-blue eyes and Ava had her father's wavy, dark-brown hair and coffee-brown

eyes.

Ava had married her high school sweetheart, Dylan Burns, who owned Burns Auto Repair with his brother. Kacey recalled seeing

Ava and Dylan walking arm-in-arm around high school, and it didn't surprise her

when she heard they had married.

When it was Kacey's turn, she moved up to the counter and Ava grinned at her.

"Kacey!" she exclaimed. "I thought that was you. Are you home for the holidays?"

"I'm teleworking and staying with my mom for a while."

"How fun! What can I get you?"

"Three vanilla lattes to go, please."

"Coming right up." Ava repeated the order to her sister and then told Kacey the total.

"How's your mom doing?"

"Great," Kacey said as Ava ran her credit card. "She's still working at the elementary school."

Ava handed her the receipt. "I'm glad to hear it. It was good to see you! Have a great day."

"You too." Kacey moved to the end of the counter while Ava turned her attention to the next customer in line. She pulled her

phone out from the back pocket of her jeans and scrolled through her messages. When she heard someone call her name, she spun

as Drew approached her with a wide smile lighting up his handsome face.

"Drew. Hi." She pocketed her phone and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Drew nodded toward the menu. “Let me guess. You ordered a vanilla latte.”

“How’d you know?”

He scoffed. “Well, it wasn’t all that long ago when we’d hop in my mom’s old Beamer and go to that coffee shop over on Lincoln

Avenue. And you ordered the same thing every time.”

“You remember that.” She gave a little laugh as she took in the sparkle in his lush, green eyes. They always reminded her

of the grass in spring.

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “How could I forget?”

“Kacey?”

She pivoted toward the counter, where Brooklyn held a to-go container with three coffee cups. “Thank you so much.”

“Come back and see us,” Brooklyn said before fluttering off to fill the next order.

Kacey turned back to Drew. “I need to get to the bakery. My mom and I are helping Dani out today.”

She turned to leave when she felt his hand touch her elbow and gently turn her back around.

“Do you have plans tonight?”

Her heart stopped. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Would you like to have dinner?”

“Yes, I would,” she managed to say.

“Great.” He exhaled, sounding relieved. “What time will you get off work?”

“Six o’clock.”

“I’ll meet you at the bakery then.” He smiled, and headed for the line to order his coffee.

“Perfect. See you then.”

She felt a spring in her step as she carried the coffees out into the chilly morning and across the street to the bakery,

where she was greeted by the bell ringing above the door and the scrumptious smells of her sister’s morning baking. Had that

actually happened? Did she just agree to go on a date with Drew? She felt the smile on her face widen even more. But just

as quickly, she tamped down her excitement. It was probably just dinner between two friends who needed to catch up on each

other’s lives. Nothing to get excited about.

Mom stood at the counter, cleaning the glass case.

“I have coffee!” Kacey sang before handing her a cup.

Mom breathed in the aroma. “Oh my! It smells divine.”

Dani appeared from the kitchen with a tray of colorful iced cookies. “I was wondering if you got lost.” She set the tray of

cookies in the display case.

“There was a line at the Coffee Bean and I ran into Drew.” Kacey gave her a cup.

Dani grinned. “Is that right?”

“And what did Drew have to say?” Mom asked.

Kacey shrugged, trying her best to not make a big deal about it. “He asked me to go to dinner tonight.”

“He asked you out?” Dani pushed on Kacey’s shoulder. “I knew he always had the hots for you!”

“Yeah, right. That’s why he never asked me out. We were only friends, Dani.”

“I think he was too nervous to ask you out,” Mom said.

Kacey shook her head. “Why would he be nervous? We were best friends. He knew me better than anyone.”

“He probably didn’t want to ruin the friendship.”

“Well, we’re just friends now, and that’s fine. It will be fun to go out for dinner and

get caught up.”

“But things are different now, Kacey,” Mom said. “You’re not kids anymore.”

“And I’m also going back to Charlotte. He’s made a life here.”

“You never know what might happen,” Dani sang before drifting back toward the kitchen. “Are you going to help me with these

cookies, Kacey? Or are you going to stand there and talk about Drew all day?”

Mom shrugged. “She’s the boss.”

“She’s always been bossy,” Kacey joked as she made her way toward the kitchen.

As she set her coffee cup on the counter and turned toward her sister, Kacey found herself wondering if they might be right

about Drew and the possibility of rekindling their friendship and maybe even something more.

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Drew peered through the glass door of Morningside Bakery shortly after six that evening and saw Kacey wiping down the tables

while her mother cleaned the counter. Kacey looked beautiful with her blonde hair pulled up in a long, thick ponytail with

wisps falling around her face. Excitement coursed through him at the thought of spending the evening with her, talking and

laughing like old times.

When he yanked on the door, he found it locked. He rapped on the glass, and her gaze darted to his. Her pink lips turned up

in a grin, and she waved as she hurried over. The lock clicked and then she opened the door wide.

“I was just finishing up. I’ll only need a few more minutes.”

He stepped into the store and inhaled the heavenly scents of the baked goods. “Take your time.”

“Drew!” Mrs. Williams hurried over. “It’s so good to see you. How are your folks doing?”

“They’re doing just fine, Mrs. Williams.”

She swatted his arm. “You and Kacey are twenty-six years old. It’s time you called me Monica.”

“That will take some getting used to,” he said, and they both chuckled.

Kacey flitted behind the counter and then returned with a bright-blue bakery box. “I have a gift for you.” She held out the

box to him.

He opened it and found it half-full of chocolate chip cookies.

“Your favorite,” she declared, beaming.

Warmth swirled in his chest as he closed the box. “You remembered.”

“Of course!”

“Thank you.” He balanced the box in one hand and pulled his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh please. I told you it’s a gift.” She waved him off. Then she glanced down at her blue apron, which was splattered with

strawberry icing, sparkles, and flour. “I’m a mess. I wish I had a change of clothes here.”

He shook his head. “You look great, Kace.” And she did. She was even more beautiful than he recalled.

“Let me freshen up. I’ll be quick.” She took off toward the back of the bakery,

through the doorway that led to the kitchen.

Drew set the box on a nearby table and then nodded at Monica. “How are things at the elementary school?”

“The kids are getting excited about the holidays. I overhear quite a few discussions about making a list for Santa, and it’s

not even Thanksgiving yet.”

“The middle school kids are just as excited.”

“Hey there!” Dani walked out from the kitchen. Her blue apron was dotted with even more colorful spills and splatters than

Kacey’s, evidence she was the baker. “I hear you’re directing the community choir. How do you like it so far?”

“It’s even more fun than I expected.”

“That’s great. Riley didn’t say much about choir practice, except that she liked it.” Dani wiped her hands on a paper towel.

“Thank you for taking over for Mrs.Hansen.”

“You’re welcome, but I’m just grateful that she thought of me.”

Monica’s smile seemed nostalgic as she turned toward her older daughter. “I love the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival. I remember

all those times we went when you were little and you sat on your father’s shoulders

so you could see the choir. Then when

Kacey was old enough, she took her turn on your dad's shoulders. There's just something magical when the mayor flips the switch

and the giant tree lights up Main Street and all the decorations are glowing on the light poles and the storefronts. It truly

feels like the Christmas season is here."

"I agree." Dani pointed to the windows at the front of the store. "I'm planning to decorate and give out hot chocolate."

"Well, I'll help after I see Riley sing with the choir," Monica said.

Drew smiled. "I think it's going to be a magical night like it always is."

Kacey hurried out from the back room with her purse and coat slung over her arm. Her shiny blonde hair was down, cascading

over her shoulders, and her makeup seemed to be refreshed, making her eyes look even bluer than usual. "Well, this is the

best I can do. Thank goodness you keep some makeup here, Dani."

Dani scoffed. "As if you even need it, Kace."

"You look great," Drew agreed with Dani, but he kept the rest of his thoughts to himself.

Kacey blushed. "Thanks." She set her purse on a chair and then pulled on her coat

over her blue T-shirt featuring the bakery's

logo. "I'll see you all later." She looked up at Drew. "Will you drop me off on your way home?"

"Nah. You can walk," he teased with a wink.

She laughed.

He'd missed that sweet lilt!

"Good seeing you," Drew told Kacey's mother and sister.

They both grinned and waved.

"Have fun," Dani sang, and he noticed a look pass between the sisters.

He pushed open the door and held it for Kacey as she slipped through. "Would you like to eat here in town or go somewhere

else?"

"Why would we go anywhere else when we're here?" Kacey spun on the sidewalk with her arms outstretched. "Let's eat at the

Splendid Kitchen." She pointed to the family restaurant halfway down the block and across the street. "They have the best

fried chicken."

"Sounds like a plan."

Drew felt as if he'd stepped back in time as they walked together down the street. He breathed in the cool November air and

glanced around at couples and families also enjoying the evening.

Above them, the sun had begun to set, bringing with it its daily explosion of colors. He glanced over at his beautiful date,

and a warm glow moved through him. He'd never expected to have Kacey back in his life. This time he hoped he could find a

way to keep her there.

"So, tell me everything that's happened to you since high school graduation. Go!" Kacey said after they'd ordered dinner.

She and Drew sat in a corner booth at the busy restaurant. Servers dressed in jeans and Splendid Kitchen T-shirts wove through

the tables and booths while murmurs of conversations floated around them. The delicious smells of homecooked meat loaf, chicken,

and beef, mixed with pies, wafted over Kacey.

The family-owned restaurant had been in business for as long as Kacey could remember and it was a favorite among locals and

visitors.

Drew lifted a dark eyebrow. "Everything since high school graduation?"

“Yup.”

“Huh.” He rubbed his angular jaw. “You know I went to Appalachian State and studied music. And I earned my teaching certificate.”

She picked up her glass of Diet Coke and took a long drink.

“Then I came back home and started teaching. That’s pretty much it.”

She traced the condensation on her glass and studied him. He was handsome, but it wasn’t just his rugged good looks. There

was something about him tonight.

“You’re staring at me.” He leaned forward. “What are you thinking about?”

Uh-oh! Heat crawled up her neck. “What do you mean?”

“You have this strange look on your face.”

“I was just thinking about middle school,” she said quickly. “Remember that Halloween when we had a party in your parents’

enormous basement?”

“Eighth grade.”

“Right! I dressed up like Wilma Flintstone, and you were Fred.”

He chuckled. “Yes. And then those popular kids crashed our little party, and the food fight started.”

“Oh yes!” Kacey groaned. “And we were up almost all night cleaning up the mess.”

“You were the only one who stayed to help. Everyone else left.”

“I can still smell that carpet cleaner we used trying to scrub the soda and dip out of the carpet.”

“My mom wound up replacing it.” He lifted his glass of Coke. “And my dad never let me forget that.”

“He still blames you for what those idiots did?”

He took a long draw from the glass and shrugged. “Of course he does.”

“Those guys who started throwing the food weren’t even our friends.”

“But it was my idea to have the party.”

“No, it wasn’t.” She pointed to her chest. “It was my idea. I suggested we have a party with just our friends, but my house was too small.” She clucked her tongue as guilt washed

over her. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “Kace, that was a million years ago.”

“Yeah, but I still feel responsible.” She took another drink. “At least I wasn’t the one who suggested we go hiking without

a map during that one camping trip! Was that Jake or Wanda?”

“Oh yeah! That was definitely Jake’s idea. We were lost for four hours before we finally found our campsite.”

The two of them laughed at the memory.

He wiped his eyes and hooted. “I’d never been so hungry in my life.”

“Me neither!” She shook her head.

Drew pointed at her. “But you were the culprit for why we were stranded in Charlotte after that concert.”

“You’re right about that one.” Kacey shook her head. “My mom didn’t want me to go because it was more than three hours away,

but she agreed because you were taking me.” She smiled. “But then Mallory and Bennett backed out because they both got food

poisoning from that sushi place where they ate the night before.” She grimaced. “Ugh.”

“And we got stuck in line at the T-shirt stand after the concert so by the time we got out to the parking lot it was nearly

empty. Which was the prime opportunity for my car to not start because someone had to check her makeup before we went into the arena and someone had left the dome light on.”

Kacey held her hand up. “Guilty as charged.”

“Didn’t it take, like, three hours for the roadside service to show up?”

“Yeah. But we had fun sitting on the hood of your car, looking at the stars.” She smiled recalling how romantic it was. Then

she frowned. “Gosh, Mom was frantic with worry, even though I called her and told her we were safe.”

“But she forgave you. My dad, however, decided to ground me for a month.”

Kacey blew out a puff of air. “Once again, my fault.”

He opened his mouth to respond just as the server appeared with their meals.

“Fried chicken, loaded baked potato, and mixed vegetables for you, ma’am.” The young woman set the plate in front of Kacey.

“Thank you.” Kacey inhaled the mouthwatering fragrance of her supper.

“And then steak and fries for you, sir.” The woman gave Drew his meal.

“That’s right. Thank you.”

The woman looked back and forth between them. “Do you need anything else?”

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Kacey and Drew both shook their heads, and the server disappeared.

“This looks delicious.” Kacey lifted her fork.

Drew retrieved the A.1. sauce at the end of the table and began pouring it over his steak. “I agree.”

They were silent while they both started eating, and contentment settled over Kacey. She remembered their senior year and

how their close friendship had suddenly fractured. It felt good to pick up right where they left off before things changed

for the worse. Talking with Drew had always been easy. She forked a bit of chicken, and when she looked up, she found Drew

watching her with an intensity that sent goose bumps trailing up her arms.

“Whatever happened to Bennett?” she asked, wondering why she decided to bring him up in that moment.

Drew hesitated. “Last I heard he was married and living in Atlanta.”

“You don’t keep up with him?”

He shook his head. “I guess you lost touch with him?”

“We lost touch in college. After all, I went to UNC Charlotte, and he went to Chapel Hill. Long distance never works, and

we were so young. I never felt like we really clicked anyway.” She began cutting up her potato. “How do you like teaching?”

His green eyes sparkled in the light of the colorful Tiffany lamp hanging above their booth. “I love it. There’s something

magical about watching the children learn how to play their instruments. It’s a gift, really. I feel like the luckiest guy

on the planet.”

“That’s amazing, and it’s so you.” She smiled with renewed admiration for him.

“It’s so me?” He almost looked offended. “What does that mean?”

“You’ve always been so giving and thoughtful. I can remember countless times when you rearranged your schedule to drive me

here or there because I didn’t have a car. You always put other people before you.”

He ate a fry and pushed his plate toward her. “Want one?”

“Thanks.” She chose a fry and dipped it in his ketchup.

“What about you? I know you’re a graphic designer, but do you like your work?”

She nodded. “I love designing websites, logos, and promotional material. I can really work anywhere.”

“So why don’t you stay here?”

She felt her eyebrow lift.

“I’m sure your mom and sister would love to have you here instead of three hours away.” His words came out at a quick clip.

“You said you’re helping your sister, right?”

“That’s true, and I love it here. But I’ve always wanted to live in a city. I’m sure you remember how I used to collect postcards

from big cities.”

“Oh yeah! You had an entire wall dedicated to postcards.” He cut up more steak.
“What happened to those?”

“They were tossed into a box and shoved in the attic when Mom decided to transform my room into a craft and sewing room.”

“Oh.”

They ate in silence for a few moments.

“So, Travis lost his job?” Drew asked.

She nodded and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Yes, he was laid off about three months ago. He was working in IT at a bank.

He’s been on a few interviews, but nothing has worked out yet.”

Drew pushed a fry through the ketchup, creating a swirly pattern. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll ask around at work."

"That would be great, thank you." She spooned the vegetables. "So, where are you living? Do you rent one of those condos on the north side of town?"

"Do you remember that little yellow house on Zimmer Avenue?"

She tilted her head. "The one with the purple shutters?"

"That's the one." He grinned.

She gasped. "You bought that place?"

"I sure did."

"Are you kidding me?" she asked and he shook his head. "Tell me you kept the purple shutters."

"Sadly, no. I painted the house gray, and the shutters are white."

"Oh, well." She laughed. "I never expected you to buy that place."

He shrugged. "The little old lady who owned it passed away, and it happened to be in my price range."

"That's so cool. I have to see it."

"Well, then you'll have to come for supper one night."

“It’s a date.” She lifted her glass, and her nerves began humming when she realized what she’d said.

“It’s nothing compared to my parents’ mansion on the lake though.”

“You know I always loved that cute little house, and now it’s yours.”

“That’s right, and it’s just enough space for me and my two cats.”

Questions filtered through her mind as she imagined him in his own little house, and she thought about his relationship status

on Facebook. How could Drew actually be single? He was such a great catch! “Your cats are too cute.”

He leaned forward. “Have you been stalking my social media?”

“Maybe?” She gave her best coy smile, along with a palms up, and he laughed. “How are your folks?”

“The same. My dad still makes comments about how I could make some ‘real money’ if I gave up teaching and joined his financial

planning firm.” He rolled his eyes. “Everything with him is about money, and he thinks I don’t make enough.”

Kacey set her fork down and studied him. “Your father isn’t proud of you for being a teacher?”

“He says it’s a noble profession, but he wants to leave the financial planning firm to me since I’m an only child. I have

no interest in that.” He shrugged. “It’s no big deal. I just ignore him.” He picked up his drink once again. “I applied for

a job as the music department head for Catawba County. The office is in Newton, but it’s a big pay raise.”

“Oh wow. Would you have to sell the house?”

“Yeah, but I doubt I’ll even get the job.”

The server appeared. “Do you need anything else tonight?”

Drew leaned forward. “Share a molten lava cake with me for old time’s sake.”

She hesitated, and he gave her his best puppy dog look. “That’s no fair, Drew Murphy. You know I can’t resist that expression.”

“It always works.” He turned toward the server. “We’ll split a molten lava cake.”

“Coming right up,” she said.

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After splitting an enormous piece of warm chocolate cake smothered in chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream, Drew paid the

check before he and Kacey walked outside. She was certain she wouldn't eat another bite of food for at least a week.

The dark sky sparkled with bright stars, and the air was crisp. Kacey breathed in the scent of a nearby woodburning fireplace.

Drew nodded down the street. "I parked at the end of the block."

"Do you still have that old Beamer?"

"No." He chuckled. "I got rid of it after I graduated from college and got my first teaching job."

"What a shame. It was a classic," she said as they started down the street together, passing the Warner movie theater, heading

toward Scoops, the ice cream parlor.

"More like a money pit." He smiled at her. "I got myself a practical Honda Accord."

"How grown-up of you." She bumped his arm with hers. They walked in comfortable silence for a moment, and Kacey soaked in

her company and their surroundings. "Pretty soon all the light poles will be decorated

with candy canes. I love when they

decorate downtown for Christmas.” She looked up at him. “So are you going to have the choir practice something other than

‘Joy to the World’?”

“No, I figured we’d just sing that a dozen times for you next Tuesday and Thursday.” This time he bumped her arm as she laughed.

“We’re planning to sing the usual Christmas favorites.”

“I look forward to the variety. I did talk to Riley and Colleen, and they promise to be quiet.”

“I got the impression that you didn’t tell Dani about my conversation with the two chatterboxes.”

“No, I didn’t. I promised Riley I wouldn’t tell her as long as she and Colleen behaved next week.”

“That’s a good plan,” he said as they walked past the Christmas Shop.

When they reached the end of the street, he pointed to a black Honda Accord. “Well, here it is.”

She ran her finger over the door. “Very pretty.”

“What do you drive?”

“A mint-green Prius.”

“Very practical and eco-friendly.”

She shrugged. “It was a great price, and I appreciate the gas mileage.”

He pushed a button on his key fob and the locks popped. Then he opened the passenger side door for her. “After you.”

“Wow. You have such nice manners.” She climbed into the seat and he closed the door for her. Then she fastened her seat belt

while he jogged around the front of the car. “This car is lovely, but don’t you miss the Beamer breaking down every day?”

He shook his head and laughed. “I do miss the adventures we had, but I don’t miss paying a mechanic all the time.”

She relaxed in the seat as he headed down Main Street and then turned left onto Rosemont. “This was fun.”

“It was.” He peered over at her. “We should do it again.”

“Definitely. I really want to see your house. I always wondered what the inside of that place looked like.”

“You won’t be impressed.”

“Sure I will. After all, I need to meet those cats.” She looked at him. “Does the gray cat always look annoyed?”

He laughed. “Yes, Loki is marked that way. He has a permanent scowl.”

“Interesting.”

When Drew steered down her street, Kacey felt her smile wobble. Their wonderful evening together was coming to an end.

He turned his car into her driveway and slipped it in Park before turning toward her. “Hand me your cell phone?”

“Of course.” She fished her phone from her pocket, unlocked it, and gave it to him.

Drew typed on her phone and then his phone dinged. He pulled his out of his pocket and typed on it next. Then he handed hers

back to her. “We have each other’s numbers now.”

“Perfect.” She slipped her phone into her coat pocket. “Thank you for a wonderful evening.”

“No, thank you.” His smile lingered on Kacey’s face a beat longer than necessary. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

She pushed open the passenger side door and climbed out of the car. She closed the door and hurried up the front steps of

the house. When she turned and waved, Drew’s horn tooted before he backed his car out of the driveway.

Happiness blossomed in her chest as she unlocked the front door and stepped into the family room, where Mom sat on the sofa

watching Last Christmas .

Mom's expression lit up, and she pressed Pause on the remote. "How was your date?"

"It wasn't a real date, Mom." Kacey flopped down on the sofa across from her mother. "It was fun to get caught up. We reminisced, ate too much, and laughed a lot."

"That smile on your face makes me think it was a real date, Kacey."

She shook her head. "We're just friends, Mom. Plus, he applied for a job in Newton, and I'm going back to Charlotte eventually."

"I always thought you two should have dated. You got along so well. And he's so good-looking."

Kacey laughed and pointed to the television. "I love this movie. I'll watch the rest of it with you."

As the movie came back to life, Kacey pulled off her coat, settled on the sofa, and pondered what it would feel like to have

Drew in her life permanently.

"All right, everyone." Drew addressed the choir the following Thursday afternoon while he sat at the piano at the front of

the room. "Let's take it from the top. Ready?" He began playing the introduction and then held up his hand for the children

to start singing. "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way..."

While they sang, his mind wandered through the past week. Kacey had lingered in his thoughts since their dinner last Saturday

night. They'd been texting, but they hadn't connected in person, since she said she had a big project to finish for one of

her clients.

He had hoped to catch her after choir practice on Tuesday, but when the session ended, Riley and Colleen hurried out of the

classroom. By the time Drew left, the bakery was dark.

Although he enjoyed their banter over text, he couldn't help but wonder if she had used her job as a reason to avoid him.

Perhaps she wanted to keep her distance, since she planned to go back to Charlotte. Or maybe she had a boyfriend waiting for

her there.

Still, he knew she'd had a good time Saturday night, and he longed to see her again. He hoped today she would come to the

choir room to fetch the girls instead of them rushing off to the bakery to meet her.

When giggles erupted from the back row, Drew scanned the choir until he found Riley and Colleen with their heads bent. He

sighed. It was time to separate those two.

Drew stopped playing and clapped his hands. “All right. Let’s take a break.” He stood and nodded to the back row. “Riley,”

he called, and her head popped up, her eyes wide. “I’d like you to come and sit in the front row, please.”

“I-I’m sorry, Mr. Murphy.” She blinked, her cheeks flushing bright pink.

He nodded. “Just come sit up front where you won’t be so disruptive.”

“Okay.” Riley glanced at Colleen, who looked equally embarrassed, and then with her eyes cast down, she shuffled to the front

row and sat on a metal folding chair beside a first-grade boy. She looked down, studying her purple jeans.

Drew returned to the piano. “Let’s take it from the top now.”

After a few more run-throughs of the song, he noticed parents had gathered at the back of the room. He spotted Kacey leaning

against the wall, grinning and holding a bakery box, and his heart lifted.

When the song ended, the adults clapped.

“Great job today,” Drew called to the kids, who were busy stowing their music and gathering up their coats and backpacks.

“See you next Tuesday. Practice the songs at home so you learn the words.”

He closed his music folder and slipped it into his backpack as the mother of one of

the fourth graders approached with her

redheaded daughter in tow who was fiddling with colorful beaded bracelets on her wrist. “Hi, Mrs. Wagoner.”

“I wanted to let you know that Patti is going to miss practice next Tuesday. She has a consultation with an orthodontist.”

“That’s fine. Thanks for letting me know.” He looked at Patti. “I hope your consultation goes well. You know, I had braces.”

The little girl’s hazel eyes rounded. “You did?” Her face pinched. “Did they hurt?”

“My teeth were a little sore, but the cool part was being able to pick what colors I wanted for my rubber bands when I went

for my checkups. The orthodontist has so many colors.”

“Did they have purple?”

“They sure did.” Drew met Patti’s mom’s gaze, and she gave him an appreciative smile. “You’ll do great.”

“Thank you,” Patti said.

“See you next Thursday,” Drew told them. He turned to the next mother waiting to speak to him and realized he had a line.

His hope to talk to Kacey deflated.

After speaking to two more mothers about their children’s schedules and answering a

father's question about logistics on the

day of the Christmas Tree Lighting, he faced the back of the room and was surprised to find Kacey still there, smiling as

Riley gestured widely while talking.

Drew shouldered his backpack and approached them.

Kacey smirked at him. "I was happy to hear a different song today."

"Well, I chose the song with you in mind."

"I thought so. This is for you." She held the bakery box out to him.

"Wow. Thank you," he said, taking the box. Then he nodded toward the door. "How about I walk you to your car?"

"I'd love that." When the girls scampered toward the exit, she called, "Slow down, girls! No running!"

The girls, however, continued past the people milling about the hallway and out the front door to the sidewalk.

Kacey shook her head. "They listen so well, don't they?"

"Yeah." He chuckled. "They know where you park, right?"

She nodded as he held the door open for her. "My car is behind the bakery." She looked up at him as they stepped out into

the cold evening air. “How did Riley and Colleen do today at practice?”

He grimaced, and she groaned. “It’s all right. I moved Riley to the front of the room.”

“Separating them is the only solution. I’ll talk to her again.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just keep them separated. It’s an exciting time of year for the kids.” He lifted the box lid,

and his mouth watered as he took in the assorted cookies. “These look amazing. You’re going to send me into a sugar crash

if you keep feeding me your delicious treats!”

“We had some leftovers today. Dani will bake more in the morning.”

“How did your work project go?” he asked as they followed the girls through the alley between the bakery and the gift shop

next door toward the parking lot.

She rubbed her hands together. “I turned it in last night, and my boss was really happy. I heard from her this morning.”

“That’s fantastic.”

The girls rushed over to the mint-green Prius and grabbed the door handle.

“I won!” Riley announced.

Colleen shook her head, and her long black braids swished back and forth. “No, I

did!”

“You both did,” Kacey announced. Then she spun to face Drew. “Do you have plans tonight?”

“No, I don’t.”

“If you don’t mind a noisy family, you’re welcome to join me at my sister’s house. Tonight is game night.” She held her hand

up. “I mean it when I say it’s noisy.”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, I am a teacher, so I’m used to noise.”

“That’s right! How could I forget?” She chuckled, then shared the address. “It’s just a couple of blocks away from my mom’s

house.”

He pointed to his car parked a half-dozen spaces away from hers. “I’ll follow you.”

“Perfect. I just have to drop Colleen off first.”

Excitement filled Drew as he hurried to his car.

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Later that evening, Kacey glanced around her sister's dining table while Drew shared a story about when he taught a music

class at a day camp.

"Most of the kids were more interested in swimming in the lake, but I had a few that actually listened," Drew said, and everyone

laughed.

"Mr. Murphy," Riley began, "what's your favorite instrument to play?"

Drew rubbed his chin. "Hmm. That's a tough question. I'd have to say the guitar, since it was the first instrument I learned

when I was about your age."

Kacey shared a smile with her mother. She was grateful when she texted her sister to tell her that she had invited Drew and

Dani told her she'd made plenty of stew to share. They spent supper laughing and sharing stories while Drew sat beside her.

He seemed to fit right in with her family. It was as if he belonged there. Her heart turned over in her chest at that thought.

Dani tapped Kacey's arm. "Why don't we clean this up and bring out that lemon cake

I baked yesterday and make some coffee?

Then we can play a game.”

“Great idea.”

Kacey and Dani carried the dishes into the kitchen and set them on the counter.

“He’s totally into you,” Dani whispered.

Kacey shushed her and peeked into the dining room, where Drew and Travis were engrossed in a conversation about IT jobs in

the area. “We’re just friends. You know that.”

“I think he would like to be more than that. Haven’t you noticed how he looks at you?”

“You’re imagining things. Let’s get the cake and go back in there.” Kacey began filling the coffee carafe with water.

Dani placed her hand on Kacey’s back. “Trust me, Kace. He’s going to ask you out.”

“And I’ll have to tell him no because I’m not staying in town forever.” Her heart sank at the thought of saying good-bye to

Drew again, but her plan all along had been to go back to Charlotte.

Later, after half of the cake was gone, their coffee mugs were empty, and they had played a rousing game of Candy Land, Kacey

and Dani filled the dishwasher before Kacey gathered up her coat and purse. She kissed her nieces good night, said good-bye

to Dani and Travis, and then walked with Drew out to his car.

The air was crisp, and she could see her breath. Above her, the stars had begun to appear in the sky, and she inhaled the

aroma of the lake in the distance mixed with the smell of wood fireplaces.

“I had a great time with your family.” Drew leaned back on his car and smiled down at her.

Kacey shivered and shoved her hands into her pockets. “I’m glad you could join us.”

He smiled. “You’re freezing. You need to get in your car and turn on the heat.”

“I will.” She touched his arm. “Talk soon, okay?”

“I plan on it, Kacey. Good night.” He opened his car door.

“Good night.” Her pulse was racing as she jogged over to her car and unlocked it. She hoped to see him again very soon.

Garrett leaned in the doorway of the band room the following afternoon. “What are your plans for the weekend?”

“I was hoping to catch up with an old friend who’s in town temporarily.” Drew walked over from his desk in the far corner

of the large room equipped with risers and music stands for the middle school band.

“That reminds me. Her brother-in-law is

looking for a job. Have you heard about any IT jobs with the school system?”

“I’ll ask around. Who’s the old friend?”

“Her name is Kacey. We were close from middle school until just before graduation.”

“Did you date her?” Garrett’s dark eyebrows lifted.

Drew sank down onto a chair by the door. “No, because I was too chicken to ask her out back then.”

“Is she married?”

“No.”

“Is she dating anyone?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Do you have feelings for her?”

“Absolutely.”

“So what are you waiting for?” Garrett said. “Go after her.”

“She’s not planning to stay here. Once she finds a new roommate, she’s heading back to Charlotte.”

“But she’s here now. You need to find a way to convince her to stay.”

Drew folded his arms over his chest and smiled. “You’re right.” A plan was beginning to form in his mind.

Friday afternoon, Kacey stood at the cash register in the bakery and rang up an order for a middle-aged woman she’d known

nearly all her life. “May I get you anything else, Mrs.Dixon?”

“No, thank you. I believe those boxes of assorted cookies are perfect for the ladies’ social at church tomorrow.” She handed

Kacey her card.

“I agree.” Kacey ran the card and then handed it back with the receipt before placing the two boxes in a shopping bag sporting

the bakery’s logo.

Mom stepped out from the kitchen. “Loretta. So nice to see you.”

“You, too, Monica,” Mrs.Dixon said as she picked up her bag. “I can’t believe Thanksgiving is only two weeks away.”

“Where has the year gone?” Mom asked.

“I was just thinking on the way over here that I need to start on my Christmas cards. I always mail them out the day after

Thanksgiving.”

Kacey leaned forward on the counter. “You’re very organized, Mrs.Dixon.”

“Well, Kacey doesn’t know it yet, but I plan to enlist her to help me with Christmas cards this year.” Mom looped her arm

around Kacey’s shoulder.

“Is that right?” Kacey asked. “I’ll add that to my list of duties while I’m home. You do know I’m a graphic designer. How

about I design a beautiful Christmas card with our names already signed on it? Then all we’ll need to do is print out address

labels.”

Mrs.Dixon shook her head. “No, no, no, Kacey. You need that personal touch with real signatures.”

“I agree. Not only do we need to design our Christmas cards and handwrite our signatures, but we also need to go shopping,”

Mom added.

Kacey pointed at her. “I’m happy to help with shopping anytime.”

Mom and Mrs.Dixon chuckled.

“You two enjoy the rest of your afternoon.” Mrs.Dixon waved and then headed for the door.

“Come back to see us soon,” Mom called after her.

Kacey looked out over the dining area, where a few couples sat enjoying their snacks

and drinking coffee. When her phone buzzed

with a text message, she pulled it from her back pocket. Her heartbeat gave a little kick when she saw who sent it.

“What’s that?” Mom asked.

She opened the message and grinned. “A message from Drew.”

Do you still love lasagna?

She fired back: Is this a trick question?

Maybe.

She laughed. Why?

Come over tonight and I’ll cook for you.

What can I bring?

You work in a bakery. You’ll think of something.

I’ll be there after I go home and change.

Perfect.

Her heart flopped around like a fish. Another date with Drew! Then she shook her head. It’s not a date. We’re friends!

“Well?” Mom asked, bringing her back to the present. “What did he say? From the

looks of it, it was good.”

“He’s going to cook for me tonight.”

Dani appeared in the doorway. “Who? Drew?”

“Were you spying on me, Dani?” Kacey asked.

Dani shrugged. “Mom is going to tell me anyway, so you might as well spill it.”

“Drew is going to cook for her tonight,” Mom said.

Dani clapped her hands. “How romantic!”

Kacey couldn’t hide her smile.

“I always knew you two would wind up together.” Mom wagged a finger at her.

Kacey rolled her eyes. “He never liked me that way.”

“That might have been true then, but I’m sure he does now,” Dani said, and Mom nodded.

Kacey was grateful when the bell above the door rang and a group of teenage girls headed toward the counter. “Welcome to Morningside

Bakery. How may I help you?” she asked, but her hands trembled with the idea that Drew might possibly care for her.

Later that evening Drew glanced over the table and rubbed his hands together. The table was set with candles, along with a

bowl of salad. The lasagna and garlic bread sat on the kitchen counter ready to be served, and their delicious scents permeated

his little cottage. Now he just needed his guest of honor.

When the doorbell rang, he brushed his hands down his green button-down shirt and his best pair of chinos before heading toward

the door. He pulled it open, and Kacey stood on the porch holding a bakery box.

She looked beautiful with her thick blonde hair cascading past her shoulders in waves, her blue eyes accentuated by makeup.

Her bright smile reminded him of the summer sun. “Hi,” she said, sounding almost shy. Did she seem different tonight?

“Come in,” he said, opening the door wide. “You’re right on time.”

She stepped past him into the house. “It smells heavenly in here.”

“Thank you. Let me take your coat.”

She set the bakery box on a nearby chair and shrugged her coat. “This place is amazing! I told you, I always wondered what

it looked like inside. Could I have the twenty-five-cent tour before we eat?”

“Of course.” He opened the coat closet and hung up her jacket before motioning behind her. “This is the tiny family room.”

“It’s so cozy!” She walked over to the sofa. “Oh! Here are the kitties.”

“That’s pretty much where they stay too—unless they’re begging for food.” He pointed to his portly orange tabby. “This is

Thor.” Then he touched his gray cat. “And this is Loki.”

She gave Thor a head rub, and he opened one eye before rolling over onto his side, facing away from her. “I guess they just

want to sleep.”

“Don’t take it personally.”

She laughed. “I won’t.” When she rubbed Loki’s chin, he began to purr. “It’s so nice to meet you both.”

Drew pointed to the kitchen. “Over here is the tiny kitchen, where the table hardly fits.”

“I think it’s adorable.” She set the bakery box on the counter and peered down at the lasagna. “Oh my. This looks amazing.”

She spun to face him. “Show me the rest of the house before we eat this incredible meal.”

“It won’t take but a minute.”

She followed him down the short hallway.

He pointed to the right. “The bathroom is here.” Then he opened a door beside it. “Tiny linen closet here.”

She peered into the bathroom. “It’s perfect.”

He pushed on the next door, revealing a desk, bookshelves, and his console piano.

“This is my office, music room, and everything

else room.”

“Wow.” She stepped into the room and turned, as if taking in every detail. “So nice.”

She touched the bookshelves. “You still

like to read?”

“I do, but I don’t read as much as I used to.”

“I remember when you always had a novel in your backpack.” Kacey walked past him and he caught a whiff of her sweet perfume,

which made his mouth dry. “And this must be your bedroom.” She gripped the doorknob and then craned over her shoulder to look

up at him. “Is it okay if I look inside?”

“Of course.”

She pushed open the door and stepped inside his modest bedroom.

He stood in the doorway as she walked around his bed, looking at his dressers, and then spinning to face him.

“I love your house.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “You’re easily impressed.”

“It’s perfect, and since I don’t have a house of my own, I think it’s fantastic.”

She moved closer to where he stood, and he touched her arm as he guided her out and toward the kitchen. “Let’s go enjoy our

meal before it gets cold.”

They sat down across from each other at the table and began to eat their salad. While they ate, they discussed the Christmas

Tree Lighting Festival and reminisced. Soon their salad, garlic bread, and lasagna were finished, and she helped him carry

their dishes to the counter.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh?” She rubbed her hands together. “I love surprises! What is it?”

“I’m working on a song, and I’d like to share it with you.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

His hands began to sweat as she followed him toward his office, where he sat down at the piano, and she stood beside him.

Closing his eyes, he began to play the song, which had been inspired when he first reconnected with Kacey. His fingers flew

over the piano as the melodious sound filled the room and a vision of her beautiful face filled his mind. When he finished,

he opened his eyes and found her watching him, her eyes shining.

“Drew,” she whispered, her voice sounding reverent, “that’s beautiful.”

No, you are . “Thank you.”

“Are you going to write lyrics for it?”

“Eventually.” He swallowed. “The music just came to me the other night. You’re the first person I’ve shared it with.”

“I’m so honored.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and the urge to kiss her nearly overwhelmed him. But he couldn’t give in to that longing

just yet. Instead he pushed back from the piano and stood. “How about some dessert?”

“Oh yes. I brought a chocolate cake.”

“Wonderful. I’ll put on some coffee.”

Soon they were sitting at the table sipping coffee and eating slices of the best cake he’d ever eaten.

“Do you remember when we used to sit on your parents’ pier and stargaze?” She rested her elbow on the table and her chin on

her palm as her expression became nostalgic. “We would stretch out on the pier and stare up at the sky for hours, talking

about everything and pretending to pick out constellations.”

Drew set his fork down. “Let’s go do it.”

“Right now?” Her brow puckered.

He pushed his chair back and stood. “Yes. Right now.”

“Okay.” She laughed as she stood too.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:22 am

Kacey smiled over at Drew as he drove his Honda down Splendid Lake Loop toward his parents' lakefront home. She folded her

arms over her middle and settled back in the seat as she contemplated how much fun she'd already had this evening. She didn't

want it to end.

"What are you smiling about?" Drew asked.

Heat infused her cheeks as she turned toward him. "I was just thinking about that time we took your dad's boat out without

asking, lost track of time, and then got in trouble when we brought it back."

Drew snorted. "I remember that clearly."

"I still don't understand why you were in trouble though. We didn't damage the boat."

"It was because I didn't ask first."

"And that was my fault because it was my idea. Again."

He gave her a sideways glance. "You didn't force me, Kace."

"No, but I seemed to always get you into trouble."

His expression became intense, and her throat suddenly felt dry.

“It was always worth it.” His features softened with the admission.

Drew steered his car onto the long, winding driveway that led to his parents’ sprawling, two-story brick colonial home that

sat on at least five acres of lakefront land. This was where Drew had grown up and where Kacey had spent countless hours with

him. Memories poured over her as Drew drove halfway up the driveway and flipped off the headlights.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he killed the engine.

He pushed open his door, and the dome light lit up his devious smile. “We’re going to sneak out onto the pier.”

“Because you want to avoid seeing your parents.”

“Come on, Kace.” He climbed out of the car and then stuck his head inside. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

She smiled and launched herself out of the car and met him at the front, where he threaded his warm fingers with hers, her

skin humming as an electrical current shot through her veins. Their shoes crunched along the rock driveway as they jogged

past the four-car garage, past the huge deck that ran the length of the back of the house, and down the path toward the lake.

Kacey sucked in a breath as she took in the beautiful lake, sparkling in the light of the moon and the stars.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I forgot how gorgeous the lake is.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I brought you here, so you can remember how much you love it.” He led her down the hill to the

pier that stretched out over the glistening water.

She breathed in the familiar scent of the lake and looked out across the water toward the lights glowing from the Splendid

Lake Cabins and Marina resort, which was run by their classmate and friend Brianna Porter and her family.

When they reached the end of the pier, they both sat down, and she took in the sound of the water lapping against the pier

and a dog barking in the distance. The sky was clear as the stars seemed to twinkle for only Kacey and Drew.

“Are you cold?” Drew’s voice was a low rumble next to her ear, sending a tremor through her.

She shook her head as happiness bubbled through her. She wouldn’t care if the lake was frozen over as long as she had Drew

beside her.

She settled into a comfortable silence and enjoyed the view of the water shimmering in the moonlight.

“I’ve been meaning to ask... are you seeing anyone back in Charlotte?”

Her eyes snapped to his face, but he was looking out at the water, his expression unreadable. “No. Are you seeing anyone?”

“No.” He gave a little laugh and shook his head. Then his tone became more serious.

“Have you ever seen yourself getting married

and having a family?”

“Someday, but probably not anytime soon.” Kacey ran her hands up and down her legs as she wondered what Drew was getting at.

He nodded and sucked in a breath. “Could you see yourself staying in Splendid Lake?”

With that question, Drew turned to face her. She studied him, wishing she could read his thoughts. “Why all these questions?”

He shrugged and a small smile formed on his lips. “I’m just trying to get reacquainted with you.”

She hesitated. “You know I’ve always dreamed of living in a city.”

“So that’s a no.”

She angled her body toward him. “What about you?”

He let out a breath. "I love it here."

"Any Christmas wishes?" Kacey could think of one of her own.

He chuckled. "I have everything I need."

She scanned the glorious dark sky and felt his eyes focused on her, pulling her gaze to meet his. The intensity in his expression

made her lose her breath.

Drew reached up and cupped his hand to her cheek. She leaned into his touch as he tilted his head toward hers. Her breath

hitched, and her pulse raced as she waited for his lips to meet hers.

"Who's out there?"

Drew jerked back and looked to where the voice called from the end of the pier. "Dad! It's me!" He jumped to his feet and

held his hand out to Kacey.

She latched on, and he helped her up. She pressed a hand to her chest, trying to catch her breath.

Drew's father still stood at the end of the pier. "Why didn't you come to the house?"

"We didn't want to bother you and Mom," Drew said, resting his hand on Kacey's shoulder.

She lifted her hand in a wave. “Hi, Mr. Murphy.”

“Kacey Williams,” he said. “It’s been a long time.”

She nodded. “Yes, it has.”

“Come inside and visit.”

“We should really be going,” Drew said.

“Nonsense. I insist,” his father said.

“Okay,” Drew said, sounding resigned.

While his father started up the hill toward the house, Drew took Kacey’s hand in his and motioned for her to slow her pace,

putting some space between them and his father. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I was hoping we could sneak out of here without

seeing my parents.”

“It’s totally fine.” Kacey smiled and gave his hand a squeeze.

Drew and Kacey followed his father up the deck stairs and into their enormous family room. She glanced around, spotting new

furniture and a larger flat-screen television than she remembered from high school.

Mr. Murphy had also changed. His dark hair was mostly peppered with gray, and his dark eyes were rimmed with wrinkles. He

also looked as if he'd gained at least twenty pounds, and Drew was now at least a few inches taller than he was.

"Marilyn," Mr. Murphy called, "you'll never guess who I found out on the pier."

"Who is it, Randy?" Mrs. Murphy appeared in the doorway, and she smiled as she hurried into the family room. "Drew! Kacey!

Oh my goodness. What a nice surprise."

Although Drew had received his angular jaw and perfectly proportioned nose from his father, Kacey had always noticed that

his gorgeous green eyes and sweet personality came from his mother.

Drew nodded and smiled. "Hi, Mom."

"It's nice to see you, Mrs. Murphy." Kacey shook her warm hand.

"Call me Marilyn." She motioned for them to follow her. "What on earth were you doing out on the pier in this cold weather?"

"We were taking a trip down memory lane," Drew said.

And your son almost kissed me, but your husband interrupted! Kacey pinned a smile on her face as the recollection of that moment made her legs feel like cooked noodles.

Marilyn waved them over. "Come into the kitchen, and I'll make some cocoa."

Randy followed his wife out of the family room.

Drew turned to Kacey. “If you want to go home, we can leave. I’ll make up an excuse.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Kacey took his hands in hers. “We can visit with them for a little bit. It will be fun.”

“Drew? Kacey?” Marilyn called.

Drew faced the doorway to the kitchen. “We’re coming, Mom.”

Kacey and Drew entered his parents’ enormous kitchen, and she felt as if she’d stepped back in time. The kitchen had the same

pristine white cabinets, stainless steel appliances, gray tile, and the matching island in the center surrounded by white

barstools with gray seats.

The white table and chairs still sat by the sliding glass doors that led out to the deck overlooking the beautiful lake.

“Have a seat,” Marilyn instructed.

Kacey sat beside Drew, and his father took a seat across from them.

“Are you back for good, Kacey?” Marilyn asked as she filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil.

Kacey shook her head. “No, I’m just here until I find another roommate in Charlotte. I might just get my own condo. I’m working

remotely and helping my sister run her bakery while I'm in town."

"That's a shame. I was hoping you'd say that you were here to stay." Marilyn frowned over at her before retrieving four mugs

from the cabinet. "What do you do?"

"I'm a graphic designer. I design websites and promotional materials."

Marilyn smiled. "How nice. I recall how you were very artistic. I still remember your artwork on display at the high school.

You even won a few awards and that nice scholarship because you're so talented."

"Thank you," Kacey said.

Marilyn disappeared into their huge pantry and emerged with a box of hot chocolate mix. She pulled out four packets and poured

them into the mugs.

"We haven't seen you in a while, Drew." Randy nodded at his son. "What's been keeping you so busy?"

"I'm directing the children's choir for the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival."

"How nice," Marilyn said.

Randy's brow furrowed. "Why would you want to take that on?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Kacey noticed Drew's spine go rigid. "Dana Hansen had

an emergency and asked me to fill in.”

“Oh no, what happened?” Marilyn asked.

Drew explained how Mrs.Hansen had to rush to Florida to care for her mother.

“Oh dear.” Marilyn shook her head. “I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m glad you were able to help her out.” When the kettle started

to whistle, she picked it up off the stove and poured the hot water into the mugs. She stirred them and then added whipped

topping before placing them on a tray and carrying them to the table.

“Thank you.” Kacey sipped her cocoa and enjoyed the warm, chocolatey drink. “It’s delicious.”

Randy gave Drew a pointed look. “So why did you take on the choir?”

“I just told you, Dad.” Drew’s words were measured. “Dana Hansen needed the help.”

“You already said that, but why would you want the hassle? Does it pay well?”

Drew set his jaw and his nostrils flared. “Dad, I happen to enjoy the kids. That’s why I became a teacher. As I’ve told you

before, sometimes it’s not about the money.”

Kacey touched his arm, hoping to ease his tension, but he continued to glare at his father.

“When is work not about the money? You know I want to retire, and I’d rather leave the firm to you than to a stranger. You should really consider

a career change, so you can afford a comfortable future.”

Drew picked up his mug and took a sip, then set it back on the gray place mat. “I applied for a music department head job

in Newton, and it pays real money.”

“How exciting, Drew!” His mother reached over and patted his hand. “We’ll miss you, but what a great opportunity.”

Randy nodded. “Have you interviewed for it yet?”

“No, I’m still waiting to hear back.”

“What are your plans for the holidays?” Kacey asked, hoping her voice sounded bright as she jumped in to change the subject.

While Marilyn began talking about Thanksgiving, Kacey noticed Drew’s posture relax slightly.

When they finished their hot cocoa, Kacey thanked Drew’s parents and then walked with him out to his car. They were both quiet

as they climbed into the Honda and he backed out of the driveway.

The silence stretched between them while he gripped the wheel and stared out at the road ahead of them.

“Are you okay?” she finally asked.

He heaved a deep sigh that seemed to come up from his toes. “I’m sorry you had to witness that.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“I get so tired of having the same conversations with my father. If he knew me, he’d understand I don’t want to go into financial planning.”

Kacey touched his arm. “I understand you and I’m really proud of you for following your dreams and becoming a teacher.”

“Thank you.”

When they reached his house, she pulled her keys out of her purse as they walked over to her car together. She looked up at

him. “Thank you for a wonderful supper and a visit to the pier. I had a great time tonight.” She glanced down, feeling nervous

now that they were alone together again, and close enough to touch.

He smiled down at her. “I did too.”

“Let’s do it again soon.”

“Absolutely.”

She hesitated for a moment and waited for him to lean down and kiss her, but he took a step back. Confusion buzzed through

her. Perhaps she had imagined the moment on the pier. Still, she'd been certain he was going to kiss her before his father

had interrupted.

"Text me when you get home," he said. "I want to know you made it okay."

"I will," she said, unlocking her car and climbing in.

Kacey waved to him before backing down the driveway. As she steered down the street, she shook her head to try to clear her

thoughts. Perhaps she'd misread Drew, and he still only wanted to be friends.

She couldn't tamp down the disappointment that cast a shadow over the evening.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:22 am

“Everyone,” Drew called over the murmur of conversations in the community center choir room the following Thursday afternoon,

“you’re all doing great, and practice is almost over. Let’s try it from the top again.” He played the introduction, and the

children began to sing, “Silent night, holy night...”

Drew smiled. The choir sounded fantastic today. The children were paying attention, and they all seemed as if they wanted

to be at practice instead of somewhere else.

When the song ended, clapping sounded from the back of the room, where a group of adults stood waiting to collect their children.

His pulse ticked up when he saw Kacey standing near the doorway. She met his gaze and blessed him with a gorgeous smile.

They had shared a brief conversation Tuesday and traded a few texts, but they hadn’t made plans to see each other again. He

hoped to remedy that as soon as he had a moment to speak with her.

“Great job today, everyone,” Drew announced. “I’ll see you Tuesday.”

Conversations broke out around the room as the children gathered up their coats and

bags and the adults herded them toward
the door.

Drew nodded greetings and slipped his music into a folder and then into his backpack. He looked up just as Kacey approached

him. “Hey, stranger.”

“Hi.” She gave him a little wave.

“Do you have plans tomorrow night?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Dinner and a movie?”

“Sounds perfect,” she said as one of the children’s mothers walked over behind her.

“Excuse me,” the mother began. “I have a few questions about the performance at the festival.”

“Just give me one moment,” he told the mother. Then he looked back at Kacey. “I’ll text you the details.”

“Okay.” She smiled and Riley walked over, threading her fingers with Kacey’s.

Riley waved at Drew. “Bye, Mr. Murphy!”

“Bye,” Drew said before Kacey, Riley, and Colleen headed out of the room. He couldn’t wait to see Kacey tomorrow.

“I have a question, Aunt Kacey,” Riley announced after Kacey had dropped off Colleen.

Kacey backed out of Colleen’s driveway and then steered toward the end of the street. “Sounds serious.” She peeked over at

her niece and gave her a feigned frown. “Is it top secret?”

Riley shook her head. “No, not really.”

“Then lay it on me.”

“Is Mr.Murphy your boyfriend? Are you going to marry him and stay here in Splendid Lake?”

“Slow down there, Riley.” Kacey braked at the stop sign at the end of the block and turned toward her niece. “What makes you

ask all these questions?”

Riley seemed to eye her with suspicion. “You get googly eyes around him!” She giggled.

Kacey laughed. “Well, we’ve been friends since we were in middle school, and we like to spend time together.”

“I think he likes you.”

“What gives you that idea?”

Her niece shrugged. “He always looks happy to see you.”

Kacey turned down the street that led to her sister's house as Riley's observation settled over her. During the past week

she'd tried hard to convince herself that Drew only wanted to be friends, but the curiosity took hold of her again.

When Kacey arrived at Dani's, she helped her mother and sister deliver their supper—breaded pork chops, mashed potatoes, and

green beans—to the table and then took a seat beside Riley.

Soon they were all filling their plates, and the sound of scraping utensils filled the room.

“So, how was everyone's day?” Mom asked.

“Aunt Kacey has a date with Mr.Murphy,” Riley announced, and heat immediately filled Kacey's cheeks as everyone turned to

look at her, even little Kelly. “I told Aunt Kacey that Mr.Murphy likes her, but she says they're only friends.”

Kacey gave a little laugh and then looked down at her niece. “Thanks, buddy.”

“That's very interesting,” Dani cooed. “That makes three weekends in a row that he's asked you out.”

Mom beamed. “Good for you, Kacey. It's about time you dated someone. I can't remember the last time you mentioned being interested

in a young man.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Kacey said as she slid a pork chop onto her plate beside her mashed potatoes and green

beans. “Since Mom is hosting Thanksgiving next week, what are you going to bring, Dani? Besides dessert, of course.”

Dani lifted her glass of water. “I thought I’d make pumpkin pie and cookies for the kids. Also, Travis’s parents would like

to join us. Peggy said she’ll bring cranberry sauce and green bean casserole.”

“You know they’re always welcome,” Mom said.

“Great.” Kacey looked over at Mom. “We can handle the rest, right?”

Mom nodded. “Sure.”

Then Kacey smiled over at Kelly, who sat in her booster seat and forked a small bite of green beans into her mouth. “Kelly

and Riley need to make up their list for Santa, right?”

“Yes!” Riley exclaimed. “I’m already working on mine, and I’ll help Kelly with hers.”

While Riley announced her wish list, Kacey glanced over at her sister, who frowned, and guilt filled Kacey’s gut. She would

get her sister alone and tell her that she’d help her with the girls’ gifts this year. She wanted to be sure her nieces had

a magical Christmas morning.

Kacey had to write a shopping list. She would find gifts for all her family members and also something special for Drew.

“Dinner was delicious, and the movie was pretty good too,” Kacey announced as she and Drew strolled toward his car the following

evening.

Drew peered up at the clear, dark sky, the bright moon glowing above them, and the stars twinkling. Then he turned toward

Kacey, her face seeming to glow in the streetlights. “You actually liked the movie?”

“No.” She laughed and shook her head. “I thought it was really boring and talky.”

He chuckled. “I did too. I’m sorry I recommended it.”

“It’s not your fault. I enjoyed the company.” She bumped his arm with her side.

“Me too.” He actually had considered holding her hand in the movie theater, but he didn’t want to come on too strong and scare

her away.

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving next week?”

“I assumed I was going to my mother’s house. Why?”

“How about you come to my house for dinner and then go to your parents’ house for

dessert.”

He stopped moving and faced her. “You want to spend Thanksgiving with me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Her expression was incredulous. “Besides, didn’t you once tell me that your mom doesn’t like to cook so

she doesn’t even make a turkey on Thanksgiving?”

“That’s true.”

“So enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving with me and my family.”

“I’d love to.”

“Great.” Her smile widened. “I’ll find out what time we’re eating and let you know.”

They made their way to his car and talked about old friends as he drove her to her mother’s house. When they arrived, he walked

her to the door.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

To his surprise, she wrapped her arms round his middle and hugged him. He closed his eyes and breathed in the flowery scent

of her shampoo. Or maybe it was her perfume.

“Good night,” she said before slipping in the door.

Drew felt as if he were floating on a cloud as he drove home and pondered how he could convince her to stay.

He was still contemplating his predicament of losing Kacey when he sat down in front of the laptop in his office. He powered

up the job website and began searching for teaching positions.

He sat up straight and sucked in a breath when he found a posting for a music teacher in Charlotte. Then he clicked on the

position and began to apply.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Kacey sang as she opened the front door and found Drew standing on her mother’s front porch the following

week.

He looked handsome dressed in chinos, a plaid button-down shirt, and a black leather jacket.

“Happy Thanksgiving to you.” He handed her a serving dish. “I brought mashed sweet potatoes with marshmallows. You might have

to warm them up in the oven.”

“Thank you,” she said as she motioned for him to come inside.

The delicious smells of turkey and all the trimmings washed over them as Kacey and

Drew walked into the family room.

“Have you ever met Travis’s parents?” she asked Drew.

“I don’t think so.”

Kacey set the serving dish on the kitchen counter and then took Drew’s arm and towed him over to where Travis’s parents stood

by Travis and her nieces. “Peggy and Tom, this is my friend Drew Murphy.”

Tom shook Drew’s hand. “Great to meet you.”

“We’ve heard so much about you.” Peggy shook his hand next. “Riley was telling us about the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival.”

“It’s only two weeks away,” Drew said.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to help serve the meal.” Kacey slipped into the kitchen and helped her sister and mother carry

the food out to the dining room.

Soon they were all gathered around the table with their bountiful Thanksgiving dinner in the center—a golden turkey, green

bean casserole, mashed sweet potatoes with marshmallows, cranberry sauce, biscuits, and gravy.

“Before we eat,” Mom began, “how about we each say what we’re most thankful for? I’ll start. I’m grateful for my family.”

Dani glanced around the table, smiling at her daughters and her husband. “I’m most grateful for this family too.”

Travis and his parents all echoed Dani’s and Mom’s declarations.

“I love my doll,” Kelly said, and everyone chuckled.

Riley sat up straight. “I’m thankful for my family—even my baby sister.”

Kacey turned to Drew, and her pulse picked up speed. “I’m thankful for special friends.” She looked around the table. “And

I guess my family too,” she teased, and everyone chuckled.

Drew studied Kacey for a moment and then he said, “I’m thankful you’re back in my life.”

Kacey’s heart hammered as she stared at him.

“Nana,” Riley whined. “Can we eat now?”

“Yeah, eat!” Kelly echoed.

Everyone laughed again.

“Yes, sweeties,” Mom said. “Let’s enjoy this wonderful meal.”

“I don’t think I can eat another bite,” Kacey told Drew as they climbed up the front steps of his parents’ house. She shivered

in the late November air.

Drew rubbed his hand on her shoulder to warm her. “But now we’re having dessert. That’s the best part of the meal.”

He opened the door, and they entered a large foyer with an open staircase that led up to five bedrooms. Conversations carried

over from the spacious dining room nearby.

After Drew hung their coats in the closet by the door, he took her hand and steered her into the formal dining room, where

his parents, grandparents, and a few aunts, uncles, and cousins she recognized sat.

“Here they are!” Marilyn announced. “You’re just in time for dessert.”

Drew and Kacey greeted his family members and then took a seat beside each other while his mother and two aunts delivered

a pumpkin pie, a chocolate cream pie, and a platter of assorted cookies to the table, along with coffee.

Kacey talked about work with a few of Drew’s cousins while she enjoyed a piece of pumpkin pie and a cup of coffee.

“So, I hear you’re directing the children’s choir for the Christmas Tree Lighting Festival,” Drew’s grandfather said.

Drew picked up his coffee mug. “That’s right. The festival is two weeks from tomorrow.”

“I think that’s wonderful,” his grandmother said. “I can’t wait to hear the children

sing. It truly feels like Christmas has

come to Splendid Lake when the tree is lit and the choir sings.”

Marilyn nodded. “I agree, Mom. And Drew has more exciting news. He applied for a music department head job in Newton. That

means he’d be in charge of the entire Catawba County Schools music program!”

“Department head. How fantastic,” his grandmother said.

His father pointed his fork at him. “Have you heard anything about the job?”

“Yes.” Drew nodded. “I have a telephone interview next week.”

Kacey turned toward him. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“There’s not much to tell.” Drew shrugged.

Kacey tried to hide her frown as she took another bite of pie. Sadness settled over her as she imagined Drew moving to Newton

while she headed back to Charlotte.

Now that she had Drew back in her life, she didn’t want to let him go, but she also didn’t know how to find a way that they

could stay together.

Drew parked his Honda in her driveway later that evening and then turned toward her. “You’ve been quiet ever since we left

my parents' house. What's on your mind?"

She heaved a deep breath and tried to put her confusing feelings into words.

"Is it that bad?" A look of worry flickered over his handsome face. "Did I do or say something to upset you? Did my family?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm just wondering why you didn't tell me you have an interview in Newton."

"It wasn't deliberate. I didn't think it was worth mentioning. I have a phone interview, and that doesn't mean I'll get the

job."

But what if you do? What will happen to us? She shook off the questions. After all, she was leaving too!

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he said.

"It's okay." She smiled before pushing open the car door and walking up to the porch with him.

"Do you have plans tomorrow?" he asked.

"I was going to work at the bakery. Why?"

"I'm terrible at picking out the right Christmas tree. I was wondering if you might go with me to buy one and then help me

decorate it."

“Do you want to come inside? I’ll ask my mom if she’ll take care of the bakery for me.” She opened the door and found Mom

sitting in her favorite recliner watching A Christmas Story .

Mom sat up as Kacey and Drew walked in. “How was dessert?”

“Very good,” Kacey said. “I was wondering if you were planning to help Dani at the bakery tomorrow.”

“I can. Why?”

Kacey placed her hand on Drew’s arm. “Drew asked if I’d help him pick out a Christmas tree and decorate it.”

“That sounds like fun. I’ll cover for you at the bakery.”

“I appreciate it, Mom.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Williams,” Drew said before Kacey walked outside.

“Call me Monica!” Mom called after him.

Kacey turned to Drew when they reached the porch. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“I can’t wait.” He jogged down the porch steps toward his car.

As he started his car, Kacey hugged her arms to her chest. She couldn’t wait either.

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Kacey pointed to a full pine tree a few inches taller than her. “This is the perfect tree.”

They had been perusing the Christmas tree lot located just outside of downtown Splendid Lake for nearly thirty minutes. Kacey

looked adorable clad in jeans, hiking boots, her teal jacket, and a matching teal hat.

“You’re positive?” he teased her.

She jammed her hands on her hips and frowned. “You said you invited me because I’m an expert, and now you have the nerve to

doubt me?”

He loved when she teased him. “You’re right, Kace. I’m out of line. If you say this is the tree, then it is.”

She laughed.

After he paid for the tree, Kacey helped him secure it on the roof of his car before they climbed in and started toward his

house.

“Could we make a stop?” Kacey asked.

“Sure. Where am I taking you?”

“It’s a surprise.” She pointed toward Main Street. “Head into town and find a parking spot anywhere.”

He parked in front of the Coffee Bean. “Are you buying me a snack?”

“Nope!” Her smile was coy as she gathered her purse from the floorboard and pushed open the door. “Let’s go.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Drew met her on the sidewalk, and she grabbed his hand before steering him through the crowd of Black Friday shoppers. “Where

are you taking me?”

“You’ll see,” she sang.

She stopped in front of the Christmas Shop and smiled up at him. “I want to get you a special ornament so you’ll remember

this Christmas. Okay?”

“That’s a great idea.” Although he was certain he’d never forget this Christmas.

Drew followed her inside the store, where several customers milled around more than a dozen Christmas trees, all covered with

lights and decorations. Each one seemed to have a theme. One had white lights and all-white ornaments, including snowflakes,

snowmen, and stars. Another tree was adorned with red lights and red decorations, and a third had multicolored lights and

matching glass balls.

A spirited rendition of “Deck the Halls” rang through the store’s speakers, and a suspiciously strong scent of pine filled

his nostrils, causing him to wonder if either plug-in air fresheners or powerfully scented candles were hidden among the decorations.

Kacey fluttered around the store, checking out displays of ornaments. Drew looked out the large glass window, where folks

decorated the light poles with garland and light-up candy canes in preparation for the festival.

When he turned, he spotted an ornament for Kacey, and he smiled as he picked it up and headed toward the cashier, where Kacey

already stood in line.

After they had both paid, they met at the door leading out to the street.

“Here you go.” She handed him the bag.

He held out a bag to her. “And here’s yours.”

He pulled out a beautiful classic wooden guitar with the year printed on it. He smiled and felt warm all the way through.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She lifted her chin. “You said it was your favorite instrument.”

“I love it.” He pointed to her bag. “Open yours.”

She smiled as she pulled a banana split ornament from the bag. “Oh, Drew! Is this to commemorate all those times we shared

a banana split at Scoops?”

“Of course.”

“I love it.” She slipped the ornament into the bag and nodded toward the door. “Let’s stop at the bakery for some Christmas

cookies and then decorate that perfect tree.”

Drew and Kacey spent the afternoon decorating the tree, eating cookies from her sister’s bakery, drinking eggnog, and listening

to Christmas music. They reminisced and laughed, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such an enjoyable day.

When the tree was done, Drew turned off the overhead lights, and they stood in front of it, admiring their work.

Kacey smiled up at him. “I was right. It’s perfect.”

“Yes, you were.” He felt the overwhelming urge to kiss her. As he started to reach for her, she crossed the room and flipped

on the lights.

She pointed to the television. “How about we watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have popcorn?”

“Who doesn’t have popcorn?”

She laughed on her way to the kitchen. “You find a movie, and I’ll make the popcorn. Is it in the pantry?”

“Yes.” Drew found the remote, flipped on the television, and sat down on the sofa.

Soon the aroma of popcorn coupled with the sound of popping filled the house, and he smiled. If only he could find a way for

this day to never end.

Later that evening, Kacey flopped down on the sofa across from her mother’s favorite chair. “It was the perfect day, Mom.

We never stopped talking and laughing.” She told her about decorating the tree and then watching a movie together. “I’ve never

felt this close to a man.”

“You love him, don’t you?” Mom asked.

Kacey sighed. “Yeah, I do, but we want different things. He’s pursuing a job in

Newton, and I'm planning to go back to Charlotte

eventually."

"What if there was a way that you could find a compromise?"

"How?"

"What if you worked remotely from Newton?"

"Mom, I don't even know how he feels about me. I think he cares for me, too, but he's never said he likes me as more than

a friend."

"What if you just asked him?"

Kacey grimaced. "And what would I do if he rejected me?"

"And what if he didn't?"

Kacey huffed and stood up. "How about we start on those Christmas cards?"

"You were always great at changing the subject." Mom headed toward her bedroom.

"I'll get out the cards, and you make us some

tea."

Kacey headed into the kitchen, her thoughts swirling with her mother's questions.

The bakery was hustling and bustling the night of the Christmas Tree Lighting

Festival. Kacey rushed around delivering hot

cocoa and Christmas cookies to the customers standing in the line that stretched from the counter to the door. Mom ran the

register, and Dani kept a supply of cookies and hot cocoa available. Customers sat at the tables in the dining area while

enjoying their festive treats.

Out the front window, Kacey saw townspeople milling about, bundled up in coats, hats, scarves, and gloves while talking, eating

Christmas cookies, drinking cocoa, and visiting the stores.

When there was a break in the line, Kacey retrieved her phone from the back pocket of her jeans and found a missed call and

message Drew had left ten minutes ago. She was surprised that she hadn't seen him, since he promised to stop by the bakery

before the program started.

She stepped into the kitchen, moved to the far corner, and then played the message.

“Hey, Kace. It's me.” His words came in a rush. “I need your help. I'm stuck in traffic, and the festival is going to start

soon. Can you possibly fill in for me? Give me a call, and I'll let you know what I need you to do. I'll take over as soon

as I get there. Thanks.”

Kacey called him back, and he answered on the second ring. “I just got your message. What’s going on?”

“I was stuck in traffic. I’m almost there, but the festival starts in ten minutes. Can you help me? I’ll tell you where everything

is. It’s easy.”

“Uh, I don’t know, Drew.” Her stomach dipped. “You remember how I froze up every time we had to give presentations at school.”

“Kacey,” he began slowly, as if speaking to a child, “you can do this. I have faith in you.”

She listened while he explained where to find the CD with the kids’ music on it and whom to give it to. “I’ll try, but you

need to promise me that you’ll get here as soon as you can, okay?”

“Thank you, Kace. You’re the best.”

“You’re going to owe me, Murphy,” she teased.

“I know. I’ll see you soon.”

Kacey disconnected the call and then slipped her phone back into her pocket before gathering up her coat, hat, and gloves.

“Where are you going?” Dani asked when Kacey returned to the front of the store.

Kacey zipped her coat. “Drew was stuck in traffic, and he needs me to direct the choir for him until he gets here.”

“What do you know about directing a choir?” Dani laughed.

“Nothing, and honestly, the whole idea of standing up there in front of all those people scares me to death, but Drew needs

help.” Kacey rushed out of the bakery and into the community center, where she found the CD and Drew’s folder of music.

She exited the community center and wove through the noisy crowd until she came to the thirty-foot-tall artificial tree that

towered at the end of the block near the town hall. The members of the children’s choir, all wearing elf hats, stood in front

of the tree. A podium faced the children, and microphones stood on stands in front of them.

Riley rushed over to Kacey and grabbed her arm. “The festival is about to start! Where’s Mr.Murphy?”

“He’s on his way, and he asked me to fill in until he gets here. I’m going to take care of the music. You tell all the kids

to get ready.” She searched the sea of nearby people until she found a young man standing by the electronic equipment, and

made a beeline to him. “Are you Brian?”

He gave her a curious expression. “Yes.”

“Drew Murphy is stuck in traffic, and he asked me to direct the choir until he gets here.” Her hands shook as she gave him

the CD. “Here’s the music.”

“Got it.” Brian took the CD and turned to the equipment.

Kacey spotted Mayor Fairmount and dashed over to him. “Excuse me, Mayor.”

“Yes?” Mayor Fairmount spun to face her.

“I’m Kacey Williams. Drew Murphy is stuck in traffic, and he asked me to direct the choir.” She took a deep, trembling breath,

hoping to calm her frayed nerves. “I-I’m ready whenever you want to make the introduction.”

“Oh good. Let’s get this show on the road.” The mayor walked over to the microphone near the tree.

Kacey joined the children and put her shaking finger to her lips, indicating that they should be quiet. When she turned toward

the crowd, her stomach plummeted, and her throat began to close up.

Calm down, Kacey! You got this!

Then Drew’s voice echoed through her mind: Kacey, you can do this. I have faith in you.

Drew believed in her, and she was determined to make him proud.

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She found her mother, Dani, and Travis standing beside Travis's parents in the crowd with Kelly perched on Travis's shoulder,

waving.

"Welcome, everyone, to the annual Splendid Lake Christmas Tree Lighting Festival," the mayor began. "It's my favorite festival

of the year. Now join me in welcoming our community children's choir as they sing us into the Christmas season. Kacey Williams

is standing in for our choir director, Drew Murphy, who is on his way. Let's give our choir a round of applause."

While the crowd clapped and cheered, Kacey took a deep breath in through her nose and worked to stop her hands from quaking

as she opened the music folder. She looked over at the children and pointed to her eyes, indicating that they needed to look

at her.

When the opening to "Jingle Bells" sounded through the speakers, Kacey smiled. She could do this! She just needed to pretend

that the entire town wasn't watching her. And just like that, she found confidence deep inside herself.

She directed the children to sing, and their voices rang out over the speakers on either side of the tree. She smiled as they

sang in unison, their little voices blending almost perfectly!

“Jingle Bells” ended, and they went straight into “Joy to the World.” Kacey smiled as they continued to serenade the crowd.

When the song ended, the mayor flipped the switch, and the tree lit up in all its colorful glory. The crowd oohed and aahed

as the children began to sing “Silent Night.”

When a tall figure filled her peripheral vision, she breathed a sigh of relief. Drew appeared beside her with a sheepish expression

on his face.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She nodded at him and then moved off to the side. She hugged her arms to her waist and smiled as the children finished the

performance with “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and then “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.”

When the choir finished, the crowd clapped and whistled for them. Drew gestured at the kids, and they all took a bow as the

crowd clapped and yelled louder.

Drew motioned for Kacey to come back up front, and she joined him. He turned toward her. “You did a wonderful job, Kace.”

“I don’t know about that, but thank you. When you’re done here, bring the choir in for cocoa and cookies at the bakery. It’s

on the house,” she said.

“Thanks. I will.”

Kacey hustled back to the bakery, where her mother and Dani were already serving more customers cookies and cocoa.

“You did fantastic, Kacey,” Mom said as she handed a customer a receipt.

Dani nodded. “It was great.”

“Thanks. I actually overcame my stage fright. I’m going to get some cocoa and cookies ready for the choir. I’ll pay for it,

Dani,” she told her sister.

Dani waved her off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Kacey had pushed a few tables together and set out cups of hot cocoa and a few plates of cookies by the time Drew led the

choir members and their parents into the bakery. “Come and help yourselves, kids. You all did a fantastic job.”

The children thanked her as they each sat at the table and dug in.

Drew took Kacey's hand and led her over to the corner, away from the children and parents. "I can't thank you enough."

"You're welcome. I should actually be thanking you."

"Why?" he asked.

"You forced me to overcome my stage fright." She tilted her head and scrunched her eyebrows. "Where were you?"

He hesitated. "I was at a job interview. For the department head in Newton."

"Oh." Her breath hitched, and she tried to stop herself from frowning. "How did it go?"

He shrugged. "It's difficult to tell."

"Oh."

"Aunt Kacey!" Riley called. "Look! It's snowing."

Kacey spun to face the window and gasped as beautiful snowflakes swirled through the air. She moved to the window and smiled

at Drew. "Isn't it beautiful?"

His eyes never left hers. "Yes, it is."

"Aunt Kacey..." Riley sang as she tugged on Kacey's sleeve.

Kacey looked down at her niece. "What is it?"

Riley giggled and pointed toward the ceiling. “Look up.”

Kacey peered toward the ceiling where mistletoe hung above them. She met Drew’s gaze, and her knees wobbled.

Drew’s lip twitched. “I guess we know what we have to do.”

He rested his hands on the sides of her face, then leaned down and brushed his lips across hers, making her lose track of

both her surroundings and time. She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of her mouth against his, and a shiver of longing vibrated

through her body.

The children began to giggle and hoot, and Kacey came back to earth. She took a step away from him, trying to catch her breath.

She met Drew’s gaze, but his expression was unreadable. And the question that had haunted her since senior year bubbled up

in her mind.

“Why didn’t you ask me to prom?” she asked.

He blanched as if her words had struck him. “I thought—Wait... Would you have gone with me?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Oh no!” one of the mothers called. “You spilled it all over, Braxton!”

Kacey pivoted toward where one of the children had dumped his cup of cocoa on the floor. “I’ll get some paper towels.”

She hurried to the kitchen and wondered if she’d ever find out if Drew cared for her.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:22 am

“So you kissed her?” Garrett grinned at Drew across the table Monday afternoon while they ate lunch in the teacher’s lounge.

Drew nodded and heat roared through his veins at the memory of how it felt to brush his lips against hers. “Yes. Thank goodness

her niece noticed the mistletoe.”

“Surely that means you’re finally dating. Good for you.”

Drew shook his head as he swallowed a bite of his ham and cheese sandwich. “No, we still haven’t talked about it. She started

to ask me why I didn’t ask her to prom, and we just haven’t had a chance to connect and finish the conversation. She was busy

with her family the rest of the weekend.”

“Wait.” Garrett set his bottle of water on the table. “What’s the story with prom?”

Drew frowned. “I was planning to ask her, but my best friend at the time beat me to it. Then they started dating, and Kacey

and I grew apart. If I’d mustered up the courage sooner, I could have asked her out myself.”

“You know what you have to do. Tell her how you feel now.”

Drew's phone buzzed. He flipped it over and found a missed call and a voice mail. He listened to the voice mail and his mouth

dropped open.

"What is it?"

"It's about the teaching job in Charlotte. They want me to come in for an interview next Tuesday."

"You applied for a job in Charlotte too?"

"Yeah, it was a whim." Drew took another bite of his sandwich.

Garrett nodded. "Well, I'll miss you, buddy, but Charlotte could be your future."

Drew let his friend's words soak through him, and hope lit in his chest.

Kacey perused her work email Friday morning. She found one from her supervisor and began responding just as her phone started

to ring. Her friend Jackie Campbell's name was on the screen.

"Hey, Jackie. What's up?" Kacey leaned back in her desk chair.

"I heard you were looking for a roommate. Is that right?"

"Yes, it is. Ginny Sorrentino got married, so I'm staying with my mom until I can find something affordable in Charlotte."

"I might have the solution to your problem. My roommate is moving out January first. Would you like to come back to Charlotte?"

You'll have a nice big bedroom and your own bathroom."

Kacey sat up straight. "What's the rent?"

Jackie gave her all the details, and the rent and utilities were within Kacey's budget.

"I know you don't go in very often, but it's right near your office too," Jackie added.

"This sounds too good to be true."

"It's not! You'd be doing me a huge favor, because I can't afford this on my own, but I love the location."

"Well, it's perfect. I'm in."

"Fantastic. I'll call you after Christmas, and we'll work out the details."

"Thank you for thinking of me," Kacey said before disconnecting the call. She stared down at her computer screen, and a mixture

of gratitude and sadness filled her. She'd been worried she wouldn't find a new roommate in the city she'd grown to love,

but she was going to miss her family. And her heart began to break at the idea of leaving Drew behind. What if Charlotte wasn't

her future anymore?

As if on cue, her phone buzzed with a text from him:

Dinner tomorrow night? My treat.

She grinned as she typed back:

Yes. Only because you're paying.

Pick you up at 6.

Don't be late.

She sighed and rested her elbows on her desk as she pondered moving back to Charlotte. How would she ever recover from losing

Drew a second time?

"I have some news," Kacey said as she sat across from Drew at the Little Italy Italian restaurant the next night.

Drew closed his menu. "I do, too, but you go first."

"Okay," she began. "So, it looks like I'm going back to Charlotte after Christmas."

His smile faded. "So soon? What happened?"

She explained how her friend Jackie called and asked if she wanted to move in January first when her roommate moved out.

"That's great, Kace." His smile seemed forced, and didn't quite meet his eyes.

"Yeah, I lucked out. What's your news?"

"I got the music department head job in Newton."

"Oh wow." She tried to sound excited as disappointment overcame her. Would she

even see Drew when she came back to visit her

family? She tamped down the thought and leaned across the table to place her hand on his. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks. It's a big raise."

"That's fantastic. When does it start?"

"After the holidays."

"So you need to sell your house and find a place to live there."

Drew nodded. "Right."

Kacey fiddled with her napkin. "We'll keep in touch, right?"

"Of course."

"Your friendship means so much to me. I'm sorry we missed out on so many years."

"I am too." He reached across the table and took her hands in his. "I promise I'll do better this time."

"Me too," she said softly.

Drew walked into Garrett's classroom Monday afternoon.

Garrett looked up from his desk. "Hey, man, what's up?"

"I got the job in Newton." Drew sank down on one of the chairs in the front row.

Garrett's face lit up. "That's great."

"Thanks." Drew rested his right ankle on his left knee. "My father, who only cares about money, said I should take it."

Garrett stood up and walked around the desk before sitting on the edge of it. "But it sounds like you don't want to take it."

"Not really." Drew pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest. "Tomorrow I'm going to Charlotte to interview for the music teacher position there."

"And that's the job you want," Garrett said.

"Yes. I want to go there with Kacey and start a life with her."

"Have you told her this?"

"No, not yet. I want to get the job first."

Garrett nodded. "And what if you don't get the job?"

"Then I'll have to think of something else."

"Good," Garrett said. "Oh, you had asked me about IT jobs with the school system. You have a friend who is looking for one, right?"

Drew nodded. "That's right."

“I have a lead for you.” Garrett handed him a piece of paper. “Have your friend call Rich Monroe. He has an opening.”

Drew took the paper. “Thank you. I’ll give Travis a call.”

“I can’t believe you convinced me to close the bakery today and go shopping with you,” Dani said Tuesday morning as she walked

inside the small mall located a few miles from the town of Splendid Lake with Kacey and their mother. “You know I need to

work.”

Kacey faced her sister, pulled a thick envelope out of her purse, and handed it to her. “Merry Christmas, sis.”

“What is this?” Dani asked, her blue eyes wide.

Kacey shared a smile with Mom and then looked at her sister again. “Just open it, Dani.”

Her sister opened the envelope and gasped at the bills stuffed inside. “I-I can’t take this.” With her eyes misting over,

Dani pushed the envelope back toward Kacey.

“No, I insist. I was saving for a down payment on a condo, but my friend Jackie called me and said she’s looking for a roommate.

So, I wanted to give you and Travis this money so you can buy the girls gifts and then use the rest for bills until something

works out for Travis. Please take it. This is my Christmas gift for you.”

Dani’s lip trembled as she pulled Kacey in for a tight hug. “You’re the best sister on the planet, Kacey.”

“You know it,” Kacey teased, and they laughed.

Dani put the envelope into her purse. “Did you know Drew called Travis and gave him a lead on a job?”

“When?” Kacey asked.

“Yesterday. There’s an opening with the school system. Drew told him to reach out to someone for an interview.”

Kacey clapped. “That’s great!”

“I know. Travis called and it sounds like a great opportunity.”

“What a blessing,” Mom said.

Warmth filled Kacey’s chest. Drew was such a wonderful man.

“Let’s go shopping,” Dani said.

Kacey pointed toward a music store. “Let me go in here to find something for Drew and then we’ll head to the toy store for

the girls.”

“What are you going to do about Drew when you go back to Charlotte?” Mom asked.

Kacey frowned. "I haven't figured that out. He was offered a job in Newton."

"Maybe you can try long distance?" Mom suggested.

Dani held her finger up. "Or you can work remotely from Newton."

"When are you going to admit that you two are meant for each other and that you need to find a way to work it out?" Mom asked.

Kacey shook her head as they walked into the music store. "We both promised to keep in touch, but he hasn't said anything

about being more than friends." The truth was she couldn't stop thinking about that kiss the night of the festival. She'd

never felt such an explosion of desire in her life. The memory sent a flush of bashful pleasure through her cheeks and made

her light-headed. And she couldn't shake the feeling that maybe her future could be in Splendid Lake with Drew instead of

in Charlotte.

"I think you need to tell him how you feel and then figure out a way to make it work," Dani told her.

Kacey smiled. "Maybe I will."

"Merry Christmas!" Kacey exclaimed as Dani, Travis, and the girls walked into her mother's house Christmas morning. She leaned

down and hugged her nieces. "You need to go over to the tree. There are presents

there for you.”

Riley took Kelly’s hand. “I’ll help you find your gifts.” She guided her over to the tree.

Dani hugged Kacey. “We have big news.”

“What is it?” Mom asked as she joined them.

Dani looked at Travis as he grinned.

“I got the job with the school system,” Travis said.

“Oh!” Mom gasped. “I’m so happy to hear that!”

“Is it the job that Drew recommended?” Kacey asked.

Dani nodded. “Yes. Drew made it happen.”

“That’s amazing,” Mom said.

“Nana?” Riley called from the Christmas tree. “Will you come over here and help us find our presents?”

Mom smiled over at them. “Of course.”

“I’ll come with you,” Travis said as he carried a large tote bag filled with gifts over to the sofa.

“What are Drew’s plans for today?” Dani asked Kacey.

“He texted me last night and asked if he could come over.”

Dani smiled. “That’s good.”

“Aunt Kacey!” Riley called. “Come here and open your gifts.”

Dani touched Kacey’s arm. “You’re being summoned.”

“We’d better go.”

Kacey sat down on the sofa between her mother and sister and watched as her nieces opened their gifts from her and her mom.

Dani pulled out a box of cookies, and Kacey brought in glasses of eggnog while they continued opening gifts, laughing, and

enjoying each other.

When a knock sounded at the door, Kacey popped up from the sofa, retrieved Drew’s gift from under the tree, and then darted

to the door.

She pulled it open and found Drew standing on the porch. Above them the sky was white and it felt like snow was coming. “Merry

Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you.”

She opened the door wide. “Would you like to come in?”

“Actually, I was wondering if we could talk out here alone for a few minutes.”

“Oh. Okay.” She shivered. “Let me grab my coat.” She set his gift on the little table next to her mother’s rocking chair,

retrieved her coat from the closet, and pulled it on. “What did you want to talk about?” she asked when she returned to the

porch.

He hesitated and then drew out a ragged breath. “Remember Tuesday when you went shopping with your mom and sister?”

“Yes.”

“I told you I was busy all day, and the truth is, I had a job interview.”

She studied him. “I thought you already heard back about the job in Newton.”

“This interview was for a teaching position. I got the job, and I really want to take it. But I need to tell you something

first.” Drew paused and swallowed. “You asked me why I never asked you to prom. I was a coward. I had planned to ask you,

but I waited too long. The truth is that I love you, and I’ve loved you since I was sixteen years old. I was never brave enough

to tell you, but now I’m telling you that I love you and I want to build a future with you in Charlotte.”

Kacey heaved a breath as happy tears leaked from her eyes. “I love you, too, Drew.” Then she held her hand up. “Hold on a

second. You said you want to make a life in Charlotte with me? Where's the teaching job?"

Drew smiled. "In Charlotte."

"You applied for a job in Charlotte?"

"Yes, I did." He cupped his hand to her cheek. "I wanted to find a way to be with you. I can't let you walk out of my life

again."

She sniffed. "Drew, I'm so honored that you did that for me. But the truth is that I've been doing a lot of thinking and I've

realized something." She paused, and his smile wobbled. "My life is here now, and I belong in Splendid Lake. How would you

feel if we stayed?"

"Actually, I'm relieved to hear you say that."

"But your job in Charlotte—is it a promotion? Are you giving up a great opportunity because of me?"

"No, actually." He shook his head. "My supervisor heard that I was interviewing for jobs, and he offered me a promotion if

I stayed here in Splendid Lake. He wants me to be director of our little music department here, and it comes with a nice raise.

If you're really happy staying here with me, I would love to accept his offer."

“That’s amazing!”

“You’re amazing, Kace.” He pulled her to him. He dipped his head and kissed her. She looped her arms around his neck and soaked

in his nearness. When he deepened the kiss, Kacey melted against him. She was certain she was dreaming, but the heat rushing

through her veins was as real as the feel of his lips.

When he broke the kiss, Kacey placed her hand on Drew’s chest. She felt something wet hit her face, and she smiled when she

realized it was snowing. “I love you, Drew Murphy, and I can’t wait to start the new year with you by my side.”

“How about we start it right now?” He kissed her again while snow drifted down, swirling around them.