

CHRISTMASVILLE

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FADE IN:

INT. WOOD WORK FACTORY - DAY

The bustling floor teems with activity. EMPLOYEES man lathes and routers, boring holes and slicing plywood.

Christmas decorations line the walls -- green garland, red bells and silver stars.

DALE LEITH, 34, red flannel coat and jeans, punches his time card and waves to a co-worker while juggling coffee and doughnuts.

LOADING DOCK - LATER

Dale dispassionately marks a clipboard, checking in deliveries. A FORKLIFT jerks to a halt and BEEPS its horn.

FORKLIFT DRIVER

Dale, you're in the service lane.

He steps back.

DALE

Sorry.

He continues his work as the forklift rolls past.

DALE (V.O.)

I used to be a woodworker. A good one, too. Chairs, coffee tables, toys... You name it.

INSERT: MONTAGE OF DALE'S WORK

CHAIR, COFFEE TABLE, TOY TRAINS -- each crafted with exquisite detail and workmanship.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE (V.O.)

I worked under my father for many years. He had a shop in town. But over here I just do shipping and receiving. All things said, that's just fine by me.

Dale shuffles to the open bay doors where, just below a ridge, lies...

EXT. SMALL TOWN - DAY

A church steeple juts above the tree-lined streets, clean sidewalks and specialty shops. Main Street, USA.

INT. LOADING DOCK - DAY

Dale's still gazing on the town as HERB PETERS, 50s, creeps up from behind and taps him on the shoulder.

HERB
Got a minute, Dale?

HERB'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Herb sits at his desk, Dale across from him.

DALE
Come again?

HERB
I said, we're laying you off.

DALE
Yeah, I heard that part. Can I ask why? It was the Messing account, wasn't it?

HERB
No, no, no. Well, that was kind of messed up, but no.

Dale waits for an answer.

HERB
Dale, it's just not as busy as it used to be. Everyone else has more time in than you. It's just, you know, business.

DALE
Really?

HERB
However, I did manage to get you a generous severance as well as a holiday bonus.
(beat)
You're welcome.

Dale stands abruptly.

HERB
Don't hit me.

DALE
Just give me the envelope.

EXT. SMALL TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Holiday cheer is on display all across town, in contrast to a downtrodden Dale, who pads along the sidewalk.

SAL LACONE, 60s, climbs down a ladder in front of his HARDWARE STORE.

SAL
Hey, Dale.

DALE
What's new, Sal?

SAL
(shrugs)
Eight days till Christmas and I ain't bought a single thing. Thank Heavens for gift certificates, huh?

Dale peers into the store next to Sal's. A FOR LEASE sign hangs in the fogged-out window. The storefront reads:

LEITH WOODWORKS

SAL
Considering it?

DALE
I don't know why they don't just rent it out already.

SAL
Maybe they're waiting for the right person to rent it out to. Know what I mean?

DALE
Yeah, I know what you mean.

SAL
Your father was a good man, Dale. I sure do miss him.

Dale nods, looks down the street to the --

TOWN SQUARE

Where a group of TOWNSFOLK decorate a fifteen foot DOUGLAS FIR with lights and ornaments.

SAL
Tree lighting's soon.

DALE
Yeah, I can see that.

SAL
Tabitha making her cookies this year?

DALE
She wouldn't miss it.

SAL
Truth be told, I think the bigger tradition 'round here are your wife's Christmas cookies. You're a lucky man, Dale.

DALE
So she tells me.

Dale heads off.

DALE
Well, I'll see you around, Sal.

SAL
(smiles)
That a threat?

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Christmas lights adorn this tidy looking Craftsman tucked in among the bare trees. Smoke rises from the chimney.

INT. LIVING ROOM - HOUSE - SAME

TABITHA, 32, pretty even when she's not trying, sorts through a box full of bells, ribbons and bows.

Stringing lights on the tree is MICHAEL, 8, cute in his PJs and earnest in his task.

A set of lights flicker out.

MICHAEL
These lights are out.

TABITHA
There's another set on the table,
hon.

Michael heads to the table where a tangled mess awaits.

MICHAEL
Daddy?

Dale sits in a recliner. The TV's on, but he's not really watching.

MICHAEL
Daddy, these lights are tangled.

DALE
Throw 'em out, then.

Tabitha's not pleased by that curt response.

TABITHA
Michael, honey. Why don't you go
upstairs and brush your teeth. We
can sort all this out tomorrow.
Okay?

MICHAEL
Aww. Do I have to?

She kisses his forehead.

TABITHA
Go on. I'll be up in a little while
to read to you.

Michael goes to kiss his father good night.

Dale snaps out of his stupor and hugs Michael just a little too tight for just a little too long.

DALE
Good night, my boy.

MICHAEL
Good night, Daddy.

Michael heads upstairs.

Tabitha watches him go, then grabs the remote and shuts off the TV.

DALE

Hey, I was watching that.

TABITHA

What's wrong? You've been moping ever since you got home.

DALE

I'm not moping.
(sighs, finally)
They laid me off today.

TABITHA

They what?

DALE

They laid me off today.

She's stunned.

TABITHA

Oh no. Dale, I'm so sorry. Why? Was it the Messing account? I bet you it was that Messing account.

DALE

No, it wasn't the Messing account. It was just... I don't know, Tab. They made cuts. I was one of them.

TABITHA

Well, that's not right, Dale. It's a week before Christmas. Who does that?

DALE

Apparently they do.

Dale rises and slowly heads to the mantle above the fireplace. He focuses on a FAMILY PORTRAIT.

INSERT: PORTRAIT

Michael, Dale, Tab. They're all happy, all is good.

But sitting in front of Dale, his hand on her shoulder, is EMILY, an eight-year old treasure wearing a big smile with eyes as pure as an infant's slumber.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE

She would've been twelve.

TABITHA

What?

DALE

Emily. She would've been twelve. Guess things might have been a lot different if... she were still here.

Tabitha knows where this is going.

TABITHA

You think losing Emily has something to do with you losing your job?

DALE

Of course not. It's just...

She goes to him.

TABITHA

Hey. This is just bad timing, Dale. That's all this is. But, we got this. You hear me? We got this. You and me. Together. As a family. Who knows? This might even be a blessing in disguise.

DALE

How do you figure that?

TABITHA

Your father's shop has been sitting vacant all these years. Maybe it's time.

Dale's already shaking his head.

TABITHA

Why not? You're every bit the woodworker your father was. Even better.

DALE

Just doesn't feel right.

TABITHA

Dale, you can't carry this weight forever. This... guilt you feel over what happened. You can blame yourself all you want, but it wasn't your fault. I think deep down you know that.

Dale sighs.

DALE

I'll go looking for work in the morning. I think I know just where to go.

Tabitha forces a smile.

TABITHA

I know you will. I have faith in you. Even when you don't.

She hugs him tight, gives a kiss, then heads upstairs.

Dale stands in place a moment, shuffles to the table and picks up the muddled set of lights.

And just stares at them.

INT. HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha in bed, sound asleep. Dale beside her, wide awake.

The clock on the night stand reads 4:44. The alarm sounds. He taps it gently and climbs out of bed.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - MORNING

Dawn, but still dark. Stores are all closed save for the blue and red neon lights of --

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - MORNING

Bells jangle as the door opens. Dale enters to find the dining room dim and chairs atop the tables.

Bacon and sausage sizzle on a grill.

Behind the counter is PETE MARONE, 60s, a well-seasoned business owner with thick glasses and a modest gut.

Dale takes a faded HELP WANTED sign and slides it across the counter.

DALE

Still looking for help, Pete?

Spatula in one hand, carton of eggs in the other, Pete turns. He snuffles, grins and jacks up his pants.

PETE
Is Santa a jolly old elf?

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

Tabitha and Michael wait at the curb. A SCHOOL BUS rolls up. Air brakes hiss, door swings open. A hug, a kiss, and off he goes.

Tabitha waves goodbye.

She pulls out her phone. No messages from Dale. Concern on her face as she dials and waits. No answer.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Dale flips a burger onto a bun and plates it. He works this like it's old hat, which is good -- it's busy.

ELIZABETH, a waitress in her fifties whose name everyone knows, grabs the plate, clearly impressed.

ELIZABETH
You done this before?

DALE
Beginners luck?

She flashes a sly grin and hurries off.

EXT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - LATER

Dale stands out back behind the store sipping coffee from a steaming cup.

The door opens.

DALE
Hey, Pete.

Pete grabs his hip and groans.

PETE
Ever had a hip replacement, Dale?

Dale shakes his head.

PETE
Me either.

DALE
So, am I hired?

PETE
Yeah, you're hired. You did a great job back there.

DALE
Thanks.

PETE
You know, I heard about them letting you go. At the factory. That's a tough break, Dale, especially around this time of year.

DALE
News travels fast, huh?

PETE
Well, it's a small town.
(he turns to go)
Your wife let you cook at home?

DALE
Only on days that end in 'no.'

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - DAY

Three HAIRDRESSERS working on three OLD LADIES hair. A fourth chair sits unattended.

First chair is GAYLE HODGINS, 50, the shop owner, a perky redhead who takes care to always look her best.

Tabitha enters, phone to her ear. She hangs up.

TABITHA
Sorry I'm late.

GAYLE
Morning, sugar.

Tabitha passes MINDY, 30s, the receptionist, as she takes a bite of a sandwich.

MINDY
(mouth full)
Tabby, you never told us your husband was such a good cook.

TABITHA

Huh?

GAYLE

Yeah. We ordered lunch from Marone's and there's Dale working the grill.

Tabitha inspects the room. Everyone has food.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

Tabitha pounds the sidewalk until she gets to Marone's. She peeks through the window.

As promised, there's Dale.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Dale pulls a ticket, plates a BLT, turns.

DALE

Liz, your food is--

But no Liz. Just Tabitha, staring him down.

DALE

Ready. Hi, hon.

INT. HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tabitha opens the stove and checks on dinner, then grabs plates from the cabinet.

TABITHA

You didn't think to call me? I had to hear about your new job from the girls at work.

Dale sits at the table with Michael, going over homework.

DALE

I'm sorry, Tab. The day just kind of happened.

TABITHA

I was worried. Gone all morning. I thought you'd disappeared.

DALE
Come on, Tabitha. I'd never just disappear.

The stove DINGS.

MICHAEL
Daddy, I don't get this.

DALE
I don't blame you. Where's the calculator?

TABITHA
No calculators.

MICHAEL
But it's easier with a calculator.

TABITHA
Which is precisely why I don't want you using one. Some things you need to figure out for yourself.

INT. CAR - DAY

Dale at the wheel, sun pouring in. Close on his eyes as--

FLASHBACK

INT. CAR - DAY

Similar day, a few years ago. Dale drives, but this time he has a passenger.

It's Emily. She holds a catalog in her lap.

EMILY
See, Daddy. This is the necklace I want to get Mommy.

The car stops at a light.

DALE
Let me see. Oh, that's pretty. I like that... What is it? Emerald?

She nods happily.

DALE
I think Mommy's gonna love it.

EMILY

What if I don't have enough money?

DALE

How much you got?

EMILY

Forty dollars from my allowance.

DALE

Forty dollars? How much we paying you?

EMILY

Not enough.

DALE

Tell you what, if you don't have enough I can spot you the rest. Deal?

EMILY

Are we going to have time? I have ice skating at three.

DALE

We'll make it, honey. We have plenty of time left.

Traffic light goes green. Dale gently taps the gas.

BACK TO SCENE

INT. KITCHEN - MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Dale dices tomatoes on a work table. Pete enters and drops an envelope in front of him.

DALE

What's this?

PETE

First pay check. And a little something for the holidays.

DALE

You didn't have to do that, Pete.

PETE

There's a lot of things I don't have to do.

Dale stuffs the envelope in his pocket.

DALE
I appreciate it.

PETE
Don't mention it. So, are we in any
danger of getting out of here?

DALE
Almost done, boss.

Dale resumes dicing, strange little smile on his face, when suddenly--

He SHRIEKS in pain, drops the knife and clutches his hand.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - LATER

Dale's hand is palm-up on a table. A NURSE in her thirties wraps it in gauze.

NURSE
You really did a number on
yourself.

DALE
Can I work with this?

NURSE
I wouldn't recommend it. It needs
time to heal. Last thing you want
are for those stitches to open.

EXT. PARKING LOT - HOSPITAL - DAY

Dale heads to his car, clicks the key fob. *BEEP BEEP*. He stares out across the lot.

He mutters under his breath, makes a fist. The frustration and rage building. He makes to pound the hood, but stops.

Stops and breaths.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - MORNING

A light dusting of snow on the ground.

SUPER: 5 DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS

INT. HOUSE - BATHROOM - MORNING

Dale's in front of the mirror, his bad hand resting on the sink as he carefully removes the dressing.

Michael appears in the doorway.

MICHAEL
Whatcha doing, Daddy?

DALE
Taking this thing off.

He unwraps the last of it, revealing an ugly set of stitches running between his thumb and forefinger.

Dale tries to make a fist and winces.

MICHAEL
That looks gross.

DALE
Doesn't feel so hot, either.

Tabitha joins Michael, her reaction just as unpleasant.

TABITHA
Eww. Dale, that looks awful.

DALE
It is what it is. I gonna try and go back to work.

TABITHA
You can't work like that. You look like Frankenstein. You're gonna scare everyone.

DALE
Is that a reference to my cooking?

TABITHA
Yes.

DALE
I don't know. I just feel so completely useless.

TABITHA
You're not completely useless. Besides, I have errands for you.

Tabitha points at Michael from behind as she kisses the top of his head.

EXT. MALL - DAY

Bright December day, cheery Christmas vibe in the air. Lots of PEOPLE coming and going, shopping bags and gifts.

A SALVATION ARMY SANTA rings a bell at the entrance.

Dale exits the mall, struggling with several bags. He stops at the curb, scans the parking lot. A bag slips from his hand.

SALVATION ARMY SANTA
Looks like you've got more than you
can handle, friend.

DALE
I'd be doing a lot better if I
could remember where I parked the
car.

SALVATION ARMY SANTA
Where's your wife?

DALE
At work.

SALVATION ARMY SANTA
Wives are much better at finding
things than we are, you know.

DALE
Ain't that the truth.

The first few flurries begin to tumble from the sky.

Salvation Army Santa leans in.

SALVATION ARMY SANTA
Hey, can you do me a favor?

EXT. MALL - MOMENTS LATER

Dale stands by the pot, staring bemusedly at the bell in his hand. He rings it a couple times, checks his watch.

Salvation Army Santa returns, adjusting his pants.

SALVATION ARMY SANTA
Shouldn't have had that second cup.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Dale's car chugs along the empty road. Snow's getting heavier and it's starting to stick.

INT. CAR - DAY

The wipers do their best, but it's hard to see.

A sharp turn looms ahead.

Dale slows, cuts the wheel sharply. Suddenly, the brakes lock and the car slides.

DALE

Whoa. Whoa!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The road twists left. The car goes straight. It fish-tails, smashes into a guard rail. But that doesn't stop it.

The guard rail breaks with a wrenching SQUEAL.

The car slashes forward, approaches a steep embankment.

INT. CAR

The car slides down the hill, tree branches slap it from every angle. Dale tenses -- braces for impact. He can't speak. This is it. No time to react. No time for anything.

CRASH!

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

Tabitha on her phone by the curb, waiting for the bus. It rings and rings, but there's no answer.

Snow's coming down pretty good now.

The bus pulls up and Michael hops off.

BUS DRIVER

(waving)

Merry Christmas!

Tabitha waves back.

TABITHA
Hey, how was your party?

MICHAEL
Great, Mommy.

TABITHA
Did everyone like the cupcakes I
baked?

MICHAEL
Yeah, they liked them. But I think
I ate too much. My stomach hurts.

TABITHA
Aww, poor baby. Next time Mommy
won't make them so yummy.

Michael runs ahead to the house.

MICHAEL
Is Daddy home yet?

TABITHA
No, honey. Not yet.

Michael looks to the sky.

MICHAEL
I betcha he's out having fun in all
this snow!

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

Dale's car lies wedged between two trees near the edge of the
thicket. A HISSING is heard as smoke rises from under the
crumpled hood.

The door slowly opens. One booted foot hits the ground, then
the other.

Dale has a nasty gash on his forehead.

DALE'S POV: Everything blurry, nothing coming together.

He lifts himself, but falls back onto the seat with a GRUNT.

Tries again, makes it out. Favoring his left leg, he
traverses a few hard earned steps.

One step, the wind whips through his hair. Another, his eyes
roll back and...

He collapses face first into the fresh powder.

Across the horizon, darkness approaches.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha stares warily out the window, speaking into her phone.

TABITHA

All right, Pete. Well, call me if you hear anything, okay? Thanks.

She clicks off. Behind her, Michael plays with his toys.

MICHAEL

Is Daddy home yet?

TABITHA

Soon, honey. He's had a lot of errands to run.

She gazes out at the falling snow, suddenly aware she's not sure of anything.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

Daylight fading fast. Dale's where we left him, motionless on the ground. The night so quiet.

Only now, footsteps are heard crunching in the snow, coming closer until--

Standing over Dale is a SMALL PERSON wrapped in a heavy parka zippered to the top. Next to him is a sled with an OIL LAMP dangling from its handles.

The small person takes a knee, throws his hood back.

Meet BUTTER FINGER.

He looks to be in his forties, but you never can tell with Elves.

Butter Finger struggles to lift Dale onto the sled. He lets out a big SIGH, zips up and heads out into the night.

BUTTER FINGER (V.O.)

Everybody else gets to stay home and make toys. Sip hot chocolate by the fire, telling their Elf tales.

(MORE)

BUTTER FINGER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But me? Oh nooo! I get to go out
and collect the guy in the snow.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Holiday trimming adorns this modest throwback of a police headquarters.

RICK SELLERS, 40s, unsuccessfully attempts to wrap a gift as he talks on the phone. Tape stuck to his fingers, the paper's ripping -- he's a mess.

RICK (INTO PHONE)

Mrs. Leith, there's nothing we can do until he's been missing for twenty-four hours. After that we can declare a missing person. Yes, I understand that. I... Yes. Look, maybe he just went out for a walk to clear his head or something...

A BOOMING voice on the other end causes Rick to jerk the phone away from his ear.

RICK (INTO PHONE)

All right, all right. I'll go out and take a look. Yes, yes. I will. Okay. You're welcome.

He hangs up the phone and sighs.

The station door opens and, stomping snow from her boots, is Sheriff SHIRLEY HASTINGS, 50s, appearing every bit the veteran of the force she is.

Rick groans.

SHIRLEY

What?

RICK

Is the cruiser warm?

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

A modest shack in the middle of nowhere. Smoke billows from its chimney while a warm glow emanates from inside.

INT. CABIN - SAME

A clothes line stretches from one end of the room to the other. A cast iron stove sits in the corner, a steaming pot atop it.

Butter Finger rests in a chair, sporting green thermals and a stocking cap, slurping hot soup.

Dale snores away on a cot, a bandage on his head. His eyes flutter and--

BUTTER FINGER

Oh, you've decided to rejoin us.

Dale locks eyes with his diminutive host, SCREECHES, falls off the cot and stumbles to his knees. He flails about and grabs the first thing he can get his hands on -- a soup ladle.

Butter spills his soup and takes cover behind the chair.

BUTTER FINGER

Whoa whoa! Take it easy, big fella.

(Dale tries to stand)

Uh, I wouldn't do that if I were you.

Dale does anyway. He clutches his ankle and falls back onto the cot. He raises the ladle.

DALE

Okay. Look. Stay back, whoever you are.

BUTTER FINGER

Easy, easy. Everything's okay, Dale. Everything's cool. Why don't you put the ladle down and we'll talk.

DALE

Wait. Wh-- How do you know my name?

BUTTER FINGER

Are we done swinging ladles?

Dale grips the ladle tighter.

Butter edges out from behind the chair and scoops the soup bowl from off the floor.

BUTTER FINGER

Okay, so your car slid down a ditch, you foolishly tried to walk away and I rescued you. Sound familiar?

Dale tries to process it.

DALE

Sort of. Where am I?

BUTTER FINGER

You're in my cabin. My humble abode.

DALE

So, what are you? Some kind of Elf?

BUTTER FINGER

What makes you say that?

DALE

I don't know. You look... Elf-like. Nothing personal, of course.

BUTTER FINGER

You sayin' I'm short?

DALE

No, I'm saying... I don't know what I'm saying.

BUTTER FINGER

I'm just playing. We Elves are short. And we have funny names.
(extends his hand)
I'm Butter Finger.

They shake.

DALE

Butter Finger, huh?

BUTTER FINGER

Friends call me Butter.

DALE

And you're an Elf?

BUTTER FINGER

Can't get nothing past you.

DALE

O-kaayy. Are there any hospitals around here?

BUTTER FINGER

You mean for your head?

DALE

No, I mean for you. Like maybe you escaped from a mental ward or something.

Butter chuckles sarcastically.

BUTTER FINGER

That's very cute. Thanks. But, it's nothing like that. Oh, and just in case you're wondering - this is not a dream. This is really happening. Okay? Okay.

Dale places the soup ladle on a table. Feeling more at ease.

DALE

So, how do you know my name? You go through my wallet or something?

BUTTER FINGER

Oh, I don't need to do that, Dale. I know everything I need to know about you.

Butter crosses to the pot on the stove, takes a set of tongs and fishes a pair of stockings from the hot water.

DALE

Like what?

BUTTER FINGER

Well, let's see. You just lost your job. You're hesitant about re-opening your father's shop. And you got a pretty big weight on your shoulders. That sound about right?

DALE

How do you know all this?

Butter just smiles.

DALE

Maybe that knock on the head was worse than I thought.

Dale scans the room and stops abruptly when he spots a bag in the corner marked REINDEER CHOW.

DALE
You got a bag over there that says
Reindeer Chow.

BUTTER FINGER
Mm hmm.

DALE
Don't tell me. Santa's reindeer,
right?

Butter turns, wrings out the stocking.

BUTTER FINGER
You know, I don't care what they
say about humans. You guys are
pretty bright.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

A space heater glows in the corner of the room.

Shirley's at her desk, sipping coffee when Rick comes through on the console. She presses a button.

SHIRLEY
What you got, Rick?

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Rick shines a flashlight onto the busted GUARD RAIL.

RICK
(into vest radio)
Well, we got a broken guard rail
over on eighty-nine. Tire tracks.
Something went down here.

He moves closer to the edge, shines the light down the ravine and sees a CAR at the bottom.

RICK
Oh boy.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Butter hands Dale a warm cloth.

DALE

You didn't happen to find my phone,
did you?

BUTTER FINGER

Nope. I was kind of pressed for
time, you know, with you freezing
to death and all.

Dale attempts to get to his feet, but he's wobbly. Butter
steadies him and helps him back to the cot.

BUTTER FINGER

Easy, partner.

DALE

(softly)

I gotta call my wife. My son...

Butter takes a fresh blanket from off the shelf and drapes it
across an exhausted Dale.

BUTTER FINGER

I know, I know. There'll be time
for that, Dale. You just relax now.
You've had quite a day.

Dale falls asleep the minute his head hits the pillow.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - MORNING

Deputy Rick Sellers knocks on the door.

Tabitha answers, looks as though she hasn't slept a wink.

TABITHA

Did you find him?

Rick removes his Stetson.

RICK

Ma'am.

EXT. CABIN - MORNING

Birds sing. The fresh snow glistens.

INT. CABIN - SAME

Sunlight pours in the only window. Dale is just now waking
up. He looks around. Butter is nowhere in sight.

Dale finds his boots and slips them on. Puts on his red flannel coat.

He spots a note tacked to the door.

INSERT: NOTE

Dale,

Had some errands to run. I suspect you'll want to go home. Be careful. Every journey begins with a tough first step.

Butter

BACK TO SCENE

Dale chuckles. He grasps the door handle and pulls it open.

His foot hits a loose board, he tumbles down the steps and face plants in the snow.

Dale lifts his head, blows snow from his mouth, opens his eyes and...

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Nothing's coming into focus. Nothing at all, but...

The sound of CHRISTMAS BELLS. Christmas MUSIC, too. SOMEONE shouts -- "WHOA!"

Dale turns just in time to see a SLEIGH coming straight for him. He shuts his eyes tight, braces for impact.

The sleigh, pulled by a lone REINDEER, halts mere inches from his face.

Two BLACK BOOTS disembark, snow crunches underneath.

The boots stop in front of a cringing Dale.

And surely this dream isn't over yet because before him is a WHITE-BEARDED hulk of a man in wool trousers and a heavy red overcoat who looks just like--

DALE

Santa?

SANTA peers down at Dale through his spectacles.

SANTA
You must be he.

The reindeer exhales, blasting away the remaining snow from Dale's incredulous face.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - FOYER - DAY

Tabitha stares at Rick in disbelief as he fiddles with the brim of his Stetson.

TABITHA
What do you mean you don't know where he is? Don't tell me that, Rick. Don't tell me that.

RICK
But we don't, Ma'am.

TABITHA
Well, why aren't you out there looking?

RICK
Ma'am?

TABITHA
You call me ma'am one more time I'll scratch your eyes out!

RICK
We're in the process of organizing a search party, Mrs. Leith. Sheriff Hastings will drop by with all the details. Not to worry. We'll find him for you, Ma'am.

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Dale, confounded, stands next to Santa. His eyes are filled with wonder because everywhere he looks... CHRISTMAS!

A majestic NORWAY SPRUCE stands in the TOWN SQUARE, encircled by an ice skating pond. Brightly lit wreaths in every door of every SHOPPE along a festive MAIN STREET--

Cobblestone sidewalks and old timey street lamps. It's a Rockwellian village come to life.

Or Currier and Ives.

TOWNSFOLK, bundled for the cold, move gaily through the street. A PAPER BOY flings a newspaper.

DALE
Am I dreaming?

SANTA
If I told you no would you even believe me?

Dale laughs.

DALE
This must be a dream.

In a clearing, near the town square, sits an OLD MAN at an easel. He adjusts his fedora, takes a puff from his pipe as he carefully applies brush to canvas.

DALE
Is that... Is that Stan Livingston, the painter?

SANTA
Ayup.

Stan Livingston turns and tips his hat.

DALE
That can't be. He died like thirty years ago. I remember. My father was a big fan of his.

Santa puts his arm around Dale's shoulder.

SANTA
Let's go for a ride.

LATER

Dale rides shotgun in Santa's sleigh, shushing through snowy woods. He turn back to see the lights of the town in the distance.

SANTA
I give you credit, Dale. Most people would've been inclined to head for the hills by now.

DALE
So, where am I? Is this like the North Pole or something?

SANTA
Not like, it is.

Dale shakes his head in disbelief.

DALE
So strange.

SANTA
What do you mean?

DALE
When I was a kid, every year my father would set up this little Christmas village. Lights on in the houses, cotton balls for snow. He called it Christmasville. And I remember I would just stare and stare at it, transfixed, thinking how one day I was gonna go there. That's what this place reminds me of.

Santa tugs at the reins.

SANTA
Sounds like a nice memory.

DALE
It was.

SANTA
Ready to make some new ones?

DALE
Are you actually Santa Claus?

SANTA
Come on! Would anyone dress like this on purpose?

DALE
You'd be surprised. Am I dreaming?
I'm dreaming, right?

Santa flicks Dale's ear.

DALE
Oww!

SANTA
Did that feel real?

Dale puts his hand to his ear, feels his head. The wound is gone.

So are the stitches in his hand.

SANTA
What is it, Dale?

DALE
Nothing.

Beat. Just the sound of reindeer hooves clopping in the snow.

Santa points over the ridge to a sprawling Victorian structure, lit up and brilliant like a Thomas Kinkadee come to life.

Santa's work shop.

SANTA
This is us.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Santa leads Dale into the FOYER, then to the --

GRAND ROOM

It's like Home and Gardens took steroids.

A spectacular Christmas tree graces the center of the room, a tremendous, roaring fireplace -- stockings everywhere and idyllic snowy landscape out every window.

And ELVES. Elves everywhere, bustling about in a frenzy of activity like a choreographed dance.

Dale marvels, staring up at the high vaulted ceilings with its polished oak studs.

SANTA
What do you think?

DALE
This is amazing. I've never seen architecture like this before.

Santa raises a fuzzy eyebrow.

SANTA
Sounds like something a woodworker might say.

They come to a large door. Santa opens it.

WOOD SHOP

Spacious, open floors teeming with enterprise. Hundreds of Elves at work, their ebullient chatter a hum of white noise under the persistent hammering and sanding.

JERVIS, a bearded Elf holding a clipboard in one hand and a hot chocolate in the other, watches over the factory floor -- all business.

SANTA

Jervis!
 (he comes over)
 Jervis, how we looking?

Two ELVES dart past Jervis.

JERVIS

Hey, no running! This isn't a day care.
 (rolls his eyes)
 Behind on everything, Mister C. Trains, fire engines. It's gonna be tight. Big demand for tractors this year. I gotta admit I didn't see that coming. Oh, and your personal trainer called. Running late.

DALE

You have a personal trainer?

SANTA

Yeah. Don't you?
 (to Jervis)
 So. Forecast?

JERVIS

Snow, I hear.

SANTA

No, no. I'm talking about -- out there.

JERVIS

Oh. We're shorthanded. That's all there is to it.

SANTA

Dale, I'd like you to meet Jervis,
my floor manager. Dale here has a
background in woodworking.

Jervis' eyes light up.

JERVIS

No kidding?

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Bare tree branches and snowy drifts. This is close to where
Dale had his accident.

Shirley Hastings, Rick at her side, addresses a group of
about ten TOWNSPEOPLE.

SHIRLEY

We're going to spread out in groups
of two. Okay? Remember, anything
you find might be of value. So
remember to let myself or Deputy
Sellers know about it. Any
questions?

RITA SIMMS

Are we a posse?

RICK

No. We're a search party, Rita.

HENRY DUGGINS

Sheriff, can you repeat that last
thing you said?

SHIRLEY

What last thing I said?

HENRY DUGGINS

I don't know. That's why I want you
to repeat it.

SHIRLEY

Pull up your ear flaps for
starters, Henry. That should help.
Okay, people. Anything else?
(apparently not)
All right. Let's move out.

The search party disperses. Someone stumbles. Muffled
laughter. One CAL PERKINS calls back:

CAL
 Hey, you're feeding us after this,
 right?

RICK
 Eat the snow, Cal.

Shirley breathes a heavy SIGH and looks across the field.

SHIRLEY
 Rick?

RICK
 Yeah?

SHIRLEY
 This search party couldn't find
 itself.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Michael at the table eating breakfast.

Tabitha mindlessly washes the dishes and stares out the
 window. Just barely keeping it together.

MICHAEL
 Mommy, is Daddy lost?

She shuts off the water and comes over.

TABITHA
 He might be, honey. For all we know
 he's out helping Santa make toys,
 but... We just gotta stay strong.
 Okay? For Daddy. And hope that he
 finds his way home.

MICHAEL
 I will, Mommy. I'll be strong.

She ruffles his hair.

TABITHA
 That's my boy.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FITTING ROOM - DAY

Santa and Jervis stand outside a stall.

DALE (O.S.)
 (from behind the door)
 So, let me get this straight. You
 want me to make toys?

SANTA
 You heard Jervis. We're behind as
 it is.

DALE (O.S.)
 And if I refuse?

Santa looks at Jervis, who shrugs.

SANTA
 Um. Big storm coming this way.
 You're kind of stuck here for a few
 days. At least.

DALE (O.S.)
 You mean I'm a prisoner?

SANTA
 Oh, bite your tongue. No one here's
 a prisoner, Dale.

FITTING STALL - INTERCUT

Dale, screwing off the cover of an air vent, is dressed in an
 Elf suit two sizes too small, and it shows in all the wrong
 places.

DALE
 And what kind of toys am I supposed
 to make?

JERVIS
 Wooden trains, fire engines.
 Traditional stuff.

DALE
 Speaking of tradition, I have one
 of my own. It's called spending
 Christmas with my family.

SANTA
 Don't be like that, Dale. You'll be
 making a lot of little kids happy.

Santa waits. No answer. He looks at Jervis, who looks back.

SANTA (CONT'D)
 Dale?

AIR CONDITIONING VENT

Dale's packed in like a sardine, inching his way through the small aluminum vent.

DALE

There's gotta be a way out of here.

Dale navigates a sharp turn. Now he's making progress. He goes further, then stops. An opening ahead.

FITTING ROOM

Santa and Jervis. Perplexed. Waiting, until--

An AIR VENT pops out behind them. Dale's legs emerge from the hole. He wiggles out, dusts off and finds himself face-to-face with Santa and Jervis.

Dale clears his throat, sheepishly brushes past and hands Jervis the vent cover.

DALE

Outfit's too tight.

INT. WOOD SHOP - LATER

Dale sits at a work station pouring over schematics.

Around him are dozens of work stations just like his.

JERVIS

You got everything you need. All your tools. Cafeteria's the next room over. Just watch out for Tic and Tac over there.

A few stations over are TIC and TAC, two Elves with sneaky grins on their faces.

JERVIS

They can be bothersome at times.
(then)
Something wrong?

DALE

These plans look like something from the nineteen-fifties.

JERVIS

Parents want an iPad, they know where to go.

(MORE)

JERVIS (CONT'D)

You want a sturdy, wholesome toy -- this is the place to get it. That's what we do here. But feel free to make some modifications if the mood strikes. I trust your judgement. You come highly recommended.

DALE

Recommended? By who?

But Jervis has gone.

Dale gazes across the sea of working Elves. Over by the SWEETS BUFFET, he spots a familiar face...

It's Butter Finger, pushing a broom.

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - DAY

Hair falling to the floor and gossipy chatter. It's busy, but when Tabitha enters it all goes kind of quiet.

Tabitha hangs her coat. She senses it.

TABITHA

Good morning.

Gayle looks up with a brush in her hand.

GAYLE

Hey, sugar.

BREAK ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Separated from the salon by a blue curtain.

TABITHA

What's going on, Gayle?

GAYLE

Sweetheart, we all know what's going on. I can only imagine what you must be going through.

TABITHA

Thanks.

GAYLE

What I'm trying to say is, you don't have to be a hero. I have more than enough girls to cover you.

TABITHA

No, no. It's okay. I want to be here. I want to keep my routine going for...

GAYLE

For Michael.

TABITHA

And for me.

Gayle can see the toll it's taking.

GAYLE

I know, honey. I know. And hey -- Everything's gonna be fine. You'll see.

TABITHA

Thanks.

They embrace.

GAYLE

And look. I know the tree lighting's soon. Believe me, no one will fault you if you don't make your cookies this year.

TABITHA

Oh no. I'm still doing them. I never miss it and I don't plan to start now.

GAYLE

Well, you're gonna have a partner this year because I'm coming over to help. And I'm not taking no for an answer. I've done some baking in my day, and I don't mind saying I'm a bit of a whiz in the kitchen.

TABITHA

You betcha, partner.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

Shirley trudges through the snow. All around just a lot of nothing, but something catches her eye.

EXT. CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

Shirley studies the ramshackle cabin, then notices BOOT TRACKS in the snow.

She steps up to the door and knocks. A creak as it opens. She pokes her head in.

INT. CABIN - SAME

Just how we saw it last. The stove, the clothes line and--

Shirley spies the cot where Dale slept, her keen eye catching a smudge of blood on the pillow.

She scrutinizes it, turns, then finds the note on the door. She fishes rubber gloves from her coat, takes the note and reads it.

Finished, she carefully places it inside an evidence bag.

Then something else. Next to the stove. She crosses the room, and--

WHUMP!

She slips on something, hits the floor hard.

Looks like frozen soup.

She tries to get up, reaches down next to the stove and comes up holding a bag of...

SHIRLEY
Reindeer Chow?

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - WOOD SHOP - NIGHT

The day winding down, Elves heading out for the night.

Dale's at his work station, picking at a wooden TRAIN with a carving chisel. He blows on it, smiles.

Jervis comes over, Dale hands him the train.

JERVIS
Hmm.
(turns it over)
Hmm.

DALE
Well?

JERVIS
This is pretty good work, Doug.

DALE
Dale.

JERVIS
Whatever. I'll see you tomorrow.

Jervis exits. Dale shuffles to the window.

OUTSIDE

Night has fallen, the lights of the village twinkle in the distance.

INSIDE

Dale looks down. Directly below is Butter Finger, holding a shovel and heading for the STABLE.

Butter sees him, stops and waves.

Dale lifts his hand halfway, waves back.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - MORNING

Shirley Hastings rings the doorbell.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Shirley and Rick sit on a sofa across from Tabitha as Michael plays in an adjoining room.

TABITHA
You don't think there was foul play involved, do you?

RICK
Not someone local.

Shirley smirks, Tabitha almost gasps.

SHIRLEY
No, we don't think foul play was involved. My best guess is he lost control of the car in the storm and rolled down that embankment.

TABITHA
Where he just up and disappeared?

Silence for a moment, then...

SHIRLEY

Tabitha, does Dale have a history of depression?

TABITHA

Depression? No. I mean, he did just lose his job.

SHIRLEY

Anything else might have been eating at him?

Tabitha sighs, checks over her shoulder.

TABITHA

Well, Christmas is always sort of a rough time. It was around this time, you know... Emily.

SHIRLEY

I remember it all too well.

TABITHA

I mean, he'd mentioned that recently, but... What are you trying to get at?

SHIRLEY

Just trying to get as much information as we can.

(then)

Were you and Dale having any marital issues?

Tabitha arches her back.

TABITHA

(nervous laugh)

What is that supposed to mean? You suggesting I drove him away?

SHIRLEY

Tabitha, look, when you open the book on how to investigate a disappearance these are the questions they tell you to ask. So please, try not to read too much into it.

RICK

Mrs. Leith, sometimes within the confines of a marriage a man can just get so... frustrated with his spouse he might think of leaving. I mean, I never have, of course, but...

Tabitha looks horrified.

SHIRLEY

Rick, would you mind waiting in the car?

Rick rises and tips his hat.

RICK

Ma'am.

Shirley watches him go, shakes her head.

SHIRLEY

I'm sorry about that. This is his first missing persons case.

TABITHA

Mine too.

SHIRLEY

Look, we're just trying to cover all the bases here. It's how we're going to find Dale. I mean, for all we know a good samaritan came out of nowhere and helped him out. This town is full of good people, Tabitha. I think you know that.

Tabitha forces a smile.

SHIRLEY

Even my deputy out there.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - MORNING

Awash in the morning sun, Dale lies on the bed and suddenly awakens to find Tabitha gazing into his eyes.

DALE

Tab?

TABITHA

Good morning, sleepy head.

DALE

Oh, my gosh. Tabitha! You have no idea. I just had the strangest dream.

TABITHA

Tell me about it.

DALE

Oh, man. I dreamt I was in a car accident, and I woke up in this, I don't know, the North Pole or something. This, like, Christmas town with Elves and Santa and...

TABITHA

(cuts him off abruptly)
Wakey, wakey!

DALE

I am awake. I--

TABITHA

(Butter's voice)
Wanna come feed the reindeer?

Suddenly, Dale wakes from his dream and we're in--

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - BEDROOM - MORNING

Dale's feet hang off a small Elf-type bed.

Butter Finger is right in his face.

Dale SCREAMS! Jumps out of bed, blankets go flying.

INT. REINDEER STABLE - DAY

Dale and Butter pass rows of reindeer stalls.

DALE

How do you tell them apart?

Butter points as he walks.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, that one's Donner. That's Blitzen over there. There's Comet. Do I really need to give you a tutorial on Santa's reindeer?

DALE
Of course not.

Butter grabs a pitchfork and stabs a bale of hay.

DALE
So, this is your job?

BUTTER FINGER
Pretty much.

DALE
Why aren't you inside making toys?

BUTTER FINGER
Just not my thing, I guess. I tried, but I kept mixing stuff up. One year I put Barbie's body on Ken. What does that tell you?

DALE
You made a mistake? Either that or you're just really confused.

BUTTER FINGER
Ha ha. Comedian here, folks. What about you?

DALE
What about me?

BUTTER FINGER
Word is you're not too keen on woodwork.

DALE
Not really, no. Used to be, though.

BUTTER FINGER
What happened?

DALE
I was running my father's shop at one point. Then we, uh... we ran into some difficulties.

BUTTER FINGER
I'm sorry. You had to give it up?

DALE
You could say that. I closed the shop. My father was long gone by that point, so I just saw no reason to carry on.

BUTTER FINGER
Your father taught you woodwork?

DALE
(smiles)
Yeah.

BUTTER FINGER
Well, you're really good at it.

DALE
Who said that?

BUTTER FINGER
Jervis did. And he doesn't hand out
compliments too often.

The slightest hint of pride washes across Dale's face.

Butter goes to grab a sack of reindeer food. Dale can see
he's struggling, so he takes it and carries it for him.

DALE
Butter, can I ask you a question?

BUTTER FINGER
Shoot.

DALE
Is this a dream?

BUTTER FINGER
I ask myself that all the time.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Peaceful and still.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Like a bomb went off. Flour everywhere. Spoons, mixing bowls,
cartons of eggs.

Gayle leans against the island with a glass of wine.

Tabitha sits nearby, her wine untouched.

GAYLE
Maybe it's like Sheriff Hastings
said - a good samaritan found Dale
and--

TABITHA
Abducted him.

GAYLE
I was going to say helped him.

TABITHA
He's been gone three days, Gayle.
How much help does he need?

GAYLE
Honey, I know you don't feel this way, but I honestly think Dale is fine. I know it. Don't ask me how. I may be psychic. But I believe Dale will be home for Christmas.

TABITHA
What if I... drove him away?

Gayle sits next to Tabitha.

GAYLE
Tabby, that's the craziest thing I've ever heard. You mean to tell me Dale faked a car accident just to get away from you? Not only do I think he'd never do something like that...
(sips her wine)
But that's just giving men way too much credit.

Tabitha smiles.

GAYLE
See? I made you laugh.

TABITHA
I don't know. Maybe you're right.
(sighs)
How are the cookies coming?

GAYLE
Fantabulous, honey! Was I supposed to use baking powder or baking soda? They all kind of look alike.

Tabitha's mouth drops.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - DAY

All the Elves working with a sense of purpose. It's crunch time.

Dale holds one of his trains as Butter watches on.

DALE

And you plane the edges like this.
Give it that streamlined look.
Here, you try.

Butter takes the train in his small hands, laughs nervously.

BUTTER FINGER

Oh, I don't know.

DALE

Yeah. Just do it. You're probably a
lot better at it than you think--

CLUNK! A small RUBBER WHEEL hits Dale in the head.

DALE

Hey!

Across the room, two ELVES hunker down and snicker.

BUTTER FINGER

We're mischievous little scamps.

DALE

Right.

Dale gets up, offers Butter his seat.

BUTTER FINGER

Where you going?

DALE

Out to get some fresh air. I think
I've hit my quota for the day.

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Dale pads the wet cobblestone, along the shop-lined main street. He hops the curb and makes his way past the iced over pond and the giant Norway Spruce.

He checks over his shoulder, tries not to look too conspicuous. The coast is clear. He whistles, takes a deep breath, then --

Makes a break for it.

He runs past a covered bridge.

Then an old oak. A couple KIDS slide down a hill on a toboggan.

He sneaks a quick glance back at the town.

Keeps going, getting further and further away when--

WHAM!

Dale's flattened -- drops like a stone.

He rises, shakes out the cobwebs.

DALE

What the..?

He cautiously reaches out. His hand touches something. It's not seen, but it's there -- An invisible barrier.

He slides a few paces to his left, feels around like a Mime. The wall is seemingly everywhere.

DALE

Hey. Hey!

His voice echoes. But no answer. A bird takes flight.

Dale hits the wall with his fists. It does not give way. He hits it again. Harder.

He drops his hands. The day is still. So quiet.

So alone.

He lowers his head and turns back.

EXT. NORTH POLE - TOWN SQUARE - LATER

Dale leans against a wooden fence in the town square, watching a YOUNG BOY, scarf flowing, as he skates past.

Dale turns. Sitting behind him, at his easel, is Stan Livingston, the painter.

Dale pushes off the fence and approaches.

STAN

Nice day.

DALE
I'm Dale Leith.

STAN
Stan Livingston.

Dale takes a peek at Stan's painting.

INSERT: PAINTING

It's exactly what they're both looking at -- The boy skating, the Christmas tree and the wooden fence.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE
That's fantastic. How do you remember detail so well?

Stan puffs on his pipe.

STAN
Well, that boy skating over yonder? He ain't gonna stay still for me. And I'm certainly not going to ask him to. I'm just gonna wait till he comes back around again. Chances are he will.

DALE
What if he doesn't?

Stan grins.

STAN
Then I just make it up.

Dale looks to the frozen pond. The young boy shushes by on his skates under careful watch of the Norway Spruce.

DALE
My father was a big fan of yours.

STAN
Was he? How nice of you to say.

DALE
Look, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but aren't you...

STAN
Dead? Yeah. Died in eighty-seven.

DALE
But you're here now.

STAN
Yep.

DALE
You're a prisoner too, huh?

STAN
No one's a prisoner here, son.

DALE
Yeah, I keep hearing that. Tell
that to the invisible wall.

STAN
There's no walls here.

DALE
Yes, there is.

STAN
Did you see it?

DALE
No.

STAN
Then how do you know it was there?

DALE
I ran face first into it.

STAN
What were you running from?

Dale thinks.

DALE
Trying to get out of here, I guess.

STAN
Most walls I know of are in here.
(points to his head)
And those walls cannot be climbed.

DALE
I think we're talking about two
different things.

STAN
Are we? Son, as far back as I can
remember I wanted to be a painter.
(MORE)

STAN (CONT'D)

I painted and painted -- with varying degrees of success along the way. But when I died I became a legend.

DALE

Rightfully so.

STAN

Maybe. But let me ask you -- how many people you know who were legends while they were alive?

DALE

Bob Dylan.

STAN

Okay, I'll give you that one.

DALE

Marlon Brando--

STAN

All right, all right. Point taken. I guess what I'm saying here is -- be a legend in your time.

DALE

(laughs)

Who could I possibly be a legend to?

STAN

Doesn't seem like a really hard question if you think about it.

Stan puffs his pipe.

Dale lowers his head, then raises it after a beat.

STAN

That wasn't so hard, was it?

Dale is silent.

Stan lifts his arm and paints an imaginary brush stroke. The air ripples in a surreal rainbow of color, shimmering as if it were water.

Dale looks on. Awestruck.

DALE

Did you just see that?

STAN
 (smiles)
 See what?

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Tabitha, working at the SALON, fighting to get through another day.
- Shirley and Rick hand out MISSING PERSON flyers on MAIN STREET.
- PEOPLE setting up in the TOWN SQUARE as a lonely banner ruffles atop the gazebo: ANNUAL TREE LIGHTING.
- Dale, at his work station. The strain of being torn from his family clearly evident, and finally--
- A forlorn MICHAEL stares out the window of his house, watching as the snowflakes softly tumble from the sky.

BACK TO

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - WOOD SHOP - DAY

Butter glues on a train whistle under Dale's watchful eye.

BUTTER FINGER
 What do you think?

DALE
 That's really good.

BUTTER FINGER
 I bet you say that to all the
 Elves.

DALE
 I'm serious. It's good.

BUTTER FINGER
 Thanks.

Jervis trots up, all stressed out.

JERVIS
 Butter! Hey, I need you to get a
 sweep out here. This place is a
 mess. The hot chocolate needs to be
 filled. Come on.

Butter shoves off.

DALE

He should be making toys, Jervis.

JERVIS

That's not up to me. The big man has the say around here.

DALE

Well, whisper in his ear or something. Give the little guy a break.

Jervis disregards him.

DALE

He's got talent, Jervis. Anyone worth their salt in this business knows talent when they see it. Butter belongs on the floor.

JERVIS

Has Butter ever told you why he's not on the floor?

DALE

Yeah. He said he messed up some dolls or something.

JERVIS

Ask him again.

DALE

What?

Jervis walks away, turns back.

JERVIS

Ask him again.

Off a confused Dale --

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Shirley, flyers in hand, waits at the curb.

TITLE: CHRISTMAS EVE

She gazes wistfully at the majestic Christmas tree in the square, red bows and colorful lights.

Rick joins her.

RICK
Nice, ain't it?

SHIRLEY
(troubled)
Yeah.

RICK
Got something on your mind?

SHIRLEY
I don't get it, Rick. We found the car, the cabin, but no Dale. How does a man up and vanish like that?

RICK
It doesn't add up. Guess we could use a little Christmas magic right about now, huh?

She shakes her head, searching for clarity.

SHIRLEY
I've been on this job many a year, Rick. First Loudonville, then Stratford. Now here. In all this time I've never let anyone down who was depending on me. Never. There's gotta be something I'm missing.
(turns)
Wait. What did you just say?

RICK
It doesn't add up?

SHIRLEY
No, no, no. After that.

RICK
We could use some Christmas magic.

Shirley shoves her flyers into Rick's chest, darts away to the cruiser.

RICK
Where are you going?

SHIRLEY
I gotta check on something.

RICK
Wait, I'll come with you.

She jumps into the car.

SHIRLEY
No, you stay here. You gotta cover
the tree lighting.

RICK
Hey! How am I gonna get back to
the...

She SLAMS the door and peels out.

RICK
... station?

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - LATER

White skies, chance of snow. PEOPLE buzzing about, preparing
for the night.

An SUV pulls up. Tabitha and Michael hop out.

GARY, 50s, the Town Selectman, greets her.

GARY
Morning, Mrs. Leith. Hi, Michael.

TABITHA
Morning, Gary. I just came by to
drop off the cookies.

Gary's eyes light up.

GARY
Oh! There they are. The famous
cookies. Can't wait to try these.

Tabitha bites her lip and smiles.

TABITHA
Thanks for saying that.

GARY
Well, we sure do appreciate it.
Everyone knows you have a lot on
your plate.

Gary takes the cookies from Tabitha.

GARY
So, we'll see you tonight?

TABITHA

Sure.

Tabitha closes the car door, then heads over to Michael, who's checking out the Christmas tree with a funny little grin on his face.

TABITHA

What's on your mind, kiddo?

Michael lowers his head.

MICHAEL

I miss Daddy.

TABITHA

So do I, honey. But we can't give up hope, okay? Never give up on hope.

MICHAEL

I won't, Mom.

TABITHA

Remember the time we ordered that telescope so you could see the eclipse?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

TABITHA

What happened?

MICHAEL

It never came. It got lost in the mail, right?

TABITHA

That's right. Remember what happened when it finally did arrive?

MICHAEL

There was a meteor shower.

TABITHA

That was pretty cool, wasn't it?

Michael smiles.

MICHAEL

Yeah, it was.

TABITHA

I guess what I'm trying to say is that... sometimes things just have a way of working out. The hard part is not knowing the reason why. That's what makes it so difficult to understand. Does that make sense?

MICHAEL

Daddy's gonna come home during the next meteor shower?

Tabitha smiles and kisses his forehead.

TABITHA

Something like that.
(then)
Come on. We better get going.

MICHAEL

Okay.

TABITHA

When is the next meteor shower anyway?

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - HALLWAY - DAY

Dale, holding a toy fire engine, walks down the hall. He moves to one side as a group of excited Elves scurry by.

Ahead is a room labelled: GYM.

Dale stops, leans back, looks inside.

GYM

Treadmills, weights, various workout equipment.

Santa's on an Elliptical machine, pushing it hard. He wears a t-shirt that proclaims -- THE MAN WITH THE BAG.

SANTA

Well, hello, Dale.

DALE

What are you doing?

SANTA

It's Christmas Eve, Dale. Gotta grease the wheels, so to speak.

DALE

Does that mean you'll let me go?

Santa hops from the machine, approaches Dale as he towels off.

SANTA

I told you already. We're not keeping you here.

DALE

Right.

SANTA

Do you think you're ready to go home?

DALE

What do you mean, am I ready? Ready for what? Don't you think this has gone on long enough? I mean, look, I'm here. Okay? I don't know how I got here, but I'm here. I've done what you asked me to do. I made your toys, and now I'm ready to go home. I did exactly what I was supposed to do!

SANTA

Dale, listen--

DALE

No, you listen. My family's waiting for me. They're probably worried sick. You got this... this... invisible wall keeping me in, so don't tell me I can leave when I want. This is crazy. What does it take to get a straight answer around here?

Dale storms out, raises the fire engine and--

SANTA

Dale!

He SMASHES it against the wall.

Elves scamper to the opposite side of the hall.

Dale storms off.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

Shadows grow long, getting on afternoon. Butter's cabin sits under a rosy December sky.

INT. CABIN - DAY

Shirley, eyes wide, searches the room. Looking for something. Anything.

She stops, reaches into her pocket and pulls out the evidence bag with the note inside. She pulls it out, unfolds it and reads aloud.

SHIRLEY

... Every journey begins with a
tough first step.

She spies the bag of Reindeer Chow, then turns to the door.

She slowly paces over and reaches out her hand, takes a deep breath, opens the door and steps out.

Her boot hits the loose board. She tumbles hard, lands face-first in the snow.

Shirley raises her head, opens her eyes.

A BRIGHT FLASH, and --

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Shirley, dazed, on the ground. There are sounds -- Christmas bells, children laughing. And now, she SEES...

The TOWN. The Christmas tree and the ice skating pond. KIDS building a snowman.

Stan Livingston's there, too. He glances over, lowers the brim of his fedora.

STAN

Evening, Sheriff.

Shirley's mouth hangs open -- Incredible -- There's no way -- There's just no way.

Another BRIGHT FLASH.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

And she's back. Back at the cabin, splayed out in the snow. She gets to her feet, bewildered.

She brushes off her coat. It takes a moment for her to catch her breath.

SHIRLEY

Well, that just happened.

INT. NORTH POLE - REINDEER STABLE - DAY

Dale tramps along the straw-covered floor. The reindeer are on edge and fussing.

Butter is at the last stall, lovingly brushing a reindeer's shiny coat.

BUTTER FINGER

Hey, Dale.

DALE

Why are you not on the floor anymore?

BUTTER FINGER

Huh?

DALE

Making toys. Why are you not making toys?

BUTTER FINGER

I told you already.

DALE

No. Uh uh. Not you. If there's one person in this whole place who can give me a straight answer it's gotta be you. Please!

Butter lowers his brush and sighs.

BUTTER FINGER

You really wanna know?

Dale, arms folded, waits.

BUTTER FINGER

One year, not too long ago, I was making toys, much like the ones you're making now.

(MORE)

BUTTER FINGER (CONT'D)

I was so proud of them. Proud to be contributing, doing what I loved to do.

(beat)

Then a couple weeks later we got word that a boy in Michigan got rushed to the hospital. Wanna know what from?

DALE

What?

BUTTER FINGER

He'd swallowed this little steering wheel. A steering wheel from a toy that I'd made, that I didn't put on properly.

DALE

Butter...

BUTTER FINGER

For that to happen on Christmas... A time of such love and happiness. I was devastated.

(then)

After that I just didn't have it in me to make toys. I didn't trust myself anymore. I lost my confidence.

DALE

I didn't know.

BUTTER FINGER

Hey, how could you know?

DALE

So, this is why you're out here?

BUTTER FINGER

It took me a long time to get my legs back under me. But it made me realize one thing -- This could've happened to anyone. Anyone at all, but it chose me. You get what I'm saying?

DALE

Yeah, I do.

BUTTER FINGER

No rhyme or reason. Nothing to justify it. But the one ray of light was that I finally found my purpose.

DALE

Cleaning out the stables?

Butter gazes up at Dale and smiles.

BUTTER FINGER

No.

The reindeer are GRUNTING. Getting restless.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, look, I'd love to stay and chat about emotional regulation, but I have to get back to work. You, too. I'm sure they'll need you for something.

DALE

Understood.

Dale turns to leave, then looks back.

DALE

Butter?

BUTTER FINGER

What?

DALE

I'm sorry.

Butter nods and watches Dale go, leaving him in silence, save for the barks of the antsy reindeer.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha wearily paces the floor, wearing a cheery Christmas sweater but a long face.

She runs a hand along the fireplace mantle, and settles on a photo of Emily.

TABITHA

How are you, baby girl?

Tabitha folds her arms as if she's hugging herself.

TABITHA

Can you do something for me, honey?
Just watch over Daddy tonight.
Okay? Wherever he is, just make
sure he's safe. Can you do that?

Emily's image smiles back from the photo.

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Mommy?

Tabitha dries her face and turns. Michael's already dressed.

TABITHA

Hey, honey. You ready for the tree
lighting?

Michael nods.

MICHAEL

Mommy?

TABITHA

Yes?

MICHAEL

Who are you talking to?

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Main Street is closed off. PEOPLE mingle and drink hot cider.
It's a celebratory mood.

A crowd surrounds a table of cookies.

And here's Gayle, proud grin, making the rounds. She
approaches JOE DUGAN and his wife MARY, both of whom are
eating the cookies.

GAYLE

Hi! How are you two?

MARY

Good. How's the salon?

GAYLE

You know, you know. So, how are the
cookies?

Joe opens his mouth to say something, then stops.

MARY

(lies)

Oh, they're great. Did Tabitha make these?

GAYLE

Well, yes. And no. Actually, no. I made them. You know, with everything going on and all I figured I'd give Tabitha a hand this year.

MARY

I see. I see. Well, you did a wonderful job.

GAYLE

(puffs out her chest)

Thanks, doll. Enjoy the lighting!

Mary studies the cookie as Gayle saunters off.

MARY

Now, that makes sense.

JOE

I don't think she used any baking soda.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

Dale slumps at his desk, putting the finishing touches on a train. He's spent and it shows.

The factory floor is still busy, only now it's ELVES carting and loading. Toys are boxed and wheeled out the door.

Dale sighs, places his final piece in a box at his feet. When he lifts his head it's Jervis he sees.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Tabitha and Michael, both are silent.

She stops the car.

MICHAEL

What?

TABITHA

Michael, I just... I just want you to know that even if Daddy doesn't come home tonight, that he loves you so much. He loves you...

(wipes a tear)

You've been so brave through all of this, and I'm so proud of you. You're getting to be such a big, beautiful boy. I don't want to disappoint you, Michael. You're so much like your father, you know that?

Michael hugs her. She returns the embrace with every ounce of energy she has left, holding on because she doesn't want to let go. Not now. Not ever.

MICHAEL

Mommy, we don't have to go to the tree lighting. We can just stay home. Stay home and look at our tree.

TABITHA

Are you sure?

MICHAEL

I'm sure, Mommy.

Tabitha nods, smiles through the tears.

TABITHA

Okay, honey. We can do that.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

At the festival Gayle is still making the rounds. Undetected, she approaches a trio of PEOPLE as they speak.

WOMAN #1

Who made these cookies?

WOMAN #2

I heard it was Gayle

MAN

What does she know about baking?

WOMAN #1

Clearly not much.

Gayle is horrified. She takes a look around and it's clear -- The looks on the PEOPLE'S faces as they eat, then discard, her cookies. They hate them.

A HEAVY MAN zips quickly past.

HEAVY MAN
Hey, where's the bathroom?

Sulking, Gayle crosses silently to the cookie table, where DENNIS and ABIGAIL SIMPSON sample the treats.

DENNIS
Oh, hi, Gayle.

GAYLE
Hi.

ABIGAIL
Have you tried the cookies yet?

Gayle suddenly brightens.

GAYLE
Why, you like them?

ABIGAIL
No, they're awful.

GAYLE
Oh.

DENNIS
Tabitha couldn't have made these.

ABIGAIL
Whoever made these should've followed the recipe.

DENNIS
Whoever made these should've gotten life. Maybe it was Marjorie Freeman?

ABIGAIL
No, definitely not her. Her baking's bad, but not this bad.

DENNIS
What about Harriet Finster?

ABIGAIL
Oh, yes! That woman can't bake for--

GAYLE
I made them!

Gayle shoots them an evil eye, holds it, then storms off into the crowd.

EXT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Day's last light hangs by a thread as the lights of the workshop dazzle in the afterglow.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - WOOD SHOP - NIGHT

Dale silently watches as the remaining Elves clear the floor.

Jervis shakes Dale's hand.

JERVIS
 It's been a pleasure, Dale.

Off Dale's confused gaze--

JERVIS
 Yes, you're finally going home.

DALE
 Seriously?
 (Jervis nods)
 I'm not sure what to say.

JERVIS
 Don't say anything, chiefly. But consider this -- the work you've done, the toys you've made. It's going to make a whole lot of children happy come Christmas morning.

Dale ponders this.

SANTA (O.S.)
 Dale!

Santa strides in. He's got the red trousers and coat, black boots and belt. This is the Santa we all know and love.

SANTA
 Boy, we sure are going to miss you.
 You did a top notch job, my boy.

Dale laughs, shakes Santa's hand.

SANTA

Well, I'd love to stay and shoot
the breeze with you, Dale, but...
(taps his watch)
I do have a schedule to keep.

DALE

I understand. And, um, I'm really
sorry about earlier.

SANTA

Broken toys can be fixed, Dale.

DALE

You take care out there.

SANTA

You too, Dale. You too.

Santa and Jervis go to leave, when Santa turns back.

SANTA

Oh, someone else wants to say
goodbye.

And in walks...

DALE

Butter.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Selectman Gary moves to the podium. He taps the mic --
scratchy feedback.

GARY

Welcome, everyone, to our annual
tree lighting!

A smattering of applause.

Gayle, still agitated, watches on. That dissipates quickly
when she sides up to JOAN JOHNSON.

GAYLE

Joanie, have you seen Tabitha?

Joan shakes her head. On to MISSES RANDOLPH.

Same question, another no.

Gayle stands on tip-toes, tries to get a better look. No
Tabitha or Michael anywhere.

She rushes the stage and interrupts Gary mid-sentence.

GAYLE
Tabitha's not here.

Gary covers the microphone.

GARY
What?

A beat as Gary thinks, then--

GARY
You don't suppose it's because no
one liked her cookies, do you?

If looks could kill.

GAYLE
No.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - WOOD SHOP - DAY

Butter presents Dale with a toy FIRE ENGINE. The one he'd
smashed, but as good as new.

DALE
You did this, didn't you?

BUTTER FINGER
I learned from the best.

DALE
Nah. Your talent was there long
before we met.

Dale places the toy in a box with the others.

Butter hands Dale an envelope marked:

DO NOT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS

DALE
What's this?

BUTTER FINGER
It's from all of us. Just a little
token of our appreciation.

DALE
Thanks. I'll never forget you,
Butter.

(MORE)

DALE (CONT'D)
 (a last look around)
 Or any of this, for that matter.

They give each other a big hug, hold it, then separate.
 Dale's staring at Butter.

BUTTER FINGER
 What?

DALE
 You know, I was driving the day it
 happened.

BUTTER FINGER
 Dale...

DALE
 The sun was just so bright that
 day. I don't ever remember it being
 so bright. Anyway, when I woke up I
 was in the hospital. Tabitha was
 there. I didn't remember what
 happened at first. It was all a
 blur. Then it became clear.

Butter lowers his head.

DALE
 I didn't see it coming.

BUTTER FINGER
 You think you should have?

DALE
 Yes. But I didn't. Why didn't I?

BUTTER FINGER
 It's hard to see what's coming,
 Dale. I guess that's why life is so
 tough after. Look at it this way --
 if I'd never had my mishap I might
 not be here with you now, would I?

DALE
 You also wouldn't be cleaning up
 after everyone, either.

BUTTER FINGER
 Point taken. But, you know what?
 I'm good at it. And that's not all
 I do. Sometimes, just sometimes, I
 get to do things not many others
 can.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The tree is lit, save for the broken strand of bulbs.
CHRISTMAS MUSIC plays in the background.

Suddenly, the BROKEN LIGHTS flicker on.

Michael comes in holding a plate of cookies and milk.

TABITHA

You know those cookies are for
Santa, don't you?

MICHAEL

(mouth full)
I know.

Then, a sound -- like SINGING. Low at first, then rising.

Tabitha's wrapping a gift. She turns, but Michael's not
there. He's at the window.

MICHAEL

Mommy?

TABITHA

Yes?

MICHAEL

There's a bunch of people on our
lawn.

Tabitha gets up, slightly unnerved. She touches his shoulder,
glances at him, then looks for herself.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Everyone who was at the tree lighting are now jam packed in
Tabitha's front yard.

Gayle stands out front, leading a chorus of SLEIGH BELLS.

The front door opens. Tabitha and Michael step out.

Selectman Gary trots over.

TABITHA

What's going on?

GARY

When we found out you weren't at
the festival we made a slight
change of plans.

Tabitha covers her mouth, clearly touched.

TABITHA

I don't know what to say. Thank you.

GARY

No, thank her.

Gayle appears from behind Gary. She takes Tabitha's hand in hers, and puts her arm around a smiling Michael.

GAYLE

Merry Christmas, sugar.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - WOOD SHOP - NIGHT

Butter, wearing a curious smile, backs away from Dale.

DALE

So, what -- do I just leave now?

BUTTER FINGER

Sure.

DALE

Well, do you mind telling me how I do that?

BUTTER FINGER

Any one of these doors will take you where you want to go, Dale. You just gotta open one.

The workshop is near empty -- two doors at the front, two at the back.

Butter slides out one of these doors.

BUTTER FINGER

See ya 'round.

Dale's perplexed. He looks around. A few straggler Elves, readying to leave, but --

Something catches his eye.

Among the remaining Elves is one who looks a little different.

It's a GIRL, about 8, seated at a desk, drawing with crayons. Smaller than the rest, there's a twinkle in her eye and a familiar little smile.

This is EMILY. Dale's daughter.

Dale can't take his eyes off her.

DALE
Oh, my God.

He slowly walks over.

After all this time. All these years. He has no idea what to say to her. What to do.

DALE
Emily?

She looks up from her drawing.

EMILY
Hi, Daddy.

DALE
Hi.
(pause)
Is it really you?

Beat.

EMILY
I made a picture for you.

He pulls up a seat and looks over her shoulder.

INSERT: PICTURE

It's a little house sitting amongst greening trees, backed by puffy clouds and an orange sun.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE
That's beautiful.

EMILY
Thanks. Mommy's really worried about you, Daddy. Michael, too.

DALE
How do you know that?

EMILY
She told me.

DALE
You talk to Mommy?

EMILY
(nods)
And Michael. I talk to them all the
time.

DALE
Do you ever talk to me?

She gazes sweetly at him.

EMILY
I'm talking to you right now,
Daddy.

DALE
Yeah, I guess you are.
(beat)
Emily...

EMILY
Can we go ice skating?

Off Dale...

EXT. NORTH POLE - TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The sheened ice reflects the lights of the Christmas tree.

Dale and Emily skate together, and it's easy to see Dale is
not the best skater. His arms flail, losing his balance.

Emily skates like it's second nature.

EMILY
It's not hard, Daddy. It's like
walking, just on ice.

DALE
That's easy for you to say.

EMILY
I'll hold your hand.

DALE
I think you better.

And together they skate, arm-in-arm.

Dale musters the courage to let go and skates on his own. He
goes on ahead.

DALE
Hey, look, I'm doing it.

Emily claps.

EMILY
Daddy, watch out!

Dale crashes into a wooden fence and collapses onto the ice. He looks up...

The clear, starlit sky. The sound of his own breath. His heart. Like this is a dream. Too quiet. This night. Frozen in a moment. The chill air silent on Christmas Eve.

Emily's face comes into view over him.

EMILY
Are you okay, Daddy?

He hears himself talking...

DALE
Yeah, I'm okay. I think.

She reaches her gloved hand to him and helps him up.

EXT. BENCH - LATER

Emily and Dale unlace their skates.

DALE
Your mother was always a better skater than I was. I guess that's why I never went too much.

EMILY
It's okay. I don't mind.

The warm glow of the village seemingly all around them. The Father in Dale slowly returning, if it had ever left at all.

DALE
So, what do you want to do now?

Emily grins.

EXT. NORTH POLE - CLEARING - NIGHT

Dale pushes a large ball of snow -- the bottom half of a snowman.

Emily watches on with delight.

DALE
Gonna need your help, little lady.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Emily and Dale complete their snowman.
- Emily uses coal for it's eyes.
- Dale places a carrot in for it's nose.

BACK TO SCENE

They admire their handiwork.

DALE
What do you think?

Hands on hips, Emily studies the snowman.

EMILY
It needs something.

EXT. NORTH POLE - MAIN STREET - SAME

A MAN, Scrooge-like in appearance, huddles against the cold as he heads down the street when--

A gust of wind blows the TOP HAT from his head and --

EXT. NORTH POLE - CLEARING - SAME

-- Right into Emily's hands. She places it atop the snowman's head.

EMILY
There. That's better.

Dale takes the hat, puts it on and bows.

DALE
A fine looking snowman, indeed, me lady.

Emily giggles.

Snowflakes tumble from the sky onto the frosty ground.

Dale marvels.

He looks to his daughter. The smile she'd worn moments ago has turned bittersweet.

He goes to her, drops to one knee.

DALE
What is it?

She doesn't answer.

DALE
You have to go, don't you?

She nods her head yes.

EMILY
I do.

Dale pulls her in and holds her tight. He doesn't want this night to end.

Not now. Not ever.

DALE
Emily... Emily, I'm sorry. I'm so,
so sorry.

EMILY
It wasn't your fault, Daddy.

DALE
No, it was. It was all my fault.

She shakes her head.

EMILY
No, it wasn't, Daddy. It wasn't
anyone's fault.
(then)
These things happen all the time
and it's no one's fault. But it's
okay to be sad, Daddy. It's okay to
miss me.

Snow falling at a steady pace now. Dale embraces her, shuts his eyes and kisses her cheek.

DALE
Will I ever see you again?

A big smile flashes across her face as she puts her small hands in his.

EMILY

Oh yes ... Bye, Daddy.

DALE

Goodbye, sweetheart.

She pulls away, leaving one of her mittens in Dale's hand.

DALE

Emily!

But she trots off, turns and waves, then disappears into the swirling snow.

Like magic. And then she's gone.

Dale's frozen breath hangs in the air. He gets to his feet. All alone. Just him and the snowman.

He ponders Emily's mitten, slides it into his coat pocket. He places the top hat back on the snowman's head.

DALE

Looks better on you anyway.

Dale takes one last look around. More confused than ever. Not sure which direction to go.

He turns, steps and catches his foot on a tree root --

WHUMP! He face plants in the snow.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

Dale's face down in the snow. He lifts his head, woozy and unclear. It's so quiet and dark, but --

Several feet away, he sees a familiar shape.

His car.

He looks at his hand -- his stitches are back.

He stands up -- falls back down. His limp has returned.

He trudges to his car, opens the door. He grabs the shopping bags from the back seat, stops and looks at his reflection in the mirror.

The gash on his forehead is back, too.

Dale smiles, pumps his fist and lets out a YAWP!

He shuts the door, heads to the embankment, dense with brush. This is not going to be easy.

Dale clenches his teeth as he climbs. Branches snap under his weight. Crawling now, his bare hands freezing.

Running on pure adrenaline. Halfway to the top, there's no turning back.

There's the busted guard rail. One more step. Another.

He reaches the apex and splays out on the shoulder of the road. Out of breath. Exhausted. Exhilarated.

He carefully gets to his feet when --

SPLASH!

A car WHOOSHES past, blasts him with a tsunami of mud and slush. The car jams on it's brakes.

A POLICE CAR.

The door opens. It's Shirley Hastings.

SHIRLEY

Holy smokes! Are you okay?

She races over.

SHIRLEY

Mister, I'm sorry. What in the world are you doing out here?

DALE

Are you an angel?

SHIRLEY

Yeah, right. I'm. Wait. Dale?

DALE

Huh?

SHIRLEY

Jeez Louise! Dale, is that you?!

He wipes mud from his face.

DALE

Yeah, last time I checked.

SHIRLEY

Oh, my gosh! Dale! You have no idea. We've been looking everywhere for you. Holy smokes! Come with me.

She helps him to the cruiser.

DALE

Shirley, where's my wife? Where's Michael? Are they okay?

SHIRLEY

Yeah. They're fine. Worried sick, but fine. They're at the tree lighting. If we hurry we'll make it.

Dale stops.

DALE

Wait. It's Christmas Eve?

SHIRLEY

Yes.

DALE

Then what are we waiting for?

Shirley opens the passenger door and forcefully shoves Dale's head into the car.

DALE (O.S.)

Ow!

She shrugs.

SHIRLEY

Sorry. Habit.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

Rolling along a darkened road.

SHIRLEY

Dale, you know I gotta ask.

DALE

Shirley, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me. Actually, I'm pretty certain you wouldn't.

Shirley smirks, checks Dale's face.

SHIRLEY

Don't be too sure of that.

EXT. TOWN - NIGHT

The cruiser passes through a railroad crossing and into the town square. Everything's dark and the tree's not lit.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

SHIRLEY

What the? Where is everyone?

She pulls over and gets out.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

She throws her hands up in confusion. Just then, her vest radio crackles.

RICK (OVER RADIO)

... Well, you're the town
selectman, you oughtta know what we
should sing next.

A chorus of JINGLE BELLS is heard through the radio. Shirley presses the button.

SHIRLEY

Rick? Rick!

RICK (RADIO)

Oh, hey, Shirl. Over.

SHIRLEY

Rick, where are you? Where is
everyone? And what happened to the
tree lighting?!

Dale pops his head out of the car.

RICK (RADIO)

We're all over at Mrs. Leith's
house. Over.

SHIRLEY

All right. Look. Stay right where
you are. I got him, Rick. I got
him!

RICK (RADIO)
Got who?

SHIRLEY
Dale, you banana. I found Dale.

RICK (RADIO)
Oh wow! That's great. Well, get
down here. And don't let him out of
your sight. Over.

SHIRLEY
(turns to the car)
I won't. O--

The car door is open. Dale's gone.

SHIRLEY
Not again.

Shirley scans the street. There's Dale -- running with his
bags. He turns a corner.

She hops in the cruiser and hits the emergency lights.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Dale's ankle is killing him. It doesn't matter. Almost home.
Shirley's pulls up next to him, lights flashing.

SHIRLEY
Dale, what are you doing? Get in.

DALE
Don't worry about it, Shirl.

He speeds up and charges ahead.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The caroling continues -- FROSTY THE SNOWMAN.

On the front porch, Tabitha passes out a plate of cookies.

Michael raises his head and steps off the porch. He senses
something. Something no one else does.

He makes his way through the crowd and out into the street.

MICHAEL
Daddy!

Dale lights up, coming up the street.

DALE

Michael!

They run to each other. Michael jumps into his father's arms.

The Christmas lights on the houses, the falling snow -- swirling together as they embrace.

MICHAEL

I knew you'd come back, Daddy. I
knew you'd come back for Christmas.

They hold onto each other like it's the first time, or the last, they'd ever done so.

Shirley's cruiser follows, blue and red lights pulsing.

DALE'S HOUSE - FRONT PORCH

GAYLE

What's got Shirley all in a huff?

Tabitha cranes her neck to see.

TABITHA

Don't know.

Michael tugs at Tabitha's coat, but she doesn't notice right off. He tugs harder.

TABITHA

What is it, honey?

MICHAEL

Daddy's home.

TABITHA

That's nice. Wait, what!

And there's Dale. Strange little smile on his face.

DALE

Hi, Tabitha.

Tabitha gasps, eyes wide. She backs into Gayle, who nudges her forward.

GAYLE

Told you so, sugar.

Tabitha shrieks with joy, throws her arms around Dale and buries her face in his chest.

The crowd CHEERS. Cups are raised, hi-fives exchanged. A chorus of SILENT NIGHT wafts through the air.

Tabitha pulls away, her cheeks red and tear-stained.

TABITHA
Is it really you?

DALE
Last time I checked.

TABITHA
(suddenly stern)
Where were you, Dale? Where were you?

Dale shakes his head, mouth open as if to speak. And all he can do is laugh.

DALE
Tab, I...

Then he remembers something. He reaches into his coat pocket, but all that comes out is the liner.

DALE
(softly)
Emily's mitten is gone.

TABITHA
What did you say?

DALE
(shakes his head)
Just thinking out loud.

Dale checks his pants pocket. This time he does produce something. An envelope. The one Butter Finger gave him.

INSERT: ENVELOPE

DO NOT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS

BACK TO SCENE

Dale tears it open and reads. Beat. He lowers the letter, and gazes out into the crowd. And there, unseen by the others, a SMALL MAN in civilian clothes quietly ambles by.

It's Butter Finger.

Dale spots him. Butter Finger turns, gives him a WINK, and disappears into the cluster of carolers.

Dale nods and puts one arm around his wife, the other around his son. He pulls his family in close as...

The caroling continues.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

A warm day. The leaves on the trees are Springtime green.

TITLE: SOME MONTHS LATER

Moving along the street, past the Luncheonette and Sal's Hardware, stopping on--

LEITH WOODWORKS

No longer boarded, it's occupied and open for business.

INT. LEITH WOODWORKS - DAY

Tabitha sits at the counter in front of a computer screen.

Dale appears from the back room, wearing a work apron and goggles. He peers over her shoulder.

DALE

Did that order just come in?

TABITHA

Yep. Mr. Madsen needs it ASAP.

DALE

Yeah, well, we better slow down on the special orders for awhile. I'm gonna have my hands full pretty soon.

Tabitha picks up a piece of paper, casts a suspicious glare in Dale's direction.

TABITHA

Are you referring to this anonymous invoice?

DALE

Uh huh.

TABITHA

(reading)

Four thousand toy trains, two thousand police cars and three thousand fire engines? Dale. Who in the world would order this?

DALE

No one from this world.

She puts the invoice away.

TABITHA

Oh, by the way, I almost forgot.

She retrieves a PAINTING by her feet, it's wooden frame chipped and faded with age.

TABITHA

I found this in with some of your father's things.

Dale takes the painting and studies it.

INSERT: PAINTING

A Winter scene of a young BOY ice skating on a frozen pond. A majestic CHRISTMAS TREE sits nearby and...

A MAN in a RED FLANNEL COAT leans against a wooden fence, pensive, watching on.

BACK TO SCENE

Dale blinks several times before looking to the corner of the painting. He brushes away some dust with his thumb, revealing the name...

S. LIVINGSTON

TABITHA

(off Dale)

What's wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost.

Dale shakes off the feeling and places the painting against a wall behind the counter.

DALE

What do you think? We'll put it right here.

TABITHA

Fine with me. It's your shop.

He puts the picture down, kisses Tabitha's cheek and heads back into the work room.

But we come back to that painting, that familiar Winter scene, and focus in on the man in the red flannel coat.

DALE (O.S.)

Hey, Michael? Michael?

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Yeah, Dad?

DALE (O.S.)

Wanna help your old man build some trains?

FADE OUT.