

CHRISTMASVILLE

Written by

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FADE IN:

INT. FACTORY - DAY

The bustling floor of an industrial woodworking shop. Christmas decorations everywhere. EMPLOYEES man lathes and routers, boring holes and slicing plywood.

DALE LEITH, 38, red flannel coat and jeans, punches his time card. Another day at the office. He waves to a co-worker, juggling coffee and a doughnut.

DALE (V.O.)

I'm Dale Leith, and this is where I work. Or worked. You see, in just a few short minutes I'm gonna get the boot. The old heave-ho. Fired. Can you believe it? Eight days before Christmas, and I'll be out of a job.

LOADING DOCK

Dale dispassionately marks a clipboard as a FORKLIFT drops off a pallet.

DALE (V.O.)

I used to be a woodworker. A good one, too. I made chairs, coffee tables, end tables... You name it.

INSERT: DALE'S HANDIWORK

All of Dale's creations, CHAIR, COFFEE TABLE, TOY TRAIN -- each crafted with exquisite detail and workmanship.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE (V.O.)

I studied and worked under my father for many years. He had a shop in town. But over here I do shipping and receiving only. And quite honestly, that's just fine by me.

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

EXT. TOWN - DAY

Church steeples jut above the trees, clean sidewalks run through a shop-lined MAIN STREET.

INSERT: SERIES OF SHOTS

- TABITHA, 36, attractive even when she's not trying, blows dries a WOMAN'S hair in the SALON where she works.

DALE (V.O.)

That's my wife, Tabitha. She's got the patience of a saint. A great woman. And as a mother she has no equal. Truly the glue of our family.

- MICHAEL, 6, speaks before his CLASSMATES, showing off a book he brought for show and tell.

DALE (V.O.)

Our son, Michael. He's bright and curious about everything. Funny thing is, the older he gets the harder I find it to answer all his questions.

- A PHOTO of EMILY, 8, a smile as big as the all outdoors and a heart to go with it.

DALE (V.O.)

And then there's Emily, our daughter. My little princess. You'll learn more about her as we go along.

- SANTA CLAUS, sporting red spandex and a green headband with holly berries, pumps away furiously on an ELLIPTICAL machine.

DALE (V.O.)

Oh yeah. And this guy. I suspect you all know who he is, but you might be wondering two things: How on Earth do I know him, and why is he on an elliptical? Both good questions.

END OF SERIES

BACK TO SCENE

INT. LOADING DOCK - DAY

Dale still gazing out on the town. The finger of one HERB PETERS, 50s, taps him on the shoulder.

HERB

Dale, you got a minute?

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. But why?
Was it the Messing account?

HERB

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

Dale waits for an answer.

HERB (CONT'D)

Dale, we're just making cuts to
balance cost here. It's not as busy
as it used to be. Everyone else has
more time in than you. It's just...
business.

DALE

Business, huh?

With an awkward smile, Herb hands Dale an envelope.

HERB

However, I did manage to secure you
a holiday bonus as well as your
severance.

(beat)

You're welcome.

Dale presses his lips tight, and nods.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

A downtrodden Dale pads the sidewalk. Holiday cheer is on display all over town -- wreaths in the shop windows and lights on the lamp posts.

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

SAL
Hey there, Dale.

DALE
What's up, 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 window. The storefront reads:

LEITH WOODWORKS

SAL (CONT'D)
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 looks down the street to the --

TOWN SQUARE

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

SAL (CONT'D)
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 (CONT'D)
Well, I'll see you around, Sal.

SAL
(smiles)
That supposed to be 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 sorts through a box full of bells, bows and ribbons.

Stringing lights on the tree is Michael, 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 (CONT'D)

Daddy, these lights are tangled.

DALE

Throw 'em out, then.

Tabitha looks up, not pleased with 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. Really?

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 it long enough to hug 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 with you? 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. Why? Was it the
 Messing account? I bet you it was
 the Messing account.

DALE
 No, it wasn't the Messing account.
 And that wasn't even my fault, by
 the way. It was a typo. But it
 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.

Sitting in front of Dale is Emily, an eight-year old treasure
 wearing a big smile and eyes as pure as an infant's slumber.

Dale's hand rests on her shoulder.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE
 She would've been twelve.

TABITHA
 Huh?

DALE

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

Tabitha keeps her distance. She knows what's coming.

TABITHA

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

DALE

No, it's... No. I 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

Well, your father's shop has been
sitting vacant all these years.
Maybe it's time.

Dale's already shaking his head.

TABITHA (CONT'D)

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 with Emily. It
wasn't your fault. Plain and
simple.

DALE

I was driving.

TABITHA

It was an accident, Dale. They hit you. Remember?

DALE

Yeah, I remember.

(sighs)

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, Dale. Even when you don't.

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

Dale stands in place a moment, then shuffles to the table, 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, Dale taps it gently and climbs out of bed.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - MORNING

Dawn, still dark. Stores are all closed save for the blue and red neon's of MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE.

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?

Spatula in hand, Pete turns, snuffles and grins.

PETE
Is Santa a jolly old elf?

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

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

Tabitha blows a kiss, waves goodbye.

She pulls out her phone. No messages. A hint of concern on her face as she dials Dale and waits. There's 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 a busy day.

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

ELIZABETH
Have you done this before?

DALE
(playfully)
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 (CONT'D)

Me either.

DALE

So, am I hired?

PETE

Yeah, sure. You're hired. You did a heck of a 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's owner -- a perky redhead who always takes care to 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

Oh, my God. 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 comes to Marone's. She peeks through the window and, as promised, there's Dale.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Dale pulls a ticket, plates a BLT, turns.

DALE

Liz, your food is--

And there's Tabitha, staring him down.

DALE (CONT'D)

Ready.

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

Yeah, well I was worried about you.
Gone all morning. I thought you'd
disappeared.

DALE

Come on. I would never just
disappear.

The stove DINGS.

MICHAEL

Daddy, I don't get this.

DALE

(checks over the work)
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 just
gotta figure out.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Dale behind the wheel, sun pouring in. And now close on Dale
as--

FLASHBACK

INT. CAR (MOVING) - 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 that? Emerald?

She nods happily.

DALE (CONT'D)

I really think Mommy's gonna like that.

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

A lot!

DALE

I can tell. Well look, if you don't have enough I can spot you the rest. Deal?

EMILY

Are we going to have enough time? Skating practice is at three.

DALE

We'll make it, honey. Don't worry.

The light turns green. Dale gently taps the gas and...

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
(smiles, winks)
I know.

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, a 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 something under his breath, makes a fist and goes to bring it down on the hood of his car. But, he stops just short. Collects his emotions.

He gets in.

EXT. HOUSE - MORNING

A light dusting of snow on the ground.

SUPER: 5 DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS

INT. BATHROOM - HOUSE - 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 gotta try and go back to work.

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

DALE
Is that a reference to my cooking?

She smiles playfully.

TABITHA

Yes.

DALE

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

TABITHA

You're not *completely* useless. Besides, I have some errands for you to run.

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

EXT. MALL - DAY

Bright December day, a 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 his bags. He stops at the curb, scans the parking lot as 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

(smiles)

Yeah, so I've heard.

Dale glances up, where 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. The snow's getting heavy 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 cuts the wheel. The brakes lock. The car slides.

DALE
Whoa. Whoa!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

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

The car slashes forward, approaching 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
(to Michael)
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 noise 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. Woozy and confused.

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

He tries to lift himself, but falls back onto the seat.

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, he wobbles and...

Collapses face first into the fresh powder.

Across the horizon, darkness approaches.

INT. LIVING ROOM - HOUSE - 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

Mommy, when's Daddy coming home?

TABITHA

I'm sure he'll be home soon, baby. He's got a lot of errands to run.

She looks out the window at the falling snow. It's at this moment she realizes she's not sure of anything.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

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

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. The hood is open just enough to see a pair of eyes.

Next to him is a sled. An oil lamp hanging from the handles gives off an orange glow.

The small person takes a knee, throws his hood back. Meet BUTTER FINGER. He looks to be in his forties, but it's hard to tell. Especially with ELVES.

Butter Finger groans as he lifts Dale onto the sled. Once finished, he zips up and heads out into the night.

BUTTER FINGER (V.O.)

Everybody else gets to stay home
and make toys. Everybody but me.
Sipping hot chocolate by the fire,
telling their Elf tales. 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 is 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 shouts on the other end. Rick jerks the phone away from his ear.

RICK (INTO PHONE) (CONT'D)

Okay. All right. I'll go out and
take a look around. 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 (CONT'D)

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.

BUS DRIVER

Everything's okay, Dale.

Everything's cool. Why don't you put down the ladle 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 (CONT'D)

Okay. Where do I start? Um... 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. And where am I again?

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 very... Elf-like.

BUTTER FINGER

You sayin' I'm short?

DALE

Well, no. No. And yes. I mean... I don't know.

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

That qualifies as funny.

BUTTER FINGER
Friends call me Butter.

DALE
And you're an Elf?

BUTTER FINGER
Can't get nothing past you.

DALE
Okaayy. 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. Know what I mean?

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. He 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. Sound about right?

DALE

How in the world do you know all
this?

Butter just smiles.

DALE (CONT'D)

(touches his head)

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

He scans the room and stops abruptly on a bag in the corner
labelled: REINDEER CHOW -- with a caricature of a reindeer
making an OK sign with it's hooves.

DALE (CONT'D)

You got a bag over there that says
Reindeer Chow. Let me guess -
Santa's reindeer?

Butter turns, wrings out the stocking.

BUTTER FINGER

Now you're catching on.

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.
Looks like something went down.

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

Rick takes a deep breath.

RICK (CONT'D)

Oh boy.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Butter hands Dale a warm cloth.

DALE

Thanks. 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 (CONT'D)

Easy, easy.

DALE

(softly)

I gotta call my wife. My son... They're gonna be worried.

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

BUTTER FINGER

There'll be time for that, soldier. You get some rest now.

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 the room. Butter is nowhere in sight.

Dale swings his feet onto the floor, finds his boots and slips them on. Puts on his red flannel coat.

He spots a note tacked to the door and reads it.

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.

He takes a step. His foot hits a loose board. He tumbles down the steps and face plants hard in the snow.

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

EXT. NORTH POLE - DAY

Nothing coming into focus yet, 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. Awaits impact!

The sleigh, pulled by a lone REINDEER, halts an inch 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. FOYER - DALE'S HOUSE - 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 it's 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 Christmas village come to life.

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

DALE
Am I dreaming?

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

Dale laughs.

DALE
It's like I time-warped to the fifties or something.

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 (CONT'D)
Is that... Isn't that Stan Livingston, the famous 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, heading down a path 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
Is this the North Pole?

SANTA
What do you think?

DALE
(laughs)
Traditionally, yeah. The North Pole. But... I don't know. It's strange. When I was a little kid, every year my father would set up this miniature Christmas village. Little lights on in the houses, cotton for snow. He used to call it Christmasville. That's what this place reminds me of.

Santa tugs at the reins.

SANTA
For me it's central command. Where all the magic happens.

DALE
Are you really Santa Claus?

SANTA
Come on now, Dale. Who else looks like this?

DALE
(shrugs)
I don't know. Am I dreaming?

Santa flicks Dale's ear.

DALE (CONT'D)
Oww!

Dale puts his hand to his ear... Then feels his head -- his wound is gone.

So are the stitches in his hand.

SANTA
What is it?

DALE
(shakes his head)
Nothing.

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

Santa points. Over a ridge is an immense Victorian structure -- like six or seven houses together, lit up and brilliant. Like a Thomas Kinkadee come to life.

SANTA

This is it.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Santa leads Dale into the --

GRAND ROOM

It's like Home and Gardens took steroids.

A spectacular Christmas tree graces the center of the room, an immense, roaring fireplace -- stockings everywhere and idyllic country scenes 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 would 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 just a hum 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, address a group of about ten TOWNSPEOPLE.

SHIRLEY

We're going to spread out in groups of two. Okay?

(MORE)

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

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

Rick, this search party couldn't find itself.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Michael at the table eating breakfast.

Tabitha's 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
I... I don't know. 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. Jervis shrugs.

SANTA
(lies)
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

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 (O.S.)
Wooden trains, fire engines.
Traditional stuff.

DALE
Speaking of tradition, I have one
of my own. It's called spending
Christmas with my family. Not being
stuck in this... alternate reality.

FITTING ROOM

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 wriggles 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

This outfit's too tight.

INT. WOOD SHOP - LATER

Dale sits at a work station pouring over schematics. Hammer, saw, planer -- everything he needs is there.

Around him are dozens of work stations just like his.

JERVIS

Something wrong?

DALE

These plans look like something from the nineteen-fifties.

JERVIS

Parents want an iPad, they know where to go. You want a sturdy, wholesome toy -- this is the place to get it.

Dale smiles in agreement.

JERVIS (CONT'D)

But feel free to make some modifications if the mood strikes. I trust your judgement. You come highly recommended.

DALE

Recommended? By who?

Jervis raises his eyebrow with a hint of a smile, but he leaves without giving an answer.

Dale stares over the sea of working Elves and, by the SWEETS BUFFET and hot chocolate station, he spies Butter Finger pushing a broom.

Dale grins.

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, don't feel like you 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 it's taking a toll on her.

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

TABITHA

Thanks.

They embrace.

GAYLE

And look. I know the tree lighting's soon. Believe me, no one is going to 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

(smiles)

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. Two sets, in fact.

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, and her keen eye focuses on 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--

Slips on something. Upon closer inspection...

Looks like frozen soup.

She 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's winding down. Elves are heading out.

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
They were right about you. This is pretty good work, Doug.

DALE
Dale.

JERVIS
Whatever. Well, I'll see you bright and early then, huh?

DALE
Yeah, I guess so.

Jervis exits as Dale shuffles to the window. Night has fallen, the lights of the village twinkle in the distance.

Dale looks down and, directly below is Butter Finger. He's holding a shovel, heading to the STABLE.

Butter notices him, stops and waves.

Dale lifts his hand halfway, smiles, 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

It there was, it wasn't 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. So does Shirley.

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. He means well. This is his first missing person case.

TABITHA

Yeah. 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.

TABITHA

Yeah.

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, we're in--

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - BEDROOM - MORNING

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

Butter Finger is mere inches from 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 (CONT'D)
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... We had a... 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 then, so I really 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

How do you know?

BUTTER FINGER

Jervis said so. 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, let me ask you a question.

BUTTER FINGER

Shoot.

DALE

Am I dreaming?

Butter laughs as they go.

BUTTER FINGER

I ask myself that all the time.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

All's quiet and still.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Looks like a bomb went off. Spoons, mixing bowls, carton of eggs and flour everywhere.

Gayle stands against the island with a glass of wine in her hand, a whisk in the other.

Tabitha sits nearby. Hasn't touched her wine.

GAYLE

Maybe it's like Sheriff Hastings said - a good samaritan found Dale, took him out of the car 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 not think he'd ever do something like that...

(sips her wine)

But that's just giving men way too much credit.

Tabitha smiles.

GAYLE (CONT'D)

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 and a file as Butter attentively 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.

Dale gets up, offers Butter his seat.

BUTTER FINGER

Where are 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, past the shop-lined main street. He crosses, hops the curb and makes his way by 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 and makes a break for it.

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 and drops like a stone.

He rises, shakes out the cobwebs.

DALE

What the..?

He cautiously reaches out. His hand hits something. It's not seen, but it's there, like an invisible barrier.

He slides a few paces to his left. Like a Mime, he feels around. This wall is seemingly everywhere.

DALE (CONT'D)

Hey. Hey!

His voice echoes. A bird takes flight. No answer.

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

Then stops. Out of breath, he drops his hands. The still of the day. So quiet.

So alone.

He lowers his head and turns back, muttering to himself.

EXT. NORTH POLE - LATER

Dale leans against a wooden fence in the town square, near the Christmas tree. He's 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

Yeah, I guess. I'm Dale Leith.

STAN

Stan Livingston.

Dale takes a peek at Stan's painting.

INSERT: PAINTING

It's exactly what's before him: The boy skating, the Christmas tree and the wooden fence where Dale was standing a moment ago.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE

How do you remember detail so well?

Stan puffs on his pipe.

STAN

Well, see 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.

(MORE)

STAN (CONT'D)

Chances are he'll come around again.

DALE

What if he doesn't come back around?

Stan grins.

STAN

Then I just make it up.

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

DALE

My father was a big fan of your work.

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

Prisoner? Oh no. No one's a prisoner here.

DALE

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

STAN

(smiles)

There's no walls here, son.

DALE

Yes, there is.

STAN
Did you see it?

DALE
No.

STAN
Then how do you know it was there?

DALE
I smashed into it.

STAN
Smashed into it, huh?
(points to his head)
The only walls I know of are in
here. Sometimes you gotta go around
'em. Did you try going around?

DALE
Yeah.

STAN
What happened?

DALE
It was still there.

STAN
You try going over?

Dale's silent. He looks around at everything, and somehow this all looks familiar.

He lifts his arm and draws an imaginary line with his finger. The air RIPPLES and SHIMMERS as if it were water.

Dale looks to Stan in awe.

DALE
Did you just see that?

STAN
(smiles)
See what?

DALE
You didn't just see that?

STAN
Hey, Dale?
(beat)
Merry Christmas.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Tabitha, working at the SALON and fighting to get through another day as Gayle eyes her with concern.

- Shirley and Rick hand out MISSING PERSON flyers on MAIN STREET.

- PEOPLE setting up in the TOWN SQUARE as a banner ruffles above the gazebo: ANNUAL TREE LIGHTING.

- Dale, sitting 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 SCENE:

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

Oh, sure. I bet you say that to all the Elves.

DALE

I'm serious. It's good.

BUTTER FINGER

Thanks, Dale.

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 makes the calls around here.

DALE

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

Jervis disregards Dale.

DALE (CONT'D)

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 Dale's confused look...

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. With its red bows and colorful lights, it stands ready for the night's festivities.

Rick joins her.

RICK

Nice, isn't it.

SHIRLEY
(troubled)
It's nice every year.

RICK
Got Dale on your mind, don't you?

SHIRLEY
I don't get it, Rick. We found the car, the cabin. 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, as if searching for clarity.

SHIRLEY
You know, 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.
(whirls around)
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 (CONT'D)
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 (CONT'D)

... 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 all
you've done. Everyone knows you
have a lot on your plate.

Gary takes the cookies from Tabitha.

GARY (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)
What are you doing, kiddo?

MICHAEL
I like that tree.

TABITHA
Yeah, me too.

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 know.

TABITHA
Hey, 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 happen. The hard part is we don't always know 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 and 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

Yeah, right.

SANTA

Do you think you're ready to go home?

That's the last straw.

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.

An ELF scampers to the opposite side of the hall.

Dale glares at Santa and 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. Inside is the note she pulled from off the door. She unfolds it, and reads.

SHIRLEY

Every journey begins with a tough
first step.

Transfixed, she finally looks away. Her eyes once again find the bag of REINDEER CHOW.

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

Her boot hits the loose board. She tumbles hard, landing 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.

And the whole time, echoing in her ears--

Santa's voice: *HO HO HO!*

Shirley's mouth hangs open. Incredulous. There's no way. There's just no way this is real.

Another BRIGHT FLASH.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

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

She looks around.

SHIRLEY
Well, that 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 on the floor 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, SIGHS.

BUTTER FINGER
You really wanna know?

Dale, arms folded, waits.

BUTTER FINGER (CONT'D)
One year, not too long ago, I was making cars, much like the ones you're making. They were nice.
(MORE)

BUTTER FINGER (CONT'D)

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

(beat)

Then we got word one day that a little boy swallowed a loose piece from a car I'd made. A steering wheel. Thankfully, the little guy was fine. But, for that to happen on Christmas? I was crushed.

DALE

Butter...

BUTTER FINGER

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

DALE

Butter, I'm sorry. I didn't know.

BUTTER FINGER

Hey, how could you know?

DALE

So, this is why you're out here.

BUTTER FINGER

Yeah. But you know what? I'm good at it.

(beat)

It took me a long time to get my legs back under me again. But it made me realize one thing. It was an accident. Could've happened to anyone, but it chose me. You get what I'm saying?

DALE

Yeah. I get what you're saying.

BUTTER FINGER

It's not always about us, Dale. Sometimes there's a... a greater purpose. We just have to figure out what it is.

DALE

And you've found yours?

Butter gazes up at Dale and smiles.

BUTTER FINGER

I think so.

The reindeer are GRUNTING. Getting restless.

BUTTER FINGER (CONT'D)

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

DALE

Understood.

Butter watches Dale depart, 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 (CONT'D)

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 were you talking to?

Tabitha freezes. Then she smiles, and Michael smiles, too. He knows.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Main Street is closed off. PEOPLE mingling 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 (MOVING) - NIGHT

Tabitha and Michael, both are silent.

She stops the car.

MICHAEL

What?

Beat.

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, then 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 as 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.

Sulking, she 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 (CONT'D)

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, and it brings a smile.

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 (CONT'D)

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

Dale laughs, shakes Santa's hand.

SANTA (CONT'D)

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.

JERVIS

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 (CONT'D)

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, then--

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 (CONT'D)

Tabitha's not here.

GARY

What?

A beat as Gary thinks, then--

GARY (CONT'D)

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 hands Dale a fire engine. The one he smashed, and it's as good as new.

DALE
You fixed it, didn't you?

BUTTER FINGER
I learned from the best.

Dale places the toy in a box with the others.

Butter hands Dale an envelope.

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.
(takes 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
that 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 (CONT'D)
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

I guess we never see it coming, Dale. That's why living life after it is so hard. It changes you. I mean, if I'd have never had my mishap I wouldn't be here with you right now, would I?

DALE

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

BUTTER FINGER

(smiles)

Good point. But 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 it rises.

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

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

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

The front yard is jam packed with CAROLERS. It's everyone who was at the tree lighting, and they're all singing.

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

The front door opens. Tabitha and Michael step out.

Selectman Gary trots over.

GARY

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

Tabitha covers her mouth.

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 turns, perplexed, and notices the last few Elves on the floor, readying to leave.

But now--

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

This Elf, a girl, is seated at a desk, drawing on paper with a crayon. She's smaller than the rest, with a twinkle in her eyes and a smile as pure as an infant's slumber.

It's Dale's daughter, Emily.

Butter slides out the open door where Santa awaits. He puts his arm around the Elf and together they leave.

Dale's heart is in his throat. He stares at her, stunned. No idea what to do. No words to express how he feels.

He walks over and stands next to her like a nervous schoolboy.

She looks up from her drawing and smiles.

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 of a little house sitting among green trees, backed with 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

Yeah. I would guess so. 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 at him with her sweet eyes.

EMILY

I'm talking to you right now, Daddy.

Dale laughs, flashes a smile.

DALE

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

EMILY

Can we go ice skating?

Off Dale...

EXT. NORTH POLE - TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The sheened ice reflecting the lights of the grand Christmas tree.

Dale and Emily skate together, and it's easy to see Dale is not the best skater. His arms flail. He almost goes down.

Emily skates like it's second nature.

EMILY

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

DALE

Yeah. That's easy for you to say.

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 quiet night is all around them. The cold, still air - the warm glow of the village. The Father in Dale slowly returning, if 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, gazes at the starlit sky.

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 stand back and admire their work.

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, my lady.

Emily giggles.

Snowflakes tumble from the sky, landing on the frosty ground.

Dale marvels at it all. Can't believe this is happening.

He looks at her and notices the smile she'd worn moments ago has turned bittersweet.

He goes to her, drops down on one knee.

DALE (CONT'D)

What is it?

She doesn't answer.

DALE (CONT'D)

You have to go, don't you?

She nods her head yes.

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

Not now. Not ever.

DALE (CONT'D)

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)

But it's okay to be sad, Daddy.
It's okay to miss me.

Snow falling at a steady pace now. Dale holds her tight, 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 and leaves one of her mittens in Dale's hand.

DALE (CONT'D)

Emily!

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

Like magic, she's gone.

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

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

DALE (CONT'D)

Looks better on you anyway.

Dale turns, takes a last look around. *Was this all a dream?*

Not sure which direction to go. He puts Emily's mitten in his pocket, turns. He catches his foot on a tree root and --

WHUMP! He face plants in the snow.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

Dale lifts his head. Quiet and dark.

Several feet away, he sees a familiar shape.

It's his car.

Dale jumps to his feet, almost loses his footing. He looks at his hand - the stitches are back.

He limps to his car, opens the door. Inside, it's just how he left it. He grabs the shopping bags from the back, stops and looks at his reflection in the mirror.

The gash on his forehead has returned.

Dale pumps his fist and lets out a YAWP!

He traverses through the snow until he reaches 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. Bare hands freezing.

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

He can almost see 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 gets to his feet when -- SPLASH!

A car WHOOSHES past and sprays him with a tsunami of mud and slush. The cars jams it's brakes.

It's a POLICE CAR.

The door opens. It's Shirley.

SHIRLEY

Holy smokes! Are you okay?

She races over.

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

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

DALE

Are you an angel?

SHIRLEY

Yeah, right. No. 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.) (CONT'D)
Ow!

SHIRLEY
Sorry, Dale. Habit.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

Rolling along a darkened road.

SHIRLEY
Dale, you know I gotta ask.

DALE

Shirley, if I told you I don't think you'd 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. Even the tree isn't 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 caroling 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. Again.

SHIRLEY (CONT'D)

Oh no.

Shirley scans the street. There he is. He's running, and turns a corner with his shopping bags.

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 cruiser, lights flashing, pulls up next to him.

SHIRLEY

Dale, what are you doing? Get in.

Dale grins.

DALE

Don't worry about it.

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 slowly makes his way through the crowd and out to the street.

MICHAEL

Daddy!

Dale lights up when he sees Michael.

DALE

Michael!

Michael jumps into his father's arms.

The Christmas lights on the houses, the falling snow -- it all swirls 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 (CONT'D)

What is it, honey?

MICHAEL

Daddy's home.

TABITHA

That's nice. Wait, what!

Tabitha covers her mouth, eyes wide with surprise. She backs up a few steps into Gayle. Gayle nudges her forward.

GAYLE

Told you so.

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. How to explain? He laughs.

DALE

Tab, I...

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

DALE (CONT'D)

(softly)

The mitten is gone.

TABITHA

What did you say?

DALE

(shakes his head)

Just thinking out loud.

Dale reaches around, checks his pants pocket. This time he does produce something. It's an envelope.

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.

Dale spots him. The small man turns, gives him a WINK, and disappears into the cluster of carolers.

Dale smiles. He puts one arm around Tabitha, the other around Michael and pulls them 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, 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, casting a suspicious glare in Dale's direction.

TABITHA
Are you referring to this anonymous
invoice?

DALE
That's the one.

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

He grins.

DALE
No one from this world.

She puts the invoice away.

TABITHA
Oh, by the way, I almost forgot.

She retrieves an old PAINTING by her feet, it's wooden frame
chipped and faded.

TABITHA (CONT'D)
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,
watching on.

BACK TO SCENE

Dale blinks several times before looking to the corner of the
painting. He brushes some dust away with his thumb and sees
the name STAN LIVINGSTON.

TABITHA
(off Dale)
What's wrong? You look like you've
just seen a ghost.

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

DALE

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

TABITHA

Fine by me.

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

We come back to the 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 me build some trains?

FADE OUT.