

THE WOODWORKER

by

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FADE IN:

INT. FACTORY - DAY

Christmas decorations grace the walls of a busy factory floor where EMPLOYEES man lathes and routers, boring holes and slicing plywood.

DALE (V.O.)

My name is Dale Leith. This is where I work. Or worked. You see, in about two minutes I'm getting fired. Can you believe that? Eight days before Christmas and I'm getting canned.

LOADING DOCK

DALE LEITH (38), bundled for the cold and not appearing too interested in his work, marks a clipboard as a FORKLIFT drops off a pallet.

DALE (V.O.)

I'm not a woodworker. I mean, I am. Technically. I worked with my father for many years, may he rest in peace. He had a shop in town. But now? Over here I'm shipping and receiving. All things said, that's just fine by me.

Dale paces to the open bay doors where, just below a ridge at the edge of the property, he looks upon the...

TOWN

His town. CHURCH STEEPLES rise above the trees, Mom and Pop stores dot a quaint MAIN STREET. This is small town life at its finest.

DALE (V.O.)

I've lived here all my life. Married Tabitha fifteen years ago this August. We had a daughter first, then a son. Emily and Michael.

Dale heaves a heavy sigh, leaving a vapor trail in the air.

DALE (V.O.)

Michael's eight. He's a great kid.
Smart. Funny. I love him to pieces.
Told his third grade teacher that
fractions were an assault on his
sanity And Emily? She's twelve.

(beat)

Or would have been...had she lived.

INT. WORKOUT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

SANTA CLAUS, wearing red spandex and a green headband, pumps
away furiously on an ELLIPTICAL machine, sweating bullets.

DALE (V.O.)

I suspect you all know who this guy
is. However, you might be wondering
two things: How in the world do I know
him? And why on Earth is he on an
elliptical machine?

INT. FACTORY - LOADING DOCK - DAY

A FINGER taps Dale's shoulder. It's HERB (50s), his boss.

HERB

Got a minute, Dale?

Close on Dale, and...

DALE (V.O.)

Sometimes, more minutes than a man can
bear.

HERB'S OFFICE

Herb sits behind a neat desk. Dale across from him.

HERB

No easy way to say this, Dale. The
company's decided to make a change.
We're laying you off.

DALE

Come again?

HERB

I said, we're laying you off.

DALE

Yeah, I heard that part.

HERB

Dale, I'm sorry...

DALE

Is it because of the Messing account?
You know that was a typo, right?

HERB

No, no, no. It wasn't the--well, that
was kind of messed up, but, no.

DALE

Then what? Is there something I'm not
doing that I need to? I'll do it. You
know me. I'll work harder. I'll--

HERB

Dale, they're making cuts to balance
cost. Business is slow. You've got
four years in. Everyone else has more.
I'm sorry, Dale. However, I did manage
to procure you a severance check and
your holiday bonus.

(beat)

You're welcome.

Dale. Stunned. Glassy-eyed. Agitated.

DALE

Gee, thanks.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Dale, downtrodden, paces the sidewalk. All the shops display
wreaths and colorful lights. Lamp posts are strung with
garland, and the church bells ring.

SAL LACONE (60s) climbs down a ladder out front of his
HARDWARE STORE.

SAL
Hey there, Dale.

DALE
What's the good word, Sal?

SAL
(shrugs)
Eight days till Christmas and I ain't
bought a single present. Thank God for
gift certificates.

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

LEITH WOODWORKING

SAL
You considering it?

DALE
(shakes his head)
I don't know why they just don't rent
it out already.

SAL
(wistful)
Maybe they're waiting for the right
buyer. Know what I mean? Your father
was a good man, Dale. Hard to believe
it's been six years already.

Down the street, in the...

TOWN SQUARE

A group of PEOPLE decorate a fifteen foot Douglas Fir with
lights and ornaments.

SAL
Tree lighting's soon.

DALE
I can see that.

SAL
Tabitha making her cookies?

DALE
Oh, yeah. 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
So she tells me. Well, I'll see you
around, Sal.

SAL
(winks)
That supposed to be a threat?

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A tidy-looking Craftsman tucked in among the bare tree
branches. Smoke rises from its chimney.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - SAME

A box full of bells, bows and ribbons. TABITHA LEITH (36),
attractive with barely any effort, sorts through the ornaments.

Stringing lights on the tree is MICHAEL (8), cute in his PJ's,
earnest in his task.

A set of lights flicker out.

MICHAEL
These lights are out.

TABITHA
There's another set on the table.

Michael goes to the table where a tangled mess awaits.

MICHAEL
Daddy?

Dale sits in a recliner, chin resting in his hand, in front of a TV he's not even pretending to watch.

MICHAEL

Daddy, these lights are tangled.

DALE

Throw them out. I'll get new ones tomorrow.

Tabitha looks up, not pleased by that response.

TABITHA

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

MICHAEL

Aw, Mom.

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 goodnight. Dale snaps out of his stupor long enough to hug Michael just a little too tight, and just a little too long.

DALE

Goodnight, my boy.

MICHAEL

Goodnight, Daddy.

Michael trundles upstairs.

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

DALE

Hey, I was watching that.

TABITHA

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

DALE

I'm not moping.

(then)

They laid me off today.

TABITHA

They what?

DALE

They laid me off at work.

The realization hits her hard.

TABITHA

Oh, no. Why? Was it because of the Messing account? It was the Messing account, wasn't it?

DALE

No, it wasn't the Messing account. And that was a typo, by the way. They just...made cuts. I was one of them.

TABITHA

Oh, Dale, I'm so sorry. Maybe I can talk to Herb's wife? I cut her hair. Maybe I can help get your job back?

(he's waving her off)

But, this is not right. It's eight days before Christmas, Dale! This...

Dale shuffles to the mantle above the fireplace, where a sea of family photos sit. He focuses on one in particular.

INSERT: PHOTO

A family portrait. Michael, Tab and Dale.

They're all happy, and everything is good.

However, sitting next to Dale is a smiling eight-year-old treasure, with a twinkle in her eye, and a smile as pure as an infant's slumber.

Her name is EMILY.

BACK TO SCENE

TABITHA

Dale?

DALE

She would have been twelve.

TABITHA

What?

DALE

Emily would have been twelve. I guess things would have been a lot different if we hadn't lost her.

Tabitha keeps her distance.

TABITHA

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

DALE

No, no. It's just...

Tabitha's seen this before. She knows she has to rein him in.

TABITHA

Dale, this is just bad timing. That's all this is. But, we got this. You hear me? We got this.

(then)

Who knows-- It might even be a blessing in disguise.

DALE

How do you figure that?

TABITHA

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

Dale's already shaking his head.

TABITHA

But, why? You're so good with your hands, and you're just as talented as your father was. Even more so.

Dale goes to speak. There's a pained look on his face.

DALE

It just doesn't feel right yet. It...

TABITHA

Dale, you can't go around carrying this weight forever. This...guilt you still feel over what happened with Emily. It wasn't your fault.

DALE

(avoiding eye contact)

Yeah, well... I'll find another job in the meantime.

Not the answer she wanted, but--

TABITHA

I know you will.

Tabitha's disappointed. Just the same, she gives him a hug and a kiss, says goodnight, then heads upstairs.

Dale stands in place for a moment. Expressionless. He slowly makes his way to the table, and picks up the muddled set of Christmas lights, and stares at them.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha's sound asleep. Dale beside her, wide awake.

A digital alarm clock reads 4:44AM. The last four changes to a five, launching Dale out of bed.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - MORNING

Just before sunrise, stores are still closed, save for the red and blue neons of MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - MORNING

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

Bacon and sausage sizzle on the grill.

Behind the counter is PETE MARONE (60s), a well-seasoned business owner with thick glasses and a gut to match. He glances up from wiping the counter.

Dale takes a faded HELP WANTED sign and slides it along the counter to Pete.

DALE

Still looking for help?

Pete snuffles, grins, continues wiping.

PETE

Is Santa a jolly old Elf?

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

Tabitha and Michael curbside. A SCHOOL BUS rolls up. A hug, a kiss, and off he goes. She waves as the bus pulls away, then takes out her phone and calls Dale.

She waits, but there's no answer. She clicks off, and heads back to the house, perplexed and concerned.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Burgers sizzle on the grill alongside sputtering eggs.

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

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

ELIZABETH

You've done this before, haven't you?

DALE

(grinning)

Beginner's luck?

She flashes a sly grin and hurries off into the organized chaos of the dining room.

EXT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - LATER

Dale stands out back behind the store, sipping from a steaming styrofoam 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, sure. You're hired. You did a good job back in there.

DALE

Thanks.

PETE

I heard about them letting you go. Over at the factory? That's a tough break around this time of year.

DALE

News travels fast, huh?

PETE

It's a small town, son.

(he turns to go, then)

Your wife let you cook at home?

DALE

Only on days that end in 'no.'

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - DAY

Four chairs, three WOMEN working them. Three OLD LADIES getting their hair done.

At the first chair stands GAYLE HODGINS (50), the shop's owner. She's a perky redhead who always takes care to look her best.

Tabitha slides in, phone to her ear. She hangs up.

TABITHA

Sorry I'm late.

GAYLE

Hi, sugar.

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

MINDY

Oh, my God. Tabitha. Your husband is such a good cook.

TABITHA

Huh?

GAYLE

You should have told us. We ordered lunch from Marone's, and there's Dale working the grill.

Tabitha inspects the room. Everyone's got food.

EXT. TOWN - MAIN STREET - DAY

Tabitha pounds the sidewalk, checking storefronts until she comes to Marone's. She peers through the window and, as promised, there's Dale.

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - DAY

Dale pulls a ticket, plates a BLT, turns and--

DALE
Liz, your food is--

There's Tabitha, staring him down.

DALE
Ready.

She lifts her eyebrows, crinkles her forehead.

TABITHA
Hi.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tabitha opens the stove and checks dinner, then reaches into the cabinet to get some plates.

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, checking his school work.

DALE
I'm sorry, Tab. The day just kinda happened, you know?

TABITHA
Well, I was worried about you. Gone all morning. I thought you'd disappeared.

DALE
I'd never just disappear.

The stove DINGS.

MICHAEL
Daddy, I don't get this.

DALE
(looks over the work)
I don't blame you. Where's the
calculator?

Tabitha removes a casserole from the oven.

TABITHA
No calculators.

MICHAEL
But, it's easier with a calculator.

TABITHA
And that's precisely why I don't want
you to use one. Some things you just
gotta figure out.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Dale at the wheel. Through the windshield, the sun peeks from behind the bare tree branches. Close on Dale as--

FLASHBACK

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Similar day, a few years ago. Dale driving, but this time Emily is his passenger.

EXT. CAR (MOVING) - SAME

The car travels down a busy road, stops at a light. And, nearby, at...

ANOTHER STREET

A BOX TRUCK rumbles past. Its DRIVER (30s) shields his eyes from the wicked sun.

DALE'S CAR

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

BACK TO SCENE

INT. MARONE'S LUNCHEONETTE - KITCHEN - DAY

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

PETE

First paycheck, Dale. I threw in a little something for the holidays.

DALE

Pete, you didn't have to do that.

PETE

I know. But I did anyway.

Dale stuffs the envelope in his pocket.

DALE

Thanks.

PETE

You bet. Hey look, finish up, will you? I wanna close up sometime today.

DALE

Okay.

Dale resumes cutting, a strange little smile on his face, when--

He SHRIEKS in pain, and grabs at his hand.

INT. EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

Dale's hand, palm-up on a table, as 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 properly. Last thing you want are for those stitches to open.

EXT. EMERGENCY ROOM - PARKING LOT - LATER

Dale heads to his car, clicks his key fob, which produces a BEEP from his car. He looks out across a sunny blue sky.

On any other day this is a rather peaceful scene.

Dale raises his good hand, goes to bring it down in anger on the hood of his car. He stops short and breathes, his frustration clear as he opens the door and gets in.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - MORNING

A light dusting of snow on the ground.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - MORNING

Dale in front of the mirror. His bad hand rests on the sink as he carefully removes the dressing.

TITLE: 4 Days Before Christmas

Michael appears in the doorway.

MICHAEL

Whatcha doing, Daddy?

DALE

Taking this thing off.

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

He 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'm gonna 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.

DALE

(smirking)

You got any errands for me to run?

Tabitha looks down at Michael, kisses the top of his head.

TABITHA

As a matter of fact, I do.

EXT. MALL - DAY

Cold December air. So many PEOPLE coming and going. It's Christmas shopping full tilt.

A SALVATION ARMY SANTA rings a bell.

Dale exits the mall, struggling with numerous shopping 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 groans as he picks up the bag.

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 better at finding things than we are, you know.

DALE

So, I've heard.

Dale looks up, where the first 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

Thanks. Shouldn't have had that second cup of coffee.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Dale's car chugs along the empty road. The snow's heavy, and it's sticking.

INT. CAR - DAY

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

A sharp turns looms ahead.

Dale cuts the wheel. The brakes lock. The car slides.

DALE

Whoa. Whoa!

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

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

The car slashes through, approaching a steep embankment.

INT. CAR

The car slices down the hill, tree branches slapping it from every angle. Dale tenses. Can't speak. This is it. No time to react. No time to--

CRASH!

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

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

Down the street, the bus comes around the corner. It pulls up. Air brakes hiss. Michael hops off.

BUS DRIVER
(waving)
Merry Christmas!

Tabitha waves back.

TABITHA
Hey, how was your party?

MICHAEL
Great.

TABITHA
Did everyone like my cupcakes?

MICHAEL
Yeah, they liked them. But I think I ate too many. 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 opens the front door, heads in.

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

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

Dale's totaled car lies wedged between two trees near the edge of the thicket. Smoke rises from under the crumpled hood, a hissing noise is heard.

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

Dale's got a nasty gash on his forehead. He's obviously out of it. Woozy and confused.

DALE'S POV: Snow and more snow. Blurry trees. Nothing is coming together.

He grabs the door and tries to lift himself, but he falls back onto the seat. He reaches for his head and moans.

He tries again, and this time makes it out. Favoring his left leg, he traverses a few hard earned steps.

One step, the wind whips through his hair. Another step, he wobbles and...

Collapses face first in the fresh powder.

Along the horizon line, darkness approaches.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha, staring warily out the window, speaks into the phone:

TABITHA

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

She clicks off. Behind her, Michael on the floor playing with his toys.

MICHAEL

Mommy, when's Daddy coming home?

TABITHA

He'll be home soon, baby. He had a lot of shopping to do.

She looks out the window again, and it's at this moment she realizes she has just lied to her son.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

Daylight fading fast.

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

There's a sound O.S., like footsteps in the snow. CRUNCH CRUNCH. Coming closer until--

The noise stops.

Standing over Dale is a SMALL PERSON, packaged in a heavy parka zippered to the top with its hood open just enough to see a set of eyes.

Next to him is a sled. An oil lamp dangling from its handles provides an orange radiance in the gloaming.

The SMALL PERSON takes a knee, and throws his hood back. Meet BUTTER FINGER. He looks to be in his forties but, you know, it's hard to tell with ELVES.

Butter Finger GRUNTS and GROANS as he lifts Dale onto the sled. He zippers up, then heads out into the night with the glow of the oil lamp lighting the way.

BUTTER FINGER (V.O.)

Everyone else gets to stay back home
where it's nice and warm. Make toys.
Sip hot chocolate by the fire. But me?
Oh nooo! I have to go out and collect
a guy in the snow.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Holiday trimming adorns this modest throwback of a police headquarters filled with outdated equipment.

RICK SELLERS (40s) sits at his desk, land line to his ear as he fidgets with a pencil.

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. I understand that. Yes. Look, maybe he went out for a walk to clear his head or something...

A BOOMING voice shouts on the other end, prompting Rick to shut his eyes and jerk the phone from his ear.

RICK (INTO PHONE)

Okay. All right. I'll go out there and take a look around. Yes. I will. Okay. You're welcome.

He hangs up the phone and takes a deep breath.

The station door opens and, stomping snow from her boots, is SHERIFF SHIRLEY HASTINGS (50s), who appears every bit the veteran of the force that she is.

Rick smirks.

SHIRLEY

What?

RICK

Is the cruiser warm?

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

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

INT. CABIN - SAME

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

Butter Finger rests in a chair, slurping hot soup.

Dale snores away on a cot, the wound on his head bandaged.

His eyes flutter, and--

DALE'S POV: Everything out of focus.

BUTTER FINGER

(mouth full)

Oh, you've finally rejoined us.

Dale locks eyes with his diminutive host, who sports green thermals and a red stocking cap.

Dale 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 drops his bowl and takes cover behind the chair.

BUTTER FINGER

Whoa oh! Take it easy there, big guy.

(Dale tries to stand)

Uh, I wouldn't put any pressure on that leg if I were you.

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

DALE

Okay. Look. I don't know who you are, but stay back.

BUTTER FINGER

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

DALE

How do you know my name? Who are you?

BUTTER FINGER

Are we done swinging ladles?

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

BUTTER FINGER

Okay. Where do I start? Umm... Your car slid down a ditch. You foolishly tried to walk out, and I rescued you.

(beat)

You're welcome, by the way.

Dale tries to process this.

DALE

And where am I again?

BUTTER FINGER

You're in my cabin. My humble abode. I'm Butter Finger. I'm an Elf. Sometimes we have funny names and, yes, we are short.

Butter extends his hand. Dale doesn't take it.

DALE

Butter Finger?

BUTTER FINGER

Friends call me Butter.

DALE

And you're an Elf?

BUTTER FINGER

Can't get nothing past you.

DALE

Okaayy. And there's no hospitals around here, right?

BUTTER FINGER

You mean for your head?

DALE

No. I mean for you. Like, maybe you escaped from a mental ward or something. You know what I'm saying?

BUTTER FINGER

That's very cute. Thanks. But no, it's nothing like that. Besides, who would claim to be an Elf that wasn't? Oh, and just in case you're wondering - this is not a dream. This is really happening. Like real time. Okay? Okay.

Dale finally lowers the soup ladle.

DALE

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

BUTTER FINGER

I don't need to go through your wallet, 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 socks from the hot water.

Dale cringes with disgust.

BUTTER FINGER

That being said, you're darn lucky I came along when I did. Any longer and you'd have been an ice sculpture.

Dale scans the room, and stops abruptly when he spots a bag in the corner that reads: REINDEER CHOW, complete with a reindeer caricature making an OK sign.

DALE

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

Butter turns, wrings out the wet sock and grins.

BUTTER FINGER

Now you're catching on.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

A space heater glows in the corner of the room.

Shirley sits at her desk, sipping coffee and trying to warm up when Rick comes through on the radio. She presses a button on the console.

SHIRLEY
What you got, Rick?

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Rick's on the side of the road, shining his flashlight onto the guard rail.

RICK (INTO VEST RADIO)
Well, we got a busted guard rail on eighty-seven. Tire tracks. Looks like something went down here.

He moves closer to the edge, shines the light down the ravine. The unmistakable shape of a car lies at the bottom.

RICK
(deep breath)
Oh boy.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Butter hands Dale a warm cloth.

BUTTER FINGER
This is for your head.

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 gets to his feet, but he's wobbly. Butter tries to steady him, and helps him back down onto the cot.

BUTTER FINGER
Easy. Easy.

DALE

(softly)

I gotta call Tabitha. She's gonna be worried...

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

BUTTER FINGER

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

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - MORNING

KNOCK KNOCK. Deputy Rick Sellers at the door.

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

TABITHA

Did you find him?

Rick removes his hat.

RICK

Ma'am.

EXT. CABIN - MORNING

A bird sings. The fresh snow glistens.

INT. CABIN - SAME

Sunlight pours in the only window. Dale is just waking up. He takes a look around the room. Butter is nowhere in sight.

Feeling better, Dale swings his feet onto the floor. He finds his boots and puts them on. He gets up, finds his RED PLAID COAT and puts that on, too.

Then he spots a note tacked to the door. It reads:

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

Dale chuckles. He grasps the door handle and pulls it open, more than ready to be on his way.

He takes a step. His foot lands on a loose board. He tumbles down the steps, and face plants in the snow.

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

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - DAY

Nothing coming into focus yet, but...

Dale hears CHRISTMAS BELLS ringing. There's MUSIC, too. Christmas music. Someone shouts -- "WHOA!"

Dale turns just in time to see a SLEIGH, pulled by a lone reindeer. He shuts his eyes, awaiting impact.

DALE

Oh no. Not again!

The sleigh halts mere inches from his face.

Two BLACK BOOTS disembark, snow crunching underneath. This is a LARGE MAN in green wool trousers and a heavy overcoat.

The boots stop in front of a cringing Dale. He glances up. And surely this dream isn't over just yet, because this WHITE-BEARDED hulk of a man looks just like--

DALE

Santa?

SANTA peers 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, don't you think you should be out there looking?

RICK

Ma'am?

TABITHA

You call me ma'am one more time and I'll scratch your eyes out.

RICK

We're organizing a search party, Mrs. Leith. Sheriff Hastings'll come by with all the details. Not to worry. We'll find him for you.

TABITHA

Not to worry? My husband has a car accident in the middle of a blizzard, goes missing in the dead of night, *you can't find him--*

(mindful of her volume)

And you're telling me not to worry?

Rick looks down at his shoes.

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - DAY

Dale, confounded, stands by 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 lamp posts. It's a Rockwellian Christmas village come to life.

Christmas music pipes in from somewhere.

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

DALE

Am I dreaming?

SANTA

If I told you you weren't, would you believe it?

Dale just laughs.

DALE

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

In a clearing, near the Norway Spruce, sits an OLD MAN at an easel. He adjusts his fedora, takes a puff from his pipe, and carefully applies brush to canvas.

DALE

Is that... Is that Stan Livingston?
The painter?

SANTA

And if I told you it was?

The OLD MAN turns and tips his hat.

DALE

Then I'd tell you this has got to be
the craziest dream I've ever had.

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - LATER

Dale rides shotgun in Santa's sleigh, heading down a path through snowy woods. He turns back to see the lights of the town behind them. All of this seems oddly familiar.

SANTA

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

DALE

Give it time.

(then, wistful)

But, this place... Strange. Reminds me of when I was a little kid. Every year my father would set up this miniature Christmas village around the tree. 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, bells JINGLE.

SANTA

For me it's home. Central command. Where all the magic happens.

DALE

Are you really Santa Claus?

SANTA

Well, who else would I be?

DALE

You didn't answer my question.

SANTA

Let me ask you a question, Dale. Who are you?

DALE

What do you mean?

SANTA

Are you the wide-eyed kid, full of wonder, gazing at your father's Christmas village? Or are you who you are now? Tired, and going through the motions. Work, paycheck, work. No zest for life anymore.

Beat. Just the sound of reindeer hooves.

DALE

How do you know all this?

SANTA

I'm Santa Claus. Come on.

Santa points.

SANTA

We're here.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Santa leads Dale through the foyer into the--

GREAT ROOM

It's like Home and Gardens on speed. A spectacular Christmas tree graces the center of the room. An immense, roaring fireplace. Christmas stockings everywhere.

Vaulted ceilings with oaken studs, immense picture windows with fantastic views. Holiday music, polished wood floors, and...

ELVES. Everywhere -- bustling about in a frenzy of activity like a choreographed ballroom dance.

Dale marvels at the spectacle of it all.

SANTA

What do you think?

DALE

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

SANTA

That's the first thing a woodworker would notice, I suppose.

DALE

Former woodworker.

They come to a large door. Santa opens it.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - DAY

A spacious, open floor teeming with enterprise. Hundreds of Elves at work. Building toys. Hammering. Nailing. The incessant chatter just a loud hum of white noise.

JERVIS, a bearded Elf, clipboard in one hand and a hot cocoa in the other, paces the floor.

SANTA

(shouts over the noise)

Jervis!

Jervis saunters over.

SANTA

Jervis, how we looking?

JERVIS

(rolls his eyes)

Behind on everything, Mister C. Trains, fire engines. It's gonna be tight. Rather large demand on toy tractors this year, though. I gotta admit I didn't see that coming.

SANTA

No, no, no. The other thing.

JERVIS

(checks his clipboard)

Oh. Um. Your Pilates class is at three, and your personal trainer comes in at four-thirty.

DALE

You have a personal trainer?

SANTA

Yeah. Don't you? Oh, Dale, this is my floor manager, Jervis.

Jervis and Dale exchange a shake.

SANTA

Dale here has a background in woodworking.

Jervis' eyes light up.

JERVIS

Really?

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Bare tree branches and snowy drifts. 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. 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, like, 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. I didn't hear it.

SHIRLEY
 Pull up your ear flaps, Henry. That
 should do the trick. Okay, is there
 anything else?
 (apparently not)
 All right. Let's go. Be safe.

The search party disperses. Someone stumbles. There's muffled
 laughter. One CAL PERKINS calls back:

CAL
 You're feeding us after this, right?

RICK
 Eat the snow.

Shirley breathes a heavy SIGH as she looks across the field.

SHIRLEY
 Rick?

RICK
 (adjusts his hat)
 Yeah?

SHIRLEY
 This search party couldn't find
 itself.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Michael's at the table eating breakfast.

Tabitha's washing dishes and staring out the window with
 faraway eyes. She's barely keeping it together.

MICHAEL
Is Daddy lost?

She shuts off the water and sits next to him.

TABITHA
(careful)
I-- I don't know, honey. For all we know he could be making toys with Santa. But...we just gotta stay strong, honey. For Daddy. And hope he finds his way home. Okay?

MICHAEL
And pray, too. I'll pray that Daddy comes home.

She's caught a little off guard, but smiles just the same.

TABITHA
Yeah. We can do that, too.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FITTING ROOM - DAY

Santa and Jervis outside a FITTING STALL.

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

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

DALE (O.S.)
What kind of toys?

JERVIS
Wooden trains, fire engines, police cars. You know. Traditional stuff.

FITTING STALL

Dale is dressed in the most ill-fitting Elf suit.

Red pants too high, green shirt too small.

He's searching for something. There's an air vent. He pulls it off and looks inside.

DALE

Speaking of tradition, I have a tradition of spending Christmas with my family. Not being stuck in this... alternate reality or whatever.

FITTING ROOM

SANTA

Oh, don't be like that, Dale. You'll be doing a lot of good for a lot of children. It's not every day we come across someone with your skill set.

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

SANTA

Dale?

AIR CONDITIONING VENT

Dale is packed in like a sardine, inching his way through the thin aluminum vent.

DALE

There's gotta be a way outta here.

Further down, Dale navigates a sharp turn. Now he's making progress. He keeps going and going, then stops. There's an opening up ahead.

FITTING ROOM

Santa and Jervis. Perplexed. Still waiting, when--

An air vent POPS out behind them. Dale's legs emerge from the hole. He wriggles out, dusts off, and finds himself staring at Santa and Jervis.

Dale looks at them. They look back. He heads sheepishly back into the fitting room stall.

DALE

Outfit's too tight.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - DAY

Dale sits at a work table. He places his hands down and looks everything over. Tools. Schematics.

JERVIS

There's a sweets buffet available if you get hungry. Hot chocolate. Mineral water. Whatever you want.

DALE

Why do you need *me*? It doesn't look like you have a shortage of Elves here.

Jervis checks over his shoulder.

JERVIS

Just between you and me, a bunch of Elves have been laid up with Elf Fever this year. It's going around.

DALE

Elf Fever?

JERVIS

Shhh! Are you nuts? You're gonna spook the Elves.

Dale looks over Jervis' shoulder. All the Elves are kinda looking at him.

Dale checks over the blueprints on his desk.

DALE

These are a little outdated, don't you think?

JERVIS

We've been using the same plans for years. But get creative, if the mood strikes. I trust you. You come highly recommended.

DALE

(laughs)

Okay.

Jervis leaves.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Butter Finger pushes a broom across the floor.

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - DAY

The salon's busy today. Lots happening, but when Tabitha enters it all goes kinda quiet.

Tabitha senses it. It's pretty obvious. She hangs her coat, and approaches her chair.

Gayle comes over.

GAYLE

Hey, sugar.

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - BREAK ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Separated from the salon by a blue curtain.

TABITHA

What's going on, Gayle?

GAYLE

Tab, look, we all know what's going on. I can only imagine how it is for you right now.

TABITHA

Thanks.

GAYLE

What I'm trying to say is, you don't need to be here if you don't want to. I've got plenty of girls to cover you. It's not a big deal.

TABITHA

No, no... It's okay. I want to be here. I just, you know, wanna keep my routine.

Gayle can see it's taking its toll, though.

GAYLE

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

TABITHA

Thanks.

Gayle embraces her tightly. Motherly.

GAYLE

And, look. I know the tree lighting's soon. Believe me, no one is going to fault you if you don't do the cookies this year.

TABITHA

Oh, no. I'll do them. I like doing them. Everyone loves my cookies. Besides, it'll... I don't know. Help take my mind off things.

GAYLE

Well, you're gonna have a partner this year because I'm coming over to help you. 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, touched)
You got it.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

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

In the distance, near a grouping of trees--

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Shirley, curious, studies the ramshackle cabin.

There's boot tracks in the snow. Two sets, in fact.

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

SHIRLEY
Hello?

INT. CABIN - SAME

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

Shirley spots the cot where Dale slept, her keen eyes focusing on a little smudge of BLOOD on the pillow.

She scrutinizes it a moment, then heads to the front door and finds the note tacked to the inside. She puts on rubber gloves, takes it down and reads it.

When she's finished, she carefully places it inside an evidence bag.

Then something else. Next to the stove. She slowly reaches down, and comes up holding a bag of--

SHIRLEY
Reindeer Chow?

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

Dale sips hot cocoa by the buffet table. The place has quieted down, and Elves are calling it a day.

Dale approaches his work station, where Jervis is inspecting one of his TRAINS.

JERVIS

Hmm.

(turns it over)

Hmm. Pretty impressive work, Doug.

DALE

Dale.

JERVIS

Whatever. Well, I'll see you bright and early then, Dale.

DALE

Okay. Hey...

(Jervis turns)

How much longer I have to do this?

JERVIS

Not much longer.

Jervis exits as Dale shuffles over to the window. Night has fallen. The lights from the town twinkle in the distance.

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

Butter stops, looks up and waves.

Dale lifts his hand halfway, smiles, and 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

(all official-like)

If it was, it wasn't someone local.

Shirley smirks, waves it off.

SHIRLEY

We *don't* think it was foul play. My best guess is he lost control of his car and slid down that embankment.

TABITHA

Where he just up and disappeared?

SHIRLEY

Tabitha, does Dale have a history of depression?

TABITHA

No, not really. I mean, he did just lose his job.

SHIRLEY

Was there anything else?

Tabitha sighs, looks over her shoulder at Michael.

TABITHA

Well, Christmas is always sort of touch and go. It was around this time we lost Emily.

SHIRLEY

I remember it all too well.

TABITHA

I mean, he'd mentioned that, 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? Are you
suggesting that I drove him away?

SHIRLEY

Tabitha, when you open the book on how
to investigate a disappearance these
are the questions they tell you to
ask. Don't read too much into them.

RICK

Mrs. Leith, sometimes within the
confines of a marriage...

(laces his fingers)

...a man can just get so frustrated
with his spouse that he might *think*
about leaving. I mean, I never have,
of course, but...

Tabitha looks horrified, as does Shirley.

SHIRLEY

Rick, could you go wait in the car.

Rick gets up, tips his hat.

RICK

Ma'am.

Shirley watches him go, shakes her head.

SHIRLEY

Look, we're just trying to cover all the bases here. It's how we're going to find Dale. Now, from what I've seen, I'm ruling out foul play. Okay? This doesn't look anything like that. For all we know, Dale got hurt, a good samaritan found him, and helped him out. This town is full of good people. I think you know that.

(then)

Even my deputy out there.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - MORNING

Morning sun floods in. Dale's asleep in bed, then suddenly awakens to find Tabitha gazing lovingly 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.

Her angelic face moves closer to his.

TABITHA

Tell me about it.

DALE

Oh, man. I dreamt I was in this 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...

TABITHA

(cuts him off abruptly)

Wakey, wakey!

DALE

I am awake. I--

TABITHA

(Butter's voice)

Wanna come feed the reindeer?

And, suddenly, we're in--

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - BEDROOM - MORNING

Dale's feet hang off a small, Elven bed as Butter Finger's kind face is mere inches from his.

Dale SCREAMS! Jumps out of bed. Blankets go flying.

INT. REINDEER STABLE - DAY

Dale and Butter pass rows of reindeer enclosures.

DALE

How do you know which one is which?

Butter points to the reindeer as they pass them.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, that one's Donner. That's Blitzen over there. And that one's Comet. I don't need to give you a tutorial on Santa's reindeer, do I?

DALE

Of course not.

Butter grabs a pitchfork, and stabs at a bale of hay.

DALE

So, this is your job?

BUTTER FINGER

Pretty much. Jack of all trades, master of none.

DALE

So, why are you not inside making toys
with the rest of the Elves?

Butter hesitates.

BUTTER FINGER

Just wasn't my thing, I guess. I kept
mixing things up. Like, one year I put
Barbie's body on Ken. What does that
tell you?

DALE

Um, you made a mistake? Either that,
or you were just really confused.

BUTTER FINGER

Ha ha. Comedian. And what about you?

DALE

What about me?

BUTTER FINGER

Word is you're not too keen on
woodwork.

DALE

Not really. No.

BUTTER FINGER

But, you're good at it.

DALE

Who said that?

BUTTER FINGER

Jervis did. He says all the other
Elves have been copying your designs.

DALE

Really?

Butter nods, jabs his pitchfork in the ground as the slightest
hint of pride flashes across Dale's face.

BUTTER FINGER

What kind of work do you do back home?

DALE

Shipping and receiving. In a
woodworking factory, of all places.

BUTTER FINGER

I don't get it. A guy with your talent
unloading trucks.

DALE

My father had a woodworking shop in
town. I worked with him for many
years. Now, *he* was a talented man.

BUTTER FINGER

What happened?

DALE

He died.

BUTTER FINGER

No, I mean what happened with you?

DALE

(deep breath)

He wanted me to keep on with the shop
and all, but... Then my daughter died,
and, well... Things just weren't the
same after that.

BUTTER FINGER

Understandable. But, you have a gift,
Dale. Rare in humans. And in Elves.

Butter grabs a sack of reindeer food, struggling as he tries
to throw it over his shoulder.

Dale takes the bag and carries it for him.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

All's quiet and still, but...

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Looks like a bomb exploded. Wooden spoons, mixing bowls and flour everywhere.

Gayle holds a glass of wine in one hand, a whisk in the other.

Tabitha sits nearby. She 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 now, 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
feel it in my gut. I may even be
psychic. But, I believe Dale will be
home for Christmas.

TABITHA

What if I...drove him away somehow?

GAYLE

Tabby, that's the craziest thing I've
ever heard. You mean to tell me that
Dale faked his car accident just to
get away from you? Put on this whole
production? 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 laughs.

TABITHA

I don't know. Maybe you're right.

(sighs)

How are the cookies coming?

GAYLE

Fantabulous!

(then)

Was I supposed to use baking powder or
baking soda?

Tabitha's mouth drops.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - DAY

Noisy and busy. It's crunch time.

Dale holds a wooden train and a file as Butter attentively
watches on.

DALE

And you plane the edges. Like this.

Sort of give it that streamlined look.

You try.

Timidly, Butter takes the train in his small hands, looks at
Dale and smiles nervously.

BUTTER FINGER

I don't know.

DALE

Just take it. You're probably a lot
better than you give yourself credit
for.

Dale gets up, offers Butter his seat.

BUTTER FINGER

Where are you going?

DALE

I need some fresh air. You go ahead
and finish up. I'll be back soon.

Butter watches Dale button his RED PLAID COAT, then nervously considers the train.

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - DAY

Dale strolls along the wet cobblestone streets, past the charming, rustic shoppes.

A late model car rolls by, tree fastened to its hood.

He crosses the street, hops the curb. He makes his way past the skating pond and the giant Norway Spruce, where he finds himself gazing out into an open, snow-covered field.

Dale checks over his shoulder. There's no one around. It's his chance. He takes a deep breath, and makes a break for it.

Past a covered bridge stands a giant oak, it's branches weighted down with snow.

He looks back at the town in the distance. Gotta keep going. Gotta get out of here. Gotta--

WHAM!

Dale's flattened, and drops like a stone.

He slowly gets to his feet, shaking out the cobwebs.

DALE

What the?

He reaches out, and his hand hits something. He can't see it, but it's there. Like an invisible barrier preventing him from going further.

He slides a few paces left. Like a mime, he feels around. And this wall is everywhere. Just...everywhere.

DALE

Hey. Hey!

His voice echoes. A bird takes flight. No one answers.

He bangs on the wall. It does not give way. It won't break. He hits it again. Harder. Again.

No movement. No escape.

Out of breath, he drops his hands, looks around him. The still of the day. So quiet.

So alone.

Resigned, he lowers his head and turns back.

INT. CHRISTMASVILLE - LATER

Dale leans on a wooden fence near the giant Christmas tree, and watches as a YOUNG BOY, scarf flowing, skates past.

That OLD MAN is there again, too. He's sitting at his easel and puffing on his pipe, some twenty feet behind Dale.

His name is STAN LIVINGSTON.

Dale pushes off the fence, and approaches.

STAN LIVINGSTON

Nice day, huh?

DALE

Yeah, I guess.

(extends his hand)

Dale Leith.

STAN LIVINGSTON

Stan Livingston.

On Stan's canvas is exactly what's before him -- the BOY skating, the CHRISTMAS TREE and the WOODEN FENCE.

DALE

How do you remember detail so well?

He puffs his pipe, adjusts his spectacles and points.

STAN LIVINGSTON

See the boy skating? He ain't gonna stay still for me. And I'm certainly not going to ask him to. I'm just gonna keep watching. He'll come around again and again. And each time he does I'll add a little something until I get it right.

Dale points to the tree in the painting.

DALE

What about that red bird you put in the tree?

STAN LIVINGSTON

What about it?

DALE

There's no bird in the tree.

Stan smiles.

STAN LIVINGSTON

Maybe not now, but that doesn't mean it wasn't there before you came by.

DALE

Seeing is believing, I guess.

STAN LIVINGSTON

That may be true for most things, but certainly not for the best of things. Least that's the way it is here.

Dale studies him a good, long moment.

DALE

Where is here?

Stan meets Dale's gaze, then looks out across the landscape.

STAN LIVINGSTON

That's a good question. Where do you think here is?

DALE

I honestly don't know anymore. I thought I was dreaming at first, but now I'm not so sure.

STAN LIVINGSTON

You know as much as I. Take a look around you. Main Street. The mountains off in the distance behind the shoppes. It's beautiful.

DALE

Yes, it is. But it doesn't answer my question.

STAN LIVINGSTON

Son, I've been a painter for many years. I've painted, and I've painted. With varying degrees of success, mind you. Yet, I always kept on, even when it seemed like things wouldn't work out. You see, I never considered painting my livelihood. It was my *life*. And if you're lucky enough to find something that fills you up with so much inspiration, the way painting does for me, then why would you even want to question such beauty?

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

And this moment. This image. Somehow it feels familiar. Like he's seen it somewhere before.

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

He looks to the old man in awe.

STAN LIVINGSTON

Merry Christmas, friend.

DALE

Yeah. I'd say so.

Dale turns to go. The old man fastens a button on his coat. He takes his brush, dips it in the red paint, and lovingly applies it to the canvas.

SERIES OF SHOTS:

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

- Shirley and Rick hand out flyers: MISSING PERSON at the top, a picture of Dale below.

- All they're getting are a lot of folks shaking their heads.

INT. PRETTY THINGS SALON - DAY

- Tabitha, cutting hair, fighting to get through another day.

- Gayle, ever the protective soul, eyeing her with concern.

EXT. MAIN STREET - TOWN SQUARE - DAY

- A BANNER hangs across the GAZEBO: 37TH ANNUAL TREE LIGHTING.

- PEOPLE stringing lights, decorating, setting up tables.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - DAY

- a forlorn Michael stares out the window, watching as the snow tumbles from the sky.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

- A FLYER for Dale hangs in the window of the vacant LEITH WOODWORKING SHOP, and finally...

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - DAY

- Dale hard at work, building. Only now, the strain of being torn from his family is clearly visible.

END OF SERIES.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - 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. And what's behind door number three?

DALE

I'm serious. It's good.

BUTTER FINGER

Thanks.

Jervis trots up, stressed out.

JERVIS

Butter, 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 turns to Jervis.

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

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

Jervis moves in close.

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 turns to leave.

JERVIS

Ask him again.

Off Dale's confused face...

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 lights, it stands ready for the
festivities to come.

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

It doesn't add up. We found the car, then the cabin. Both show signs of Dale's presence, but no Dale. How does a man up and vanish like that?

RICK

It's a mystery. We sure could use a little Christmas magic right about now.

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 my 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's a mystery.

SHIRLEY

No, no, no. After that.

RICK

We could use some Christmas magic.

Shirley pushes her flyers at Rick's chest, darts to the cruiser.

RICK

Where are you going?

SHIRLEY

I gotta check on something.

RICK

Wait, I'll come with you.

SHIRLEY

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

Shirley jumps into the cruiser.

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 are buzzing, preparing things for tonight.

Tabitha and Michael pull up in her SUV. They get out, and Tabitha lifts the hatch.

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

GARY

Morning, Mrs. Leith.

TABITHA

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

GARY

Thank you so much. It sure was nice of you to do this. We all know you have a lot on your plate right now.

TABITHA

I appreciate you saying that.

Gary takes three boxes from the car.

GARY

Well, thanks again. So, we'll see you tonight, right?

TABITHA

Sure.

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

TABITHA

Hey, kiddo.

MICHAEL

That's a pretty tree.

TABITHA

It sure is, baby cakes.

Michael lowers his head.

MICHAEL

It's almost Christmas and Daddy's still not home.

TABITHA

I know, honey. I know. But let's not give up hope, okay? We need to be strong.

MICHAEL

Strong like my big muscles.

TABITHA

Yes. Strong like your big muscles.

They watch a while longer.

TABITHA

Come on. We better get going.

And as they leave, the sudden red *whoosh* of a Cardinal as it lands on a branch in the tree.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Dale wanders the colorful halls. Elves hurry past, chatting excitedly.

After all, it's Christmas Eve and there's not a moment to spare.

He holds a FIRE ENGINE. One that he made. And for the first time, we see the love and care that went into it: Smooth edges, red and yellow paint, rubber tires and headlights.

Ahead, a room labelled: GYM. Dale stops, leans back and looks inside.

GYM

Treadmills, weights. Various workout equipment.

Santa's pushing it hard on an Elliptical machine. A towel wrapped around his neck, he wears a t-shirt that proclaims: *THE MAN WITH THE BAG.*

SANTA

Well, hello, Dale.

DALE

What are you doing?

SANTA

Tonight's the big night. Gotta grease the wheels, so to speak.

DALE

Big night?

SANTA

It's Christmas Eve, Dale. You did know that, didn't you?

DALE

I guess I lost track of time.

(beat, then)

Does this mean I get to go home?

Santa walks over, toweling off.

SANTA

You think you're ready?

And that, right there, is 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, I'm here. Okay? However I got here, I'm here. I bought into it. I made your toys. I did exactly what I was supposed to do.

SANTA

Dale, listen--

DALE

No, you listen. My family's home waiting for me! They're probably worried sick. You got this...invisible wall keeping me in. This is crazy! I'm ready to go. What's 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, where it shatters into a thousand pieces.

An ELF moves to the other side of the hall.

Dale pays him no mind. He looks at Santa, his anger boiling over, 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.

The stove. The blood-stained pillow. It's all still here.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out an EVIDENCE BAG. Inside is the note she pulled from off the door. She unfolds the note, and reads it again.

SHIRLEY

Every journey begins with a tough
first step.

Shirley stares at it. Transfixed. She looks away, her eyes once again find the bag of REINDEER CHOW.

Hands at her sides, she stands in front of the door. She paces her breathing, opens the door and steps out.

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

She raises her head, opens her eyes.

A BRIGHT FLASH, and...

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - DAY

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

The TOWN. The streets and the shoppes. The Christmas tree and the ice skating pond. KIDS building a snowman. And all the while, echoing in her ears--

The JOLLY ONE himself: *HO HO HO!*

Shirley's mouth hangs open. There's no way. There's just no way this is real. She shakes her head.

Another BRIGHT FLASH.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - DAY

Back where she started -- in front of the cabin in the snow. She slowly gets to her feet, a tad unsteady, and brushes off the snow.

The sudden sound of quiet. Peaceful and bewildering.

SHIRLEY

Well, that happened.

INT. REINDEER STABLE - DAY

Dale tramps on the straw-covered ground, the reindeer on edge and fussing.

Dale finds Butter at the last stall, lovingly brushing the coat of one of the reindeer.

BUTTER FINGER

Hey, Dale.

DALE

Big night? Lots of presents to deliver?

BUTTER FINGER

You know it.

Dale looks around, presses his lips together.

DALE

Why are you not on the floor making toys, Butter?

BUTTER FINGER

I told you already.

DALE

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

Butter stops.

BUTTER FINGER

My father taught me how to make toys a long time ago. And I was pretty good at it, too, you know. But... I kept forgetting things.

(MORE)

BUTTER FINGER (cont'd)

Little details like the steering wheel of a car, or the smokestack of a train. Not good if you're an Elf. But, I figured they were small things, you know? Not that big a deal.

Butter continues brushing, sighs.

BUTTER FINGER

Then one year, not too long ago, we got word that a boy swallowed a loose piece from a toy. A tiny bell from a fire engine. A toy I'd made.

(beat, then)

Thankfully, the little guy was fine. Everything had a happy ending, but... After that I just didn't have it in me to make toys. I didn't trust myself anymore. I lost my confidence.

Dale lowers his head as Butter continues.

BUTTER FINGER

And it took me a while - a good long while - to realize that what I did, as bad as it may have seemed at the time, was nothing more than an accident. Something that could've happened to anybody, but chose me. You get what I'm saying?

DALE

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

BUTTER FINGER

It's okay. How could you know? Anyway, now, I brush the reindeer. I fill the hot chocolate. I clean up after other people. It's not as bad as it seems. Sometimes it's actually pretty fulfilling.

DALE

(smiling)

I'll bet.

The reindeer are grunting. They're getting restless.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, I better get on back to work.
You, too. I'm sure they'll need you
for something.

DALE

Okay. Well, I'll see you around.

BUTTER FINGER

You will.

Butter watches Dale leave. Silence, save for the barks of the
antsy reindeer.

BUTTER FINGER

It's okay, boy. We got a big night
ahead of us, don't we?

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tabitha wearily paces the floor, wearing a cheery Christmas
sweater and a sad face.

She runs her hand along the fireplace mantle, and gazes at a
photo of Emily.

TABITHA

How are you, my baby girl?

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

TABITHA

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

MICHAEL (O.S.)

Mommy?

Tabitha quickly wipes her face.

TABITHA

Hey. You ready to go to the tree lighting?

Michael nods.

TABITHA

Well, I'll get my jacket and we'll go.

MICHAEL

Mommy, who were you talking to?

Tabitha freezes, then smiles. Michael returns it. He knows exactly who she was talking to.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

MAIN STREET closed off. Lots of PEOPLE mingling. It's a celebratory mood. Hot cider in styrofoam cups.

A crowd surrounds a table of cookies -- Gayle's cookies.

And here's Gayle, proud smile, making the rounds. She approaches JOE DUGAN and his wife MARY, both of whom have cookies and cider.

GAYLE

Hey! How are you?

MARY

Good, good. How's the salon?

GAYLE

You know, you know. So, how're the cookies?

Joe opens his mouth to say something, then stops.

MARY

Oh, great.

(just above a whisper)

Did Tabitha make these?

GAYLE

Well, yes and no. Actually, no. I made them. I helped her out. You know, with everything going on and all.

MARY

Right, right. They're wonderful.

GAYLE

(puffs out her chest)

Thanks, doll. Enjoy the lighting!

Mary studies the cookie as Gayle saunters away.

MARY

Now, that makes sense.

JOE

I don't think she used baking soda.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

Dale slumps at his work station, putting the finishing touches on a train. He's spent. It's noticeable.

The factory is still bustling, only now, Elves are carting and loading. Toys are boxed and wheeled out the door, ready for delivery.

Dale sighs, places his final piece of handiwork 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.

Tabitha stops the car.

MICHAEL

What?

A beat.

TABITHA

Michael, I just want you to know that no matter what happens, that even if your father doesn't come home tonight, that he loves you. He loves you...

(she wipes a tear)

You've been so brave through all of this. I love you so much, my boy, and I don't want to disappoint you. You're so much like your father, you know that?

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

MICHAEL

Mommy, we don't have to go to the tree lighting if you don't want to. We can just go home. We can go home and look at our tree. And maybe open a present.

Tabitha laughs through her tears.

TABITHA

Okay, honey. We can do that.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Gayle 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 #1

What does she know about baking?

WOMAN #1

Clearly not much.

Gayle inches away, horrified. She looks around, and it all becomes evident: The looks on people's faces as they taste, then discard, her cookies.

Sulking, she moves silently to the cookie table, where DENNIS and ABIGAIL SIMPSON sample the treats.

DENNIS

Oh, hi, Gayle.

GAYLE

(aggravated)

Hi.

ABIGAIL

Have you tried these 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

Then who?

DENNIS

That's a good question. I know Tabitha's going through a rough patch, but *sheesh!* You think it was Marjorie Freeman?

ABIGAIL

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

DENNIS

What about Harriet Finster?

ABIGAIL

Ooh! Yes. That woman can't bake for--

GAYLE

I made them!

You could hear a pin drop. Gayle gives each of them the evil eye, holds it a beat, and storms off into the crowd.

EXT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Day's last light hanging by a thread. The lights from Santa's workshop dazzle in the afterglow, like something only a child's mind could conjure.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

Dale where we left him, silently watching as the remaining Elves clear the floor.

Jervis shakes hands with Dale.

JERVIS

It's been a pleasure, Dale.

Dale's confused.

JERVIS

Yes, you're finally going home.

DALE

I'm not quite sure what to say.

JERVIS

Don't say anything. But, consider this-- The work you put in is gonna make a whole lot of kids happy Christmas morning.

Dale ponders this, and it produces a smile.

SANTA (O.S.)

Dale!

Santa strides in, and now he actually looks like the man himself -- The black boots. The red suit. The whole nine.

SANTA

Boy, we sure are going to miss you.
You were really beasting it up good.

Dale laughs, shakes his head.

SANTA

Well, I'd love to stay and shoot the breeze, but...

(taps his watch)

I got a schedule to keep.

DALE

Understood. Oh, and, I'm sorry about what happened earlier.

SANTA

Broken toys can be fixed, Dale.

DALE

You take care of yourself.

SANTA

You too, Dale. You, too.

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

SANTA

Oh, someone else wants to say goodbye.

And in walks...

DALE

Butter.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

Selectman Gary approaches the podium. He taps the mic, there's some scratchy feedback, then:

GARY

Welcome, everyone, to our thirty-seventh annual tree lighting!

A smattering of applause.

In the crowd is Gayle, still a tad agitated. However, that dissipates quickly as she slides up to JOAN JOHNSON.

GAYLE

Joanie, have you seen Tabitha?

Joan shakes her head. On to MISSES RANDOLPH.

It's another NO as Selectman Gary drones on in the b.g.

Gayle stands on tip-toes, trying to get a better look. She doesn't see Tabitha or Michael anywhere.

With that, she rushes the stage and interrupts Gary mid-sentence. He covers the microphone.

GAYLE

Tabitha's not here.

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 - FACTORY - NIGHT

Butter hands Dale a fire engine. The one he smashed. It's as good as new.

DALE

You fixed it, didn't you?

BUTTER FINGER

Told you I was good at making toys.

Dale places the toy into the box with the rest.

DALE

Thank you.

BUTTER FINGER

Don't mention it.

There's something else. Butter gives Dale an envelope.

BUTTER FINGER

I just wanted to give you this before
you left.

The envelope is marked: DO NOT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS.

DALE

What is this?

BUTTER FINGER

It's from all of us. I can't tell you
what's inside, but you might find it
helpful going forward.

Dale taps the envelope in his free hand.

DALE

Thanks, Butter.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, I better let you go. I'm sure
you're anxious to get on your way.

Suddenly, Dale doesn't seem all that anxious.

BUTTER FINGER

What is it?

DALE

You know, I never did tell you what happened to my daughter.

BUTTER FINGER

Dale, it's okay.

DALE

No, I want to tell you. You see, I was driving the day it happened. I'd picked her up early from school...

INT. CAR (MOVING) - FLASHBACK - DAY

Dale driving, Emily next to him. Snow on the ground as the sunlight flashes across their faces.

DALE

How was school, honey?

EMILY

It was good.

DALE (V.O.)

We were going Christmas shopping. She wanted to buy her mother this necklace she'd seen.

Emily flips the pages of a catalog.

EMILY

Here it is, Daddy.

Emily's little finger points at a dainty necklace with a blue, snowflake pendant.

DALE

Oh, that's really nice. I think Mommy's gonna love that.

EXT. CAR (MOVING) - SAME

From overhead, Dale's car heads into town.

DALE (V.O.)

I was stopped at a light. It turned green, and bam. We never even knew what hit us.

END FLASHBACK

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

DALE

I woke up later in the hospital. Tabitha was there. I didn't remember what happened at first, but then... then it all 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

We never see it coming, Dale. That's why living life after it is so hard. It changes you. Just like it changed me.

DALE

I don't understand.

BUTTER FINGER

Well, if I'd never had my mishap, I wouldn't be here with you, would I?

DALE

You wouldn't be cleaning up reindeer poop, 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.

Butter slowly backs away, revealing the last straggler Elves
cleaning up, clearing out.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The tree is lit, save for that one broken strand of bulbs.
Christmas music plays in the b.g.

Suddenly, those 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

Just leave that on the table, hon.

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 down, then looks for herself.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The front yard is jam packed with everyone from the tree lighting. Everyone is singing. Caroling, to be precise.

Gayle stands out front, leading the chorus.

The front door opens. Tabitha and Michael step out. She covers her mouth, unsure how to respond.

She smiles as Selectman Gary trots over.

GARY

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

Tabitha tears up.

TABITHA

Thank you.

GARY

No. Thank her.

Gayle comes over, takes Tabitha's hands in hers.

GAYLE

Merry Christmas, honey.

(to Michael)

You too, sweet pea.

INT. SANTA'S WORKSHOP - FACTORY - NIGHT

Butter backs away, a strange little smile on his Elven face.

Dale turns, perplexed, and once again sees the last few Elves readying to leave the room.

And that's when it hits him.

Among the remaining Elves is one who looks a bit different. She's seated at a desk, drawing with a crayon. Smaller than the rest, she has a twinkle in her eyes and a smile as pure as an infant's slumber.

This is 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. Everything - all of it - was leading to this. This one moment. And now that it's here, he has no idea what to do.

Except to slowly walk to his daughter, where he hovers over her like a nervous school boy.

DALE

Hi.

She looks up from her drawing.

EMILY

Hi, Daddy.

DALE

(choking back tears)

What are you doing here?

EMILY

Drawing a picture for you.

He pulls up a seat. The picture is of a little house sitting among green trees, backed by blue skies and a yellow sun.

DALE

That's a beautiful drawing, honey.

EMILY

Thanks. Mommy's worried about you, you know? Michael, too.

DALE

She-- How do you know?

EMILY

She told me.

DALE

You talk to Mommy?

EMILY

Mmm hmm. And Michael.

DALE

Do you... Do you ever talk to me?

Emily smiles, looks at him with her sweet eyes.

EMILY

I'm talking to you right now.

Dale timidly tucks some of her loose hair behind her ear.

DALE

Yeah, I guess you are.

(pauses, then)

Emily...

Her face brightens.

EMILY

Can we go ice skating?

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The sheened ice reflects the multi-colored lights from the Christmas tree.

Dale and Emily skate together. Dale, not the best skater, holds onto Emily for balance.

EMILY

It's like walking, Daddy. But, you know, on ice. It's easy.

DALE

Maybe if I was Michelle Kwan.

EXT. BENCH - LATER

Emily and Dale unlace their skates.

DALE

Your mom is a pretty good skater. I guess that's why I never went much.

(MORE)

DALE (cont'd)

'Cause I was so bad at it.

EMILY

It's okay. I don't mind.

The night is all around them. The cold, still air. The warm glow of the town. The *Father* in Dale slowly returning, if it had ever left at all.

DALE

What do you want to do now?

Emily grins.

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - NIGHT

In a clearing, Dale pushes a large lump of snow -- the bottom half of a snowman.

Emily looks on with delight, then gazes skyward.

DALE

I'm gonna need your help, young lady.

SERIES:

- Together, they complete the snowman.
- Emily sets coal for it's eyes.
- Dale places a carrot for a nose.

They stand back and look at it.

DALE

What do you think?

Hands on her hips, Emily studies the snowman.

EMILY

It needs something.

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

A MAN, SCROOGE-like in appearance, huddles against Winter's chill as he makes his way down the street when--

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

EXT. CHRISTMASVILLE - NIGHT

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

EMILY

There. That's better,

Dale takes the hat and tries it on. He bows.

DALE

That's a fine looking snowman, indeed,
my lady.

Emily giggles.

A snowflake tumbles through the air and lands on the frosty ground. Another follows.

Dale marvels.

DALE

How perfect can this get?

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

Dale goes to her, drops to one knee.

DALE

What is it?

He looks in her eyes, and somehow he knows the answer.

DALE

You have to go.

She nods.

Dale pulls her in tight. He doesn't want this night to end. Doesn't want to let her go. Not again. 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

It wasn't anyone's fault. But it's okay to be sad, Daddy. It's okay to miss me. I miss you, too.

Snow falling at a steady pace now. Dale holds her tight, and shuts his eyes as she kisses his cheek.

DALE

Will I ever see you again?

A big, happy smile flashes across her face as she puts her hand in his.

EMILY

Bye, Daddy.

DALE

Goodbye, sweetheart.

She trots off, turns to wave. A gust of wind swirls, and she disappears through the snowflakes. Like magic.

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

He places the top hat back on the snowman's head.

DALE

Looks better on you anyway.

Dale turns, takes one last look around. *God, was this all a dream?* He steps forward, then notices something on the ground. He picks it up.

It's a MITTEN. Little girl-sized. He smells it, smiles, and looks into the dark of the night. He pockets the mitten, takes another step and--

His foot catches on a tree root, and -- WHUMP! -- he face plants in the snow.

EXT. SNOWY FIELD - NIGHT

Dale, face down in the snow. He lifts his head. It's quiet and dark, yet oddly familiar.

Several feet away, he recognizes a shape covered with fresh powder -- his CAR.

He bolts up, almost comes crashing down again. His limp is back. He brushes the snow from his car, finds the door handle and opens it.

Inside, it's just how he left it.

He reaches in and grabs the shopping bags.

He catches his reflection in the rearview mirror. The gash on his head has returned.

Dale pumps his fist in the air, and lets out a YAWP!

He traverses through the snow until he reaches the edge of the field, dense with brush. It's the embankment.

He climbs, and immediately grabs his ankle. This is gonna be tough. He gets down on all fours and begins to crawl.

Branches snap under his weight. His bare hands are freezing. Running on pure adrenaline now. Halfway to the top. There's no turning back.

He grunts. The shopping bags drag behind. He can almost see the busted guard rail. One more step. Another.

Dale reaches the top and splays out on the shoulder of the road. Out of breath. Exhausted. Exhilarated.

He manages to get to his feet when -- SPLASH!

A car WHOOSHES past and sprays him with mud. It jams on it's brakes. It's a POLICE CRUISER.

The door opens and out steps Shirley Hastings.

SHIRLEY

Holy smokes! Are you okay?

She races over with no idea who this man is yet.

SHIRLEY

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

DALE

Are you--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

Last time I checked.

Shirley nearly jumps on him.

SHIRLEY

Oh, my gosh! Dale! You have no idea. We've been looking all over 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

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

Dale stops.

DALE

It's Christmas Eve?

SHIRLEY

Yes, it's Christmas Eve.

DALE

Then let's go.

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

DALE (O.S.)

Ow.

SHIRLEY

Sorry. Habit.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

Driving along a darkened road.

SHIRLEY

Dale, you know I gotta ask.

DALE

Shirley, even if I could find a way to put it into words, I still don't think you'd believe me. Actually, I know you wouldn't.

She glances Dale's way. Smirks. Well, actually...

EXT. TOWN - NIGHT

The cruiser rolls through a railroad crossing and into town. Everything is dark. Even the Christmas tree isn't lit.

INT. POLICE CRUISER - NIGHT

SHIRLEY

What the? Where is everyone?

She pulls the car over and gets out.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

She throws her hands up. This isn't right. Just then, her vest radio crackles.

RICK (RADIO)

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

A chorus of JINGLE BELLS comes through her vest radio. Shirley presses the button.

SHIRLEY

Rick? Rick?

RICK (RADIO)

Oh, hey, Shirley. Over.

SHIRLEY

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

RICK (RADIO)

Oh, we're all here caroling at Mrs. Leith's house. Over.

Dale mouths the word "*what*," but Shirley shakes her head.

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, geez! Wow! Well, get down here.
And don't let him out of your sight!
Over.

SHIRLEY

(turns to the car)

I won't. Ov--

The door is open. Dale's gone. Again.

Shirley scans the street. She spots him. Dale's running. He 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, but that doesn't matter. He's almost home.

Shirley's cruiser, lights flashing, pulls up next to Dale. She rolls down the window.

SHIRLEY

Dale, what are you doing? Get in.

He turns to her, out of breath, and grins.

DALE

Don't worry about it. I'm almost home.

He speeds up and charges ahead.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The caroling continues on the jam packed lawn. It's the celebration they didn't have in town.

On the front porch, Tabitha passes out her cookies.

Michael raises his head, and steps off the porch. He senses something the others don't. He slowly makes his way through the crowd. When he hits the street, his eyes light up.

MICHAEL

Daddy!

Dale's coming down the road, shopping bags bouncing. When he sees Michael, he runs even faster.

DALE

Michael!

Michael jumps into his father's arms. The lights from the houses, the falling snow - it swirls together as they embrace.

MICHAEL

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

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

Shirley's cruiser follows, it's blue and red lights pulsing in the night.

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 his Mom's coat, but she doesn't notice. He tugs harder.

TABITHA

What, honey?

MICHAEL

Daddy's home.

TABITHA

That's nice. Wait. What--

Dale steps out from behind Selectman Gary

DALE

He said, 'Daddy's home.'

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

GAYLE

Told you so.

(pushes Tabitha)

What are you waiting for?

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. Another chorus of Christmas music breaks out.

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

TABITHA

Is it really you, Dale?

DALE

Last time I checked.

Dale puts his arm around his wife, and looks out on the townspeople as the serenade continues. Then...

He checks his coat pockets. They're empty. He looks up.

DALE

(softly)

Emily's mitten is gone.

TABITHA

What did you say?

He shakes his head, and smiles.

DALE

Nothing. Just...thinking out loud.

Suddenly, he reaches into his jeans pocket. This time he pulls out an envelope.

DO NOT OPEN TILL CHRISTMAS.

Dale seems surprised that it's really there. He tears it open, and reads it.

After a moment, he folds the note and puts it back in his pocket.

DALE

Okay.

He gazes out to the crowd once more. Through the sea of people, the lights and all the chatter, a SMALL MAN in civilian clothes quietly ambles by.

The small man catches Dale's eye, gives him a WINK. Then, like magic, disappears into the cluster of people.

Dale smiles wearily, yet warm and contented. It's the first true happiness he's felt in a while. He turns to Michael, then to Tabitha as...

The caroling continues.

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

It's a warm day. The leaves on the trees are Springtime green.

TITLE: SOME MONTHS LATER

Moving past the shops along Main Street. The luncheonette, Sal's hardware store, and...

LEITH WOODWORKING

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

INT. LEITH WOODWORKING - DAY

Wearing an apron, Dale returns from the back room. He slips off his goggles and peers over Tabitha's shoulder at a computer screen.

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. I'm gonna have my hands full pretty soon.

Tabitha picks up a piece of paper, and casts a suspicious glare at Dale.

TABITHA

Are you referring to this anonymous invoice?

Dale's quiet for a moment.

DALE

Uh huh.

TABITHA

(reading the invoice)

Four thousand toy trains, two thousand police cars and...

(squints)

...three thousand fire engines? Dale, who in the world would order this?

DALE

No one from this world.

She puts the invoice down.

TABITHA

Oh, hey, I almost forgot.

She reaches down and retrieves an old PAINTING, its wooden frame chipped and dusty.

TABITHA

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

Dale takes the painting from her, and studies it closely.

INSERT: PAINTING

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

A MAN in a RED PLAID coat leans against a wooden fence,
watching on.

BACK TO SCENE

Dale blinks several times. He looks to the bottom corner of
the painting, brushes off some soot with his thumb and finds
the name: STAN LIVINGSTON.

TABITHA

(off Dale)

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

Dale wears a crooked grin. He 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.

Dale puts the painting down, kisses Tabitha on the 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 coat.

DALE (O.S.)
Hey, Michael?

MICHAEL (O.S.)
Yeah, Dad?

DALE (O.S.)
Wanna learn how to build some trains?

FADE OUT.