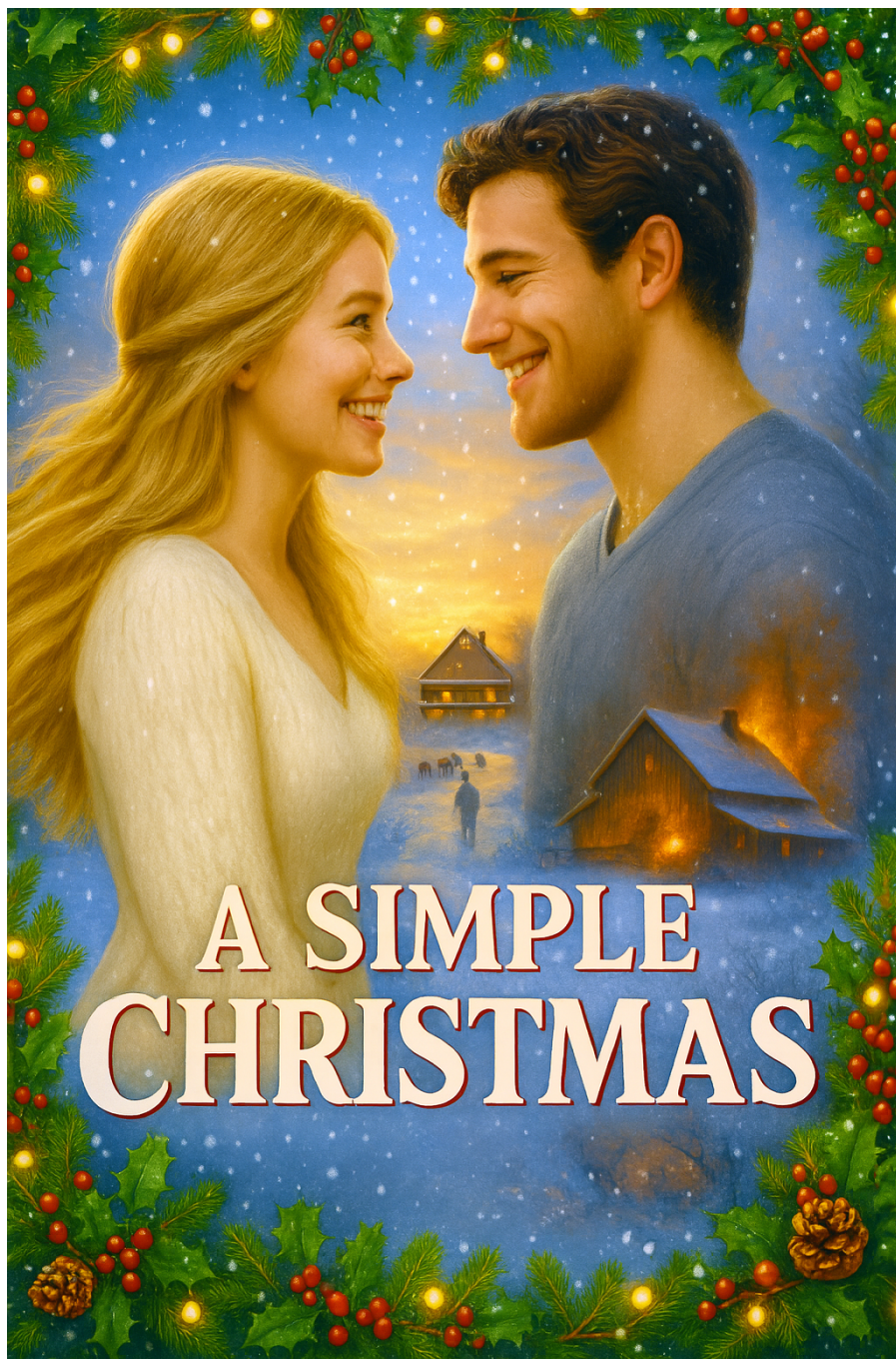




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EXT. FARM - DUSK

The wedding barn glows from rows of twinkling candles, casting a soft light against the encroaching night. Snow blankets the fields, sparkling under the faint glow of a rising moon. Inside, the barn hums with quiet excitement.

INT. WEDDING BARN - CONTINUOUS

The barn is a vision of simplicity and beauty. Hand-carved benches line the walls. Ceiling beams wrapped in evergreen garland, twinkling with warm white fairy lights.

Mason jar candles on every beam and ledge, casting a golden glow.

A large wooden arch at the altar, draped in cedar garland, and hanging mistletoe.

At the front, an simple preacher stands, his hands folded in reverence.

RACHEL, the bride is at the front. She is timid in a simple muslin dress with a blue ribbon and small white, blue and yellow flowers in her hair. Her best friend LEAH, stands beside her.

LEAH
(whispering)
Are you freaking out?

RACHEL
Just... kind of anxious.

Leah gives her a look-head tilted, skeptical.

LEAH
You know you don't have to go
through with it if it doesn't feel
right, right?

Rachel hesitates, fingers nervously tucking hair behind her ear.

RACHEL
I mean... it feels like what I'm
supposed to do. Like it's time.

LEAH
Yeah, but do you actually love him?

Before Rachel can answer, the barn doors creak open slightly. AARON, the groom, walks to the front to join Rachel, his face arrogant and expectant.

Then—

SCREEEEEECH!

A rusted-out pickup truck SKIDS into the driveway, kicking up dirt and gravel. The engine ROARS before the truck lurches to a stop right outside the barn doors.

The driver's door swings open. ZEKE TROYER a very handsome 23 year old in blue jeans jumps out. His hair is unkempt— he has that rugged charm. He storms into the barn.

ZEKE

Rachel!

Inside the barn, Rachel stiffens.

Rachel's father, EZRA, 50's distinguished, rises from his seat, face dark with anger.

EZRA

Not today Zeke.

Rachel's groom, AARON, clenches his fists, stepping protectively closer.

Gasps ripple through the crowd. Guests shift uneasily.

Rachel steps forward, eyes blazing.

RACHEL

Zeke, now's not the time.

Zeke laughs, pointing at Aaron.

ZEKE

Aaron? That's who you want?

He takes another step towards her.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

You know you love me.

A gust of icy wind sweeps in, extinguishing some of the candles. Guests gasp and murmur.

The barn falls silent. All eyes are on Rachel, whose face drains of color. She glances at Aaron, then back at Zeke, frozen in place.

Zeke steps further inside. His voice cracks with emotion.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

Rachel, you know this isn't right.
You don't love him.

As Zeke moves closer, he accidentally brushes against one of the candle stands near the aisle. The stand wobbles, then tips, sending the candle crashing to the floor. The flame catches on the hay scattered along the edges of the barn. Zeke immediately and clearly puts it out.

But Aaron secretly puts another fire to the hay. Guests gasp as the fire quickly spreads. Aaron rushes forward, barking orders as if he was not the one who started it.

AARON

Everyone out of the barn!

Someone coughs, waving away smoke, eyes widening as flames rise

EZRA

It's burning!

AARON

Water! Get water now!

Men and women scramble, yelling, grabbing children, grabbing buckets and shouting over one another. The fire licks up the wooden beams, climbing faster than anyone can control it. Smoke begins to fill the barn, thick and choking.

PREACHER

Everyone out! Now!

Rachel freezes, staring at the flames. Aaron grabs her arm, pulling her toward the exit.

AARON

Come on, Rachel. Let's go!

Then the fire starts behind him. Now Zeke isn't just a screw-up, someone who left the community to find himself; he's a scapegoat.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

Flames lick up the sides of the wooden barn, thick black smoke billowing into the freezing night air. Shadows dance across the snow as panicked voices call out. Horses inside whinny in terror.

Zeke barrels through the barn doors, his instincts kicking in. His firefighting knowledge takes over—he scans the scene, calculating his next move.

ZEKE
(shouting)
Everyone out—now! The beams won't hold!

Young country boys are desperately trying to throw buckets of water onto the blaze, but it's useless. The fire is spreading too fast.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
(urgent)
Drop the buckets—get the animals out!

He pushes through the smoke, unlatching horse stalls, slapping the animals' hindquarters to send them racing toward the exit. The air is thick, choking, but he doesn't stop.

Suddenly—a wooden beam crashes down, splintering inches from where Zeke stands. The fire is raging too fast.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Go! Get out! Now!

The last farmhand stumbles out, coughing, eyes watering. Zeke turns to follow—but as he reaches the door, it doesn't budge.

CLUNK.

He tries again. The door won't move. He slams his fist against it—it's locked. From the outside.

EXT. BARN - CONTINUOUS

Aaron steps back from the door, eyes flickering coldly as he drops the heavy wooden beam into place, locking Zeke inside. He adjusts his coat, his face blank as he turns and walks away.

INT. BURNING BARN - CONTINUOUS

Zeke spins, realizing what's happened. The heat is unbearable now—flames crawling up the rafters.

Smoke fills his lungs, and he drops low, his training kicking in. His mind races—no time for panic. He scans for an escape.

A small upper loft window. His only chance.

He grabs a wooden crate, stacks it against the stall, climbs fast. The fire roars beneath him. His shirt sticks to his skin from the heat.

His vision blurs—too much smoke. His chest heaves.

ZEKE
(gritted)
Not today...

With everything he has left, he lunges—grabbing the edge of the window, pulling himself up. His fingers slip—his feet kick against the wood—but he hauls himself through.

EXT. BARN ROOF - NIGHT

Zeke bursts through the window, tumbling onto the snow-covered roof. A wave of cold air hits him like a slap. He gasps, choking out smoke.

Below, the flames engulf the barn—and suddenly, the roof collapses inward.

If he'd stayed seconds longer—he'd be dead.

Zeke rolls, sliding off the edge—plummeting into a snowdrift.

EXT. SNOWDRIFT - CONTINUOUS

Zeke lies there, staring at the burning barn, chest rising and falling fast. He's badly bruised.

Then—his gaze locks onto Aaron, standing near the crowd.

Aaron's face is carefully neutral—but there's a flicker of something else.

Realization hits.

A slow, burning anger rises in Zeke's smoke-filled lungs.

Aaron locked him in.

The guests are out in the snow, coughing and clutching each other. Rachel stands a few feet from the barn, staring in horror as the roof collapses inward. Sparks fly into the night sky.

Aaron spots Zeke and strides toward him.

AARON
(furious)
This? This is what you bring back
with you? Ruin?

ZEKE
I'll rebuild it. I'll fix
everything.

AARON
You don't fix things, Zeke. You
wreck them. And you just did it
again.

Rachel looks between the two men, her face pale and tear-streaked.

RACHEL
Stop it, Aaron.

AARON
(spinning on her)
Stop it? He just burned down the
barn! Ruined our wedding!

Rachel shakes her head, her voice trembling.

RACHEL
It was an accident.

Aaron lets out a bitter laugh, gesturing to the inferno.

AARON
Some accident.

The barn groans as the last of it collapses, sending a cloud of ash and embers into the night. The crowd watches in stunned silence, their faces lit by the glow of the fire.

ZEKE
I put out the fire! Someone else
started it.

Zeke's jaw tightens. A flicker of pain, then rage.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
I've changed, Rachel. You'll see.

Beat.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
And I'll be back for you.

AARON
(to Zeke)
You should've stayed gone.

He stares at her one last time. Then turns on his heel, limps back to his truck.

Zeke climbs in, GUNS the engine. The truck PEELS OUT, disappearing into the dark.

Silence.

The wedding is ruined. The guests are gone. The barn is burned down.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - DAY

A thin trail of smoke curls into the gray sky from the barn fire. The snow crunches underfoot, and the world is wrapped in that eerie stillness that follows chaos.

Up the path, DANIEL and LEAH walk side by side. He carries a covered basket; she clutches a small bouquet of winter flowers, the only pop of color in the muted landscape.

LEAH
She's totally gonna roll her eyes at us.

DANIEL
Yeah.
(adjusts the basket)

LEAH
(grinning, nudging him)
And we're doing it anyway.

DANIEL
Obviously.

Leah glances toward the farmhouse, her expression softening.

LEAH
With your mom gone... she shouldn't have to sit in there by herself.

DANIEL

She's my sister. Of course we've
got her.

They reach the porch. Daniel knocks once, then pushes the
door open.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE

Rachel sits at the wooden kitchen table, a crumpled bouquet
of blue, white, and yellow flowers in her lap. Tears streak
her face.

Leah stands beside her, one hand gently on Rachel's shoulder,
the other gripping the back of a chair.

RACHEL

I was supposed to be married
today...

Her voice cracks. She swipes at her cheeks, but the tears
keep coming.

Leah exhales and quietly pulls out a chair, sitting beside
her.

LEAH

You still can be. Just... not
today.

Rachel looks up, eyes searching Leah's.

RACHEL

Everything was planned. Every
little thing...

Leah squeezes her hand.

LEAH

I know. It sucks. But maybe this
wasn't the right time. Maybe it
wasn't meant to happen yet.

Rachel's breath hitches.

LEAH (CONT'D)

If it was? Nothing would've stopped
it. Not even Zeke crashing in like
a human fire alarm.

Rachel lets out a shaky breath, eyes fixed on the flickering lantern light. The tears slow.

RACHEL

What if Aaron sees this as, like...
a sign?

Leah gently shakes her head.

LEAH

Then that's your sign he's not it.
The right guy doesn't bail when
things go sideways.

Rachel nods, slowly at first, then stands. Something shifts—grief giving way to resolve.

RACHEL

I'm going to find Zeke.

Leah stiffens slightly.

LEAH

Rachel...

RACHEL

I need to talk to him. Face to
face. He's not coming back on his
own—and I can't just let it end
like this.

LEAH

Are you sure this is smart?

Rachel glances toward the rattling door.

She grabs her coat, shrugging it on with purpose as she heads for the exit.

Daniel and Leah exchange a look as the wind slams against the porch. They watch her go--- worried.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The moon casts a silver glow over the quiet countryside.
Rachel riding her horse through the snow dusted moon lit
landscape down a dirt road.

Rachel grips the reins.

Then—a flicker of light.

Down by the river, headlights cut through the darkness. A truck sits parked, engine off, the glow reflecting off the water.

Rachel reins the horse to a stop.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVERBANK - NIGHT

Rachel steps carefully down the slope. The closer she gets, the more she sees— Zeke.

He sits on the tailgate of his truck, elbows on his knees, shoulders hunched. His face is streaked with tears.

Zeke hears her steps and looks up. His eyes are red, his whole body weighed down by shame.

ZEKE

I knew you'd come.

Rachel hesitates.

RACHEL

How did you know

ZEKE

Because our bond is unbreakable.

RACHEL

You don't just show up and rewrite the past.

Zeke lets out a shaky breath, looking at the reflection of the headlights in the water.

ZEKE

I'm not trying to.

Rachel doesn't argue.

RACHEL

You torched the barn, Zeke and you torched us.

Zeke wipes his face with the back of his sleeve, staring at the ground.

ZEKE

I didn't torch the barn. I put out the fire, someone else started it.

RACHEL
That might be true but you
definitely ruined us.

ZEKE
I've spent so long running from
what I was raised to be, from this
place. And look where it's got me.

Rachel folds her arms.

RACHEL
And now?

He lifts his head, eyes shining with something desperate.

ZEKE
Now I'm done running.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
I don't want the city. It's empty,
no community everyone chasing money
and fame.

He stands, wiping his hands on his jeans, taking a step
closer.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
I'm so sorry for running. I know
I've apologized so many times since
you've known me. But if you can
forgive me...just see that I've
changed.

Rachel's throat tightens.

RACHEL
I've always forgiven you.

Rachel exhales slowly, her hands trembling.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
I've heard so many apologies.

She looks away, staring at the river.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
How is this time different, you
always leave for something you
think is better.

Silence.

Then, Zeke takes another step towards her, his voice low but full of conviction. He reaches out to hold her hands. She doesn't pull back.

ZEKE

Not this time. Watch me.

Rachel meets his gaze, her heart pounding. The river rushes beside them, the headlights illuminating them.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. PHILADELPHIA FIRE STATION - TRAINING AREA - LATER THAT MORNING

INT. TRAINING BAY - DAY

Bright, practical space. CPR mannequins lined up like a weird army. The team moves with quiet focus.

DAVE kneels beside a dummy, demoing compressions.

DAVE

Keep your weight centered. About a hundred a minute—think rhythm, not chaos.

Zeke matches the motion on another dummy. Clean, controlled. Dave throws him a quick nod.

Across the room:

A group hauls a dummy through a window using a ladder hoist.

Another team runs hose drills through taped-out "hallways."

INT. COMMON AREA - MOMENTS LATER

The crew's chilling—coffee, Gatorade, half-hearted roasting. Zeke slings his gear bag over one shoulder. Dave and Paul linger.

ZEKE

I'm heading back to Paradise. That little town I grew up in.

Brief pause.

DAVE

So that's why you've been ghosting your locker.

PAUL
Can't blame you. Cleaner air, no
sirens at 3 a.m. 'cause someone
nuked pizza rolls.

ZEKE
Yeah, just cows in the road and
neighbors who still think I'm
fifteen.

They all smirk. A quiet beat.

DAVE
You've been rock solid here. Low
drama. Sharp under pressure.
Weirdly precise with a hydrant
wrench.

Zeke laughs under his breath.

ZEKE
I learned way more here than I
expected.

Dave offers his hand. A real one-firm, respectful.

DAVE
If Paradise doesn't pan out, this
door's open. Always.

Paul steps up, claps Zeke on the shoulder, pulling him into a
quick one-arm hug.

PAUL
Don't be a stranger. And hey-if
you're bored, come show the rookies
how not to flood the bay.

Zeke smiles. One last glance around the room. Bittersweet.

ZEKE
Seriously... thanks for everything.
I'll never forget it. Or you guys.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. FEED STORE - SMALL TOWN - DAY

A modest feed store sits on a quiet country lane. The faded
wooden sign creaks in the breeze.

CUT TO:

INT. ROOM ABOVE THE FEED STORE - DAY

A tiny room: a narrow bed with a handmade quilt, a simple desk with a chair, and a single window letting in a sliver of daylight. Zeke enters with a worn suitcase and sets it down, studying his new space.

The door swings open. HANK, an eccentric, older man in a slightly rumpled hat, ambles in with a mischievous grin.

HANK

This room isn't much- but it's honest work. Rent's covered if you help out at the store, and you'll get a hot meal with the misses every day.

ZEKE

A hot meal sounds like heaven.

Hank rummages in his vest pockets, then frowns.

HANK

Now, let me just give you the keys.
(pauses, scratching his head)
Where in the heck did I put these keys?

Hank taps pockets, glances under a stack of feed bags, and mutters to himself.

HANK (CONT'D)

I always lose 'em. I lose everything - you can help me with that.

ZEKE

Happy to help you where I can.

Zeke chuckles softly as Hank finally spots a small set of jangling keys tucked behind the table.

HANK

Ah, here they are! Never a dull moment.

Hank hands the keys to Zeke with a quirky flourish.

Zeke nods and smiles, accepting the keys as he glances around the humble room.

CUT TO:

INT. ZEKE'S ROOM - NIGHT

The air is thick, suffocating. The flicker of a red neon sign outside paints the walls like a warning.

ANNA (22) - pretty, messy, hollow-eyed in her jeans and a threadbare tee - lets out a sharp, brittle laugh. It doesn't reach her eyes.

Her fingers tremble as she grabs Zeke's shirt, pulling him closer.

ANNA
(whispers, raw)
You love me, right? You said you
loved me.

Zeke cups her face. His hands are shaking too. He kisses her - hard - like he's trying to silence the collapse.

She yanks him onto the mattress. Bodies tangled. Heat. Confusion. It's not love - it's escape.

Then her laughter breaks - a sob, sudden and cracking.

ANNA (CONT'D)
(choking out)
You always leave...

Zeke freezes. Her voice splinters the haze. The room warps - the walls seem closer, the light colder. The sheets are damp with sweat.

He stumbles up, breath uneven, fumbling for his shirt. His boots scrape the gritty floor.

ANNA (O.S.) (CONT'D)
(screaming)
You promised, Zeke!

He spins"

She's gone.

Just the hum of the neon. His breath. His heartbeat.

He reaches the door, hand gripping the knob.

He hesitates.

Then slams it shut behind him.

INT. ZEKE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Zeke gasps, sitting bolt upright in bed. His chest heaves, sweat glistening on his face. His hands clutch the blanket. He swings his legs off the bed, standing unsteadily.

He crosses to the window, pushing the curtain aside. The quiet countryside stretches before him, bathed in moonlight. He stares out, his reflection in the glass haunted. He's remembering.

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARM - 13 YEARS AGO - EARLY SPRING

A muddy field.

RACHEL (12) stands in a dress too big for her. She squints up at ZEKE (13), who's grinning proudly, holding what barely qualifies as a homemade kite.

The wind howls. The kite flutters weakly - doomed from the start.

YOUNG RACHEL

This is literally the worst idea
you've ever had.

YOUNG ZEKE

Nah - all genius inventions look
dumb at first.

He bolts forward, dragging the floppy contraption behind him. It flaps once... twice... then nosedives directly into a pile of manure.

Rachel doubles over laughing. Zeke returns, covered in streaks of mud but looking like he just won an award.

YOUNG ZEKE (CONT'D)

Okay-maybe it needs, like... slight
design improvements.

YOUNG RACHEL

You always do this. You crash
things up and laugh at it.

YOUNG ZEKE

That's 'cause you're always here to
laugh with me.

She looks at him, caught off guard.

He pulls something from behind his back – a bent, rusted horseshoe twisted into a wobbly heart shape.

YOUNG ZEKE (CONT'D)
Made you this. Horseshoe... for
luck.

YOUNG RACHEL
Seriously?

YOUNG ZEKE
I know. It's kinda janky.
(beat)
But it'll bring you good luck. I
promise.

He places it in her hands. They are both muddy now, but neither of them seems to care.

CUT TO:

BACK TO PRESENT – INT. RACHEL'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Rachel stands at her dresser, looking down at the same twisted horseshoe heart. It's a little rusty now, but still holds that bent, weird charm.

She smirks.

RACHEL (V.O.)
You always thought anything could
fly... even people like us.

She tucks the horseshoe under her pillow like a secret.

CUT TO:

INT. PREACHER'S HOME – MORNING

Soft morning light spills through lace curtains. A simple wooden table anchors the room.

Zeke sits, hands clenched. Across from him, the PREACHER watches silently. The old wall clock ticks.

PREACHER
You came here for forgiveness?

Zeke nods. Quiet. Heavy.

PREACHER (CONT'D)
Why now?

Zeke hesitates, then shrugs.

ZEKE

I messed things up. The wedding. My whole life, really.

The preacher says nothing. Just waits.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

When my mom died... when my dad left... I didn't know how to stay. So I ran.

The preacher's gaze softens.

PREACHER

We noticed.

A pause.

ZEKE

City life—it's loud. Empty. You chase everything and still end up alone.

He exhales.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

I'm done running.

Silence.

The preacher leans forward, folds his hands.

PREACHER

Words are easy. Living it—that's the real proof.

Zeke nods.

ZEKE

I will.

The preacher studies him. Then stands.

PREACHER

You're not alone, Zeke. Not now. Not ever. You can always come to me for help.

Zeke looks up. A flicker of relief crosses his face. Maybe even hope.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RACHEL'S FARM - EARLY MORNING

The air is crisp and cold, the breath of fifty men and women visible in the early light. The first frost glistens on the fields.

The new barn skeleton rises high, beams locked into place, the urgent pounding of hammers echoing across the valley.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARN SITE - BY THE TABLES

Zeke is there, his hands are rough and calloused, gripping a heavy wooden beam as he and two other men hoist it into position.

Some of the men watch him warily. He feels their glances, the quiet murmurs, but he keeps working. He knew this wouldn't be easy.

Three older men—JOSHUA, PAUL, and JED—stand off to the side, their sleeves rolled up, tools in hand. They watch Zeke with narrowed eyes as he struggles with the planks.

JOSHUA

(low, to the others)

He don't belong here.

PAUL

(adjusting his hat,
frowning)

A man who burns something down
don't deserve the right to build it
back

JED

(grumbling)

The boy's a menace.

Zeke sets his plank down with a heavy thud, jaw tightening. He swallows hard, then picks up another without a word.

Daniel, Rachel's brother walks up behind Zeke, offering him his hand.

DANIEL

I'm so glad you're back.

Zeke wipes his hands

ZEKE

They're not.

DANIEL

Just keep working - they're
stubborn like a bunch of old goats
but they'll come around.

The three men exchange glances, clearly unimpressed. Ezra
(Rachel's father) joins the three men looking on.

EZRA

The barn burning was a mistake.

JOSHUA

A mistake? A mistake is spillin'
milk at supper. This... this was a
calamity.

PAUL

(nodding)

The kind that nearly killed us all.

JOSHUA

(grumbling)

Well, at least the boy's got a
strong back.

PAUL

(half-smirking)

Stronger than his sense, anyway.

The men chuckle, the tension breaking slightly.

CUT TO:

EXT. LUNCH TABLES - CONTINUOUS

On the long wooden tables, steaming platters of food are
being set out—roast chicken, buttered noodles, warm bread,
apple pies.

Rachel and Leah carry pictures of hot cider serving everyone.
Rachel's hands shake slightly as she pours a cup, knowing
Zeke is near.

As she steps past him, she brushes against his arm. Just
barely. A touch. A moment.

Electricity sparks between them.

Zeke stiffens, inhaling sharply. His fingers twitch, like he
wants to reach for her but doesn't dare.

Rachel's cheeks flush. She turns away quickly, heart racing.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. BARN SITE - MID-MORNING

The sound of hammers and saws fill the air, men working swiftly as the barn takes shape.

Then—a sharp gasp.

EZRA (Rachel's father) stumbles back from the worksite, one hand clutching his chest. His face twists in pain, his breath ragged.

Nearby men drop their tools, eyes widening.

MAN #1

Ezra?

Ezra tries to steady himself against a beam but his legs buckle. He slumps to his knees, gasping.

MAN #2

Somebody get help!

MIRIAM, a single woman in her fifties, ruddy cheeks, runs toward him, her long skirt kicking up dust.

She drops to her knees beside him, grasping his trembling hand.

MIRIAM

Ezra! Ezra, look at me! What's wrong?

Ezra struggles for breath, his face going pale.

Then—Zeke moves.

EXT. BARN SITE - CONTINUOUS

Without hesitation, Zeke rushes forward, shoving past the gathering men. He kneels down next to Ezra

ZEKE

He's having a heart attack - we have to keep him warm.

The crowd freezes.

JOSHUA
How do you know that?

ZEKE
Trust me! He needs to be on his back. Now! Loosen his collar so he can breath, Prop his knees take the pressure off his heart.

Zeke kneels beside Ezra, his training from the fire department kicking in. He tilts Ezra's head slightly, checking his airway, then presses two fingers to his neck.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Call 911! Easy now, Ezra. Slow breath in... let it out. Again. Stay with me.

MIRIAM
Go to the phone shanty in my barn!

RACHEL
I'm going!

Rachel runs down the road to the phone shanty.

Ezra's eyes flutter, his chest barely rising.

ZEKE
Someone get aspirin-NOW!

The men hesitate-aspirin?

DANIEL
There's some in the house-I'll get it!

He sprints toward the house.

Zeke leans in, speaking firmly to Ezra.

ZEKE
Ezra, I know it hurts, stay with me. Keep your eyes open. One-twenty and climbing... we're over three minutes now.

The men exchange uneasy glances.

A moment ago, none of them trusted him. Now, they're looking to him.

Zeke doesn't hesitate.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

We need to get him out of the cold.
He needs to be lying flat and warm.
If we can get him to a bed, it'll
help his circulation.

JED

That's too far.

Zeke grits his teeth--then moves.

He hoists Ezra into his arms, gripping him tightly, carrying the older man as if he weighs nothing.

The crowd parts as Zeke strides toward the house, every muscle in his body straining.

Ezra moans weakly.

Zeke glances down, sweat on his brow.

ZEKE

I got you, Ezra. Just breathe.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - MINUTES LATER

The door swings open. Zeke carries Ezra inside, carefully lowering him onto a bed.

Daniel rushes in with the aspirin.

DANIEL

Here!

Zeke takes the pill, gently placing it in Ezra's mouth, helping him swallow with a sip of water.

ZEKE

This will thin your blood, keep it
from clotting. Help is coming.

Ezra's breathing steadies. The color starts to return to his face.

The crowd outside waits in stunned silence.

EXT. RACHEL'S FARM - DAY

Red and white emergency lights flash across the snowy fields. The ambulance idles near the farmhouse, its back doors open.

A small group of Amish men and women stand nearby, silent, watchful.

Near the front steps of the house, Zeke stands, sweat still clinging to his forehead.

On the bed, Ezra lies bundled in a thick quilt, his face pale but alert. Two PARAMEDICS kneel beside him, checking his vitals.

PARAMEDIC #1 (CHECKING VITALS MONITOR,
NODDING)

His pressure's stabilized. Heart
rate's holding.

Zeke exhales.

PARAMEDIC #2 (GLANCING AT THE GROUP,
THEN AT ZEKE)

If he hadn't been laid flat, kept
warm, and given that aspirin... he
might not have made it.

PARAMEDIC #1 (TO ZEKE)

Good work.

A beat of silence. The crowd exchanges glances, their usual reserve now tinged with something else.

ZEKE (QUIET, LOOKING DOWN)

Anyone would've done the same.

PARAMEDIC #1 (CLIPPING THE BP CUFF
AWAY, SHAKING HIS HEAD SLIGHTLY)

Not everyone would've known how.

The stretcher clanks open. The paramedics lift Ezra carefully. He catches Zeke's eye.

Zeke swallows, nods once. The stretcher rolls up into the ambulance.

RACHEL

Can I come with him?

PARAMEDIC #1

You family?

RACHEL

I'm his daughter.

PARAMEDIC #1

Quick then.

Rachel jumps in the ambulance.

The ambulance doors slam shut. The engine hums to life. Rachel steps forward, hesitates. Aaron stares at Zeke, fists at his sides.

Zeke doesn't move. Just watches the ambulance pull away, its lights flashing against the snow.

The wind picks up. The group lingers, waiting for someone to speak. No one does.

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Zeke steps outside.

The men pause mid-motion, watching him.

A minute ago, he was the outsider.

Now... it's different. They're not sure what to make of him.

DANIEL

That move back there—where'd you
learn all that?

Zeke exhales, eyes flicking toward the barn.

ZEKE

When I left, I thought I was gonna
be a firefighter. Did the training.
Worked with Pittsburgh Fire,
Station 6.

Miriam crosses her arms, nodding slowly.

MIRIAM

You should teach us. The stuff you
know—how to actually help in a real
emergency.

ZEKE

I'd be down for that. Seriously.

He looks around. Faces watching him—not with suspicion this time...

But with something closer to respect

CUT TO:

FLASHBACK - 2 YEARS AGO - EXT. HAYFIELD BEHIND RACHEL'S FARM
- LATE SUMMER EVENING

The sky glows warm with streaks of pink and orange. Zeke and Rachel sit cross-legged on a quilt in the middle of a hayfield. A small, slightly sad campfire flickers between them.

Zeke pokes at it with a stick, grinning like a kid. Rachel holds up a jar of marshmallows.

RACHEL
You swore you knew how to build a fire.

ZEKE
I do. I just, you know... don't follow traditional fire structure guidelines. I'm a disruptor.

RACHEL
You're a menace with a matchstick.

She leans in, sticks a marshmallow into the fire— It immediately ignites like a fireball.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Ahh! Seriously?!

She waves it frantically. Zeke jumps up.

ZEKE
Give it here—give it!

He snatches it from her, tries to blow it out— Instead, the flaming marshmallow launches into the dry hay nearby.

They both freeze.

RACHEL
Zeke...

ZEKE
Yup. I see it.

He dives, grabs his lemonade jar, and sloshes it over the smoking spot, then stomps like a maniac. A beat of tension— The smoke dies out.

Zeke straightens, slightly winded, triumphant. Rachel stares at him, wide-eyed.

RACHEL
Well... that was mildly horrifying.

She laughs, covering her face. He gives her a mock bow.

ZEKE
You're welcome. First official fire
save.

RACHEL
Not bad.

She steps closer, brushes ash off his shirt.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
But you didn't panic. You just
handled it.

Zeke quiets, suddenly serious. Their eyes meet.

ZEKE
I dunno. Felt like... I had to keep
you safe. Like, no matter what.

RACHEL
Thanks for saving me.

A long beat. Then she leans in.

They kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. EZRA'S BEDROOM HOUSE - TWO DAYS LATER

A small lamp flickers on the wooden nightstand, casting soft,
golden light across the small room.

Ezra rests in bed, his breathing steady but weak. The
blankets are pulled up to his chest, his weathered hands
folded atop them.

Beside him, Miriam sits on a wooden chair, her hand gently
wrapped around his.

Ezra squeezes her hand.

EZRA
You don't need to be here.

Miriam shakes her head.

MIRIAM
No place else I need to be.

Ezra watches her, tired but grateful.

EZRA
I'll be fine.

Miriam's fingers tighten around his.

MIRIAM
I know. But I didn't. Not the day
before yesterday.

Ezra looks down at their hands, a faint smile playing at his lips.

EZRA
I suppose I gave you a fright.

MIRIAM
More than that.

She hesitates, eyes searching his face.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)
If Zeke hadn't been here...

Ezra's expression turns thoughtful, his free hand rubbing his chest.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)
Maybe it was good that he left.
That he learned what he learned.
That he came back.

Ezra's brow furrows.

MIRIAM (CONT'D)
Zeke knew what to do and you're
alive. I'd say that's providence!

Ezra nods slowly.

EZRA
It's humbling to think about.

Miriam leans in slightly, her voice softer now.

MIRIAM
I don't know what I would do if
anything happened to you.

She glances down, almost embarrassed by her confession.

Ezra's fingers trace over hers, a comforting gesture.

EZRA

And I you.

Miriam lifts her gaze, meeting his.

For a moment, they simply sit together in the glow of candlelight.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RACHEL'S FARM - EARLY MORNING

The sun rises over frost-covered fields, casting a soft golden glow.

Rachel steps carefully through the barnyard. A woven basket rests in her arm as she gently collects eggs from the coop.

The hens cluck lazily. The only other sounds are the soft rustling of straw and the faint clip-clop of a horse in the distance.

She reaches for another egg—

A shadow falls across the ground.

She turns, startled.

Zeke stands just outside the coop, hands stuffed in his coat pockets, a familiar smirk on his lips.

RACHEL

You always sneak up on women
gathering eggs?

ZEKE

Only when they're the prettiest
ones in Lancaster County.

Rachel flushes. She tries to hide it, turning back toward the hens.

RACHEL

You're awful bold for a guy the
whole town thinks torched our barn.

ZEKE

Hey now—wasn't me.

(beat)

You know that. I'm the guy who puts
fires out, remember?

He gestures toward the distance.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Anyway—figured I'd start hauling
lumber.

Time to earn my redemption arc.

He tips his hat with a grin and heads toward the road, his
stride light and confident.

Rachel watches him go, cheeks still flushed.

She shakes her head, smiling to herself.

CUT TO:

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY - CHRISTMAS FAIRE SETUP

The town square is coming alive.

Red gingham tablecloths flutter in the breeze. Pine garlands
are wrapped around fence rails. Booths brim with canned apple
butter, handmade soaps, and crocheted potholders. Kids dash
between grown-ups, clutching paper stars and half-eaten
cookies.

Rachel adjusts a basket of ornaments, tugging her mittens off
with her teeth. She smooths the cloth like she's done it a
hundred times.

Nearby, Miriam wrestles with a string of lights—focused,
grim, and clearly a veteran of many Christmas Faires.

MIRIAM
Careful with that corner—it catches
wind every year. Last time the
whole table took off like a buggy
without a horse.

RACHEL (SMILING)
I remember. Jam went flying
everywhere.

Miriam grunts, fighting the lights like they've personally
wronged her.

Footsteps crunch in the snow behind them.

ZEKE (O.S.)
Need another set of hands?

Rachel turns.

Zeke stands there, a coil of garland over one shoulder. He's a little dusty, like he came straight from the barn, but his grin is easy and familiar.

RACHEL
Thought you'd be finishing the
rafters.

MIRIAM (WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT)
You can start by fixing this light.
It's been crooked since '08.

ZEKE (DEADPAN)
Only '08? Practically brand new.

He hops onto the edge of the booth and fiddles with the crooked light. Rachel steps in and steadies the ladder instinctively.

RACHEL
You always show up just in time for
the fun part.

ZEKE
Great skill of mine. Impeccable
timing.

He climbs down and glances at Rachel's table-lined with dried orange slices, pinecones, and handmade tags.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
You really make it feel like
Christmas around here.

RACHEL (SHRUGS)
Just tradition.

ZEKE
Nah. It's a you thing.

Suddenly, the ladder leg sinks into the snow. Zeke wobbles, grabs the post.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Whoa—!

He hops down just in time, landing with a thud beside Rachel. A garland's looped around his neck, and a lantern dangles from his arm like a fashion statement.

RACHEL (HALF-LAUGHING)
You good?

ZEKE (DEADPAN)
Dignity took a hit. Otherwise, I'm fine.

He fumbles with the garland. It's hopeless. Rachel helps. Their fingers tangle.

They finally get it off. Both are laughing now—Rachel maybe a little more than she expected.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Guess that makes it official. I'm back.

RACHEL (SOFTLY)
Yeah. You are.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARN - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun hangs low, casting long shadows across the half-built barn. Zeke is alone, driving nails into a beam.

Aaron approaches, his footsteps crunching on the dirt. Zeke hears him but doesn't stop working. Aaron stops a few feet away, standing stiffly with his hands at his sides, his jaw clenched.

AARON
(flat, restrained)
You've got a knack for showing up when you're least wanted.

Zeke pauses mid-swing, exhales, and sets the hammer down. He doesn't look at Aaron right away.

ZEKE
You need something?

AARON
Yeah. I need to know what you're doing here.

Zeke turns to face him, his expression calm but tired.

ZEKE
I'm building a barn.

AARON
(coldly, stepping forward)
You burn everything you touch.
Rachel. The barn.
(MORE)

AARON (CONT'D)

And now you just show up swinging a hammer like that makes up for it?

ZEKE

Was it me....or you Aaron. I put out that fire.

AARON

(cutting him off)
Rachel called off the wedding. She ain't mine now. But she sure ain't yours.

ZEKE

...She did?

AARON

(stepping closer, voice lowering)
She's looking at you again. Like she used to. And you—you just stand there, acting like you're not tearing everything apart.

ZEKE

Rachel's choices are her own.

AARON

(bitter laugh)
Right. You're just some innocent bystander, huh? You don't get it, do you? You leave wreckage wherever you go, Zeke. And the rest of us—people like me—we're left cleaning it up.

Zeke takes a deep breath, clearly holding back.

ZEKE

It's not up to you if I come back.

Aaron shakes his head, his voice quieter but sharper now.

AARON

You think pounding a few nails makes up for everything you've done? For the people you've hurt?

Zeke's jaw tightens, but his voice stays calm.

ZEKE

It's a start.

Aaron stares at him for a moment, his expression unreadable, then steps back.

AARON
(quietly, cold)
Stay out of her way, Zeke. Or that
nail won't be the only thing that
gets a hammerin'.

Without waiting for a response, Aaron turns and walks off, leaving Zeke alone. Zeke watches him go, his shoulders sagging slightly before he picks up the hammer and gets back to work.

CUT TO:

FLASHBACK - EXT. OLD COVERED BRIDGE - SUNSET - ONE YEAR AGO

The last light of the day filters through the slats of a weathered wooden bridge. Crickets hum in the background. Zeke(24) and Rachel (24) sit side-by-side, legs dangling over the edge above the slow-moving creek below.

She's barefoot. He's fiddling with a carved wooden button that looks a lot like a heart, flipping it between his fingers. Silence between them—comfortable, but loaded.

RACHEL
You ever think about... settling
down?

Zeke glances sideways at her.

ZEKE
You mean like... gettin' married?

RACHEL
(smiling softly)
That's usually what settling down
means around here.

He leans back on his hands, looking up at the sky.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm built for that. Not just here—anywhere. Like... do I even know how to be someone's person?

Rachel watches him.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
You already are. You just don't see
it yet.

He goes quiet.

ZEKE

You deserve someone steady, Rach.
Someone who doesn't disappear when
things get messy.

RACHEL

Yeah, well... you always come back.

ZEKE

What if one day I don't?

Rachel's eyes shift. She swallows.

RACHEL

Then I stop waiting.

A long pause.

ZEKE

If I ever ask someone...

It'd be you.

RACHEL (BEAT, BRAVE)

Then ask.

Zeke turns. She catches him off guard. He half-smiles—torn.

ZEKE

Not yet.

I still don't know who I am outside of here. If I stay now,
I'll just pull you into the chaos with me.

Rachel breathes in slow. Then:

RACHEL

Then figure it out.
But when you come back—come back
whole. No pieces. No halfway.

Zeke nods, almost to himself. Then he takes her hand.
Squeezes. Lets go.

Stands.

He starts to walk away.

She watches until he disappears down the dirt path, the
fading sun swallowing him.

And then, finally, she cries. Deep non-stop sobs.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - AFTERNOON

The fire pops and crackles, casting a cozy glow across the room. Wind taps against the windows, but inside it's calm.

Ezra sits in his chair with a wool blanket over his legs, color back in his cheeks.

Rachel pours hot tea into two plain mugs, then brings them over and sits beside him on the bench.

Ezra takes his mug, nodding in thanks as he blows on the steam.

EZRA

You've been hovering all day.

RACHEL (HALF-SMIRKING)

Yeah, well, maybe don't scare the life out of us next time.

Ezra chuckles, shaking his head.

EZRA

Point taken.

They sip in silence for a beat. The warmth of the tea, the fire—it's peaceful.

RACHEL (SOFTLY)

I saw Miriam leaving yesterday.

Ezra glances over the rim of his cup.

EZRA

She brought more soup.

RACHEL (EYEBROWS RAISED)

Just soup?

Ezra sets down his mug and exhales.

EZRA

You fishing for something, or...?

RACHEL (GENTLY)

She's been like a mom to me, you know. Always shows up when I need someone—no big speech, just... steady.

Ezra studies her.

EZRA
She's solid. Always has been.

RACHEL (SMILES)
I think you two would make a good
team. You already are, really.

Ezra chuckles again, softer this time—maybe a little shy.

EZRA
Didn't think I'd be getting
relationship advice from my kid.

RACHEL
Guess we're both growing up.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. CHRISTMAS FAIRE - TOWN SQUARE - EVENING

The whole town has gathered. A tall pine tree stands in the center, strung with handmade ornaments and old-fashioned lanterns. Kids chase each other with candy canes. Rachel and Zeke walk side by side, both pretending they're not enjoying this.

RACHEL
I still say this tree is crooked.

ZEKE
It's not crooked. It's leaning with
character.

RACHEL (GRINS)
So it's the Zeke of trees.

ZEKE
Wow. That was almost a compliment.

A bell rings. The crowd hushes. A few children lead the countdown.

KIDS (O.S.)
Three... two... one!

The lanterns flicker on. The whole tree glows. A cheer goes up. Rachel tilts her head, pretending to be unimpressed, but she's clearly not immune.

RACHEL (SOFTLY)
Okay... that's kind of pretty.

ZEKE

You ever made a snow angel?

RACHEL

What am I, six?

ZEKE

I'll take that as a no.

Suddenly—he falls backward into the snow like a plank. A soft whump. She yelps and jumps back.

RACHEL

Are you okay!?

ZEKE (FROM GROUND)

I'm making art.

RACHEL

You're making an idiot of yourself.

ZEKE

Same thing, really.

He starts moving his arms and legs like a giant, slightly flailing snow angel.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

Come on. It's tradition.

He throws a snowball at her feet. She squeals, jumps back... then suddenly drops right next to him in the snow.

RACHEL

If I get frostbite...

ZEKE

I'll warm you!

They both move in unison—arms and legs sweeping through the snow. Then they stop, breathing hard, staring up at the stars.

They laugh. Really laugh. For once, everything feels light.

A small crowd nearby claps politely at their snow angels. A kid yells:

KID (O.S.)

Do it again!

RACHEL (SITTING UP)

Never happening.

ZEKE

That was your big Christmas moment.
You peaked.

They look at each other, cheeks red from cold and laughter.

RACHEL

You're ridiculous.

ZEKE (GRINNING)

And yet you're still here.

She stands, brushing off snow, shaking her head with a smile.
Zeke offers his hand to help her up. She takes it.

The crowd returns to caroling, and the two walk off arm in arm, leaving two lopsided snow angels behind.

CUT TO:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - EARLY MORNING

The first big snow of the season has buried the roads and fields under a thick, blinding white. The world is silent except for the occasional crack of a tree limb breaking under the weight of ice.

Then—the deep rumble of hooves.

Through the frozen mist, a line of men emerge, bundled in coats and scarves, guiding their horses and plows.

They hit the snow hard, shovels scraping, the rhythmic clang of metal on ice filling the morning air.

Zeke is among them.

His breath fogs in the cold, his coat dusted in fresh powder as he works alongside the others, keeping pace, his muscles burning but his focus unshaken.

He shoves his shovel into the packed snow, heaving it over his shoulder. It lands in a heavy thud. He barely pauses before plunging the blade in again.

No one says much, but every so often, glances are exchanged. Some of the older men watch him with quiet skepticism.

Zeke feels it. But he keeps his head down and works.

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - PORCH

Rachel watches from a distance.

She leans against the porch railing, coat pulled tight around her shoulders.

She can't take her eyes off Zeke.

He's working harder than any of them.

DANIEL

You keep staring like that, Rachel,
he might start thinking he has a
chance.

Rachel startles, snapping her head toward Daniel.

RACHEL

Who me>

Daniel smirks, his gloved hands rubbing together for warmth.

DANIEL

No? Just admiring the fine art of
snow shoveling?

Rachel huffs, tearing her gaze away but smiling.

CUT TO:

EXT. SNOW-COVERED ROAD - DAY

Daniel walks up, shaking snow off his gloves. The crew of men is working hard, clearing the road with shovels and snowblowers.

DANIEL

Once we finish this stretch, we
should check on the older folks.
Make sure everyone's okay after the
storm.

The shoveling slows. A few guys pause, leaning on their shovels, looking over at him.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Widow Lapp's been on her own since
spring. The Millers, too.

If they're low on firewood or food, we'll bring it over.

There are a few nods. One guy mutters, "Yeah, good call."

ZEKE

Alright—who's up first?

Daniel grins and claps Zeke on the shoulder.

DANIEL

You and me. Widow Lapp always puts out those cinnamon rolls when someone brings firewood.

ZEKE (GRINNING, SWITCHES SHOVEL HANDS)

Now you're speaking my language.
Let's go.

A couple guys chuckle. The rest get back to it, energy lifted.

CUT TO:

EXT. COUNTRY FARM - LATE AFTERNOON

Fresh snow sparkles on the wide open field. Zeke is strapping a spirited old horse to a wooden sleigh decked out in pine and red ribbon. He brushes snow off the bench seat just as Rachel approaches, still in her apron, cheeks pink from the cold.

RACHEL

So they really put you in charge of sleigh rides?

ZEKE

Guess they figured I'm the only one stubborn enough to match this guy.

He nods at the horse, who tosses its head.

RACHEL

Bold move. Could go either way.

ZEKE

I live for chaos. Come on—before we lose the light.

Rachel climbs up and settles beside him.

EXT. SNOWY PATH - MOMENTS LATER

Zeke clicks his tongue and gives the reins a light flick. The horse surges forward faster than expected.

The sleigh jerks. Rachel squeals— —and ends up crashing right into Zeke's chest.

She's half-laughing, half-mortified.

Rachel tries to sit up, but a bump sends her flying back into him.

RACHEL (GRINNING)
Maybe I should just stay here.

ZEKE
Zero complaints.

Their eyes meet. The air between them shifts—almost electric—until the horse lets out a loud, snotty snort, breaking the moment.

EXT. OPEN FIELD - LATER

The sleigh slows as they reach a clearing. A few cookies tumble out of a paper bag onto Rachel's lap.

RACHEL
Wait—did you pack snacks?

ZEKE
Yeah. It was supposed to be romantic. Now it's just... chaos with carbs.

She laughs and chucks a cookie at him. He ducks, laughing too. Snow starts drifting down in light flakes.

EXT. FIELD - QUIET MOMENT

The sleigh comes to a soft stop. Snow falls gently around them. Rachel's still leaning slightly into him. She doesn't move.

ZEKE (SOFTLY)
I just wanted to do something that made you smile.

RACHEL
You did. Even if I'm gonna wake up sore tomorrow.

ZEKE
Totally worth it.

She finally sits up, snowflakes landing in her hair. Zeke notices but doesn't say anything. The sleigh creaks in the silence.

RACHEL
So what's next on your holiday
chaos list?

ZEKE (GRINNING)
Snow angels? Or popcorn garlands.
I'm versatile.

RACHEL
Definitely popcorn. Lower injury
risk.

They laugh. The horse snorts again—clearly unimpressed.

CUT TO:

EXT. AMISH COMMUNITY - EARLY MORNING

Snow blankets the fields, the world still and quiet. The faint sound of a wood axe striking echoes in the cold air.

Zeke swings the axe against a log, his shirt half open, his breath visible in the crisp morning. His hands blistered, his arms aching—but he doesn't stop.

Daniel watches with curiosity.

DANIEL
You look like you're about to fall
over.

Zeke exhales sharply, resting his hands on his knees.

ZEKE
I forgot how much work being in the
country actually is.

Daniel laughs.

From a distance, a group of men murmurs among themselves, their gazes flicking toward Zeke.

MAN #1 (MUTTERING)
He won't last. They never do.

MAN #2 (DISAPPROVING)
Leaving is one thing. Coming back
is another.

Zeke hears them—hears the judgment in their voices—but says nothing. He lifts the axe again and splits another log cleanly in half.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

The snow outside piles high against the windowsills, but inside, the room is alive with laughter.

At the long wooden table, Rachel, Leah, and several other young women sit together, their hands busy with making Christmas gifts.

CLOSE-UP ON THE GIFTS

CLOSE-UP ON THE GIFTS

Leah and Rachel sit cross-legged on a large woven rug, working on a patchwork quilt—bold colors, soft textures. A speaker in the corner hums quietly with acoustic indie music.

Abigail, 17, loops chunky yarn into a scarf, earbuds in, one dangling free.

SARAH

(wrapping a handmade
doll)

This dress actually turned out
decent. Even though I didn't follow
a single instruction.

MARY

(stitching a
handkerchief)

I'm impressed. Last year you hot-
glued half your projects to
yourself.

LEAH

This one's for Sarah down the road.
She's been powering through the
cold like it's nothing, but I saw
her hands last week—barely holding
her cane.

RACHEL

Yeah. She needs something warm. She
won't ask.

Abigail holds up her scarf—one end clearly shorter than the other.

ABIGAIL

So... this is slightly tragic. Be honest—can I still gift it?

SARAH

Tragic? Nah. It's got "handmade with love" vibes. The Willow kids'll be obsessed.

Leah glances over. Rachel has gone quiet, gently smoothing the scarf in her lap.

LEAH

That one's not for the drive, is it?

Rachel shrugs.

RACHEL

I don't know. I just... started knitting. Didn't really plan it.

A beat. The energy shifts—curious silence.

MARY

You sure it's not for a certain someone with a tendency to show up right when you're pretending not to wait for him?

Rachel rolls her eyes but can't suppress the smile tugging at her lips.

RACHEL

You all need actual hobbies.

The room bursts into soft laughter. Rachel hides behind the scarf.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

I'm never showing you guys anything again.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARN - LATE AFTERNOON

Zeke unloads a few wooden planks beside the barn. The air is cold, his breath visible in short puffs. He wipes his brow, focused.

Suddenly— Aaron strides up, furious.

AARON
(through clenched teeth)
What are you doing here?

Zeke looks up, cautious.

ZEKE
Working.

Zeke doesn't answer. He doesn't have to.

Aaron shoves him.

AARON
You think you're some kind of hero
now?

ZEKE
(steady, not retaliating)
Lay off, Aaron.

AARON
You're such a jerk.

Aaron explodes—shoves Zeke hard in the chest.

AARON (CONT'D)
Make it right? You broke her! You
torched her life and my life just
like you torched this barn!

Zeke stumbles but stays on his feet. Doesn't push back.

ZEKE
I'm not fighting you.

AARON
Why? You think ta makes you holy?
Makes you a man?

Just then—

RACHEL'S VOICE CUTS THROUGH THE SILENCE.

RACHEL (O.S.)
Aaron, STOP!

She's at the barn entrance, panic in her eyes. She runs to Zeke, kneeling beside him.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
(angrily to Aaron)
What is wrong with you?

AARON
You think he's changed? He hasn't.
He's still the same selfish coward
who ran the second things got hard.

RACHEL
Go. Away.

Aaron steps back, wounded pride burning in his eyes.

AARON
You really want him? Then fine!
You're problem now!

FADE OUT:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The moon hangs low, casting silver light over the snow-covered fields. The air is crisp and still, the only sound the rhythmic clop-clop of horse hooves against the frozen road. They are back in the sled. Zeke arranges a blanket over her legs.

A sled moves steadily along the path, lantern swinging gently from the side. Inside, Zeke holds the reins, Rachel beside him, bundled in her coat.

RACHEL
It's almost Christmas.

Zeke lets out a soft breath, his fingers flexing on the reins.

ZEKE
Guess it is.

Rachel studies him.

RACHEL
You sound... wildly underwhelmed.

ZEKE
Christmas never meant much.

RACHEL
Okay well, that's officially
tragic.

ZEKE

Didn't know any better, honestly.

Zeke exhales, his breath visible in the cold air.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

I was always on my own. Even as a boy. Christmas well - just another day.

Rachel's heart tightens.

RACHEL

No family gatherings? No big meal?

FLASHBACK - INT. SMALL KITCHEN - DAY - YEARS AGO

A dim, cramped kitchen. A young Zeke, maybe 9, sits at the table, swinging his legs. His mother stirs something weak on the stove, coughing into her sleeve. The window frosts. No decorations. No laughter.

Back in the sled, Rachel's brow creases.

RACHEL

No family gatherings? No big meal?

ZEKE

Maybe a meal if my mom was well enough. Usually just my dad yelling at her for one thing or another.

FLASHBACK - INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - CHRISTMAS PAST

A teenage Zeke flinches as a beer bottle smashes on the floor. His father shouts in the background, unseen. Zeke's mom moves to protect Zeke behind her.

Zeke stares straight ahead.

ZEKE

Once she passed... it was just me. I'd spend Christmas wherever I landed.

FLASHBACK - INT. PICKUP TRUCK - NIGHT - CHRISTMAS EVE

Early twenties Zeke lies in the back seat of his truck, wrapped in a sleeping bag. A gas station burrito in his hand. A tiny radio hums static-laced Christmas music. He stares up at the roof. Alone.

FLASHBACK - INT. CHEAP MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT - ANOTHER YEAR

Zeke unlocks a battered motel door, throws down a grocery bag. A single candy bar and a can of chili spill out. The TV flickers quietly. He sits on the edge of the bed and doesn't bother turning on the lights.

Back in the sled, Rachel's eyes glisten. She reaches out, placing her hand gently on Zeke's arm.

He blinks, surprised by the touch.

RACHEL

Yeah, no. You're not doing the solo
Christmas thing this year.
We've got room. Deal with it.

She leans in and wraps her arms around him. Zeke stiffens at first... then, slowly, he lets himself breathe.

He leans into her warmth.

The sled drifts on through the night.

And for the first time in a long time—Zeke doesn't feel alone.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARN - DAY

A group of men, young and old, stand in a semicircle inside the barn. Zeke stands at the front, a straw dummy lying on the ground before him.

ZEKE

Alright, if someone collapses, the
first thing you do is check if
they're breathing. If they're not,
you start chest compressions.

The men exchange hesitant glances. Zeke kneels beside the dummy, placing his hands over its chest.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

You put your hands here. Lock your
elbows. Push hard and fast, like
this.

He demonstrates, pressing rhythmically on the dummy's chest.

DANIEL

How do you know it's working?

ZEKE

The goal is to keep the heart
pumping until help arrives. If you
do nothing, they die.

Silence. The men shift uncomfortably, but curiosity flickers
in some of their eyes.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

Who wants to give it a try?

A beat. Then, Daniel steps forward. Zeke nods, stepping back
as Daniel kneels and mimics his movements.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

Good. Keep going. You want about a
hundred compressions per
minute—think of it like a steady
rhythm, like a horse trotting.

Daniel works, sweat forming on his brow. The others watch
intently. Slowly, the resistance begins to fade.

JED

(gruffly)

Maybe there's some use in this.

JOSHUA

Saved Ezra's life...

PAUL

I guess can't hurt to learn
something new.

Zeke allows himself a small smile as more men step forward to
practice, one by one.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - EVENING

The fireplace crackles warmly, casting a golden glow over the
simple wooden table where Rachel, Daniel, Leah, Ezra, and
Rachel moves to bring the fresh bread out of the oven.
Daniel and Leah are setting the table. A Christmas wreath
with a red ribbon hangs on the door.

RACHEL

Zeke told me last night... he's never
had a real Christmas.

LEAH

Like never-ever? Not even a sad
tree with one ornament?

RACHEL

Nope. No tree. No gifts. Just him,
and maybe some gas station eggnog.

DANIEL

That's... bleak.

Rachel shakes her head.

RACHEL

His father left, his mom passed
when he was still young. After
that, he just drifted. He spent
most Christmases in rented rooms or
in his truck.

Ezra nods solemnly, his voice steady.

EZRA

That explains a lot. A man without
a foundation is always searching
for something to anchor him.

Miriam leans forward, smiling.

MIRIAM

Well... it's time he had a real
Christmas.

RACHEL

We're giving him the most
Christmas. Tree, carols, sweaters
that itch—he's getting the deluxe
package whether he likes it or not.

CUT TO:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun hangs low, casting a faint orange glow over the snow-
covered road. The trees stand bare, their branches black
veins against the pale sky.

Zeke is finishing up his work for the day, hauling firewood
onto a sled to deliver to the elders. His breath comes in
steady puffs, his coat dusted in sawdust and snow.

Then—the sound of an approaching car.

Zeke pauses, frowning. He turns just as a black car pulls up, engine purring unnaturally loud against the stillness of the Amish countryside.

The driver's side door swings open.

His father TOM TROYER steps out.

His presence is as sharp and dangerous as ever. His hair is slicked back, his clothes fancy.

Zeke tightens his grip on the sled rope.

ZEKE

What are you doing here?

Tom smirks, leaning against the car.

TOM

What, no hug for your old man?

Zeke doesn't answer.

Tom exhales sharply, shaking his head.

TOM (CONT'D)

Heard you came crawling back.
Thought I'd see it with my own
eyes.

Zeke keeps his stance firm.

ZEKE

I came home.

Tom lets out a bitter chuckle.

TOM

Home? This place ain't home. It's a
cage, boy. And you're locking
yourself back inside it.

Zeke meets his gaze, unmoved.

ZEKE

I don't see it that way.

Tom's smile fades slightly. He steps closer, lowering his voice.

TOM

You think these people love you?
You think they ever wanted you?

Zeke's jaw tightens.

TOM (CONT'D)
Your mother—she wasn't the saint
you think she was.

Zeke stiffens.

Tom tilts his head, watching him like a snake sizing up its prey.

TOM (CONT'D)
You ever wonder why I really left?

Silence.

Tom takes another step, his voice dropping to a cruel whisper.

TOM (CONT'D)
She cheated, Zeke. You were a
mistake. Not mine. Just a mess she
couldn't fix.

Zeke's stomach twists, but he doesn't move.

Tom leans in.

TOM (CONT'D)
I left because I wasn't gonna raise
another man's bastard. And now
you're running back to the same
people who whispered behind her
back, judged her, made her life
miserable. You're a fool.

Zeke takes a step back, his hands shaking—but not from fear.
From restraint.

He inhales deeply through his nose, then exhales slowly,
steady himself.

Tom watches, waiting for an explosion.

When it doesn't come, his smirk returns.

TOM (CONT'D)
You don't have to stay here, boy. I
can give you a way out. Money. A
car. Hot girls. A life where you
don't have to spend your days
shoveling snow and chopping
firewood for people who don't even
want you.

Zeke lifts his gaze, eyes clear.

ZEKE
I don't believe you.

Tom's smirk falters.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
And I don't want any of that.

Tom's face darkens.

TOM
You ungrateful little—

CRACK!

Tom swings. His fist connects with Zeke's jaw, snapping his head to the side.

Zeke stumbles back a step. His lip splits, blood trailing down his chin.

The cold wind rushes between them.

Zeke straightens. He lifts a hand to his mouth, wipes the blood away, then looks back at his father—calm.

Tom waits. Expects retaliation.

But it doesn't come.

Zeke shakes his head.

ZEKE
The old me would've hit you back.

Tom narrows his eyes.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
I will not fight you.

Tom lets out a scoff, but there's something almost uneasy in his expression. He steps back, brushing imaginary dust off his coat.

TOM
You really are your mother's son.

He turns, walks back to his car, and slams the door shut.

TOM (CONT'D)

Remember when you crashed that
truck trying to impress a girl?
You've always been a fool, Zeke

TOM (CONT'D)

What happened to that girl Zeke you
left her too.

The engine revs, tires spinning against the frozen road.

Zeke watches as the car disappears over the hill, fading into
the distance.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. FEED STORE - NIGHT

The old wooden steps creak under his weight as he trudges up
to the small apartment above the store.

CUT TO:

INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The tiny space is bare. A simple cot in the corner, a wooden
chair, a small table. No decorations, no signs of
warmth—except for one thing.

A handmade book sits on the table, its leather cover worn
soft from years of handling.

Zeke sets his gloves down, removes his coat, and picks up the
book. He runs his fingers over the inscription inside the
cover.

CLOSE-UP OF THE
INSCRIPTION:

"My dear Zeke, I will always love you."

BACK TO ZEKE

His throat tightens. He moves to the cot, sitting on the
edge, flipping through the pages.

Inside are personal letters from his mother—her handwriting
small and careful.

Memories rush back—

FLASHBACK - INT. AMISH HOME - KITCHEN - YEARS AGO

His mother's laughter fills the room. Young Zeke, no older than six, giggles as he flicks a dollop of whipped cream onto her nose. She gasps, feigning shock, before retaliating with a playful smear across his cheek.

MOTHER

Oh, now you've done it!

She tickles him, their laughter echoing through the warm, butter-scented kitchen.

CUT TO:

FLASHBACK - INT. ZEKE'S CHILDHOOD HOME - SUNDAY MORNING

His mother's gentle hands smooth down his unruly hair, fixing it before church.

MOTHER

There you are, my sweet boy.

She smiles, pressing a kiss to his forehead. He leans into her touch, safe, warm.

CUT TO:

BACK TO PRESENT - INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

He closes the book, pressing it against his chest. For a long time, he just sits there in the golden light of the single oil lamp.

Then, in a voice just above a whisper-

ZEKE

Miss you so much Mom...

His eyes close, exhaustion pulling him down. The flame flickers softly, casting a warm glow over his battered face.

Outside, the wind whispers through the trees.

The first true Christmas snow begins to fall.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. RACHEL'S BARN - MID-MORNING

The morning sun glistens off the snow-covered fields, casting long shadows across the land. The cold air bites, but inside the barn, the scent of fresh hay and horses brings warmth.

Zeke stands by the barn doors, rolling up his sleeves, preparing to start work. His breath fogs in the air.

He winces slightly as he lifts a saddle onto a wooden post. A dark bruise stains the side of his jaw, stretching toward his cheekbone.

Rachel approaches from the path, basket in hand, but the moment she sees him—she stops.

The bruise is impossible to miss.

She sets the basket down rushing over to him.

RACHEL
What happened to your face?

Zeke glances up, then looks away, adjusting the saddle.

ZEKE
Nothin'.

Zeke exhales, rubbing the back of his neck.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
It doesn't matter.

Rachel's brows knit together. She steps closer.

RACHEL
It does to me.

Then—he exhales. His shoulders drop.

ZEKE
It was my Dad.

Rachel's heart sinks.

RACHEL
He was here?

Zeke nods.

ZEKE
Came back just to remind me I was
an unwanted mistake.

Rachel's breath catches.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Told me my mom cheated. That he
left because he wasn't gonna raise
another man's son.

Rachel stares at him, floored.

Zeke lets out a hollow laugh, shaking his head.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Said I was a fool for coming back.
That he could offer me money, a
fast car, women—everything the
world says a man should want.

Rachel feels her throat tighten.

RACHEL
And you said?

Zeke lifts his gaze, steady.

ZEKE
I said no. I said I don't believe
him about Mom. I don't want those
things in my life anymore.

Rachel's eyes soften.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Then he hit me.

Zeke shrugs, as if it doesn't matter.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
But I didn't hit back.

Rachel steps forward, wrapping her arms his neck, holding him
tight.

RACHEL
You are wanted here.

Zeke passionately kisses her and she melts into his embrace
kissing him back.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

The winter light pours through the window. The kitchen smells amazing—brown sugar, apples, cinnamon. Dough's rolled out on the table. Rachel's focused, hands fast and clean. Zeke is across from her, sleeves rolled up, peeling apples like he's auditioning for a cooking show. A little too intense.

RACHEL

You know they don't judge apple slices for presentation, right?

ZEKE (NOT LOOKING UP)

ZEKE (STILL FOCUSED) (CONT'D)

Speak for yourself. I take pie aesthetics very seriously. I'm just saying—if this whole pie-baking thing doesn't work out, I've got options.

RACHEL (DEADPAN)

Not in pastry.

He peels one last slice with unnecessary flourish.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

Okay, lowkey impressed. Been practicing?

ZEKE

Nah. Just got a good teacher.

Rachel raises a brow. She dusts the dough with flour, starts folding the crust into the pie plate.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

I forgot how quiet it gets out here. No traffic. No phones blowing up. Just... pie.

RACHEL

You say that like pie's a bad thing.

ZEKE (WATCHING HER HANDS WORK)

Not at all. Honestly, it's kinda why I came back.

She pauses. Looks up slowly.

RACHEL

For pie?

ZEKE (SMILING)
Not just pie.

A look passes. She doesn't press—just nudges the tin toward him.

RACHEL
Alright then, city boy. Crimp the edges. Impress me.

ZEKE
What even is crimping?

RACHEL
Like folding—but make it fashion.

He starts mimicking her. It's wonky, but sincere.

RACHEL (EYEING HIS WORK) (CONT'D)
Okay. Honestly? Solid B+.

They laugh.

CUT TO:

INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

The small lamp flickers, its weak glow barely reaching the corners of the small room.

Zeke head in his hands forehead pressed against them.

ZEKE
Maybe I don't deserve to be here.
Maybe I don't deserve a second chance.

His eyes squeeze shut, and suddenly—

FLASHBACK - EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT

Neon lights buzz. The pavement is slick with rain, reflecting the glow of liquor store signs and cheap motel marquees. The air smells like gasoline and cigarettes.

A beat-up truck idles at the curb.

Zeke sits behind the wheel, hands gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles turn white.

Outside, just beyond the reach of the streetlight, Anna stands in the rain.

She's young—barely twenty —her coat too thin for the cold.
Her arms are crossed over her belly, hugging herself.

She leans down to the passenger window, knocking softly.

ANNA

Zeke... please. Don't leave me like
this. It's ours.

Zeke stares ahead, jaw clenched.

ZEKE

I tried to help you but you won't
change.

She taps the window again, harder this time.

ANNA

Don't leave me here.

His fingers twitch on the gear shift.

She's shaking now, her breath fogging the glass. Her eyes are
wide—pleading.

ANNA (CONT'D)

You said we'd figure it out
together. You promised.

Zeke swallows hard.

ZEKE

You're not taking care of yourself.
I can't do this anymore.

ANNA

Just go then!

His own reflection stares back at him in the rearview mirror.

ZEKE

Ok - no problem.

The words catch in his throat.

Then, before he can think too much—he slams the truck into
drive.

ANNA

Zeke, no—

Her voice gets swallowed by the sound of tires peeling away.

He doesn't look back.

He doesn't see her stumble forward, calling his name.

He just drives.

CUT TO:

BACK TO PRESENT - INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Zeke jolts awake, chest heaving. Sweat clings to his skin. He's still on the edge of the dream—hands clenched, body tight like it's bracing for impact.

He sits forward, elbows on knees, trying to breathe.

ZEKE

I left her.

I just walked away.

He swallows hard, voice cracking as he stares at the floor.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

What kind of person does that?

He closes his eyes. Beat.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

I can't be that guy anymore. I won't.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

The city hums with life, but it feels distant, almost alien. Neon signs buzz, and cars rumble by on wet asphalt. Zeke walks the streets, his Amish clothes and hat making him stand out like a shadow from another time. A crumpled piece of paper with an address is clenched in his hand, damp from the misty air.

He stops beneath a flickering streetlight, squinting at the numbers on the nearest building. He checks the paper, looks back at the building, and frowns. He's lost.

A group of teenagers on bikes whiz past, laughing, their music blaring from a speaker. Zeke steps out of their way, his boots splashing in a puddle. He exhales sharply, looking up at the towering buildings around him, then back down at the paper.

ZEKE
(muttering)
Twenty-seven... two-nine... where is
it?

He keeps walking, the city's sounds growing louder sirens in the distance, the hiss of a bus pulling to a stop. He approaches a corner where a man huddles in a doorway, wrapped in a tattered blanket. Zeke hesitates, then pulls a folded bill from his pocket and hands it to the man. The man nods silently in thanks, and Zeke moves on.

Finally, he stops in front of a nondescript apartment building. The windows barred. The number matches the one on the paper. Zeke stares at it for a long moment, his heart pounding in his chest.

He pushes the door open and steps inside.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING NIGHT

The hallway is dimly lit, the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. The air smells faintly of mildew and old takeout. Zeke glances at the mailboxes, his finger trailing over the faded nameplates. His hand stops on one that reads: A. RILEY.

He swallows hard and starts climbing the stairs. Each step creaks under his boots, the sound echoing in the quiet building. On the second floor, he finds her door. 2C.

He stands there, staring at the number for what feels like an eternity. His hand hovers near the doorframe before he finally knocks three soft raps that sound impossibly loud in the silence.

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - DAY

The apartment has peeling wallpaper, the smell of burnt coffee, an old Christmas card taped to the fridge. A thrift-store couch, a secondhand coffee table, and curtains that don't quite match.

The door opens slowly. Anna stands there, arms crossed, her face hard, unreadable. Zeke stands on the other side, hat in hand, holding a brown paper bag in his other.

ANNA
(flat)
What do you want?

ZEKE
(quietly)
To talk.

Her jaw tightens. For a long beat, she just stares at him. Finally, she steps aside.

ANNA
Five minutes.

He steps inside carefully, glancing around. She stays near the door, arms still crossed, like she's ready to throw him out if needed.

ZEKE
(gesturing to the bag)
I brought something. Just... some money.

He sets it gently on the table. She doesn't move.

ANNA
Money? That's what you think this is about?

ZEKE
No. It's not about the money. It's about you.

She lets out a sharp laugh, bitter and short.

ANNA
Oh, now it's about me?

He winces but doesn't look away.

ZEKE
I just need you to know I'm really sorry I left you. Nothing personal - this life is just not for me.

She turns back to him, her face hard again.

ANNA
Nothing personal! Ha! Why are you here now, Zeke? To make yourself feel better? To ease your guilt?

His voice is steady, though his eyes betray the weight he carries.

ZEKE
I needed to tell you how sorry I am.

She exhales sharply, shaking her head.

ANNA

You think that's enough? That you just say the words and everything's fine?

ZEKE

No. I don't expect you to forgive me.

They stand in silence, the tension thick and unmoving. Finally, she nods toward the bag on the table.

ANNA

Leave the money. And go.

He nods, turning to the door. He places his hat back on his head but pauses with his hand on the doorknob.

ZEKE

For what it's worth... I am really sorry.

ANNA

Just get out of here!
Don't ever come back here!

Her expression flickers—pain, anger. She doesn't respond. He opens the door and steps out, the door clicking shut behind him.

CUT TO:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The wind howls through the snow-covered trees. Snow falls fast and heavy, turning the dirt road into a frozen wasteland. The headlights of Zeke's truck cut through the storm as it crawls forward, tires slipping on the icy ground.

Inside the cab, Zeke grips the steering wheel tightly. His breath fogs the inside of the windshield.

Suddenly, a dim light flickers in the distance. Zeke squints, peering through the snowstorm. It's the faint glow of a lantern, swinging wildly in the wind.

ZEKE

What the heck...?

He slams on the brakes, the truck sliding to a stop. He throws it into park, grabs his coat, and steps out into the storm.

EXT. SNOW-COVERED FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Zeke pulls his coat tight around him, his boots crunching through the deep snow as he trudges toward the light. The wind stings his face, the cold biting at his fingers.

As he gets closer, he sees it—a HORSE-DRAWN BUGGY tipped on its side in the ditch, one wheel spinning uselessly. The lantern hangs from the side, barely clinging to its hook.

A WOMAN'S voice cuts through the storm—frantic, panicked.

WOMAN (O.S.)

Help! Please, someone help us!

Zeke picks up his pace, nearly slipping as he reaches the buggy. He sees the WOMAN, in her mid-30s, kneeling in the snow, desperately trying to pull a YOUNG BOY, no older than six, from the overturned buggy.

ZEKE

Hey! What happened?

The woman looks up, her face pale and streaked with tears.

WOMAN

The horse spooked and tipped us over! My son—he's trapped!

Zeke kneels beside the buggy, assessing the situation. The boy's leg is pinned under one of the wooden beams, and he's shivering violently, his face pale.

ZEKE

(to the boy)

Hey, buddy, I'm gonna get you out, Just hang on.

The boy nods weakly, tears streaming down his face.

Zeke turns to the woman.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

Can the horse move?

WOMAN

I-I think so, but I couldn't unhitch it by myself.

ZEKE

Alright, stay with your son. I'll handle the horse.

Zeke moves quickly to the front of the buggy. The horse is panicked, its eyes wide with fear. It stomps its hooves, the harness pulling taut.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Whoa, easy there. Easy.

He places a hand on the horse's neck, speaking softly.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
You're alright. I've got you.

The horse calms slightly, enough for Zeke to unhook the harness. He leads the horse a few steps away, tying it to a nearby tree.

He rushes back to the buggy, kneeling beside the boy. The woman is holding the boy's hand, her face full of fear.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Okay, I'm gonna lift the beam. When
I do, pull him out. Got it?

The woman nods, bracing herself.

Zeke positions himself over the beam, gripping it tightly. He takes a deep breath, his muscles straining as he lifts it off the boy's leg. The boy cries out in pain, but the woman quickly pulls him free.

WOMAN
I've got you, I've got you!

Zeke lets the beam drop, falling to his knees in the snow, panting.

ZEKE
Is he okay?

The woman checks the boy over, her hands shaking.

WOMAN
His leg... he's so cold...

Zeke nods, standing up and shrugging off his coat.

ZEKE
Wrap him in this.

The woman hesitates, then takes the coat, bundling it around the boy. Zeke looks back at the road, then to his buggy.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

My truck is just up the road. We'll
get him inside, out of the storm.

He bends down, scooping the boy into his arms. The boy's head rests against Zeke's chest, his small body trembling.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

(softly)

Hang in there, kid.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZEKE'S TRUCK- MINUTES LATER

Zeke reaches the truck, the wind howling around him. He opens the passenger door, carefully placing the boy inside. The woman climbs in after him, holding her son close.

Zeke slams the door shut, circling around to the driver's side. He climbs in.

Zeke drives forward, his eyes focused on the road as the storm rages on.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S KITCHEN - CHRISTMAS COOKIE EXCHANGE - DAY

Controlled chaos. Twenty women, elbows deep in dough, powdered with flour, voices overlapping, laughter spilling over like an overfilled mixing bowl.

The long farmhouse table is covered in cookies—gingerbread men, sugar cookies, peanut butter blossoms. A half-dozen children weave between skirts, stealing dough, ducking swats, and escaping like tiny criminals.

LEAH

(wielding a wooden spoon
like Thor's hammer)

If one more person says my cookies
could chip a tooth, I swear I'm
launching them—and the
cookies—straight out that window.

Laughter erupts around the room. Leah drops the spoon like she's been fatally insulted.

LEAH (CONT'D)
(mock-offended, clutching
her heart)
How dare you. These hands are
certified pastry artists.

Another burst of laughter. Then—

POOF. A cloud of flour sails across the kitchen, smacking
Rachel right on the shoulder.

Rachel freezes. Her lips twitch.

RACHEL
(stern, low)
Oh. You wanna play?

She grabs a handful of flour and whips it at Leah, who lets
out a screech and dives behind Miriam like she's taking cover
in a food fight war zone.

LEAH
(yelling from behind
cover)
I knew you were feral!

The room explodes with chaos. The Christmas cookie war has
officially begun.

Ask ChatGPT

Chaos erupts.

Flour flies.

Dish towels whip.

A rolling pin is lifted like a club.

From the corner, Miriam wipes flour from her sleeve, shaking
her head.

Rachel pauses covered in flour, looking around at the mess
and the warmth, the chaos, the joy.

A KNOCK at the door. Urgent.

Rachel wipes her hands and moves to answer.

INT. FRONT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

She opens it— Zeke stands there, soaked with snow. In his arms, a pale, injured boy, maybe 9, groans in pain. A flustered mother follows behind.

ZEKE

His leg's probably broken. Buggy tipped right up the road. You're the closest house.

RACHEL

(bringing them in)
Come in. Hurry.

INT. RACHEL'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The boy is gently laid on the couch. The women gather, concerned.

LEAH

His leg—look at the angle.

MOTHER

I think it's broken bad.

Zeke kneels by the boy, takes quick stock—calm and focused.

ZEKE

It's definitely broken.

RACHEL

What do you need?

ZEKE

Clean cloths. Something to elevate the leg. And ice—if you've got it. In this storm, I think we should call 911.

The women scatter into action. Towels, a cushion, and a bowl of snow are brought over fast.

Zeke lifts the leg gently and sets it on a folded quilt. The boy winces but doesn't scream.

ZEKE (CONT'D)

(to the boy, gently)
You're okay. I've seen worse.
You're one tough kid.

Rachel hands him the cloths.

He tightens the cloth, firm but careful.

RACHEL (SOFTLY)
You did good bringing them here.

Zeke looks up. Their eyes meet.

ZEKE
Anyone would've.

RACHEL
No. They wouldn't have.

FADE OUT.

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE KITCHEN - EVENING

The fireplace crackles, casting dancing shadows over the walls. The once-chaotic kitchen is now calm, cozy, the air still thick with the scent of cinnamon, butter, and molasses.

A mountain of Christmas cookies sits in the center of the wooden table—plates stacked high with gingerbread men, sugar cookies, peanut butter blossoms. A few cookies are noticeably missing—pilfered by small, sneaky hands.

At the far end of the table, two younger siblings Amos and Abigail

Miriam stands over them, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

MIRIAM (RAISING AN EYEBROW)
I counted those cookies.

Abigail and Amos glance at each other, cheeks puffed out like guilty chipmunks.

LEAH (GRINNING, SETTING DOWN A FRESH PLATE)
You two are about as subtle as a cow in a glass shop.

Amos tries to swallow quickly. Abigail chokes on a giggle.

The kids immediately snatch one more cookie each, then take off like lightning. Laughter follows them as the women settle into quiet conversation.

Rachel leans her head back, watching the fire flicker. Leah flops into the chair beside her, sighing dramatically.

RACHEL

You know Zeke's living above the feed store? That little attic room with the slanted ceiling? Guy can barely stand up straight.

Ezra and Miriam look at each other.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

He needs a real home. A place to settle.

EZRA

And what are you suggesting?

Rachel glances between them, heart pounding.

RACHEL

Our guest house! It's been sitting empty for years. He could take care of it—fix the roof before the snow sets in too deep.

Ezra sits back, rubbing his chin. He doesn't answer right away.

MIRIAM

Do you really think he's changed?

RACHEL

I do.

Ezra leans forward, resting his elbows on the table.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

Yeah. I really do.

EZRA

(slowly)

Alright. We'll offer it.

(beat)

But if he bails again—no second chances.

Rachel nods quickly.

RACHEL

Got it.

Ezra sighs, offering the smallest of smiles.

Rachel beams.

LEAH

It can be our Christmas present to him.

MIRIAM

Great idea!

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. VILLAGE - BACK OF GENERAL STORE - EVENING

The sun is fading behind the trees, casting long shadows over the snow-covered ground.

Zeke wipes his forehead, his breath curling in the icy air as he stacks the last crate onto the delivery sled. The day's work is nearly done.

Then—a voice behind him. NATE - ANNA'S BROTHER

NATE (O.S.)

Well, well. Look who's playin' humble farm boy.

Zeke stiffens.

Slowly, he turns.

Three young men stand there.

Their coats are worn, their boots caked in mud. One of them, Nate, smirks as he pulls a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it with a slow drag.

He knows them. Old drinking buddies.

ZEKE

Ain't got time for this.

He turns back to the sled.

NATE

You got time. 'Specially since we came all this way to see you.

The second guy, TYLER, chuckles.

TYLER

You really tryin' to play Country again? You're missing all the parties.

ZEKE

Leave.

Nate exhales a cloud of smoke, shaking his head.

NATE

Oh, we will. Just thought we'd remind you what happened to your girl. You know - my sister.

Zeke goes still.

Slowly, he turns back.

NATE (CONT'D)

Yah, the one you left behind.

NATE (CONT'D)

She waited for you, y'know. Thought you were comin' back.

Tyler shrugs.

TYLER

Guess she finally figured out you weren't. What kind of guy you are.

Zeke swallows, throat dry.

NATE

Thought we'd leave you a present in your apartment though.

Nate tosses his cigarette into the snow, smirking.

NATE (CONT'D)

Anyway. Have fun playin' farmer.

They turn, walking off into the cold.

Zeke doesn't move.

Their truck peels out.

He bolts up to his apartment.

CUT TO:

INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The place is a disaster. The couch is overturned, the kitchen drawers pulled out, their contents spilled across the floor.

Shards of broken plates and glasses glitter in the faint moonlight streaming through the window. The faint smell of stale beer and something burned lingers in the air.

Zeke steps inside, his heart sinking further with every step. He leans against the wall for support.

In the corner, a small pile of debris catches his eye—papers, books. He stumbles toward it, kneeling carefully as he sifts through the mess. His fingers stop on the worn leather-bound journal from his mother.

Zeke sinks to the floor, holding the journal tightly to his chest.

He opens the journal carefully, his fingers tracing the faded handwriting on the first page.

CLOSE-UP: THE PAGE

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Zeke closes the journal, pressing it against his forehead, his eyes squeezed shut.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. YODER HOUSE - EVENING

The wind howls outside, rattling the wooden shutters and whistling through the cracks of the old farmhouse. Inside, the fireplace roars, casting flickering light across the small gathering.

Ezra sits in his wooden chair, hands wrapped around a cup of hot cider, while Miriam and Rachel fold blankets near the hearth. Leah and Daniel are on the floor playing with the younger kids.

The storm pounds against the walls, shaking the very foundation of the house.

RACHEL

This storm came faster than they
said it would.

Miriam nods, glancing toward the window.

MIRIAM

The worst of it's just beginning.

CRACK!

A gust of wind slams into the house, making the shutters bang violently against the frame. Everyone jumps at the sound.

Rachel, standing near the window, suddenly gasps.

RACHEL

The barn!

The others turn toward her.

Rachel's eyes are wide, fixed on something outside.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

The barn door's blown open!

Daniel strides to the window, peering out. Sure enough, the heavy wooden doors hang open, swinging wildly in the wind. Inside, the lantern light flickers dangerously, illuminating the panicked animals.

RACHEL (CONT'D)

The animals—we have to keep them inside!

Ezra shakes his head.

EZRA

It's too dangerous, Rachel. The wind is too strong!

But Rachel is already grabbing her coat.

RACHEL

We can't just leave them to the storm!

She rushes toward the door.

LEAH

Rachel, wait!

Too late—Rachel flings the door open, and the wind immediately rushes in, nearly knocking her back. Snow whips into the house as she pushes forward, disappearing into the blizzard.

For a second, everyone freezes, stunned.

EZRA (TO DANIEL)

Go get help! Get Zeke!

CUT TO:

EXT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The wind howls through the narrow alley, snow swirling like angry ghosts. Daniel stumbles up to Zeke's apartment building, his coat pulled tight against the storm. He freezes when he sees the busted door hanging ajar, the faint flicker of light from inside casting jagged shadows across the snow-covered ground.

INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

The place is still in shambles. Zeke sits slumped against the wall, his mother's journal clutched tightly in his hands. The storm rages outside, snow drifting in through a broken window. The cold seems to have seeped into everything.

Suddenly, Daniel bursts through the doorway, his face pale from the cold and urgency.

DANIEL

Zeke! What happened here!?

Zeke jolts, looking up, startled. Daniel's coat is coated in snow, his breath coming out in gasps.

ZEKE

Just a visit from some old friends.

DANIEL

Definitely not your friends.

ZEKE

What's up—

DANIEL

(cutting him off, voice
frantic)

The storm's torn through the farm.
The barn door's gone, animals are
loose in the snow. We need all the
help we can get.

Zeke looks around his wrecked apartment, hesitating for a brief moment.

ZEKE

Let's go.

He pushes himself to his feet, shaking off his exhaustion, and grabs his coat.

CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE ROAD - NIGHT

In Daniel's truck - The storm has worsened. The wind howls like a living thing, driving snow into their faces. Zeke and Daniel fight their way through the icy roads.

CUT TO:

EXT. YODER BARN

They press forward, heads down against the biting cold, their breaths visible in the freezing air. Daniel stumbles, falling into the snow. Zeke grabs his arm, pulling him back to his feet.

ZEKE

You good?

DANIEL

(nodding, shivering)

Keep going.

The two push on, determined.

CUT TO:

INT. YODER'S FARM - NIGHT

The barn is in chaos. One door hangs by a single hinge, slamming against the frame in the storm. The wind howls through the broken structure, scattering hay and snow across the barnyard. Cows and horses wander, panicked and confused.

DANIEL

Gate's busted! The horses are heading for the river!

ZEKE

Not if I get to them first.

MONTAGE:

- Zeke barrels into the blizzard, nearly losing his footing as he stumbles through knee-deep snow. One of the horses rears, eyes wild, nostrils flaring.

- He lunges forward, grabbing the reins just as the animal jerks away. Zeke's boots skid in the snow, his muscles straining as he fights to steady the massive creature.

– Another horse breaks loose, galloping in a blind panic. Zeke pivots, throws his arm around its neck, slipping in the icy slush. They both go down—hard.

– Gritting his teeth, Zeke scrambles to his knees, snow clinging to his coat and face. He gets a firm grip on the reins and growls low, calming the animal with sheer will.

– Inside the barn, Daniel slams his shoulder into the door as the wind tries to rip it from its hinges. Boards clatter to the ground. He fumbles with frozen fingers, wrapping rope around the beam and pulling tight with every ounce of strength.

– Back outside, Zeke leads both horses toward the barn, jaw clenched, guiding them through the chaos. Another gust tears at him, nearly knocking him sideways, but he doesn't stop.

– Daniel manages to wedge a beam across the door. Just as Zeke reaches the barn, Daniel throws it open. Snow blasts inside. Zeke shoves the horses through, slamming the gate behind them.

Breathless, soaked in snow and sweat, Zeke meets Daniel's eyes..

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

The storm is raging. The wind roars whipping snow across the fields in thick, blinding sheets.

Rachel struggles forward, boots sinking into the deep snow, hands shielding her face from the stinging ice.

She reaches the barn, grabbing onto the edge of the swinging door to keep from being blown over. She is trying to get the cows back inside.

ZEKE

Rachel....get inside!!!!

Inside, the horses are rearing, the cows shifting nervously, their breath fogging the freezing air.

Rachel fights the wind, trying to push the heavy door closed, but it's too strong.

Then—strong hands grip the door beside hers.

Rachel whips around.

Zeke's coat is covered in snow, his face red from the cold.

RACHEL
I can help!

Zeke grits his teeth, bracing against the wind.

Together, they push against the door, their muscles straining as the wind fights against them.

CUT TO:

INT. BARN - CONTINUOUS

With one final shove, the door slams shut.

The wind screams outside, but the barn holds steady. The storm is locked out—for now.

Rachel leans back against the door, catching her breath. Zeke stands beside her, chest heaving, snow melting in his hair.

The animals shift, calming under the dim flicker of the lantern.

ZEKE
You're out of your mind, you know that?

RACHEL (GRINNING, BREATHLESS)
Takes one to know one.

A beat. Tension lingers—charged, unspoken.

Then the barn door creaks open again.

Daniel steps in, brushing snow off his coat.

DANIEL
Rach, come on. We gotta check on the others.

ZEKE
I'll stay. Get these guys settled.

DANIEL
(quick nod)
Alright. Don't freeze in here.

Zeke gives a faint smile. Rachel hesitates for half a second before following Daniel out. She glances back once. Zeke's already moving toward the animals.

CUT TO:

EXT. YODER BARN - NIGHT - BLIZZARD RAGING

The storm is relentless snow whips through the air. Inside the barn, Zeke is alone, struggling against the wind to secure the doors.

ZEKE (GRITTING HIS TEETH)
Come on. Hold—hold—damn it, HOLD!

He grabs the wooden latch, trying to brace it closed, but the force of the storm is too strong.

Another powerful gust slams against the barn, sending a flurry of snow and ice through the gaps in the wood.

Zeke staggers back, his body already numb from the cold.

He grips the beam, his breath coming in sharp gasps, visible in the freezing air.

Through the swirling snow, the shadows of the horses shift nervously in their stalls.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Just a little longer.

His fingers, red and stiff from the cold, work to tie the rope around the latch.

Then—the wind roars again.

A sharp crack splits through the night as a beam above him shifts, sending a pile of heavy snow crashing down.

Zeke tries to move, but the weight hits his back and shoulders, knocking him forward.

He lands hard on the frozen ground, face-down in the snow.

For a moment—everything is still. The only sound is the brutal wind.

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Inside the farmhouse, Rachel paces by the window, her arms wrapped around herself.

She bites her lip, glancing toward Miriam, who is setting blankets by the fire.

RACHEL
Zeke should have been back by now.

Leah looks up, frowning.

Rachel turns to the window again.

Snow whirls violently outside. The barn is barely visible.

Something in her chest tightens.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
I'll check.

Before anyone can protest, Rachel throws on her coat and grabs a flashlight.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARN

As she approaches she is frightened by a horse running towards her. She sees the barn door open again. She can't find Zeke.

RACHEL
Zeke?

No answer.

She lifts the flashlight higher—and then she sees it.

A dark shape in the snow.

Rachel gasps, racing forward.

She drops to her knees beside Zeke, grabbing his face with her gloved hands.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Zeke, open your eyes! Please!

His lips are blue, his skin pale. Snow clings to his hair and coat, his breath barely visible. She is desperately digging him out of the snow.

Panic flares in her chest.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
You are not dying out here!

She presses her hands to his chest, shaking him.

His eyelids flutter, a weak groan escaping.

ZEKE (MUMBLING)
R-Rachel...?

Relief rushes through her, but she doesn't have time to waste.

RACHEL
Can you stand?

He tries, but his legs give out beneath him.

Rachel grits her teeth, hooking her arms under his.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Move!

She drags him through the snow, struggling against the wind.

Zeke leans against her, barely conscious, his breathing shallow.

After what feels like an eternity, they reach the farmhouse.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Rachel bursts through the door, gasping for breath, dragging Zeke inside.

Miriam, Ezra, Leah and Daniel rush over, eyes wide.

LEAH
What happened?!

Rachel drops to her knees, fumbling to remove Zeke's wet coat.

RACHEL
Get blankets!

Ezra grabs firewood, stoking the fire to full heat.

Rachel presses her hands to Zeke's freezing cheeks, her own shaking.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Zeke, you have to wake up.

His eyes barely open. His voice is weak.

ZEKE
You... found me.

She grabs his hands, rubbing warmth back into them.

RACHEL
I always will.

His fingers twitch slightly, and she exhales in relief.

CUT TO:

INT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT - CHRISTMAS MORNING

Bright golden morning streaks across the room.

Zeke sits on the edge of his cot, buttoning his coat. He looks at his mother's journal, still resting on the table where he placed it the night before.

He opens it to read:

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit"

Next to the book is a present - wrapped in simple paper and string. He picks up the book and the present and slips it into his jacket. He is smiling.

Opening the door, he steps into the crisp morning air.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZEKE'S APARTMENT.

Snow blankets the ground, untouched. Zeke pulls his coat tighter around him, staring out into the stillness. Then—a FIGURE steps from the shadows of a nearby tree. It's Tom Troyer, his father, rugged, weary, and out of place in his modern coat and boots.

Zeke stiffens but doesn't turn. He swallows hard before speaking.

ZEKE
You shouldn't be here.

TOM
I had to see you, son.

ZEKE
So now I'm your son again?

Tom steps closer, his boots crunching against the snow. Zeke finally looks at him, his expression guarded, but there's a flicker of longing—deep down, he's still that boy who once idolized his father.

TOM
I got a house with heat that kicks in before your feet even touch the floor in the morning. A truck that takes me wherever I wanna go. That's freedom, Zeke. And you could have it too.

ZEKE
(quietly)
That's not what I want.

TOM
No future beyond farm chores. You could have more. You deserve more.

Tom falters.

ZEKE
The truth is, you left. You wanted more, and that's your choice. But don't stand here and tell me I should want the same just because you did. I don't hate you Dad. I just don't want the same things.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
You think that's freedom but you are trapped by wanting things. By your loneliness. That isn't freedom.

TOM
Zeke—

ZEKE
(steadfast)
No. I know who I am. And it's not who you are.

He looks past Zeke toward the house, the flickering light from the windows reflecting in his eyes.

TOM
You really gonna stay?

ZEKE
I am staying.

He takes a step back into the shadows.

TOM
Then Merry Christmas, son.

TOM (CONT'D)
I'm sorry for hitting you.

ZEKE
It is what it is.

ZEKE (CONT'D)
Merry Christmas, Dad.

The word Dad is soft, almost involuntary, but it holds weight. Tom hears it, hesitates for just a moment... steps towards Zeke and gives him a hug, then turns and disappears down the road.

CUT TO:

EXT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - CHRISTMAS MORNING

The porch is lit with soft golden light and trimmed with pine. Rachel, Leah, Ezra, Miriam, little Amos, Abigail, and Daniel are gathered outside, bundled in winter coats and scarves, steam rising from mugs.

Zeke approaches, a little uncertain. His boots crunch the snow.

Rachel steps forward, eyes bright.

RACHEL
Took you long enough.

Zeke Traffic was brutal. You know-sleigh congestion.

The group chuckles. Ezra gestures him closer.

EZRA
You coming in, or just here for the porch view?

Zeke pauses, nerves flickering.

Rachel reaches for his hand. Their fingers lock.

RACHEL
Come on. It's Christmas.

She gives his hand a gentle tug. He follows.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Come on.

Zeke follows.

CUT TO:

INT. RACHEL'S FARMHOUSE - CHRISTMAS MORNING

A modest pine tree stands in the front room near the hearth, trimmed with hand-strung popcorn garlands, dried orange slices, and wooden stars carved by hand. Beneath it, a few gifts wrapped in brown paper and tied with red yarn rest on a quilted blanket.

Along the mantel, fresh evergreen boughs are laid across, dotted with cranberries, pinecones, and a few small felt ornaments the kids made. A single red candle flickers at each end. Stockings—simple, handmade, wool—hang with care.

The kitchen table is set for breakfast with stoneware mugs, cloth napkins, and a basket of warm biscuits. A jar of spiced apple butter, a plate of sugar cookies shaped like stars, and a steaming pot of coffee complete the spread.

AMOS (10) tears into his package, pulling out a hand-carved wooden slingshot.

AMOS (GRINNING)
No way! This is sick! Thanks
Daniel.

Daniel chuckles, ruffling Amos' hair.

Rachel's younger siblings unwrap their gifts—cloth dolls, wooden animals, hand-sewn mittens. Their small fingers smoothing over the textures with quiet awe.

Miriam hands Ezra a thick wool scarf, knitted in deep blues.

MIRIAM
You need something to keep that
stubborn neck warm.

Ezra studies it, then gives a slow, approving nod.

EZRA

I was thinking that might be you.

The room fills with warm laughter.

Rachel unwraps her gift slowly. Inside is a small wooden heart, smooth and simple. On the back, carved in Zeke's blocky handwriting:

"Thank you for leading me home."

She freezes. Breath catching.

RACHEL

Zeke...

She looks up—eyes glassy. He shifts, suddenly awkward.

ZEKE

I'm better with wood than words.

EZRA (CLEARING HIS THROAT)

Well, seems like the perfect moment...

Everyone turns.

EZRA (CONT'D)

We'd like to offer you the guesthouse. It's yours, if you want it.

ZEKE (STUNNED)

Wait, seriously?

DANIEL

Yeah. A guy needs a place to land. You've earned it.

Rachel steps closer, touching Zeke's arm gently.

RACHEL

Let's go see it. I think you'll like the view.

A beat. He nods, overwhelmed.

DANIEL

Alright, people—boots on. Let's go break in Zeke's new house.

Laughter again as coats fly on and the whole crew bundles up, heading out into the cold.

CUT TO:

EXT. SNOW-COVERED PATH - CHRISTMAS AFTERNOON

The world is pure and untouched, the fresh snow glistening like diamonds under the afternoon sun. The storm from the night before has passed, leaving behind a clear blue sky, crisp air, and a landscape that looks like something out of a storybook.

A procession moves happily along the path from the farmhouse to the smaller guest house.

Their boots crunch over the snow, their breaths visible in the cold air, laughing as they go.

EXT. GUEST HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The small home stands waiting, its wooden walls dusted with fresh snow. The front door has a beautiful pine wreath, decorated with red berries and a red ribbon.

CUT TO:

INT. GUESTHOUSE

The moment Zeke steps in, he stops.

The small home glows with warmth.

A handmade quilt is draped over the rocking chair, the deep blues and rich reds standing out against the wooden walls.

A pine garland hangs above the mantle, simple but beautiful, the fresh scent filling the air. A fire is crackling in the fireplace.

The table is set with a warm oil lamp, a fresh loaf of bread, and a jar of homemade preserves. Cheeses, and other dishes.

A small wooden chest sits at the foot of the bed, filled with extra blankets.

Zeke turns slowly, taking it all in.

His hands shake slightly. He's never had anything like this.

Never had a home prepared just for him.

Never had a place where he belonged.

Rachel steps beside him, her voice soft.

RACHEL
We wanted it to feel like
Christmas.

ZEKE
If this is what Christmas feels
like, then I'm all in!

Zeke nods, blinking quickly, trying to hide the emotion rising in his chest.

Leah wraps an arm around the younger siblings as they giggle, peeking inside. Miriam and Ezra stand near the doorway, watching quietly.

Ezra clears his throat, speaking firmly.

EZRA
You've worked hard. You're a good
man.

He turns, looking at Rachel holds her hands.

His voice is rough, raw with emotion.

ZEKE
Without you, I wouldn't have had
the courage to have come back.

Rachel smiles softly. They embrace.

CUT TO:

INT. GUESTHOUSE - ZEKE'S NEW HOME - NIGHT

A low fire glows in the hearth. The room is warm, lived-in, quiet.

Zeke stands in front of a shelf, holding his mother's old journal. He places it on the shelf.

Rachel leans against the doorframe, watching him.

RACHEL
So... unpacked one thing. You're
basically moved in.

ZEKE
I like to pace myself.

She walks over, eyes the shelf.

RACHEL
Bold choice putting it next to the
cookbook.

ZEKE
You know the importance of pie in
my life.

She steps beside him.

RACHEL
Didn't expect you to stick around
past the pie.

She lifts an eyebrow.

ZEKE
... this place, this life—
(pause)

RACHEL
Christmas has a way of reminding us
what actually matters.

Beat.

ZEKE
I'm not leaving again.

She walks over. Stands beside him.

RACHEL
Good. I need help with the chickens
at dawn.

They laugh and embrace.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Merry Christmas, Zeke.

ZEKE
Merry Christmas, Rachel.

The fire crackles. Snow drifts outside.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END