

THE LAST CHRISTMAS MEMORY

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - LATE AFTERNOON - CHRISTMAS EVE

A blanket of fresh snow swallows a winding two-lane road. A family SUV winds its way through the trees, tires crunching. A soft glow of golden sunset filters through the branches.

INT. SUV - CONTINUOUS

CLAIRE (12), bright-eyed, thoughtful, stares out the window. Her parents, MARK (40s, practical) and JESSICA (40s, warm), sit up front.

In the back seat are her cousins: LUCY (6), full of questions, and BEN (8), glued to a tablet.

Lucy looks up from a picture book.

LUCY

Are there bears? Mom said Grandpa once fought a bear up here.

JESSICA

(smiling)

He scared one away by yelling at it. He didn't "fight" it.

BEN

That's still kinda cool.

Claire smiles to herself - Grandpa Walt is the keeper of tall tales.

EXT. LAKESIDE CABIN - LATER

A postcard-perfect A-frame cabin sits nestled against a frozen lake. Wreaths in the windows. Smoke from a chimney. Christmas perfection.

The SUV parks. Another family truck is already there.

The doors open. Kids spill out, running through the snow.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - LATER

Warmth. A roaring fire. White Christmas lights twinkling across garlands. Several FAMILY MEMBERS bustle around, unloading bags and gifts.

GRANDPA WALT (early 70s), rugged, kind, eyes soft but distant, sits in an armchair watching the chaos.

He smiles... but his eyes flicker with momentary confusion.

Claire notices from across the room. She gives him a gentle wave.

Walt recognizes her – his face lights up.

WALT
There's my star.

Claire walks over, hugging him.

CLAIRE
I missed you, Grandpa.

WALT
I missed...
(beat, searching)
I missed all of you.

It's subtle. But the pause is there.

INT. CABIN – DINING ROOM – EVENING

The long wooden table is filled with food, chatter, laughter. The family digs in.

Walt sits between Jessica and Claire. He tries to follow conversations but there's too many voices.

Ben talks loudly about video games. Lucy argues about who gets the last roll. Adults laugh over wine.

Walt blinks, overwhelmed. He picks up his fork, then sets it down. He forces a smile.

A moment... then:

WALT
I'm... just going to freshen up.

He pushes his chair back and walks away.

Lucy watches him go.

LUCY
Why does Grandpa forget stuff all
the time?

The table quiets.

Jessica exchanges a look with Mark.

She turns to the children with gentleness.

JESSICA

Kids... Grandpa's memory isn't working like it used to. He has something called pre-dementia.

Lucy tilts her head.

LUCY

Is that like having a cold?

Soft laughter around the table.

JESSICA

No, honey. It just means he has good days... and foggy days. But he's still Grandpa.

Claire takes this in quietly. She's old enough to understand – and it only deepens her concern, not her fear.

She looks toward the hallway where Walt disappeared... thoughtful.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – LATER THAT NIGHT

The cabin is quiet now. Most family members are in their rooms. Only the glow of the Christmas tree and the crackling fireplace light the room.

Claire tiptoes downstairs, unable to sleep.

She freezes when she sees–

Walt, sitting alone by the fire, hot cocoa steaming in his hands. Bathed in warm golden light. Peaceful.

Claire smiles.

She approaches softly.

CLAIRE

Couldn't sleep either?

Walt looks up. His eyes are sharper... clearer... present.

WALT

(smiles)

Not tonight.

(MORE)

WALT (CONT'D)

Something about Christmas Eve keeps
the old gears turning.

Claire sits beside him.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... what was your favorite
Christmas?

Walt exhales slowly... a smile tugging at the corner of his
mouth.

WALT

Oh... now that's a story.

His eyes drift toward the tree... and the lights begin to
twinkle brighter.

WALT (CONT'D)

Maybe... maybe I'll tell you about
the very first one I remember.

Claire leans forward, excited.

WALT (CONT'D)

It was... well, it must've been...
1953.

The fireplace CRACKS loudly -

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. SMALL MIDWEST TOWN - 1953 - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Snow. Laughter. A young boy races down the street.

EXT. SMALL MIDWEST TOWN - 1953 - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Snow falls on a Norman Rockwell MAIN STREET. Kids in wool
coats pull sleds. A Salvation Army SANTA rings his bell on
the corner.

A SMALL BOY (7), in an oversized coat and knit cap, races
past, dragging a home-made sled.

This is YOUNG WALT.

His nose is red, his grin wide. He almost wipes out, then
recovers, laughing.

YOUNG WALT

Sorry, Mister!

He darts around the Santa, nearly colliding.

SANTA
Whoa there, cowboy!

Young Walt keeps running, full of Christmas Eve energy.

WALT (V.O.)
Back then, Christmas didn't come in
delivery trucks. It lived in the
snow... in the way the whole town
slowed down for one night.

Young Walt turns down a side street.

EXT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - 1953 - DAY

A small, modest HOUSE with a crooked porch. A handmade wreath hangs on the door.

Smoke curls from the chimney.

Young Walt drops his sled, charges up the steps, FLINGS the door open-

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS - 1953

A cramped, cozy kitchen. His MOTHER (30s, apron on, hair up) battles a ROAST in the oven. Pots bubble on the stove.

MOTHER
Wally! Close that door, I'm not
heating the whole neighborhood!

He slams it shut, still grinning.

YOUNG WALT
Ma, they put the big star on top of
the tree in front of the
courthouse! It's huge!

MOTHER
(distracted)
That's nice, sweetheart. Wash your
hands. And see if your father's
finished "fixing" the lights.

She rolls her eyes fondly.

Young Walt scrubs his hands in the sink, then hurries out.

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER - 1953

A small, slightly crooked CHRISTMAS TREE stands in the corner. Tinsel hangs in clumps. A RADIO plays a crackly version of "JINGLE BELLS."

On the floor: a tangled mess of COLORED LIGHTS.

Walt's FATHER (30s, work shirt, suspenders) sits cross-legged among the cords, cigarette dangling from his lips, a FUSE in hand.

FATHER

I swear these things are plotting
against me.

YOUNG WALT

Did you fix 'em?

FATHER

(grimly hopeful)
Plug it in.

Young Walt hurries to the outlet, plugs in the cord.

The lights FLICKER... then all but ONE go dark with a sad little POP.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Well, we got one. That's progress.

Young Walt laughs.

YOUNG WALT

Maybe it's the leader.

FATHER

Yeah, well, the leader's got a lazy
army.

He pulls the plug, resigned.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Go get the box of ornaments, champ.
Lights or no lights, we're not
having a naked tree.

Young Walt salutes, runs off.

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - HALL CLOSET - 1953

Young Walt stretches up to pull down a dusty, taped-up BOX marked "XMAS."

As he lifts it, the bottom starts to give.

YOUNG WALT

Uh oh—

The box TEARS. ORNAMENTS tumble out in SLOW MOTION.

Young Walt gasps.

One GLASS ORNAMENT falls—

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

—Claire watches, listening intently by the fire. The flicker of the flames plays across her face.

CLAIRE

Did you drop it?

Walt smiles, eyes distant but vivid.

WALT

Shattered it into a hundred pieces.
Thought your grandma was gonna cry.

He turns his gaze back to the tree, lost in the memory.

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM - 1953

The ornament SHATTERS on the floor.

Young Walt stares at the glittering shards like they're radioactive.

YOUNG WALT

I'm dead.

Mother rushes in, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

MOTHER

What happened?

YOUNG WALT

I dropped Grandma's angel ball.

He winces, bracing for impact.

Instead, Mother sighs, kneels down next to him.

MOTHER

Are you bleeding?

YOUNG WALT
(confused)

No...

MOTHER
Then we're fine.

She gently pulls him back from the glass.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
Some things can't be fixed. But
they can be swept up.

She smiles.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
Besides... that ornament's seen
every Christmas since I was a
little girl. Maybe it's tired.

Young Walt looks at her, surprised by the kindness.

YOUNG WALT
We... we can get you a new one.

MOTHER
(soft)
I already did.

She reaches into her apron pocket and pulls out a SMALL,
WRAPPED BUNDLE.

Young Walt's eyes widen.

YOUNG WALT
But it's not Christmas yet.

MOTHER
Well... sometimes Christmas comes a
little early.

She presses it into his hands.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
Go on. Open it by the tree.

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - 1953 - MOMENTS LATER

Young Walt sits cross-legged in front of the crooked tree and
unwraps the bundle carefully.

Inside is a NEW ORNAMENT: simple, round, with a little
painted HOUSE and TINY GOLD LIGHTS.

YOUNG WALT
It's... ours.

MOTHER (O.S.)
Thought maybe it was time we had
one that looked like home.

Father enters, wiping his hands, having surrendered to the
evil lights.

FATHER
Well? How's it look?

Young Walt stands, very serious.

He hangs the ornament himself, right in the center of the
tree.

The RADIO swells with "I'LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS."

Young Walt steps back, admiring it.

YOUNG WALT
It looks... perfect.

Father slips an arm around Mother.

FATHER
Lights or no lights... we did all
right.

They share a quiet family moment.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Back to Walt and Claire by the fire.

Claire looks at the PRESENT-DAY TREE, spotting an OLD, FADED
ORNAMENT that resembles the one he just described.

CLAIRE
Is that it?

She points.

Walt squints, following her gaze.

He sees it. The old ornament. Weathered, but still hanging
dead center.

A soft, almost boyish smile spreads across his face.

WALT
I'll be damned.

He chuckles.

WALT (CONT'D)
Your grandma... she snuck that thing
onto every tree we ever had.

Claire studies the ornament with new reverence.

CLAIRE
I never knew the story.

WALT
(gentle)
That's the thing about stories...
they're still there. Even when the
lights go out for a while.

He taps his temple lightly.

Claire's eyes glisten, but she covers it with a half-smile.

CLAIRE
Tell me another one.

Walt leans back, the firelight dancing.

He glances at a PHOTO on the mantle – a younger Walt in uniform, flanked by his parents, a tree behind them.

WALT
All right...
(beat)
How about the Christmas before I
left for a place I never should've
gone?

Claire leans in.

CLAIRE
Vietnam?

Walt nods slowly.

The crackle of the fire grows louder, carrying us into—

EXT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - BACKYARD - NIGHT - LATE 1960s
(FLASHBACK)

Snow falls over an older, slightly worn version of the same house. A string of lights flickers on the eaves, some burned out.

Teenage WALT (late teens), hair longer, in a worn jacket, stands alone, smoking, staring up at the sky.

The sound of distant Christmas music drifts from inside.

EXT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - BACKYARD - NIGHT - LATE 1960s
(FLASHBACK)

Teenage WALT (18), lean, restless, stares up at the cold December sky. His breath clouds in the air. He flicks away the last of his cigarette.

Through the window behind him, the glow of a CHRISTMAS TREE flickers. Laughter from his family carries faintly.

Walt isn't laughing.

The back door CREAKS open. His FATHER (40s now, more tired in the eyes) steps out holding two mugs.

He joins Walt, hands him a mug.

Walt nods a thanks, blows on the steam.

FATHER
You're quiet tonight.

TEEN WALT
Just thinking.

FATHER
That can be dangerous.

He gives a small smile, trying to keep it light.

Walt doesn't return it.

TEEN WALT
Got my orders.

Father stiffens... but he nods slowly.

FATHER
Vietnam?

Walt nods once.

TEEN WALT
January sixth.
(beat)
Merry Christmas, right?

Father takes this in. He doesn't flinch, but it hits him deep.

FATHER
You scared?

Walt shrugs, but it's a lie.

TEEN WALT
They say most guys don't see
anything their first few weeks.
That it's just... waiting.

FATHER
Waiting can kill you same as
anything.

Walt cracks the faintest grin.

TEEN WALT
Thanks, Dad. Really helping.

Father nudges him gently.

FATHER
You'll come home. You hear me?

Walt stares ahead, trying to believe it.

TEEN WALT
Mom cried.

FATHER
That's her job.
(then, soft)
Mine is to tell you the truth.

Walt looks at him.

FATHER (CONT'D)
You'll go. You'll do what you're
asked. And then one day...
(steady)
One day you'll be back here again.
And Christmas will be loud and
messy and normal. Just like always.

Walt absorbs the words. They help – more than he'll ever
admit.

From inside, his MOTHER'S VOICE rings out:

MOTHER (O.S.)
Boys! Get in here! We're doing
pictures before the tree falls
over!

Father chuckles.

FATHER

She's been saying that since '53.

Walt smiles – genuinely this time.

Father wraps an arm around his shoulder and leads him in.

We HOLD on the empty backyard for a beat... Snow drifting. Quiet. A sense that something precious is slipping away.

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE – LIVING ROOM – MOMENTS LATER – 1960s

The tree is bigger now, but just as crooked. Siblings wrangle with garland. Mom fixes everyone's collars.

Teen Walt steps inside. His mother hurries to him, straightening his shirt, brushing a lock of hair aside, her eyes shining with equal parts pride and fear.

MOTHER

Smile, sweetheart. Someday you'll want to remember this.

Walt does smile – for her.

A CAMERA FLASH freezes the moment.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Walt sits quietly, staring into the fire. Claire watches him, moved.

CLAIRE

You were brave.

Walt shakes his head softly.

WALT

No. I was eighteen. There's a difference.

Claire studies him with a deepening respect.

CLAIRE

Did you get to come home for Christmas after that?

A long silence.

Walt's jaw tightens.

Not yet. Not this memory.

WALT
(gently deflecting)
That's... a different story.

He reaches toward a SMALL WOODEN BOX on the table beside him.
An old, worn keepsake.

He opens it – inside are several small items:

a dog tag

a faded matchbook

a photo of a small platoon

and a folded paper star

Claire leans closer.

CLAIRE
What's that?

Walt lifts the PAPER STAR – edges yellowed, creased.

WALT
My sister made it. She handed it to
me the night before I shipped out.
Said it'd keep me on the right
path.

CLAIRE
Did it?

Walt turns the star gently between his fingers.

WALT
Depends on the day.

He sets it back in the box, closes it.

Walt draws a breath – this next memory lighter, gentler.

WALT (CONT'D)
I'll tell you a different one.
Something... easier.

Claire nods, giving him the space.

CLAIRE
Okay, Grandpa. Tell me.

He closes his eyes... letting another earlier Christmas rise in his mind.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - CHRISTMAS MORNING - 1970s (FLASHBACK)

A tiny apartment kitchen. Cheap decorations. A mismatched tree with paper chains.

Young Dad Walt (20s now), home from the service, sits cross-legged on the floor with two TODDLERS climbing across him.

Wrapping paper everywhere.

This is a happy Walt, lighter, younger, full of life.

He lifts one toddler into the air and roars like a lion. They shriek with joy.

BACK TO PRESENT - CABIN GRAND ROOM

Claire laughs at the image forming in her mind.

CLAIRE

You had long hair?

Walt smirks.

WALT

Everybody had long hair.

He settles deeper into the chair.

WALT (CONT'D)

Now that was a Christmas...
(smiles to himself)

The first year I felt like I could
breathe again.

The fire crackles softly.

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - CHRISTMAS MORNING -
1970s (FLASHBACK)

Young Dad Walt (20s, mustache, long hair) sits on the floor with wrapping paper everywhere. His toddlers crawl over him like puppies. Laughter fills the small space.

Walt (present-day) smiles at the firelight in the cabin.

WALT (V.O.)
 When I got home, I swore my kids
 would have Christmases they'd never
 forget. But the truth is...
 (beat)
 I remember the ones *I* had just as
 much.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. 1950s STREETS - CHRISTMAS EVE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A classic 1950s sedan rolls through a neighborhood glowing
 with Christmas lights. Houses shine with blinking bulbs,
 dancing Santas, glittering rooftops.

Inside the car:

Young Walt (maybe 8 or 9)

His BROTHER and SISTER

MOM and DAD up front

They're bundled in coats, fogging the windows as they press
 forward to marvel at the lights.

YOUNG WALT
 (excited)
 Look! That one has a moving
 reindeer!

BROTHER
 That Santa's huge!

SISTER
 I like the angels!

Their parents smile at the joy radiating from the kids.

EXT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - LATER - 1950s

Dad backs the car slowly out of the open garage.

Mom unbuckles her seat belt with exaggerated drama.

MOM
 Oh, drat... I forgot something in the
 house.

Young Walt watches her suspiciously.

YOUNG WALT
 Again?

MOM
 (too innocent)
 Happens to all of us, sweetheart.

She gets out. Walt's little eyes follow her closely.

She steps under the garage door... pauses... and simply pulls the door down.

That's it.

No re-entering the house. No "forgotten item." Just... door down.

Walt's jaw drops.

YOUNG WALT
 (whispers)
 Wait... what?

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS - 1950s

Mom gets back in quickly, a tiny knowing smile at the corner of her mouth.

MOM
 All set.

YOUNG WALT
 You... you didn't go inside.

MOM
 (shrugs)
 Guess I didn't forget anything this year.

Young Walt's brain WHIRRS.

YOUNG WALT (V.O.)
 If Mom didn't go inside... Then who would put out the presents?

His eyes narrow, Sherlock-mode activated.

MONTAGE - DRIVING THROUGH LIGHT DISPLAYS

- Houses blazing with lights - Wooden nativity scenes -
 Animated elves hammering toys - Giant Santas waving in the cold air

Young Walt watches all of it... but he's thinking now.

Something's off. Something big.

YOUNG WALT (V.O.)
 I knew the scam. Thought I had it
 solved. Thought Mom was slipping.
 Turns out... I was the sucker.

EXT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - RETURNING HOME - LATER - 1950s

The family car pulls into the driveway.

Waiting at the front door is GRANDMA, coat on, waving
 frantically.

GRANDMA
 (excited)
 Hurry! Hurry! You just missed him!

All three kids YEARN forward in their seats.

ALL KIDS
 SANTA?!

Grandma points toward the end of the street.

GRANDMA
 That way! He flew off not even
 thirty seconds ago!

That's all Walt needs.

He EXPLODES out of the car like a rocket.

EXT. STREET CORNER - 1950s - CONTINUOUS

Young Walt SPRINTS down the sidewalk - Olympic speed - scarf
 trailing behind him like a comet.

YOUNG WALT
 I SEE HIM!
 I SEE HIM!

His brother and sister tear after him.

They all reach the corner, breath steaming, eyes wide with
 wonder.

They stare at the empty sky... but in their minds...

He really was there.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Claire LAUGHS, covering her mouth.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... Did you really think you
saw him?

Walt grins, his eyes bright with the memory - or maybe with the lingering spark of childhood.

WALT
(shrugs)
That night? Yeah...
(beat)
I absolutely did.

Claire melts - this is the kind of memory you keep forever.

WALT (CONT'D)
And I kept that run a secret for
years. Didn't want your uncle to
know he never caught up to me.

Claire chuckles, sipping her cocoa.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... these stories are amazing.

WALT
(softly)
They're all I have left, kiddo. So
I'm glad someone still wants to
hear them.

A quiet, intimate moment passes.

The fire crackles.

Then Walt's expression subtly shifts... A shadow crossing his features.

The beginning hint of the deeper memory to come.

WALT (CONT'D)
Not every Christmas was like that.

Claire senses the change... But she doesn't push.

CLAIRE
When you're ready... you can tell me.

Walt nods, looking into the fire -

reflections of flames flickering in his eyes.

The seed of the Vietnam Christmas tragedy is planted.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Claire shifts a little closer to Walt, sensing his mood soften, then tighten again.

She wraps her hands around her cocoa, waiting.

CLAIRE

You said there was one more before
the hard ones.

Walt nods, eyes drifting upward toward the mantle.

A SINGLE ORNAMENT sits there - a simple, felt heart with slightly crooked stitching.

Walt sees it.

His breath catches - not painful, but tender.

WALT

Your grandma made that one. First
Christmas after we got married.

Claire studies the ornament, newly curious.

CLAIRE

Mom said she was really creative.

WALT

Creative... stubborn... impossible...
(smiles softly)
And perfect.

Claire smiles at the glow in his eyes.

WALT (CONT'D)

She made our whole first Christmas
by hand. Everything.

Claire leans in, hooked.

CLAIRE

What was it like?

Walt exhales... and the room warms as we fade into-

INT. SMALL STARTER APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATE 1970s (FLASHBACK)

A tiny apartment, barely furnished. A single strand of mismatched lights droops across a crooked tree.

LINDA (20s, alive and bright with determination) stands on a chair pinning construction-paper snowflakes to the wall.

Young Walt (late 20s) enters with two grocery bags, shaking off snow.

YOUNG WALT
Thought you said you were gonna
wait for me.

LINDA
I waited for, like... five minutes.

She hops down, almost falls—

Walt catches her by the waist.

LINDA (CONT'D)
See? Your timing is perfect.

YOUNG WALT
Or your balance is terrible.

She pokes him in the chest.

LINDA
It's Christmas Eve. We're doing
this together.

Walt sets down the groceries and steps toward her.

YOUNG WALT
Together, huh?

LINDA
(grinning)
Always.

She hands him a paper snowflake.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Hang that up while I finish your
present.

She disappears into the small bedroom.

Walt hangs the snowflake — badly — and laughs to himself.

INT. SMALL APARTMENT — MOMENTS LATER — 1970s

Linda emerges holding a small wrapped box behind her back.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Don't look yet.

YOUNG WALT
I'm not looking.

LINDA
You're totally looking.

YOUNG WALT
I'm literally facing the wall!

She laughs, circles around him, then stops in front of him, holding out the box.

LINDA
Open it.

Walt unwraps it carefully.

Inside is the felt heart ornament – the one on the cabin mantle.

YOUNG WALT
You made this?

LINDA
First thing I ever sewed. Couldn't feel my fingers for two hours.

Walt turns it over in his hands, moved.

YOUNG WALT
It's perfect.

LINDA
So don't you dare put it on the back of the tree where nobody can see it.

Walt leans down, kisses her forehead.

YOUNG WALT
Front and center. Every year.

Linda smiles, suddenly soft and vulnerable.

LINDA
We don't have much... but we have us.
And that's enough for me.

YOUNG WALT
More than enough.

They hang the ornament together, his hand covering hers.

BACK TO PRESENT - CABIN GRAND ROOM - NIGHT

Walt stares at the felt heart on the mantle - older now, edges worn, stitches loose.

Claire touches his arm.

CLAIRE
She sounds amazing.

WALT
(voice thick)
She was.

A long beat.

WALT (CONT'D)
Lost her too soon.

Claire doesn't speak - she just lets him feel it.

Walt breathes, steadying himself.

When he speaks again, his tone shifts subtly... darker, deeper.

WALT (CONT'D)
After she passed... Christmas changed
for me.

Claire watches him... sensing where he's heading.

WALT (CONT'D)
I guess it first changed long
before that, though.

A beat.

WALT (CONT'D)
In the jungle.

Claire blinks.

Quiet. Serious.

CLAIRE
Vietnam?

Walt nods slowly.

WALT

Yeah. That's the one story I've
tried not to tell. But every year...
it follows me.

The fire crackles louder, shadows shifting across Walt's
face.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

The fire crackles. Outside, snow taps gently against the
windows.

Walt shifts, his fingers lightly brushing the felt heart
ornament on the mantle. Claire waits patiently, watching him
breathe through something unseen.

WALT

Before we get to the heavy stuff...
maybe a few more... easier memories.

Claire smiles softly.

CLAIRE

I'd like that.

Walt nods and settles back, eyes drifting upward as if
searching the ceiling for the past.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. WALT FAMILY HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - 1950s
(FLASHBACK)

A tiny black-and-white TV glows in a dark living room.

Young Walt (7) sits cross-legged on the floor in footie
pajamas, hugging a pillow.

ON TV -

Alastair Sim in A Christmas Carol.

Marley's ghost suddenly lets out a CHILLING WAIL.

Young Walt GASPS, ducks behind the couch.

Mom BURSTS into laughter.

MOM

Oh, Wally... he can't get you through
the screen!

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)
Dad, this is amazing!

DAD
Took me three weeks. Your mother
says I'm nuts.

One strand of old-fashioned Christmas lights flickers... then
dies completely.

Dad groans.

DAD (CONT'D)
One light goes out... the whole dang
thing quits.

Young Walt holds up a single bulb like a surgeon.

YOUNG WALT
We'll interrogate this one.

INT. WALT HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - EARLY 1960s

A shiny aluminum Christmas tree glitters in the corner.

A COLOR WHEEL hums loudly as it rotates - blue... red... green...
yellow...

BROTHER
It's like a spaceship.

YOUNG WALT
If it explodes, I'm blaming you.

INT. WALT HOUSE - SAME NIGHT

Mom hands each kid a handful of tinsel.

MOM
One strand at a time! One! Strand!
At! A! Time!

Young Walt throws an ENTIRE FISTFUL at the tree.

MOM (CONT'D)
WALLY!

He shrugs.

YOUNG WALT
That was technically "one" handful.

Mom chases him around the tree.

INT. WALT HOUSE - CHRISTMAS MORNING - EARLY 1960s

Young Walt proudly hands a beautifully wrapped box to his glamorous AUNT JUDY.

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)

I got this for you myself!

Everyone watches.

She opens the lid-

ANTS POUR OUT LIKE A HORROR MOVIE.

Aunt Judy SCREAMS. Grandma drops her coffee. Grandpa jumps backward shouting:

GRANDPA

JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH!

Dad snatches the box and throws it out the front door.

Young Walt is HORRIFIED.

YOUNG WALT

(near tears)

I... I bought it weeks ago...

Aunt Judy wipes ants off her coat - then LAUGHS.

AUNT JUDY

Oh sweetheart... it's the thought that counts!

Young Walt exhales in immense relief.

YOUNG WALT

Next year I'm getting you perfume.

Everyone LAUGHS.

BACK TO PRESENT - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT

Claire wipes tears of laughter from her eyes.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... you were a menace.

Walt grins proudly.

WALT

Best years of my life.

Claire sips her cocoa, still smiling.

Then Walt's smile softens... fades... Not painfully – but with weight.

WALT (CONT'D)

That's the funny thing about memories, Claire. They stay bright... even when the dark ones are waiting behind them.

Claire shifts closer, sensing the change.

CLAIRE

You don't have to rush the hard ones.

Walt shakes his head.

WALT

No... I think it's time.

He looks into the fire.

The flames CRACKLE, reflecting in his eyes like a distant battlefield.

WALT (CONT'D)

It was Christmas Eve. 1968. The jungle was so quiet... we thought we'd gotten a miracle.

Claire becomes very still.

Walt speaks almost in a whisper—

WALT (CONT'D)

We were wrong.

We hold on Claire— her breath caught—
as the fire's glow slowly fades into—

EXT. VIETNAM - JUNGLE - NIGHT - 1968 (FLASHBACK)

Blackness.

Then—

A faint HUM of insects.

A low, distant BOOM.

Moist air hanging thick.

The jungle glows in moonlight, silver and ghostlike.

A small FIRETEAM of six American soldiers moves carefully through the brush.

Their breath soft.

Their rifles low.

Among them is PRIVATE FIRST CLASS WALT HARRISON (19) – young, tense, scared but trying not to look it.

Sweat beads down his face despite the cool night.

SGT. MORANO (30S)

Keep it quiet. Eyes open. Careful
on your spacing.

The men nod.

Walt gulps softly.

WALT (V.O.)

It was Christmas Eve. And for the
first time in months... the jungle
felt still. Like even the war was
taking a breath.

They advance slowly, foliage brushing their faces.

Up ahead, PFC JOE "MICKY" MCKENNA (19) – Walt's closest friend – taps him lightly on the arm.

MICKY

(whispers)

When we get home... I'm takin' my
girl ice skatin'. Gonna propose
right on the rink.

Walt smiles weakly.

WALT

(whispers back)

She'll say yes.

MICKY

She better. Bought the ring off my
cousin. Cost me two weeks' pay.

They share a quiet grin.

Through the trees, a faint GLOW appears.

A tiny hut. A lantern inside.
A single light in the darkness.
Sgt. Morano raises a clenched fist – halt.
The FIRETEAM freezes.
They crouch low... listening.
Nothing but wind.

LYLE (20S, NERVOUS)
(whispers)
What d'you think?

MORANO
Could be nothing. Could be
something.

Walt peers over the brush.

Then–

A SOUND.

Soft. Barely audible.

A child's cry.

Everyone stiffens.

Micky's eyes widen.

MICKY
(whispers)
You hear that?

Walt nods.

WALT
It's a kid...

Morano swears under his breath.

MORANO
Stay put. Could be bait.

Micky shakes his head.

MICKY
Come on, Sarge... We can't just leave
a kid out there.

Morano snaps back, low and angry.

MORANO

That's exactly how they get you
killed.

The cry continues.

Soft, desperate, heartbreaking.

Walt's jaw tightens.

WALT (V.O.)

Everything in me said stay still.
Follow orders. But...

He swallows hard.

WALT

(whispers)

Sergeant... It really sounds like a
kid.

Morano looks between them – torn.

He motions to TWO MEN.

MORANO

Fine. Three of us check it out. The
rest cover us.

Walt and Micky exchange a look – a mix of fear and hope.

MORANO (CONT'D)

Move slow. Eyes sharp.

They creep forward toward the hut.

The crying stops.

Walt freezes.

WALT

(whisper, trembling)

Why'd it stop?

Micky whispers under his breath.

MICKY

Maybe they heard us...

They inch closer... closer...

A faint rustle – then silence.

Sgt. Morano raises his hand.

MORANO

Hold—

A brief, eerie pause.

Then—

A MASSIVE EXPLOSION.

A blinding FLASH.

The hut ERUPTS in fire and shrapnel.

Walt is thrown backward, smashing into the dirt.

His ears ring.

Smoke fills the air.

He scrambles onto his elbows—

WALT

(choking)

MICKY!?

MICKY!!

Through smoke and fire—

He sees Micky, lying on his back, not moving.

Walt crawls to him on shaking hands.

WALT (CONT'D)

No, no, no, no...

Micky is bleeding heavily — chest, shoulder, face speckled with shrapnel.

Walt presses a hand to his friend's wound.

WALT (CONT'D)

Stay with me... Micky! Stay with me!

Micky's eyes flutter.

MICKY

(weak)

Walt... tell... her...

His voice fails.

WALT
I will! I swear I will!

Micky tries to breathe – but the sound rattles.

MICKY
(final whisper)
Merry... Christmas...

His body slackens.

Walt's breath catches –

He lets out a broken, helpless cry.

WALT
MICKY!!
MICKY!!!

Behind him, the rest of the squad pulls Walt away as gunfire erupts from deeper in the jungle.

MORANO
MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!!

But Walt fights them.

WALT
I'm not leaving him!!

MORANO
He's gone!
LET'S GO!!

Walt is dragged back into the trees – tears mixing with dirt and smoke.

WALT (V.O.)
That was the night I learned
something I didn't want to know...
Christmas ain't always snow and
lights and family.

FADE TO:

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Walt sits motionless.

Claire stares at him, eyes full of tears.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... I'm so sorry.

Walt looks into the fire, voice barely above a whisper.

WALT
I've been trying to forget that
night for fifty years. But every
Christmas Eve... it finds me again.

Claire slowly reaches out and takes his hand.

He squeezes hers gently – grateful, shaken, human.

WALT (CONT'D)
I promised I'd tell her... but she'd
already moved on by the time I got
home.

A long, heavy silence.

Then Claire leans her head on his shoulder.

He breathes in... and for a moment –

he doesn't look lost.

He looks whole.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

The fire burns low now, glowing embers flickering like
memories fighting to stay alive.

Walt stares into the flames, hollow but steady. Claire hasn't
moved – her head still resting gently on his shoulder.

A long, delicate silence.

WALT
After that night... something in me
changed.

Claire lifts her head just enough to look at him.

CLAIRE
Anyone would change, Grandpa.

Walt shakes his head, slow and weary.

WALT
No. I mean... Christmas changed.

He exhales... a deep, unsteady breath.

WALT (CONT'D)

When I got home, the lights... they didn't look the same. The music didn't sound the same.

CLAIRE

Because of Micky?

Walt nods.

WALT

Because I made it home and he didn't.

A faint crack in his voice.

WALT (CONT'D)

I carried that... every Christmas. Every time I heard a bell ring... or smelled pine... or watched your dad tear open a gift.

Claire absorbs this gently.

CLAIRE

But you still celebrated. You still made Christmas special.

Walt smiles faintly.

WALT

For your dad and your aunt and uncle. For your grandma. They deserved the magic.

He pauses.

WALT (CONT'D)

I just kept a part of me tucked away.

Claire squeezes his hand.

CLAIRE

Until tonight.

That lands. Soft. True.

Walt looks at her – really looks – clarity in his eyes.

WALT

Maybe you're the one who was supposed to hear it. The one who'd understand.

Claire's eyes glisten.

CLAIRE
I'm honored you told me.

Walt smiles – small but real.

WALT
You remind me of someone.

Claire smiles back.

CLAIRE
Grandma?

WALT
(shakes his head)
No. Me.

She laughs, wiping a tear.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... that's the nicest thing
you've ever said to me.

WALT
(soft grin)
Don't get used to it.

They share a gentle laugh – a release valve after the emotional weight.

Walt relaxes deeper into his chair. Claire sits cross-legged on the rug, chin on her knees.

CLAIRE
Tell me what happened next. After
you got home. After... everything.

Walt nods slowly.

WALT
The first Christmas back... that one
was the hardest.

He looks into the fire again, memories sparking.

WALT (CONT'D)
Your grandma tried to fix me a
feast. Ham, rolls, pie... the works.

CLAIRE
Sounds like her.

WALT

But when I sat at the table... I
couldn't eat a thing.

He rubs the heel of his hand against his brow.

WALT (CONT'D)

I kept seeing Micky's face. Hearing
him say "Merry Christmas"... like it
was a punchline.

Claire listens with reverence.

WALT (CONT'D)

So I stepped outside... just for air.
Didn't want to spoil the day.

He takes a long, pained breath.

WALT (CONT'D)

That's when your grandma found me.

EXT. SMALL APARTMENT PORCH - NIGHT - EARLY 1970s (FLASHBACK)

Snow falls gently. Young Walt (early 20s), back from Vietnam,
sits alone on the porch steps. Hands shaking. Staring at
nothing.

Linda appears behind him, wrapped in a cardigan.

She sits beside him, silent for a long beat.

LINDA

I know you're hurting. But you're
home. And you're safe.

Walt doesn't look at her.

LINDA (CONT'D)

Micky would've wanted that.

Walt's jaw tightens.

YOUNG WALT

He should've been here... not me.

Linda slides her hand into his.

LINDA

Then let him be in your heart. Not
your guilt.

Walt's eyes fill - the first tears he's allowed himself.

Linda leans her forehead against his.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Come back inside. Your family needs
you. I need you.

Walt nods... barely.

She helps him up, guiding him gently inside as snow continues
to fall.

BACK TO PRESENT - GRAND ROOM - NIGHT

Walt wipes a tear quietly.

Claire is deeply moved.

CLAIRE
She really saved you, didn't she?

WALT
(emotion rising)
Every year. She saved me every
Christmas. She kept the light on
until I found my way back.

Claire takes his hand again.

CLAIRE
And now you're saving me.

Walt looks at her, surprised.

WALT
How's that?

Claire shrugs - shy but honest.

CLAIRE
I've been scared about you. About
losing the stories. Losing you.

Walt's eyes soften.

WALT
Kiddo... as long as you remember
them... I'm not going anywhere.

Claire wipes her eyes.

CLAIRE
Then keep going. I want every
story.

Walt chuckles softly.

WALT
You sure? There's some real
disasters coming.

Claire brightens.

CLAIRE
Even better.

Walt leans back.

The fire glows warmly.

WALT
All right then... let me tell you
about the Christmas when your dad
almost burned down the living room.

Claire GASPS, delighted.

CLAIRE
What?!

Walt grins – mischief returning.

WALT
Oh, that one's a doozy.

FADE INTO...

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Claire leans in, eager, bracing herself for whatever disaster
is about to roll out of Walt's memory.

Walt takes a long sip of cocoa – like fueling up before
launching a rocket.

WALT
Okay... picture this. Your dad's
maybe twelve... thinks he's a genius...
and decides he's going to "improve"
our Christmas lights.

Claire's eyebrows lift.

CLAIRE
That already sounds dangerous.

WALT
Oh, dangerous doesn't cover it.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HARRISON HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATE 1980s (FLASHBACK)

A crowded, slightly messy living room filled with 80s-style decorations.

A mix of retro ornaments, blinking colored lights, and a tree that leans suspiciously to one side.

Young MARK (12), confident as an astronaut, stands on a step stool holding three extension cords, two broken light strands, and a strip of electrical tape.

YOUNG MARK
(to himself)
If I connect the green one into the
yellow one... and add this one... it'll
make ALL the lights blink fast.

He grins like a mad scientist.

Linda rushes in with laundry.

LINDA
Mark Harrison, what are you doing?

YOUNG MARK
Making Christmas more awesome.

LINDA
That answer scares me.

She exits.

Mark begins taping multiple cords together in a horrifying homemade junction.

YOUNG MARK
(whispers)
Science.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER - 1980s

Young Walt (40s), reading the newspaper, hears strange ZAPPING noises.

YOUNG WALT
(calls out)
Mark? What are you doing out there?

MARK (O.S.)
Nothing!!

Walt's eyes narrow.

YOUNG YOUT
(mutters)
Lord help us.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS - 1980s

Mark connects the final plug -

SPARKS burst like fireworks.

YOUNG MARK
YES!

Then-

WHOOSH!

The entire tree lights up in a blinding strobe, blinking at seizure-inducing speed.

The garland VIBRATES.

The angel starts spinning like a helicopter blade.

Tinsel blasts OFF like confetti guns.

The old bubble lights BOIL in their tubes.

YOUNG MARK (CONT'D)
(terrified)
NO NO NO-!!

Walt rushes in-

YOUNG WALT
HOLY-!!
MARK, UNPLUG IT!!

YOUNG MARK
I CAN'T TELL WHICH ONE IS THE RIGHT
ONE!!

Smoke rises from behind the tree.

YOUNG WALT
EVERYONE, MOVE!!

Linda runs in, SCREAMS, grabs the baby off the floor.

Grandma crosses herself.

Grandpa calmly takes a sip of eggnog.

GRANDPA

Told you the boy was gonna be an
electrician or an arsonist.

The lights pop.

A FIREBALL shoots up the side of the tree.

LINDA

WALLY!!!

YOUNG WALT

I GOT IT!!

He dives behind the tree, yanking every cord out of the wall.

Everything goes dark.

A long, stunned silence.

Smoke drifts from the angel.

YOUNG MARK

(very small)

...Merry Christmas?

Linda stares at him, speechless.

Grandpa pats Mark on the shoulder.

GRANDPA

You almost took out the whole
neighborhood, kid. Good work.

BACK TO PRESENT - CABIN - NIGHT

Claire is laughing so hard she has to hold her stomach.

CLAIRE

Oh... my... God. That is ABSURD!

WALT

(grinning proudly)

That boy nearly burned down three
houses that year.

CLAIRE

Did he get in trouble?

WALT
(shrugs)
I mean... he lived. That was
punishment enough.

They laugh together.

The fire pops softly – gentle, warm, peaceful.

Then Walt grows quieter... thoughtful.

WALT (CONT'D)
Funny thing is... after that year...
Christmas never felt quite the
same.

Claire's smile softens.

CLAIRE
Because of Grandma?

Walt nods slowly.

WALT
Yeah. After she passed... the lights
didn't shine as bright.

A long beat.

WALT (CONT'D)
I tried my best for your dad... but...
part of me was still in the jungle.
Part of me was with her. And part
of me... just went quiet.

Claire gently slides her hand across his.

CLAIRE
That's why you're telling me all
this, isn't it?

Walt meets her eyes – and this time, he doesn't look lost at
all.

WALT
(quiet)
Because you're the only one who
asked.

A warm, raw silence settles between them.

CLAIRE
Then don't stop asking your
memories to come back. I'll help
you find them.

Walt swallows, deeply moved.

WALT
(whispers)
I know you will.

He looks at the tree – the felt heart ornament, the old
painted wood one, the faded train – pieces of a life.

WALT (CONT'D)
All right... you ready for one more?

Claire brightens instantly.

CLAIRE
Always.

WALT
Good. Because this next one... is the
story of the WORST Christmas dinner
I ever cooked in my entire life.

Claire's eyes widen with delight.

CLAIRE
Oh no...

WALT
Oh yes.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Claire curls deeper into her blanket, bracing for impact.

Walt cracks his knuckles dramatically.

WALT
Now... this wasn't Vietnam-level
tragedy... but it came close.

Claire snorts.

CLAIRE
Sounds promising.

WALT
 Christmas Eve. Your grandma had the
 flu. I decided – God help us – that
 I would cook Christmas dinner.

Claire already shakes her head.

CLAIRE
 Grandpa... no.

WALT
 Oh yes.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HARRISON HOUSE - KITCHEN - EARLY 1990s (FLASHBACK)

Young Walt (mid-40s), sleeves rolled, apron on, looks like
 he's about to perform brain surgery rather than cook a meal.

He holds a 20-pound turkey like it personally offended him.

YOUNG WALT
 (to turkey)
 I don't like you either.

A cookbook sits open. He squints at it.

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)
 "Remove giblets." What the hell are
 giblets?

He sticks his arm inside the turkey– and screams.

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)
 GOOD LORD– It's like reaching into
 a swamp!

Kids run in from the living room.

MARK (12), his SISTER (10), and TODDLER LUCAS stare at him.

MARK
 Dad... are you fighting the turkey?

SISTER
 It sounds like it's winning.

TODDLER LUCAS
 (points)
 Dada go boom.

Walt slams the turkey onto the counter, triumphant.

YOUNG WALT
Found 'em. I think.

He holds up the bag of giblets like it's radioactive.

MARK
Are... are we supposed to eat that?

YOUNG WALT
(grim)
God, I hope not.

He tosses it into the trash and moves on.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER - 1990s

The turkey is now in the oven, slathered in... something.

Spices, butter, herbs, ketchup, maybe? It looks like a crime scene.

Walt wipes his forehead proudly.

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)
I'm basically a chef now.

He opens the fridge and grabs a can of whipped cream.

YOUNG WALT (CONT'D)
Dessert!

He sprays it onto a pie - except it's not a pie. It's a frozen pizza still in its box.

MARK
Uh... Dad?

Walt freezes mid-spray.

YOUNG WALT
...Christmas pizza?

Linda enters, pale and tired, wrapped in a robe.

LINDA
What's burning?

Walt freezes.

YOUNG WALT
Nothing is—oh dear God.

Smoke pours from the oven.

Everyone SCREAMS.

Walt yanks the door open.

The turkey is ON FIRE.

Not a little. A respectable, committed fire.

SISTER

MOM!!

DAD LIT CHRISTMAS ON FIRE!!

Linda just closes her eyes.

LINDA

I was out of the room... for fifteen
minutes.

Walt grabs baking soda and dumps it on the turkey like he's
putting out a forest fire.

The flames die.

Silence.

Then—

TODDLER LUCAS

Dada cooked!

BACK TO PRESENT - CABIN - NIGHT

Claire wipes tears from her eyes from laughing so hard.

CLAIRE

You nearly burned the house down...
just like Dad!

WALT

Runs in the family. You be careful.

They laugh again.

But slowly, Walt's smile softens. Not sad — reflective.

He gazes at Claire like he's seeing her from a quiet, deeper
place.

WALT (CONT'D)

Kiddo... I made mistakes. A lot of
them. But Christmas... no matter how
messy I got... your grandma made it
beautiful.

Claire tilts her head, sensing the shift.

CLAIRE
You miss her.

WALT
Every day. Every Christmas. Every
breath.

He looks toward the mantle – the felt heart, the old
ornaments, the photos.

WALT (CONT'D)
I think... maybe the reason my
memories slip is because I'm trying
too hard to hold onto the wrong
things.

Claire slides closer to him.

CLAIRE
Then hold onto the right ones. The
ones you're telling me.

Walt's throat works.

WALT
You're helping me remember them.

She lays her head against his arm.

Soft. Warm. Family.

CLAIRE
I wish Grandma were here.

Walt nods.

WALT
She is. In every one of these
stories. In every laugh. In every
ornament. In every Christmas light.

He gestures at the fire.

WALT (CONT'D)
And here.

Claire looks into the flames.

CLAIRE
Do you... remember the last Christmas
with her?

Walt breathes in... a fragile breath... but not afraid.

WALT

Yeah. I remember that one. Clear as day.

Claire waits.

We slowly drift into-

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HARRISON HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT - CHRISTMAS EVE
(FLASHBACK, 10 YEARS AGO)

Soft, warm lighting. The tree is decorated beautifully - classic, simple, elegant. It has Linda's touch all over it.

Older Walt (mid-60s) enters carrying a blanket.

On the couch sits LINDA (60s) - thin, tired, but still wearing the same gentle smile she always had. A small oxygen tube rests under her nose.

LINDA

(teasing)
Took you long enough,
Harrison.

WALT

(soft laugh)
Blanket retrieval is a
dangerous mission.
He drapes it over her
legs.

LINDA

Thank you.

Walt sits beside her, their shoulders touching.

A slow instrumental version of Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas plays softly from the old stereo.

Linda's eyes drift toward the tree.

LINDA (CONT'D)

You did a beautiful job this year.

WALT

Only because you yelled
instructions from the recliner.

LINDA
Quality control.

She laughs gently, then winces – pain flickering under the surface.

Walt notices immediately.

WALT
You want me to get your meds?

She shakes her head.

LINDA
Not yet.
I want to be here. With you. Just
like this...

She nestles into him.

Walt wraps an arm around her – protective, tender.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Do you remember our first
Christmas? That tiny little
apartment with the leaning tree?

WALT
Leaning?
Thing was ready to fall and sue us
for negligence.

She smiles warmly, eyes shining.

LINDA
And we didn't have money for
ornaments... so we popped popcorn and
strung it with your sewing kit.

WALT
You mean your sewing kit. I never
learned to sew. Still haven't.

Linda playfully nudges him.

LINDA
You learned enough to keep my heart
stitched together.

Walt swallows – the words hit him.

WALT
Linda...

She takes his hand.

LINDA
Hey...don't be sad. I've had a
beautiful life. You made it
beautiful.

Walt's eyes fill. He tries to hide it – fails.

WALT
I'm not ready.

Linda's smile softens.

LINDA
You don't have to be. Just promise
me one thing.

Walt nods, voice fragile.

WALT
Anything.

Linda places her hand over his heart.

LINDA
Don't disappear. Not from the kids...
not from the grandkids... not from
Christmas. Promise me you'll keep
showing up.

Walt tries to breathe.

WALT
I... I'll try.

LINDA
No.
Promise.

He nods, breaking.

WALT
I promise.

Linda smiles – relieved, peaceful.

LINDA
Good.
Because they're going to need you.

She leans her head onto his chest as *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* grows fuller.

Walt kisses the top of her head.

WALT
I love you, Lin.

LINDA
Always.

The moment stretches – warm, heartbreaking, sacred.

Then Linda closes her eyes.

Not dramatically. Just... rests.

Walt holds her, knowing. Loving her through it.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Walt's eyes glisten. But he isn't shattered – he's remembering with love, not loss.

Claire sits silently beside him, deeply moved.

CLAIRE
That was... beautiful.

Walt nods slowly.

WALT
She was everything good in my life.

Claire puts her hand over his.

CLAIRE
And you kept your promise. You're still here. With us.

Walt exhales – shaky, but centered.

WALT
Some days I'm not so sure.

CLAIRE
(firm, emotional)
I am.
A quiet, powerful beat.
(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Grandpa...

why'd you tell me all
this tonight?

Walt looks at her – truly
looks – eyes clearer than
they've been in years.

WALT

Because I'm afraid the memories
might stop coming. And I need
someone to carry them. To keep them
alive.

Claire's voice breaks with emotion.

CLAIRE

I will.
I promise.

Walt nods, grateful in a way words can't touch.

He reaches out... and gently brushes a tear from her cheek.

WALT

You've got your grandma's heart.

Claire smiles, glowing.

CLAIRE

And your stories.

The fire crackles softly...

Walt leans back in his chair. Claire slides onto the rug
beside him, blanket wrapped around her.

A perfect, fragile peace.

Until—

FOOTSTEPS upstairs. Someone in the family stirs.

Walt listens... smiles.

WALT

Looks like we've been up later than
Santa approves.

Claire laughs under her breath.

CLAIRE

Want to go to bed?

Walt shakes his head.

WALT

Not yet.
I've got one last story.

Claire brightens.

CLAIRE

Your favorite Christmas?

Walt shakes his head again – gently, lovingly.

WALT

No...yours.

Claire blinks.

CLAIRE

Mine?

Walt smiles with pure warmth.

WALT

The day you were born.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

The fire glows low.

Claire pulls her blanket closer, eyes wide with anticipation.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... I've never heard this one.

Walt smiles – tender, nostalgic, warmed from the inside.

WALT

I didn't tell it much. Guess I was
saving it for tonight.

Claire sits up straighter.

CLAIRE

Tell me everything.

Walt exhales, settling in as if opening a treasured box.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - CHRISTMAS NIGHT (FLASHBACK, 20 YEARS AGO)

A small-town hospital decorated with cheap, cheerful Christmas lights.

A paper snowman taped crookedly to the wall.

Walt (late 50s), wearing a big winter coat, PACES across the floor like a nervous caged bear.

Linda (50s), very alive and full of spark, sits calmly knitting.

LINDA

Walter, sit. You're wearing a groove in the tile.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

They said complications.
Complications means trouble. Nobody uses the word "complications" when they mean "everything's fine."

Linda snorts.

LINDA

She's in labor. That is complicated.

Walt shoots her a look.

Linda pats the seat beside her.

LINDA (CONT'D)

Sit, Wally.

He reluctantly sits, bouncing a knee at warp speed.

LINDA (CONT'D)

Heavens... you're worse than Mark.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

That boy was panicking too! He called me six times on the drive over.

Linda gives him a knowing smile.

LINDA

You raised a good man. He's going to be an incredible father.

Walt softens.

It lands, right in the heart.

INT. HOSPITAL - MATERNITY HALLWAY - LATER (FLASHBACK)

A NURSE hurries toward Walt and Linda.

NURSE

Mr. Harrison? You can come in now.

Walt nearly faints from relief.

Linda squeezes his hand.

INT. DELIVERY ROOM - MOMENTS LATER - FLASHBACK

Mark (early 30s), exhausted, sweaty, emotional, stands beside his wife, SARAH, who cradles a tiny newborn wrapped in a pink blanket.

Walt stops in the doorway - breath stolen.

MARK

Dad... meet Claire.

Sarah carefully lifts the baby so Walt can see her.

Claire's newborn eyes blink open.

For a beat, Walt stands frozen - wide-eyed, awestruck.

He moves closer, slowly, reverently.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

(softly)

Oh my... she's beautiful.

Sarah smiles warmly.

SARAH

You want to hold her?

Walt nods, choked with emotion.

He takes Claire - tiny, warm, perfect - into his arms.

Her little hand curls around his finger.

Walt melts. Completely.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

Hi there, peanut. I'm your grandpa.

Mark watches, teary.

MARK

Looks like you're a goner.

Walt laughs through breaking emotion.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

I'm done for. Absolutely done for.

He rocks her gently.

A moment of pure peace.

Then Claire's eyes – newborn but alert – lock onto Walt's.

Something shifts in him.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT (CONT'D)

(whispers)

I think... I think she knows me.

Linda rests her head on Walt's shoulder, watching them.

LINDA

Of course she does. Souls recognize souls.

They share a look – full of love, full of future.

Then:

SARAH

Walt... what do you think of her name?

He looks at the baby again.

The room seems to brighten around them.

YOUNG GRANDPA WALT

Claire... means "light." She's perfect.

BACK TO PRESENT – CABIN – NIGHT

Claire is staring at the fire, tears running freely down her cheeks.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... you never told me that.

Walt's voice is gentle.

WALT
I didn't need to. I lived it every
time you smiled.

Claire wipes her tears with her sleeve.

CLAIRE
Grandpa...

Walt reaches out, touching her cheek.

WALT
You were my first Christmas after
your grandma passed. The first time
I saw joy again was in your little
face.

Claire's breath catches.

CLAIRE
I... I don't know what to say.

WALT
(smiles softly)
Then don't. Just sit with me.

She leans her head onto his shoulder again.

He puts an arm around her.

CLAIRE
Grandpa? Do you remember everything
I told you tonight?

Walt closes his eyes peacefully.

WALT
Every word.

Claire smiles - relieved, comforted, hopeful.

CLAIRE
Do you think... tomorrow... you might
tell everyone some of these
stories?

Walt hesitates.

WALT
I don't know if I can.

CLAIRE
That's okay. I'll help you. We can
tell them together.

Walt looks touched beyond measure.

WALT
I'd like that.

A soft beat as the fire pops gently.

Claire nestles closer.

CLAIRE
I love you, Grandpa.

Walt closes his eyes.

WALT
I love you too, kiddo.

Their silhouettes glow in the firelight –
two generations linked by memory, love, and Christmas.

FADE TO:

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – CHRISTMAS MORNING

Soft sunlight filters through the frosted windows.

The house is alive now – muffled laughter, whispers, the rustle of wrapping paper.

Claire sits beside Walt on the couch, still wrapped in the blanket she fell asleep with.

Walt stirs, blinking awake gently.

CLAIRE
Morning, Grandpa.

Walt looks around, confused for half a second – then sees Claire, the tree, the stockings...

And his confusion melts into a slow, warm smile.

WALT
It's Christmas.

CLAIRE
Yeah. We made it.

A few feet away, the LITTLE KIDS giggle as they tiptoe past the room, peeking in.

LITTLE GIRL
(whispering)
He's awake!

LITTLE BOY
Shhh! He'll see us!

They run off.

Walt chuckles softly.

WALT
I used to sound like that. Little
footsteps... too excited for sleep.

CLAIRE
You sounded worse. Dad told me.

WALT
(mock offended)
Lies. All of it.

Claire laughs.

INT. CABIN - KITCHEN - MINUTES LATER

The whole family is gathered now.

Mark is cooking bacon like he's handling explosives.

SARAH is pouring coffee for everyone.

The kids run circles around the island, still buzzing with anticipation.

Walt steps in slowly, steadying himself on the doorframe.

The family notices - genuinely surprised, pleasantly.

MARK
Dad. You're up early.

WALT
Thought I'd supervise breakfast.
Make sure you don't blow up the
kitchen like... certain people in
this lineage.

Mark grins.

MARK
Hey. That tree incident is ancient
history.

WALT
(deadpan)
It was 1991.

The family bursts into laughter.

Claire beams – because this is exactly what she hoped for.

INT. CABIN – KITCHEN TABLE – MOMENTS LATER

Everyone sits down to eat.

For the first time in years, Walt sits at the head of the table.

It doesn't feel ceremonial.

It feels... natural.

He looks around at the faces – kids, grandkids, in-laws – and something opens inside him.

WALT
(quiet but full)
Merry Christmas, everyone.

They all respond warmly.

FAMILY
Merry Christmas, Dad! Merry
Christmas, Grandpa!

Walt watches them begin eating – kids making a mess, laughter everywhere.

And then–

A memory... faint, soft, warm.

Walt leans closer to Claire.

WALT
You know... when I was your age...
every Christmas morning... I'd sneak
downstairs into my uncle's bakery.

Claire listens, smiling with curiosity.

WALT (CONT'D)
He always had a loaf of sourdough
and a slice of salami waiting for
me. Just us. Our little ritual.

CLAIRE
(soft)
That's beautiful.

WALT
Haven't thought of that in years.

Claire's eyes light up.

She reaches across the table – grabs a small bread roll and a slice of ham – and places them in front of him.

CLAIRE
Then... let's make a new ritual.

Walt stares at the plate... and something in him breaks open – grateful, emotional, full.

He takes a small bite.

WALT
(smiles through it)
Merry Christmas, peanut.

Claire squeezes his hand under the table.

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Wrapping paper everywhere.

The kids are tearing into gifts with shrieks of joy.

Walt sits with a coffee mug, watching, taking it all in.

For once, he isn't drifting.

He's present.

Mark sits beside him.

MARK
You doing okay, Dad?

WALT
I'm... good. Better than I've been in
a long time.

Mark nods, relieved.

MARK
Claire's been good for you.

WALT
She saved my Christmas. Don't tell
her I said that.

MARK
(smiles)
I won't.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - LATER

Claire and the younger kids place ornaments back on the tree
that have fallen off during the present-opening chaos.

Claire picks up one of the oldest ones - a small wooden train
Walt carved decades ago.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... I found this one on the
floor.

Walt looks at it... softness in his eyes.

WALT
Made that in '72. Claire's dad
drooled on it for the first three
years of his life.

Claire laughs - puts it gently back on the tree.

Then she spots something else:

LINDA'S FAVORITE ORNAMENT

A delicate glass heart, slightly cracked but still beautiful.

Claire lifts it carefully.

CLAIRE
Should we put this one up together?

Walt freezes.

Tears gather instantly.

Not painful tears - sacred ones.

WALT
Yes. Let's do it right this time.

They walk to the tree together.

Claire hands the ornament to Walt.

His hand trembles.

Claire steadies it.

Together – slowly, reverently – they hang the ornament on the highest branch.

Walt exhales... relieved... peaceful.

WALT (CONT'D)
(whispers)
Merry Christmas, Lin.

Claire leans her head briefly against his shoulder.

CLAIRE
She would love this. All of this.

Walt nods.

WALT
I think she's here.

The fire pops softly.

The tree glows brighter.

EXT. CABIN - BACKYARD - LATE MORNING (PRESENT)

(middle of page 65)

Light snow falls. The entire family spills outside bundled in coats, scarves, and boots. Kids chase each other through the snow, making messy snow angels along the yard.

Mark pulls a sled from the garage.

MARK
Dad, want a ride?

WALT
(smirking)
At my age? Only if Claire's the one steering.

Claire beams.

CLAIRE
Deal.

Walt settles onto the sled – kids cheering around him – as Claire pulls him gently through the yard.

EXT. CABIN - TREE LINE - MOMENTS LATER

Claire stops near a quiet spot at the edge of the woods. Walt takes in the snowy world - slow, peaceful, full.

The distant laughter of kids fills the air.

Claire sits next to him on a fallen log.

CLAIRE
Pretty out here.

WALT
(soft)
Yeah. Reminds me of old
Christmases.

A silence - comfortable, reflective.

Walt brushes snow off his gloves, eyes wandering to the tree line.

Then the moment shifts - deeper.

WALT (CONT'D)
You know, kiddo... when you get
older... Christmas changes.

Claire turns to him - listening.

WALT (CONT'D)
When you're young, it's magic.
Lights... noise... everyone alive and
loud.

CLAIRE
(gentle)
And when you get older?

Walt exhales - long, knowing.

WALT
Your parents are gone. The kids
grow up. The house gets quieter.
And suddenly Christmas... doesn't
feel the way it used to.

Claire absorbs that - heavy, true.

CLAIRE
I think that's what scares me,
Grandpa. Losing people.

Walt nods. He's been there.

WALT

It changes... but it doesn't disappear. Because even when people go... the love they gave you? That doesn't go anywhere.

A soft gust of wind shakes snow from the branches.

WALT (CONT'D)

I lost my mom... my dad... your grandma... and a lot of buddies before I was ready.

CLAIRE

(quiet)

I know.

WALT

But their Christmases – their laughter, their stories... the way they made the season feel – all of that lives right here.

He presses a hand to his chest.

WALT (CONT'D)

And as long as *you* remember them... they're still part of every Christmas morning you wake up to.

Claire's eyes glisten.

CLAIRE

So that's how you keep them with you?

WALT

Yeah. You tell the stories. You bake their cookies. You hang their ornaments. You love the way they taught you to love.

Claire breathes in – deeply moved.

CLAIRE

I don't ever want to forget them. Or you.

Walt reaches over and places a gentle hand on her cheek.

WALT

You won't, Claire. You couldn't if you tried. Because you've got all of us in you. Every one of us.

A tear runs down her cheek. Walt wipes it away with a rough thumb.

WALT (CONT'D)

And someday... when you have kids of your own... and they ask you why Christmas feels different than it used to... you'll tell them the same thing.

Claire leans into him.

CLAIRE

I love you, Grandpa.

WALT

I love you too, kiddo. And if Christmas changes again someday... make sure it changes because of *love*.

A moment. A perfect, human moment.

Walt looks out over the snowy yard, where the kids play wildly and Mark attempts to build the world's worst snowman.

WALT (CONT'D)

You know something? I think this one... might be my favorite Christmas.

Claire smiles, glowing.

CLAIRE

Me too.

The wind carries the sound of laughter as we slowly fade back into the full family scene.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - AFTERNOON (PRESENT)

($\frac{3}{4}$ into Page 68)

The family trickles back inside, rosy-cheeked from the cold. Boots stomp, coats peel off, kids run wild again.

Claire leads Walt back to his chair near the fire. She gently helps him sip hot cocoa.

WALT

Mm. Perfect temperature. You finally learned.

CLAIRE
Took me long enough.

She smiles – but something thoughtful lingers behind her eyes.

She glances toward the old wooden chest near the bookshelf – one she remembers her grandmother keeping special things in.

She hesitates.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Grandpa... can I show you something?

WALT
Long as it's not that sled again.

CLAIRE
Promise.

Claire walks to the chest, kneels, and opens it carefully. Inside are old photo albums, faded cards, dried flowers...

And a small, sealed envelope with a familiar handwriting.

Linda's handwriting.

Claire freezes.

She lifts it gently.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
(soft, emotional)
Grandpa... this has your name on it.

Walt's expression changes – surprise, then recognition, then a slow, quiet ache.

Claire brings it to him.

WALT
(whispers)
Lin's handwriting...

He holds it in trembling hands.

CLAIRE
Should I... open it for you?

Walt breathes in, steadying.

WALT
No. No... I can do it.

He carefully opens the envelope – slow, reverent. Inside is a folded letter, yellowed at the edges, but lovingly preserved.

Walt unfolds it.

His eyes take a moment to adjust.

Then he begins to read – voice thin, wavering.

LINDA (V.O.)
(gentle, warm, the voice
of a woman who loved
deeply)
My dearest Walt, if you're reading
this, then I couldn't tell you
these things myself.

Claire inches closer, eyes full.

LINDA (V.O.)
I know you, Walter Harrison. I know
your heart, your stubbornness, your
guilt, and your love.

Walt wipes a tear quickly – embarrassed – but Claire places her hand over his.

LINDA (V.O.)
I know the weight you carried home
from Vietnam. I know the memories
that haunt you every Christmas. And
I know how hard you tried to be
strong for everyone.

Walt closes his eyes – breath catching.

LINDA (V.O.)
But my love... the world never needed
you to be strong. We only ever
needed you to be here.

Claire squeezes his hand – steadying him.

LINDA (V.O.)
I want you to keep living. Keep
laughing. Keep telling the stories
– even the ones that hurt.

Walt's lips tremble.

LINDA (V.O.)

And when the memories get harder to find... when the names fade... when your Christmases begin to blur... promise me you'll let someone help you remember.

Walt looks at Claire – eyes overflowing.

LINDA (V.O.)

Promise you won't disappear, Walt. Not from our children... not from our grandchildren... not from Christmas. Stay in the light. They will carry you when you cannot carry yourself.

A tear slips down Walt's cheek.

LINDA (V.O.)

And one more thing, my love:

A beat.

LINDA (V.O.)

When you meet our granddaughter someday, hold onto her. She will be your lantern when the night grows long. I feel it already – she will have your heart.

Walt breaks – silently – beautifully.

Claire takes a shaky breath, tears falling.

LINDA (V.O.)

I love you, Walt. I always will. Merry Christmas, my darling. –Lin

The letter falls slightly in Walt's hand as his strength falters – but Claire catches it, holds it with him.

Walt bows his head, shoulders trembling, but Claire is there, anchoring him.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... I'm right here. Just like she said.

Walt looks at Claire – truly looks – and sees the light Linda promised.

WALT
(broken whisper)
She knew. She knew you before you
were even born.

Claire presses her forehead to his.

CLAIRE
And she knew... I'd need you too.

Walt pulls her into a trembling, grateful embrace.

The fire crackles softly –
warming them both.

FADE OUT TO: THE TREE GLOWING BRIGHTER

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – LATE AFTERNOON (PRESENT)

(4 lines into Page 72)

The fire has burned higher now – crackling warmly. The
Christmas tree glows bright with its mismatched ornaments,
old and new.

Walt sits quietly, still holding Linda's letter in his lap.

Claire stays beside him, protective but letting him breathe.

Across the room, the rest of the family whispers, unsure if
they should approach him or give him space.

Mark finally steps forward – gentle, cautious.

MARK
Dad... you okay?

Walt looks up. There's a softness in him – a clarity – a
peace that wasn't there the day before.

WALT
(steady)
Yeah. I think I am.

Mark lets out a breath he's been holding for years.

He kneels beside his father – the two men eye to eye for the
first time in a long while.

MARK

You scared me last night, Dad. When you went to bed early... when you seemed... distant.

Walt nods.

WALT

I was drifting. Too much quiet in my head.

Mark's throat tightens.

MARK

I don't want to lose you. Not yet.

Walt takes his son's hand – a rare gesture between them.

WALT

Then don't. I'm right here, son.

Mark bows his head, swallowing emotion.

MARK

Thank you... for staying.

Walt smiles.

WALT

Your mother left me instructions. I finally read them.

MARK

(tearing up)
Sounds like her.

He squeezes Walt's hand.

MARK (CONT'D)

Dad... would you... maybe join us tonight? For dinner? For... everything?

Walt looks around the room – at the family he drifted away from in small ways, year by year.

WALT

I'd like that. Very much.

Claire beams.

INT. CABIN - DINING ROOM - EARLY EVENING

The table is set with mismatched plates, chipped mugs, folded napkins. Candles flicker. The kids fidget in their chairs.

It's imperfect and beautiful.

Walt enters slowly with Claire at his side.

The room quiets - surprised and touched.

Sarah gestures to the empty seat at the head of the table - the seat Walt hasn't taken in years.

SARAH

Walt... would you...?

Walt hesitates. Claire rests a hand on his arm gently.

CLAIRE

Grandpa... it's your seat.

Walt breathes in - then steps toward it.

He sits.

Everyone exhales - deeply moved.

Mark lifts his glass.

MARK

Before we eat... I'd like to say something.

Everyone quiets.

MARK (CONT'D)

This... seeing Dad here like this... this is the best gift I could've asked for.

Walt shakes his head, smiling softly.

WALT

I'm not the only one with something to say.

He looks at Claire.

WALT (CONT'D)

Kiddo... why don't you help me with this part?

Claire's eyes widen in surprise – then fill with gratitude and pride.

CLAIRE

Really?

WALT

You're the reason I remember any of this. I want you right here with me.

She stands beside him – her hand resting lightly on his shoulder.

The room falls silent.

Walt rises slowly – careful, steady – holding onto the back of the chair.

He looks at the family – really sees them.

WALT (CONT'D)

I've spent a lot of years... hiding pieces of myself. Trying not to let the darkness spill out onto Christmas morning.

Everyone listens – breath held.

WALT (CONT'D)

But this family... you've given me more love than I ever thought I deserved. And tonight... thanks to this girl here...

He nods to Claire, who beams, cheeks pink.

WALT (CONT'D)

I remembered who I am. And who I've always been. Your dad... your grandpa... your husband... your brother... your friend.

A hush falls. Even the kids go still.

WALT (CONT'D)

And I want to say... thank you. For letting an old man find his way back. For keeping Christmas alive... even when I couldn't.

Claire rests her head against his arm.

WALT (CONT'D)

I love you. All of you. And this...
this is the best Christmas I've had
since your grandma was here.

Tears fall across the table – quietly, openly.

Sarah wipes her eyes. Mark squeezes Sarah's hand. The
youngest kids lean into their parents.

WALT (CONT'D)

(with a small, emotional
smile)

Merry Christmas.

FAMILY

(whispered, heartfelt)

Merry Christmas.

Walt sits again – slow, steady – but full. Whole. Present.

Dinner begins.

Claire slides into the chair beside him, holding his hand
under the table.

Walt takes a deep breath – and looks around the table at his
family.

WALT

Lin...
you'd love this.

His smile glows warm in the candlelight.

EXT. CABIN – BACK PORCH – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Dinner has ended. Laughter echoes faintly from inside the
cabin where the family is cleaning up, still riding the
emotional warmth of Walt's unexpected toast.

Outside, snow falls in soft, lazy flakes. The yard is still,
the woods dark and quiet.

Walt steps onto the back porch, bundled in a thick sweater
and a borrowed coat. He breathes in the cold air, letting it
fill his lungs.

A moment later, the door creaks open behind him.

Claire steps out, carrying two mugs of hot chocolate.

CLAIRE
I figured you'd sneak out here.

She hands him a mug.

WALT
Maybe I needed a minute to soak it
all in. Or maybe I just needed
fresh air. Hard to tell which.

CLAIRE
(soft smile)
Mom says the same thing whenever
the whole family's together.

Walt chuckles quietly, sipping his cocoa.

They stand shoulder to shoulder, watching the snow fall.

EXT. CABIN - BACK PORCH - CONTINUOUS

A gentle silence.

Claire glances at Walt - searching his expression.

CLAIRE
Grandpa... you okay after everything
today?

Walt nods slowly.

WALT
Better than okay. Haven't felt
this... steady... in a long time.

Claire studies him - proud, relieved.

CLAIRE
I'm really glad. You deserve that.

Walt watches the lights from inside the cabin, glowing
through frosted windows.

WALT
You know... holidays get quieter as
you get older. People move away,
new families start, kids grow up.
The house... doesn't feel the same.

Claire looks at him gently - understanding.

CLAIRE
But it felt full tonight, didn't
it?

Walt smiles.

WALT
That's the part I'd forgotten. How
full it can feel even when some
chairs at the table aren't filled
anymore.

Claire rests her head on his arm.

CLAIRE
You didn't forget. You just needed
someone to bring the memories back
into the light.

Walt's eyes soften.

WALT
(moved)
That someone was you, kiddo.

EXT. CABIN - BACK PORCH - LATER

The snow deepens. The wind hushes the world around them.

Claire shifts slightly, nervous but determined.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small wrapped
box.

CLAIRE
I... got you something.

Walt stares at the present with surprise - almost childlike.

WALT
For me? You didn't have to...

CLAIRE
I wanted to. And I want you to open
it now.

He hesitates - then gently unwraps the box.

Inside: A small, simple wooden ornament.

Handmade. Painted with care.

It's two small figures sitting together – one tall, one small – under a Christmas tree.

Beneath them, a tiny inscription:

“Grandpa & Me – Christmas Memories”

Walt's breath catches.

He brushes a thumb over it, overwhelmed.

WALT

Claire... this is... beautiful.

CLAIRE

I made it in art class. It's nothing fancy, but–

WALT

(shakes his head,
emotional)

No. This is everything. This... is the most meaningful gift anyone's given me in years.

He holds the ornament gently, like something sacred.

Claire smiles through tears.

CLAIRE

I wanted you to have something from this Christmas that you won't forget.

Walt looks at her – eyes full, glistening.

WALT

I'm not forgetting a thing, kiddo. Not tonight. Not this. Not you.

They lean their heads together in shared warmth.

EXT. CABIN – BACK PORCH – CONTINUOUS

After a long moment of quiet–

CLAIRE

Grandpa... earlier you said you had one last story.

Walt exhales – a slow, deep breath.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the letter from Linda – folds it carefully.

WALT

Yeah. I do.

He turns toward the snowy woods, eyes distant but calm.

WALT (CONT'D)

And this one... this one's not about the past.

Claire looks at him, confused.

CLAIRE

Not the past?

Walt shakes his head, smiling softly.

WALT

This one's about the future. Your future.

Claire's eyes widen – heart beating faster.

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

Walt looks at her with a tenderness that almost glows.

WALT

I want to tell you about the last Christmas memory I want you to carry... long after I'm gone.

Claire holds her breath – emotion flooding her eyes.

CLAIRE

Grandpa...

Walt takes her hand.

WALT

It starts right here. Right now. On this porch with you and me in the falling snow.

EXT. CABIN – BACK PORCH – NIGHT (PRESENT)

Snow drifts quietly across the yard, softening every sound. The porch light casts a warm halo around Walt and Claire, their breath curling into the cold air.

Claire sits beside him on the wooden step, blanket wrapped around both of them.

CLAIRE

(soft)
What did you want to tell
me?
Walt takes a long breath
– unhurried, thoughtful.

WALT

You know...

for most of my life... Christmas was noisy. Kids running, your grandma laughing, wrapping paper everywhere...

He smiles – a small, nostalgic curl at the corners of his mouth.

WALT (CONT'D)

But as time went on... it got
quieter. People moved, people
passed, the house echoed
differently.

Claire listens, heart aching for him – but ready.

CLAIRE

Grandpa...
I know that feeling. I've felt it
too.

Walt nods, touched.

WALT

I figured you might.

A soft wind blows. Snowflakes land on Claire's hair and melt instantly.

Walt watches her for a moment – pride and love filling his eyes.

WALT (CONT'D)

So here's the last Christmas memory
I want you to have.

Claire shifts closer, holding his hand.

WALT (CONT'D)

It's not about the past. It's about
you.

Claire's breath catches.

CLAIRE

Me?

Walt nods slowly.

WALT

One day -

years from now - you'll be sitting somewhere warm, maybe with kids of your own, maybe with someone you love... and the world will feel a little different than it does today.

Claire's eyes glisten - imagining it, seeing it.

WALT (CONT'D)

And you'll look at a Christmas tree... or hear a song... or see the snow fall just like this...

He gestures gently to the white swirl around them.

WALT (CONT'D)

And you'll remember this night. You and me. Right here. Talking about love and loss and life. And how Christmas changes... but the heart of it never does.

Claire wipes a tear, overwhelmed.

CLAIRE

Grandpa...
I'll remember. I promise.

Walt squeezes her hand - steady, strong.

WALT

And when you remember... that's me living on. Not in pictures... not in stories... but in the way you love your family. In the way you show up. In the way you carry light into someone else's dark winter.

Tears spill down Claire's cheeks.

CLAIRE

I'll carry it all. Everything you've given me.

Walt gazes at her - the deepest love in his eyes.

WALT
That's my last Christmas memory.
Not one from before... but one I get
to give you.

Claire hugs him – tight, long, full of every emotion she has.

Walt holds her with surprising strength.

WALT (CONT'D)
(whispers)
Thank you...
for reminding me who I
am.
They stay like that,
wrapped in the blanket
and the snowfall, the
world quiet and sacred
around them.

EXT. CABIN – BACKYARD – CONTINUOUS

The back door opens.

Mark steps out, smiling softly when he sees them.

MARK
You two okay out here?

Claire pulls back slightly but keeps a hand on Walt's arm.

CLAIRE
Yeah, Dad.
We're perfect.

Mark nods – knowing the truth of that.

MARK
Come inside when you're ready.
We're gonna take a family photo
before the kids destroy each other.

He heads back in.

Claire laughs through her tears.

CLAIRE
We should go in soon.

Walt nods.

WALT
Yeah...one more minute.

They sit together, watching the snow settle around them, every flake landing like a blessing.

FADE OUT TO
SNOWFALL

INT. CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

The entire family gathers in front of the Christmas tree. Kids fidget. The adults herd them into something resembling order.

Mark fiddles with the camera on a tripod, trying to get the timer to work.

MARK

Okay... everybody squeeze in. Closer...
closer... Dad, lean in a bit.

Walt moves slowly but confidently into the middle row. Claire stands right beside him, their shoulders touching.

Sarah adjusts the tree lights behind them, smiling brightly.

SARAH

(teasing)

Everybody say "Merry Christmas!"

FAMILY

Merry Christmas!!

The camera flashes - a warm, bright burst of memory captured forever.

The moment feels full, glowing, alive.

Claire glances at Walt. He's smiling in a way she hasn't seen in years.

INT. CABIN - GRAND ROOM - LATER

Most of the family drifts into the kitchen for dessert and chatter. Kids race around with candy canes. Wrapping paper crinkles underfoot.

Walt remains standing by the tree, gazing up at its ornaments - almost reverent.

Claire approaches quietly.

CLAIRE

You okay?

WALT
(nods slowly)
I'm just... thinking about all the
Christmases in this room.

She looks up at the ornaments with him.

CLAIRE
It's like a museum of your life.

WALT
(smiles softly)
Yeah. And tonight... you helped me
find the right wings of it again.

Claire blushes at the praise.

Walt reaches behind an old wooden train ornament, searching...
His hand finds something tucked deep inside the branches.

He gently pulls out a small, faded velvet pouch.

Claire's eyes widen.

CLAIRE
What's that?

Walt opens the pouch, revealing a tiny gold locket.

It's simple. Old. Well-loved. And still shining.

Inside, a miniature photo of Walt and Linda, young and
glowing with life.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Grandpa... that's beautiful.

WALT
(soft)
Your grandma gave this to me our
first Christmas as husband and
wife.

He places the locket in Claire's palm.

Her breath catches.

CLAIRE
Grandpa, I- I can't take this.

WALT
Yes you can. And you will.

He closes her hand gently around it.

WALT (CONT'D)

I want you to have it. To keep it close. To remember that love... real love... lasts a lifetime.

Claire's eyes fill, shimmering in the tree's glow.

CLAIRE

I'll treasure it. Always.

Walt places a hand over hers – warm, steady.

WALT

And when you share Christmas with someone you love someday... give it to them. Pass it on. Let our story keep going.

Claire nods – deeply moved, honored.

CLAIRE

I promise.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Mark re-enters with a plate of desserts.

MARK

Okay, who wants pie—

He stops, seeing Walt and Claire together, the locket in her hand.

Understanding dawns on him.

MARK (CONT'D)

(soft)

That was your mom's, wasn't it?

Walt nods.

Mark's eyes mist over.

MARK (CONT'D)

She'd be so happy you gave it to Claire.

Walt reaches out, gripping his son's arm.

WALT

Your mother... is here tonight. I can feel her.

Mark nods – unable to speak for a moment.

MARK

Yeah... me too.

He pulls Walt into a hug – unexpected, strong, real.

Walt closes his eyes, leaning into his son's embrace.

WALT

(quietly)

Merry Christmas, son.

MARK

Merry Christmas, Dad.

Claire watches – heart swelling.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – A FEW MINUTES LATER

The family gathers around the tree for one last moment before bedtime.

Kids settle onto the carpet. Adults stand behind them, mugs of cocoa, wine, and cider in hand.

Claire gently nudges Walt.

CLAIRE

You want to say something? Just one last thing?

Walt smiles – a peaceful smile, full of light, not weighed down anymore.

He steps forward slowly, the fireplace casting a golden glow across his face.

Everyone quiets.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – NIGHT (PRESENT)

The room is silent. The crackle of the fire, the soft hum of the Christmas tree lights – every face turned toward Walt.

Claire stands behind him, hands clasped, watching with love and pride.

Walt takes his time. Breathes deep. Looks at each person in the room – letting the moment settle.

WALT

(gentle, steady) I want to thank all of you... for giving me the best gift an old man could ask for. Sarah wipes a tear. Mark's chin trembles. The kids listen – even the little ones. WALT (CONT'D) You gave me... another Christmas. One I didn't think I'd get. One I didn't know I needed. One I'll remember... as long as I'm breathing. He glances back at Claire – and his whole face softens. WALT (CONT'D) And this girl here... she reminded me what it means to be part of a family. To be seen. To be loved. Even when the memories get foggy. Claire snuffles, tears forming again. WALT (CONT'D) I want all of you to know... I'm not disappearing anymore. I'm here. With you. And I'm gonna keep showing up as long as this heart keeps beating. A hush. A warmth spreading through the room. Walt motions to Claire. WALT (CONT'D) Claire... bring me the ornament you made. Claire steps forward holding the small wooden ornament: Grandpa & Me – Christmas Memories. She places it carefully in Walt's hands. Walt turns to the tree. He lifts the ornament toward a branch near the top – the tree shimmering gold and green. WALT (CONT'D) This right here... this is the memory I want all of you to hang onto. He hangs the ornament – gently, reverently. A perfect
(MORE)

WALT (CONT'D)

moment. WALT (CONT'D) The Christmas where I found my way back. The Christmas you all brought me home. Claire wraps her arms around him from behind. The family closes in, forming a tight, loving circle around them – hands on shoulders, soft tears, warm smiles. WALT (CONT'D) (soft, emotional) This one... this Christmas... is my favorite. Mark's voice breaks as he whispers:

MARK

Ours too, Dad.

The camera pulls back – capturing the silhouette of the family around the glowing tree. The fire flickers gently beside them. Snow falls outside the window.

A perfect Christmas tableau.

INT. CABIN – GRAND ROOM – LATER THAT NIGHT

The room is dim now, lit only by the tree.

Claire brings Walt a warm blanket as he settles into his favorite chair.

CLAIRE

You tired, Grandpa?

WALT

(smiling) Best kind of tired. Claire kneels beside him.

CLAIRE

Before you sleep... can I ask one more thing?

WALT

Anything.

CLAIRE

What memory should I tell... if someone asks about you someday? Which one should I share first?

Walt looks at her – eyes bright, clear, full.

WALT

Tell them about tonight. The night
your grandpa remembered who he was.
And who he loved.

Claire kisses his cheek – soft, warm, lingering.

CLAIRE

I love you, Grandpa.

WALT

I love you too, kiddo. More than
every Christmas put together.

EXT. CABIN – NIGHT

Snow drifts across the yard. The lights inside glow like a
beacon in the quiet woods.

Inside, Walt closes his eyes peacefully.

Not slipping away.

Just resting.

Content.

Full.

Home.

FADE OUT

SUPER: "THE LAST CHRISTMAS MEMORY"

FADE TO BLACK