

THE SANTA-SKEPTICS

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - LATE AFTERNOON

Winter dusk turns the campus silver-blue. Students rush past barren trees, breath clouding the air. Christmas lights twinkle around lampposts - festive, but worn with age.

A banner hangs near the faculty building:

"ANNUAL WINTER RETREAT - MANDATORY FOR PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT"

INT. FACULTY MEETING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Six philosophy professors sit at a long table, each radiating a different flavor of exhaustion. Papers, half-empty coffee cups, and a broken stapler litter the center.

DEAN MARSHALL (60s, chipper to a fault) stands at the head, oblivious to the dread in the room.

DEAN MARSHALL
Everyone excited for our
departmental retreat?

Silence.

DEAN MARSHALL (CONT'D)
Good! You'll caravan up tomorrow
morning. Fresh mountain air! Team
building! Collaboration!

Still silence.

JOAN (50S, SHARP, BURNT-OUT)
Dean Marshall... with respect, we're
philosophers, not a rowing team.

WARREN (40S, TIGHTLY WOUND)
And it's finals week.

LILA (30S, TIMID)
And... there's a storm coming.

DEAN MARSHALL
Nonsense! That's just... weather.
You'll be at Evergreen Ridge Lodge
by sundown. Lovely place. Very...
restorative.

The professors exchange miserable looks.

MARCUS (50S, GENTLE BUT HAUNTED)
Do we have a choice?

DEAN MARSHALL
Absolutely.
(beat)
No.

He hands them a printed itinerary titled:

"RENEW. RECONNECT. REINSPIRE."

ORTIZ (60S, SOULFUL)
God help us.

DEAN MARSHALL
Yes! Exactly! Have fun!

He exits, humming "Jingle Bells."

They sit in defeated silence.

CUT TO:

EXT. CAMPUS PARKING LOT - NEXT MORNING

A biting wind blows snow across the asphalt. The six professors load bags into a university van.

Fiona arrives last - stylish coat, tired eyes, the aura of someone holding her emotions together with fishing wire.

FIONA
Sorry. I overslept.

JOAN
Oh good, we waited just long enough
to resent you for it.

Fiona forces a smile.

MARCUS
Everyone buckled? Road looks slick.

WARREN
Slick implies traction. This is
ice.

ORTIZ
Think positive, Warren.

WARREN

I refuse.

They pile into the van.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - LATE MORNING

The van snakes up a steep, winding road through dense pine forest. Snow thickens. Wind howls.

Inside the van, tension rises with altitude.

INT. VAN - CONTINUOUS

The professors sit wedged together like unwieldy luggage.

LILA

(nervous)

So... team building. That'll be fun.

JOAN

Fun is a social construct.

WARREN

Fun is a lie we tell children.

ORTIZ

(gently)

Fun is possible if you let it be.

Fiona stares out the window, distant.

MARCUS

Fiona? You okay?

FIONA

Just tired.

But something deeper flickers in her eyes. Something hollow.

Suddenly - a BLAST of wind rocks the van.

WARREN

Marcus! Watch the curve-

Too late.

The van skids on black ice.

Marcus fights the wheel -

They spin –

LILA
Oh God–

MARCUS
Brace!

The van SLAMS into a snowbank.

Silence.

Breathless.

Everyone is shaken but unharmed.

JOAN
If this is foreshadowing, I decline
it.

MARCUS
Is everyone okay?

Murmured affirmatives.

Ortiz tries his phone. No signal.

ORTIZ
Nothing. Dead zone.

WARREN
Wonderful. We're stranded in the
mountains with emotional baggage
and no reception.

FIONA
(quiet)
We can walk. The lodge can't be
far.

They gather their bags and step out into the storm.

CUT TO:

EXT. EVERGREEN RIDGE LODGE – LATE AFTERNOON

The storm calms just as they reach a clearing.

Before them stands EVERGREEN RIDGE LODGE – tall, old, rugged
timber and warm windows glowing like embers through snowfall.

A welcoming sight... yet something about it feels ancient.

Alive.

The professors exhale with relief.

LILA
It's... beautiful.

WARREN
Beautiful things are often traps.

JOAN
You're exhausting.

As they approach –

The massive wooden door OPENS by itself.

Not violently.

Just... aware.

A tall man stands framed by warm light.

NICK (50s?), silver hair, ageless eyes, wearing a simple winter sweater and boots. He radiates calm, warmth, and something impossible to name.

NICK
You made it.

The professors exchange looks.

MARCUS
Did the Dean call ahead?

NICK
(smiling)
Your arrival was expected.

He steps aside.

NICK (CONT'D)
Please. Come in. Warm yourselves.
The fire's been waiting.

They hesitate – but something in Nick's eyes dismantles their fear.

They enter.

As the last one crosses the threshold...

The wind outside shifts – almost a sigh of recognition.

CUT TO:

INT. LODGE FOYER – CONTINUOUS

The foyer is stunning. Rustic wood beams, soft golden lamps, evergreen garlands, and a towering fireplace crackling in the next room.

Warmth envelops them like a blanket.

FIONA

This... doesn't feel real.

NICK

That's all right. Not everything true feels real at first.

A chill moves through the group – not from cold.

From intuition.

Nick's eyes linger briefly, gently, on Fiona.

She looks away.

NICK (CONT'D)

Let me show you to your rooms.
Tonight begins what you were meant
to find.

WARREN

And what exactly is that?

Nick smiles – kind, cryptic, knowing.

NICK

Whatever you lost.

The professors exchange uneasy glances.

Nick moves toward the staircase.

They follow.

Behind them, the heavy lodge door **softly closes itself.**

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

The professors follow Nick up the creaking wooden steps.

The hallway is warm, lined with framed winter landscapes and antique lanterns that glow softly.

Nick stops before a row of doors.

NICK

Each room is prepared for you. Drop your things, get warm. We'll meet by the hearth in ten minutes.

WARREN

Do we get itineraries for this retreat?

Nick smiles as if Warren told a charming joke.

NICK

Not everything meaningful can be scheduled.

He moves on.

Warren frowns after him.

WARREN

I hate him already.

JOAN

That's because he smiled at you.

WARREN

Yes. Exactly.

INT. FIONA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Fiona enters a rustic but elegant room. A fire crackles softly.

A knitted throw rests at the foot of the bed. A small decorative MUSIC BOX sits on the dresser.

She freezes.

A memory flickers - faint, fast, painful.

She quickly looks away from the music box, forcing her breath steady.

INT. MARCUS'S ROOM - SAME TIME

Marcus sets his bag down and looks around.

There's a pine-scented candle on the nightstand.

He touches it gently - something in him tightens.

He sits at the edge of the bed, staring at nothing.

Loneliness sits beside him.

INT. ORTIZ'S ROOM - SAME

Ortiz notices a small framed quotation on his wall:

"REMEMBERING IS A FORM OF LOVE."

He touches it, moved.

ORTIZ

Beautiful...

A tear gathers - he wipes it away before it can fall.

INT. JOAN'S ROOM - SAME

Joan opens a large window, letting in freezing air.

JOAN

Perfect. Hypothermia. Nature's
Xanax.

She closes the curtains, annoyed with herself but unable to stop being... herself.

INT. LILA'S ROOM - SAME

Lila finds a tiny wrapped gift on her pillow - gold paper, red ribbon.

She hesitates... then opens it.

Inside: a single RED BIRD ORNAMENT.

Her breath catches.

LILA

How...?

Her eyes fill with cautious wonder.

INT. WARREN'S ROOM - SAME

Warren checks the room suspiciously.

He examines a lamp.

Checks behind the curtains.

Checks under the bed.

WARREN

I swear, if there's a camera in
here-

He opens the closet-

Empty.

He relaxes... slightly.

INT. LODGE FOYER - TEN MINUTES LATER

Nick waits by the massive stone hearth.

The firelight softens the room - warm, ancient, peaceful.

One by one, the professors gather.

MARCUS

This place... it's incredible.

NICK

It's patient. That's its gift.

JOAN

Lodges don't have gifts.

NICK

Everything has gifts if you know
how to look.

The group exchanges wary glances.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Nick gestures for them to sit on the couches around the fire.

NICK
Before we begin, there's something
you should know about Evergreen
Ridge.

WARREN
Ah, the sales pitch.

NICK
More of a story.

They settle in – despite themselves, hooked.

NICK (CONT'D)
The lodge was built over a century
ago by Elias Wren – a philosopher,
much like you. He believed people
carried invisible burdens. Regrets.
Wounds. Failures.

ORTIZ
He wasn't wrong.

NICK
Elias wanted to build a refuge
where sorrow could rest long enough
for joy to return.

Lila listens intently, holding her bird ornament in her
pocket.

JOAN
And how does a building accomplish
that?

Nick looks directly at her – not confrontational, but deeply,
gently knowing.

NICK
Some places remember us.

The fire CRACKS sharply – louder than it should.

Everyone jumps slightly.

WARREN
That's not ominous at all.

MARCUS
(to Nick)
Why us? Why this place?

Nick stands, moving closer to the fire.

NICK

Because each of you has forgotten something you were never meant to lose.

Silence.

That lands harder than any of them expect.

FIONA

Lost what?

Nick turns to her – his eyes ancient and soft.

NICK

Hope.

Fiona swallows hard and looks away.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM – LATER

The group now sits with mugs of steaming tea.

LILA

So what exactly do we do on this retreat?

NICK

Simple. You rest. You talk. You notice what you feel instead of what you think you're supposed to feel.

JOAN

Sounds like emotional entrapment.

WARREN

Sounds like therapy.

NICK

No. Therapy works in the mind. This place works in the soul.

Another small crack from the fireplace – this time, decorative pinecones above the mantle shift slightly.

The group collectively looks up.

MARCUS

Did that... move?

JOAN

Probably settling wood.

ORTIZ

Wood doesn't settle upward.

Nick smiles faintly.

NICK

You're noticing. That's good.

They exchange uneasy glances.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Nick walks the professors toward the dining room.

NICK

Dinner is in an hour. Until then –
explore. Sit with yourselves. Let
the lodge greet you in its own way.

WARREN

What does that mean?

Nick pauses at the end of the hallway.

NICK

It means this: The moment you stop
resisting... you'll start
remembering.

He leaves them to absorb that.

They look at one another.

JOAN

I vote we resist indefinitely.

ORTIZ

Too late for that.

LILA

Something's happening here.

MARCUS

Yeah. And I don't think we've seen
the start of it yet.

Fiona says nothing.

She holds her breath–

–as the faint sound of a CHILD'S HUMMING echoes from
somewhere upstairs.

Fiona stiffens.

FIONA
...Did you hear that?

MARCUS
Hear what?

But the sound is gone.

Or perhaps only she heard it.

Fiona tries to steady her hands.

JOAN
Probably the wind.

FIONA
(quiet)
Yeah. Probably.

She knows it wasn't.

CUT TO:

INT. LODGE DINING ROOM - EARLY EVENING

A long wooden table is set for six. Candles flicker inside red glass holders, casting warm shadows on the walls.

The professors sit, picking half-heartedly at bowls of hearty stew.

LILA
This is really good.

JOAN
Of course it is. Places like this
always lure you in with soup.

WARREN
I'm documenting everything strange
that happens. For research. And
liability.

ORTIZ
(smiles)
Warren, sometimes life doesn't want
to be solved.

WARREN

And sometimes life is a scam
designed by the hospitality
industry.

Nick enters carrying fresh bread.

A soft hush seems to follow him.

NICK

How's everyone adjusting?

JOAN

Are hallucinations part of the
package?

MARCUS

Joan—

JOAN

No, seriously. Because Fiona heard
something earlier.

Fiona tenses.

FIONA

I—I don't know what I heard.

Nick looks at her with inexplicable kindness.

NICK

Sometimes a sound is a memory
trying to be heard.

That lands too hard.

Fiona drops her gaze into her soup.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY - LATER

The group disperses after dinner.

Marcus walks beside Fiona.

MARCUS

You sure you're okay?

FIONA

Yeah. I just... didn't sleep well
last night.

Marcus hesitates.

INT. LODGE UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - SAME

Lila walks past the rooms when she hears a soft flutter.

She stops.

LILA

Hello?

Silence.

She continues - then stops again.

The fluttering returns.

She looks down.

Her red bird ornament - the one she placed safely inside her coat pocket - is now perched on a hallway table.

Lila's breath trembles.

LILA (CONT'D)

That's... not possible.

The bird gently tilts to one side.

As if listening.

Lila backs up, startled.

LILA (CONT'D)

Nope. No thank you. Not tonight.

She hurries off.

INT. LODGE STUDY - SAME

Warren enters a small study lined with old books.

He pulls a dusty volume titled ****"THE PHILOSOPHY OF BELIEF."****

He opens it.

The inside is blank.

Every page.

WARREN

What kind of sick joke is this?

He slams it shut – then notices new text appearing on the cover.

The title slowly changes to:

“THE FUTILITY OF CERTAINTY”

Warren stares in disbelief.

WARREN

No.

The title shifts again:

“YOU CAN’T MEASURE EVERYTHING.”

Warren drops the book like it burns.

He backs away – shaken to the core.

WARREN

Nope. No. Absolutely not.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM – SAME

Joan enters, looking for tea, but stops when she sees Ortiz standing near the glowing Christmas tree.

JOAN

Why are you staring at that thing like it gave you stock tips?

ORTIZ

Touch an ornament.

JOAN

Hard pass.

ORTIZ

Joan.

She rolls her eyes, reaches for an ornament with exaggerated sarcasm—

Then freezes.

JOAN

...It’s warm.

ORTIZ

Yes.

JOAN
Why is it warm?

ORTIZ
Because something is happening
here.

Joan drops her hand as though the ornament suddenly bit her.

JOAN
No. No, no, no. I am not doing
"Christmas wonder." I refuse.

She storms off.

Ortiz smiles to himself.

INT. FIONA'S ROOM - SAME

Fiona stands at the edge of her bed, staring at the music
box.

Her hands tremble.

She touches it.

A soft LULLABY begins to play.

Fiona jolts back - her breath stops.

FIONA
No... Please don't...

She covers her mouth as tears spring to her eyes.

The melody continues - tender, haunting.

Then-

A child's giggle echoes from the hallway.

Fiona collapses to her knees, overwhelmed.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Marcus comes running.

MARCUS
Fiona? I heard-

He stops short.

The door to Fiona's room is slowly swinging open by itself.
Inside, Fiona kneels on the floor, shaking with emotion.
Marcus kneels beside her.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Fiona... talk to me.

FIONA
(whispers)
It's not possible. That... that music
box was my daughter's.

Marcus freezes.

MARCUS
I... I didn't know you had—

FIONA
She died. She died three years ago.

Marcus's heart breaks for her.

Before he can speak—

Nick appears in the doorway.

Not startled. Not surprised.

Just present.

NICK
Fiona... Some memories don't break
us. They wait for us.

Fiona sobs harder.

Nick kneels, resting a gentle hand on the music box.

The melody softens, almost sighs.

NICK (CONT'D)
You're not alone here.

Fiona looks up at him — desperate, terrified, hopeful.

FIONA
Why is this happening? Why now?

Nick's eyes glisten with something ancient.

NICK

Because grief is ready to become
something else.

A SHIVER runs through the whole lodge – lights dim, fireplace
embers glow brighter, ornaments shimmer.

The others rush to the hall, breathless.

They sense it.

Something undeniable.

Something impossible.

Their skepticism cracks – for the first time..

They are afraid.

And maybe a little hopeful.

CUT TO:

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM – MOMENTS LATER

The professors gather, shaken. The fire blazes brighter than
before – almost aware.

Fiona sits trembling on the couch. Marcus stays close,
protective.

Warren paces like a trapped animal.

WARREN

Okay. Enough. Someone explain what
just happened because I'm about one
heartbeat away from hiking back
down this mountain.

JOAN

You wouldn't make it ten feet in
that snow.

WARREN

I'd rather freeze than be haunted
by Christmas decorations!

Ortiz stands near the fire, absorbing the room's energy.

ORTIZ

This place is waking up.

JOAN
Places don't "wake up," Ortiz.

ORTIZ
Then what's your explanation?

Joan hesitates – the first time she can't come up with a sarcastic retort.

LILA
(quiet)
My ornament moved.

Everyone looks at her.

LILA (CONT'D)
I put it in my coat. It showed up
in the hall. Like someone placed it
there.

WARREN
Someone is messing with us!

He glares at Nick.

Nick remains still. Calm.

NICK
I assure you, no one here is
playing tricks.

WARREN
Oh right – the magically warm
ornaments, the sentient fireplace,
the phantom giggles – all just...
coincidence.

Nick's expression softens rather than hardens.

NICK
Warren, sometimes the truth waits
for the bravest skeptic.

Warren stops pacing – insulted, but struck.

Marcus speaks, voice steady.

MARCUS
Fiona... the music box. Why did it
scare you?

Fiona clutches a blanket tighter.

FIONA
It wasn't the music box. It was the
sound with it.

JOAN
The sound?

Fiona nods.

FIONA
A laugh. My daughter used to laugh
like that.

Pain slices through the room.

Fiona breaks again – softly.

Nick kneels beside her.

NICK
She loved that melody. You kept it
because you never stopped loving
her.

Fiona's breath collapses.

FIONA
(broken)
Don't talk like you knew her.

Nick's eyes hold a deep, ancient sadness.

NICK
I didn't. But love leaves echoes.

Fiona covers her face, sobbing.

Marcus puts a hand on her shoulder.

Joan sits beside Fiona too – not touching, but present – a
small miracle in itself.

Lila snuffles, eyes glistening.

Ortiz closes his eyes, whispering a prayer.

Warren... is still.

Silenced.

INT. LODGE KITCHEN - LATER

Warren enters, finds a kettle already whistling.

WARREN

Did someone—

He lifts it. It's full. Fresh.

He didn't turn it on.

He turns around. A mug sits on the counter.

Steam rising.

No one is there.

Warren's fear finally cracks.

WARREN (CONT'D)

(whispers)

What do you want from us?

INT. LODGE DINING ROOM - SAME

Lila sits alone, staring at her red bird ornament.

She sets it on the table.

LILA

Okay. If you're... alive... or magical...
or whatever — move again.

Silence.

She leans closer.

LILA (CONT'D)

Please.

The bird remains still.

Lila collapses slightly — disappointment more painful than fear.

LILA (CONT'D)

Figures. Even miracles don't like
me.

A beat.

Then—

The ornament hops. Just once.

Lila gasps, hand over her mouth.

LILA (CONT'D)

...Hi.

The bird tilts its head.

Tears spill down her cheeks.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM - SAME

Joan stands by the massive windows, pretending she's not crying.

Ortiz approaches gently.

ORTIZ

You okay?

JOAN

No. And I resent the question.

Ortiz smiles with understanding.

ORTIZ

You care more than you let on.

JOAN

I care so much it's stupid.

She grips the edge of the window frame.

JOAN (CONT'D)

What if I break here? What if that's the whole point?

ORTIZ

Then let yourself break.

She looks at him - angry, frightened, vulnerable.

JOAN

I don't know how.

INT. LODGE FOYER - LATER

Nick gathers the group around the fire again.

The room hums faintly - like wind inside wood.

NICK

I know today has been overwhelming.
Unwanted. Unasked for.

He looks at Fiona.

NICK (CONT'D)
And painful.

Fiona lowers her eyes.

Nick steps closer, voice soft but steady.

NICK (CONT'D)
There is one rule in this lodge.

The others wait, breath held.

NICK (CONT'D)
Whatever rises, you face it. No
running. No hiding. No numbing. You
let the truth come.

Warren scoffs.

WARREN
And what if the "truth" is just
emotional manipulation aided by
atmospheric anomalies?

Nick smiles – not condescending, but compassionate.

NICK
Then it will pass. But if it's
real... it will free you.

Silence.

That hits **every** member of the group differently.

Nick looks around at each of them.

NICK (CONT'D)
Now... who among you is brave enough
to let your truth speak first?

No one answers.

Lightning flashes outside – brief, distant.

Slowly, Fiona rises.

Her voice barely audible.

FIONA
I'll go first.

The group turns to her.

Marcus pales, worried.

MARCUS
Fiona – you don't have to–

FIONA
I do.

She wipes her face, trembling.

FIONA (CONT'D)
If this place wants truth... then
here it is.

She steps toward the fire.

The flames respond – rising slightly, warming the air.

FIONA (CONT'D)
I'm the reason my daughter died.

The room goes *still.*

Even the flames hesitate.

Nick steps forward gently.

NICK
Begin there.

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Fiona stands in the doorway of her room, shaken from the music box incident.

Marcus hovers, unsure how close he's allowed to be.

MARCUS
Fiona... I'm here, okay? Just
breathe.

She tries – but her breaths keep breaking apart.

FIONA
I don't understand. I *left* that
music box in storage. I haven't–
(voice cracks)
I haven't listened to it since the
funeral.

Marcus gently places a hand on the doorframe, not crossing the line unless she invites him.

MARCUS

Whatever's happening... it's not your fault.

Fiona lets out a small, bitter laugh.

FIONA

Marcus, everything is my fault.

Before he can respond—

A soft *thump* echoes down the hallway.

They both turn.

A single toy block — pastel blue, with the letter "A" — sits in the center of the hallway floor.

Marcus stiffens.

MARCUS

Was that here before?

Fiona's knees weaken.

FIONA

No...

The block *rotates* slowly... by itself... and stops with the letter "A" facing her.

Fiona backs up, hand covering her mouth.

FIONA (CONT'D)

That was her first letter. She used to carry those blocks everywhere—

She breaks. Marcus catches her before she collapses.

MARCUS

Fiona, look at me. We're okay.
You're okay.

But the lodge is beginning to pulse with memory.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Ortiz watches as another string of lights along the Christmas tree glows brighter, almost *comforting.*

He places a tentative hand on a branch.

The lights brighten, warm as breath.

ORTIZ
(whispers)
You're trying to help her, aren't
you?

As if in response, the lights flicker softly.

INT. LODGE UPSTAIRS HALL - SAME

Lila stands halfway up the staircase, clutching her red bird ornament.

LILA
If anyone else is seeing weird
things, now would be a great time
to say so.

Joan crosses the landing.

JOAN
We're not discussing it in a
hallway. That's how horror movies
start.

LILA
Joan, a Christmas tree winked at
me.

JOAN
Better than Warren. He glared at
everyone all through dinner.

Warren appears behind them, frazzled and pale.

WARREN
My book changed titles. By itself.

Lila and Joan stare.

LILA
Like... magically?

WARREN
No. Scientifically impossible.
Categorically illogical. And yet
here we are.

Joan sighs, rubbing her temples.

JOAN

Great. The one time I hoped I was spiraling, it turns out we're having a collective meltdown.

INT. LODGE FOYER - MOMENTS LATER

Nick stands by the fireplace as the group assembles.

He doesn't look shocked. He looks... patient.

NICK

Something has shifted, hasn't it?

Warren throws up his hands.

WARREN

Oh don't do that. Don't do the mystical "I've been expecting this" routine.

NICK

(softly)

I didn't expect miracles. I expected honesty.

He turns toward Fiona, who is being supported by Marcus.

NICK (CONT'D)

The lodge responds to what we hide.

Fiona winces.

FIONA

Then it needs to stop responding.

Nick kneels in front of her, gentle but grounded.

NICK

When grief has been buried too long, it doesn't die. It looks for the first warmth it can find.

A beat.

NICK (CONT'D)

It found yours.

Fiona shakes, caught between breaking and breathing.

FIONA

I don't want to remember- I don't want to feel-

NICK
But you already are.

Another pulse moves through the lodge.

A soft tremor – not threatening.

Like a heart responding to theirs.

Marcus clutches Fiona tighter.

Lila moves to her side.

Joan too – uncharacteristically tender.

Even Warren stops pacing.

The group forms around her.

For the first time... united.

Nick rises.

NICK (CONT'D)
This is only the beginning.

He gestures toward the fire.

NICK (CONT'D)
Sit. Tonight, we face what comes.

The flames rise slightly – glowing gold, not orange.

Fiona stares at the fire, terrified... but ready to step toward it.

She wipes her tears.

FIONA
Okay. I'll start.

She walks slowly toward the hearth.

Marcus and the others follow.

The lodge creaks – an approving exhale.

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM – LATER THAT NIGHT

The fire glows brighter than before – steady, warm, almost attentive.

The group gathers slowly. Fiona sits nearest the hearth, knees drawn in slightly. Marcus sits close but gives her space. The others settle around her—Joan, Lila, Ortiz, Warren.

Nick stands behind them, hands folded.

A long moment passes before Fiona speaks.

FIONA

My daughter's name was Abby.

Lila's breath catches softly.

FIONA (CONT'D)

She was six. Happiest kid you ever saw. Nothing scared her. Not storms, not heights... not even the dark.

The fire crackles gently – as if listening.

FIONA (CONT'D)

Three years ago... we were driving home from my sister's house. I was tired. Too tired.

She swallows hard.

FIONA (CONT'D)

I thought I could make it. But I fell asleep behind the wheel.

A heavy silence spreads.

FIONA (CONT'D)

When I woke up... the car wasn't on the road anymore.

She wipes her face, tears shaking loose.

FIONA (CONT'D)

Abby died on impact.

Marcus lowers his head. Joan's eyes well up, though she tries to hide it. Lila quietly cries.

Ortiz whispers something soft in Spanish – a prayer.

Warren looks gutted, unable to intellectualize any of this.

Fiona forces a trembling exhale.

FIONA (CONT'D)

I have lived every day since
believing that I killed my child.
And I don't know how to stop
believing it.

Nick kneels beside her again, but keeps a respectful
distance.

NICK

Guilt is not the same as
responsibility.

FIONA

It feels the same.

NICK

Only because you haven't forgiven
the part of you that was hurting.

Fiona shakes her head, shaking harder.

FIONA

I don't deserve forgiveness.

Nick looks directly into her eyes – not pity, but truth.

NICK

No parent who loves that deeply is
meant to suffer alone.

The fire rises slightly, almost pulsing.

Fiona breaks again, leaning forward, caught in an emotional
undertow.

Marcus reaches out. She takes his hand.

MARCUS

Fiona... you didn't cause the storm.
You didn't choose exhaustion. You
didn't choose grief.

Her body shudders with another wave.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

You just survived it. And that's
harder than dying from it.

Fiona leans into him, letting herself be held.

Joan wipes her eyes aggressively.

JOAN

Damn it.

Lila places a hand on Fiona's back.

Ortiz moves closer, warm, steady.

Warren leans forward, voice unsteady.

WARREN

Fiona... I'm so sorry.

She nods, unable to speak.

Nick rises.

NICK

Thank you for sharing what was
locked inside. The lodge responds
to courage.

A soft, musical CHIME echoes from nowhere.

Everyone looks around.

LILA

...Did the house just applaud?

JOAN

If this place starts giving
standing ovations, I'm out.

A small laugh ripples through them – the first shared moment
of release.

INT. LODGE HALLWAY – MOMENTS LATER

The group disperses slowly, exhausted but softened.

Warren lingers behind Nick.

WARREN

You speak like you've done this
before.

NICK

I've seen grief. It teaches more
than fear does.

WARREN

That sounds like a rehearsed line.

NICK
Maybe. Or maybe truth doesn't
change much from year to year.

Warren bristles.

WARREN
I still don't trust any of this.

Nick smiles faintly.

NICK
Good. Miracles don't require trust.
Only attention.

Warren has no reply.

INT. LODGE UPSTAIRS LANDING - SAME

Lila stops Joan as she walks toward her room.

LILA
You were really kind to Fiona.

JOAN
(annoyed)
Don't tell anyone.

LILA
I won't.
(softly)
I liked seeing it, though.

Joan stiffens slightly - compliments confuse her.

JOAN
Let's not get sentimental. I'm
allergic.

She disappears into her room.

Lila smiles.

INT. MARCUS'S ROOM - SAME

Marcus stands at his window, watching snow sift through
moonlight.

He looks calmer... but also troubled.

He pulls a small PHOTO from his wallet - a younger Marcus,
smiling with a man who looks very much like him.

He hesitates, then sets the photo on the nightstand.

The pine-scented candle beside it flickers gently toward the picture.

Marcus watches, heart tight.

MARCUS
(whispers)
Not yet.

He blows out the candle.

INT. FIONA'S ROOM - SAME

Fiona lies on the bed, drained but breathing more evenly.

The music box now sits closed - still.

A soft glow of moonlight spills across her face.

She stares at the ceiling.

For the first time... her breathing is steady.

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM - LATE NIGHT

The fire has settled into a warm, steady glow.

The group sits in a loose circle - some staring into the flames, others lost in thought.

The emotional weight from Fiona's confession still lingers, but now softened by something else:

Relief.

Nick drapes a blanket around Fiona's shoulders.

NICK
You released something heavy
tonight. Rest will feel strange for
a while.

Fiona nods weakly.

FIONA
I didn't think I could say any of
that out loud.

NICK
Pain only stays sharp when it's
silent.

Fiona absorbs this, shaky but calmer.

Marcus clears his throat, glancing at the others.

MARCUS
Maybe... maybe she shouldn't have
been first.

JOAN
(snorts)
Oh yes. Let's critique her trauma
timing.

WARREN
I mean, if we're ranking grief-

JOAN
Warren, shut up.

Warren shuts up.

A soft glow brightens the mantle above the fireplace - the
pinecones subtly shimmer.

Ortiz notices first.

ORTIZ
It's reacting to her.

Lila leans forward, fascinated.

LILA
Like the lodge is... comforting her.

Warren stands abruptly.

WARREN
Not this again. No more "the
building is alive" theories,
please.

JOAN
You literally watched your book
change titles. Maybe sit this one
out.

Warren glares, but he's too rattled to argue.

INT. LODGE FOYER - MOMENTS LATER

Nick guides Fiona gently toward the hallway.

NICK
Get some sleep. Tonight was a long
time coming.

Fiona hesitates.

FIONA
Nick... How did the music box get
here?

Nick meets her gaze with quiet gravity.

NICK
Grief leaves trails. Love follows
them home.

Fiona absorbs that – not fully understanding, but feeling
something soften in her chest.

Marcus steps forward.

MARCUS
I'll walk her to her room.

Fiona almost refuses – pride, fear – but...

FIONA
(small)
Thank you.

They go upstairs together.

INT. UPSTAIRS LANDING - CONTINUOUS

Marcus walks beside her, slow and gentle.

MARCUS
You don't have to be strong all the
time.

FIONA
Yes I do.

MARCUS
Not here.

She stops, leaning against the railing.

FIONA

The worst part isn't losing her.
It's the moments I forget. When the
world is quiet and I feel... normal.

Marcus nods.

MARCUS

That's not betrayal. That's
survival.

Her eyes soften – gratitude, grief, fear all tangled.

INT. LODGE MAIN FLOOR – SAME

Back downstairs, Joan tosses a tiny piece of firewood into
the flames – more aggressively than needed.

JOAN

I hate vulnerability.

ORTIZ

Why?

JOAN

Because it's messy. Irrational. And
people always leave once they see
it.

Ortiz gives her a warm, steady look.

ORTIZ

Maybe not everyone.

Joan goes still – the comment hits deeper than she wants to
show.

JOAN

Don't get poetic with me, Ortiz.

ORTIZ

You started it.

INT. LODGE STUDY – SAME

Warren storms into the study, grabbing books from the shelf
and tossing them into a pile.

WARREN

Titles don't change. Pages don't
blank. This is impossible.

He flips open the book from earlier.

The pages are blank again.

Warren's voice cracks.

WARREN (CONT'D)
Stop it. Stop toying with me.

The BOOK suddenly slams shut.

Warren recoils, terrified.

WARREN (CONT'D)
(shaking)
What do you want from me?

Silence.

Then the words slowly appear on the cover:

"LET GO."

Warren drops it, breath shaking uncontrollably.

INT. LODGE UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - SAME

Marcus gently walks Fiona to her door.

MARCUS
If you need anything tonight...
knock.

She nods.

FIONA
Marcus... thank you. For not... fixing
it. For just being here.

MARCUS
You'd do the same.

She hesitates, then steps into her room.

Marcus waits until the door closes before letting his own
façade crack.

INT. FIONA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is dim except for the moonlight.

The music box now sits closed, perfectly still.

Fiona sits at the edge of the bed, touching it gently.

FIONA
(whispers)
Abby...

A faint, warm glow pulses once from inside the box – tiny but unmistakable.

Fiona doesn't scream.

Doesn't recoil.

Instead... she cries softly, a different kind of tears.

Not terror.

Not guilt.

Memory.

INT. LODGE LIVING ROOM – SAME

Nick stands alone near the fireplace, watching the flames move with emotion.

He speaks to the room – or someone beyond it.

NICK
She's opening. The others will
follow soon.

A faint shimmer of light moves across the mantel – like a response.

Nick's expression softens.

NICK (CONT'D)
Yes. It's almost time.

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE DINING ROOM – MORNING

Soft winter light fills the room. Snow falls thickly outside.

The professors sit around the table with coffee, looking more tired – but less guarded – than before.

Joan aggressively butters a biscuit like it insulted her entire lineage.

JOAN
I hate crying. It should be illegal.

LILA
I think crying is good for you.

JOAN
So is cardio. I don't do that either.

Ortiz chuckles softly.

Fiona enters the room.

Everyone looks up – waiting, worried.

She offers a small, fragile smile.

FIONA
Morning.

They exhale in collective relief.

Marcus pulls out a chair for her. She sits beside him.

MARCUS
How'd you sleep?

FIONA
I didn't. But it wasn't... bad.

Nick arrives with a pot of coffee, cheerful but not intrusive.

NICK
Good morning. Today will be... illuminating.

Warren nearly chokes on his drink.

WARREN
Oh fantastic. More "illuminating."

Nick pours Warren more coffee anyway.

NICK
You're very close. The lodge is listening.

Warren mutters into his mug.

WARREN
Great. A sentient Airbnb.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - LATER

A roaring fire. Soft snowfall outside.

The group sits in a semicircle as Nick prepares the space – adjusting lamps, opening curtains, placing small wooden boxes beside each chair.

JOAN
Are those gifts? Because if this is Secret Santa, I'm out.

NICK
Not gifts. Invitations.

He sits.

NICK (CONT'D)
The lodge will continue responding to each of you. You can ignore it... or you can listen.

LILA
What's inside the boxes?

NICK
Something the lodge believes you're ready for.

Warren scoffs.

WARREN
"Believes." Great. Now the building has opinions.

Nick gestures.

NICK
When you're ready – open them. No sooner. No later.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The professors stare at their boxes like they might explode.

Joan crosses her arms.

JOAN

Nope. I'm not touching mine. I've seen horror films. This is how ghosts get in.

ORTIZ

Ghosts were here before you were born, Joan.

JOAN

Exactly. Why bother them?

Marcus looks at his box – troubled.

MARCUS

What if I don't want to know what's in mine?

NICK

Then it will wait. Grief doesn't push. It opens when asked.

Fiona watches her own box closely – afraid and curious.

Lila sits forward.

LILA

I'll go first.

Everyone turns.

WARREN

Of course you will.

Lila opens her box.

Inside: a small NEST woven from soft twigs and pine needles... and the little red bird ornament, now glowing faintly.

Lila gasps.

LILA

Oh...

The bird hops inside the nest.

Joan and Warren jump.

WARREN

Absolutely not.

JOAN

Is it... alive?!

ORTIZ
It's responding to her heart more
than her hand.

Lila touches the nest gently.

LILA
(whispers)
I always wanted to feel chosen. By
anything. By anyone.

The bird tilts its head, nuzzling her finger.

Lila cries – but smiles through it.

LILA (CONT'D)
Thank you.

The group softens – seeing her pain for the first time.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM – CONTINUOUS

All eyes turn to Joan.

JOAN
Oh don't look at me. My box is
staying sealed. Sealed for life.
Sealed in the cold vacuum of space.

Nick raises an eyebrow.

NICK
Fear is the loudest refusal.

JOAN
I'm not afraid. I'm...
(beat)
...strategically cautious.

Ortiz puts a gentle hand on her arm.

ORTIZ
We're here. Whatever it is... you
won't face it alone.

Joan looks at him – sees sincerity – looks away quickly.

JOAN
I hate this retreat.

But she reaches for her box.

Her hands tremble.

She opens it.

Inside lies a small SILVER POCKET WATCH – old, elegant, engraved.

Joan recoils.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Oh no. Nope. That's it. I'm done.

WARREN

What? What's wrong?

Joan's eyes fill, uninvited.

JOAN

This belonged to my mother.

Ortiz softens instantly.

JOAN (CONT'D)

She left when I was twelve.
Completely vanished. No note. No
explanation.

She wipes an angry tear.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I found this watch under her pillow
the day she left. I kept it. I
hated it. I hated her for leaving.

The watch TICKS – once – though it's unwound.

Joan jolts.

JOAN (CONT'D)

It never ticked before.

Nick speaks softly.

NICK

Some goodbyes were never meant to
be final.

Joan looks at the watch like it might break her.

Then—

Ortiz gently pulls her into a hug.

She allows it.

For two seconds.

Then pulls away.

JOAN
If you tell ANYONE I hugged you- I
will deny everything.

Ortiz smiles.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Warren eyes his box like it's a venomous snake.

WARREN
Oh, I already know mine will be
awful.

NICK
You fear judgment more than truth.

WARREN
That's because judgment is real.
Truth is... negotiable.

NICK
Not here.

Warren sighs dramatically.

WARREN
Fine. Let's get this psychological
torture over with.

He opens his box.

Inside sits a STACK OF GRADED PHILOSOPHY PAPERS - all marked
with red ink.

Warren's face drains of color.

WARREN (CONT'D)
Oh God.

Lila squints.

LILA
Are those... your old student
evaluations?

Warren's voice breaks.

WARREN
They're the papers from the
semester I failed two students.

He picks one up – hand shaking.

WARREN (CONT'D)

One of them dropped out. I found out later she left school for good. She said I discouraged her. That I made her feel stupid.

The room goes still.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I told myself I graded fairly. That rigor mattered more than feelings.

He looks up – devastated.

WARREN (CONT'D)

But I crushed her. I know I did.

A soft swirl of wind blows through the room – almost compassionate.

Warren sits heavily.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I just... followed the rules.

Nick kneels beside him.

NICK

Compassion is not the opposite of rigor. It is the completion of it.

Warren breaks – the first time.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Now only Marcus's box remains unopened.

He stares at it, rigid.

MARCUS

I can't do this.

FIONA

Marcus... we're here.

He shakes his head.

MARCUS

Some things stay buried for a reason.

Nick steps forward.

NICK
Not here.

Marcus closes his eyes – then opens the box with trembling hands.

Inside:

A PHOTOGRAPH

of Marcus and the older man from his wallet...

Only now, the photograph is burned around the edges. The older man's face is half-faded.

Marcus flinches as if struck.

MARCUS
No... No, no, no...

Fiona reaches for him.

FIONA
Marcus – what is it?

Marcus grips the photo, chest tightening.

MARCUS
That's my brother.

The lodge GROANS softly – a deep, wooden ache.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
He died because of me.

Everyone falls silent.

The air thickens – the lodge responding.

NICK
Tell them.

Marcus looks around.

He is not ready.

But the lodge is waiting.

FADE OUT.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Marcus stands frozen, clutching the half-burned photograph. The flames in the hearth dim slightly, as if holding their breath.

The others wait - not pushing, but present.

Fiona steps closer.

FIONA

Marcus... when you're ready.

Marcus stares at the photo, jaw tight, eyes wet.

MARCUS

My brother's name was Daniel. He was... everything I wasn't. Brave. Brilliant. Good.

He swallows hard.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Two years ago... he called me late one night. Said he wanted to talk. Said it was urgent.

The group listens intently.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

But I had a lecture to finish. Papers to grade. I told him I'd call him back in the morning.

The photo trembles in his grip.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

He died that night. Heart failure. Alone.

The room goes absolutely still.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I missed my last chance to be his brother. I chose work. I chose... something that didn't matter.

Fiona reaches out - touches his arm.

He doesn't pull away.

FIONA

You couldn't have known.

MARCUS

But I could have listened. I should have listened.

Ortiz speaks gently.

ORTIZ

Guilt is love without a place to go.

Marcus looks at him, shaken.

MARCUS

The worst part? He always believed in me. Even when I didn't.

The fire brightens softly, warm and steady.

Nick steps forward, voice low.

NICK

Marcus... Daniel didn't die because you didn't answer. And you didn't fail him. You only forgot you mattered to him.

That line breaks something open in Marcus.

He lets out a sob he's been holding for years.

Fiona quickly embraces him. He collapses into her arms – raw, unguarded.

Lila cries softly. Joan looks away, pretending she's not crying. Warren rubs his sleeve across his eyes, pretending he's not either.

Ortiz places a hand on Marcus's back.

ORTIZ

You're not alone anymore.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM – MOMENTS LATER

The group sits together again – closer than before.

Nick watches the fire – which flickers strangely, like a heartbeat syncing with theirs.

Fiona wipes her face, then looks at Marcus.

FIONA

Thank you for telling us.

Marcus nods – exhausted, but lighter.

MARCUS

I didn't think I'd ever say any of that out loud.

JOAN

Welcome to Evergreen Ridge. The place where repressed trauma becomes breakfast conversation.

The group *laughs* – tired, fragile, but real.

Even Warren cracks a smile.

WARREN

I'm starting to think I under-packed on emotional bandwidth.

Nick steps closer, expression shifting – more serious, more mystical.

NICK

You've each opened a door tonight. The lodge... knows this.

A soft wind brushes through the great room, though the windows are closed.

The candles flicker.

LILA

Okay, that was not the heater.

WARREN

Do NOT say it's the lodge breathing. I will jump out a window.

Nick raises his hand.

NICK

There is something you must see now. All of you.

He gestures toward the hallway.

NICK (CONT'D)

Come with me.

INT. LODGE UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

The hall is darker than usual - moonlight barely touching the old wooden floors.

Nick leads them toward a door they haven't noticed before.

A narrow door.

Unmarked.

JOAN

That wasn't there yesterday.

WARREN

Oh God. We're doing secret doors now.

Nick turns the old brass knob.

The door CREAKS open.

Inside is a staircase - descending into dimness.

NICK

This is the heart of the lodge.
Where it remembers.

He looks back at them.

NICK (CONT'D)

And where you will remember, too.

They all hesitate.

Warren shakes his head vehemently.

WARREN

Nope. No. Stairs into darkness is where horror protagonists die.

JOAN

If Warren's scared, I'm scared. And I hate that.

Nick extends a hand.

NICK

You're ready.

Fiona steps forward first.

FIONA

If this is where healing happens... I
want to see it.

Marcus follows.

Lila, trembling but brave, goes after them.

Ortiz nods respectfully and steps in.

Joan freezes – then sighs dramatically.

JOAN

If I die, I'm haunting all of you.

She goes.

Warren is last.

WARREN

(muttering)

I'm a professor. I should be
grading papers, not spelunking
inside sentient architecture..

He follows them down.

Nick closes the door behind them.

The lights fade.

FADE OUT.

INT. HIDDEN STAIRCASE – CONTINUOUS

The professors descend cautiously. The wooden steps creak
underfoot – not ominous, but ancient.

A faint warm glow pulses from below, like a heartbeat guiding
them.

Warren stays glued to the wall.

WARREN

I swear if anything jumps out, I'm
suing this mountain.

JOAN

For what? Emotional distress?
Because we're already there.

Ortiz chuckles softly.

ORTIZ

Fear is normal. It means your heart knows something important is coming.

WARREN

Or that something horrible is coming— that's also a possibility.

Lila clutches her bird nest.

Marcus glances at Fiona — she's steadying her breath, stronger than earlier.

MARCUS

If this gets too intense, we turn back. Okay?

Fiona nods — but her eyes say she won't turn back.

INT. LODGE BASEMENT CORRIDOR — MOMENTS LATER

They reach the bottom of the staircase.

The basement is **nothing** like they expected.

No tools. No storage. Instead: a long corridor lined with ***old wooden doors***, each one unique — carved with symbols, initials, and worn engravings.

The air is warm — like breath against winter.

LILA

This doesn't feel like a basement.
It feels like...

ORTIZ

...memory.

Nick appears behind them — he didn't walk down the stairs, but he is simply **there.**

NICK

The lodge has always held stories.
Now it holds yours.

He gestures down the corridor.

NICK (CONT'D)

Each door responds to the person it calls. When it's your moment... you'll know.

Everyone shifts uneasily.

WARREN

Okay, hold on – we're doing Narnia
meets group therapy? Because I did
NOT sign up–

A door at the far end **creaks open**.

Just a few inches.

Fiona freezes.

FIONA

...That one.

The others turn toward it.

The door has no carvings – only a soft pink glow beneath it.

Marcus takes her hand.

MARCUS

You want us with you?

Fiona squeezes his hand.

FIONA

Yes.

INT. MEMORY DOOR #1 – FIONA'S ROOM – CONTINUOUS

They step into a room filled with warm, golden light.

Toys. A tiny dress hanging on a hook. A small bed with a
stuffed bear.

Joan gasps.

JOAN

This is–

FIONA

(soft)

Abby's room.

Fiona walks forward, trembling as she picks up a small
drawing taped to the wall.

It's a crayon picture: Fiona holding Abby's hand under a
bright yellow sun.

Warren swallows hard. Lila quietly cries.

Marcus steadies Fiona when her legs weaken.

MARCUS
You're doing great.

Fiona touches the drawing lovingly.

FIONA
She used to draw suns even on rainy days. She said the sun was "hiding but still there."

Ortiz wipes his eyes.

ORTIZ
Children understand hope better than adults.

A soft giggle echoes through the room.

Fiona gasps – looks toward a corner.

A faint silhouette of a child's form flickers – not frightening, not fully visible – just warm light shaped like memory.

FIONA
Abby...?

The silhouette giggles again, running behind a small dresser.

Marcus steps back, stunned.

WARREN
Okay, that's– That's not– I mean–

JOAN
Warren, breathe.

Fiona drops to her knees, hand outstretched, tears falling freely.

FIONA
I'm so sorry, baby. Mommy is so, so sorry.

The light shape steps forward – just enough to illuminate Fiona's tear-streaked face.

Then–

It touches her hand.

A warm pulse flows through her.

Fiona sobs – but this time it's relief, release, love.

The silhouette giggles one last time...

...and fades like morning light.

Fiona collapses into Marcus's arms, shaking – but healing.

He holds her tightly.

MARCUS

She knows you loved her. She always
knew.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – MOMENTS LATER

Nick guides them gently back into the hallway.

The door closes softly behind Fiona.

She leans against the wall, breathing deeply.

FIONA

I thought it would destroy me. But
it... didn't.

NICK

Love never destroys. It transforms.

Fiona nods – changed.

Another door creaks open.

This time, carved with ****an intricate cross**** – old, elegant,
sharp-edged.

Ortiz steps forward instinctively.

ORTIZ

This one is mine.

He turns to the group.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)

Come with me?

They nod, gathering at his side.

Nick holds back, watching, guiding.

They step into Ortiz's door–

FADE OUT.

INT. MEMORY ROOM – ORTIZ'S DOOR – CONTINUOUS

The group steps through the doorway and into a small chapel-like space.

Soft candlelight flickers across old stone walls. A wooden pew, worn by time, sits in the center of the room. A stained-glass window glows with warm colors, even though no sun shines outside.

Ortiz stops cold.

LILA

Ortiz... what is this place?

Ortiz runs a trembling hand along the pew.

ORTIZ

This is... my childhood church. I haven't seen this place in forty years.

Joan scans the room, wary but softer than usual.

JOAN

It's beautiful.

Ortiz closes his eyes, taking a deep breath.

ORTIZ

I used to come here with my mother. She'd light a candle every Sunday... no matter how little money we had. Said hope was worth a coin.

Marcus watches him with respect.

MARCUS

What happened to her?

Ortiz hesitates – then steps toward the altar.

A single candle sits there.

Unlit.

ORTIZ

She died when I was eighteen. Cancer.

He swallows hard.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)
I prayed every day. Asked for a
miracle. Begged for one.

He touches the candle gently.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)
When she died... I thought God had
abandoned me.

Fiona steps forward, understanding.

FIONA
You abandoned Him too.

Ortiz smiles sadly.

ORTIZ
I did. Not out of anger... but out of
heartbreak.

The candle suddenly flickers – not lit, but glowing faintly
from within.

The group gasps.

WARREN
...Nope. No. Candles do not self-
illuminate. That is not physics.

JOAN
Warren, please – this isn't about
you right now.

Ortiz kneels in front of the candle.

ORTIZ
I've spent my whole life missing
her... but too afraid to admit it.
Afraid that longing meant weakness.

Tears fall from his eyes.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)
I thought faith failed me. But
really... I failed my faith.

The candle ignites – softly, beautifully– a golden flame that
casts warm light across the room.

Ortiz gasps – overwhelmed, broken, healed all at once.

LILA

Ortiz... your mother didn't leave
you.

Ortiz lowers his head.

ORTIZ

She never did.

A soft breeze passes through the chapel – peaceful, warm.

The stained-glass window brightens, illuminating Ortiz in
soothing color.

He smiles through tears.

ORTIZ (CONT'D)

Thank you.

He doesn't specify who the thank-you is for.

He doesn't need to.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – MOMENTS LATER

The group exits Ortiz's door. The door closes gently behind
them, a final respectful bow.

Ortiz wipes his face and exhales shakily.

ORTIZ

I feel... lighter.

JOAN

You look lighter. And less
insufferably serene than usual.

Ortiz chuckles softly.

LILA

That was beautiful.

Fiona squeezes his arm.

FIONA

She was with you. I felt it.

Ortiz's eyes glisten – grateful.

A new door CREAKS open down the corridor.

Not Fiona's.

Not Ortiz's.

Not Marcus's.

This door is smaller, older. Marked by a faint, trembling
red line etched across its surface.

Warren freezes.

WARREN

Oh no. Nope. That's mine, isn't it?

Nick appears beside him.

NICK

You've been holding your fear the
longest. The lodge waits for the
ones who hide the deepest.

Warren backs up a step.

WARREN

No. Absolutely not. I'm not ready.
I'm not—
(swallows hard)
I don't want to see what's in
there.

Joan steps forward – surprisingly gentle.

JOAN

None of us wanted to. But look what
happened when we did.

She gestures at Fiona. At Marcus. At Ortiz.

JOAN (CONT'D)

You're not alone, Warren. We're
right here.

Warren looks at her, stunned by the kindness.

WARREN

Joan... are you being nice to me?

JOAN

Don't make it weird.

He exhales shakily.

Lila takes his hand.

LILA

You don't have to be brave. Just willing.

Warren nods slowly.

WARREN

Okay. But if a clown jumps out, I'm suing Nick personally.

Nick smiles.

NICK

There are no clowns here, Warren. Only truths.

Warren approaches the door.

His hand trembles as he rests it on the old wooden surface.

The red line glows faintly...

...and the door swings inward.

INT. MEMORY ROOM – WARREN'S DOOR – CONTINUOUS

A small, cramped office. A desk cluttered with ungraded papers. Stacks of old red pens.

A single chair sits in the center.

Warren's breath catches.

WARREN

This is my office...

He steps inside slowly, terrified.

The others remain close.

Nick stays at the doorway – not entering, but watching with compassion.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I spent years here. Thinking rigor meant cruelty. Thinking fear produced excellence.

He picks up a red pen from the desk – it CRUMBLES in his hand.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I never realized how afraid my students were of me. How much weight one sentence from me carried.

A chair in the corner shifts – just a little.

Warren stares.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I told myself it didn't matter. That grades were objective. That failure was necessary.

A soft whisper fills the room – like overlapping voices.

Not words.

Just disappointment.

Warren's face collapses.

WARREN (CONT'D)

I hurt people. I... I *hurt* people.

He falls to his knees.

Fiona and Ortiz rush to his side.

FIONA

Warren, listen to me. You didn't know the weight you carried.

ORTIZ

Now you do. That's redemption.

The whisper fades.

A stack of papers on the desk suddenly BLOWS open–

Every page now bears the same handwritten words:

"YOU CAN TRY AGAIN."

Warren sobs – loud, unrestrained, collapsing into Lila's arms.

WARREN

I don't deserve another chance.

LILA
 (crying)
 That's why it's a miracle.

The room warms – golden light enveloping Warren.

And for the first time...

He lets himself accept forgiveness.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – MOMENTS LATER

Warren emerges from the room – trembling, red-eyed,
 transformed.

Joan pats his shoulder.

JOAN
 Well... that was brutal.

WARREN
 (broken laugh)
 Yeah.

JOAN
 But you're still here.

WARREN
 Yeah.

She squeezes his arm – quick, awkward.

JOAN
 Good job, professor.

Warren smiles – small, but real.

Another door begins to glow.

This time...

Joan's.

Her face drains.

JOAN (CONT'D)
 Oh hell.

Nick steps beside her.

NICK
 You knew this was coming.

Joan stares at the glowing door, terrified and furious all at once.

JOAN

I hate this retreat.

But she steps forward—

Hand shaking—

And reaches for the doorknob.

FADE OUT.

INT. MEMORY ROOM — JOAN'S DOOR — CONTINUOUS

The group steps cautiously into Joan's memory room.

But unlike Fiona's and Ortiz's, this one is *bare.*

A modest living room. Old carpet. Outdated floral couch. A single lamp with a crooked shade.

It feels... lonely.

Joan stiffens instantly.

JOAN

Oh great. We've entered the 'sad sitcom' era of my childhood.

But her voice cracks despite her sarcasm.

Lila steps closer.

LILA

Joan... is this your family home?

Joan nods once — sharp, controlled.

JOAN

My mother used to sit right there.

She gestures at the couch.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Every night. Chain smoking.
Watching whatever soap opera was on. Waiting for my dad to come home.

She hugs herself unconsciously.

Ortiz walks softly around the room, noticing something near the lamp.

A single PACKET OF MATCHES.

He looks to Joan.

ORTIZ

Matches?

Joan freezes – breath catching.

JOAN

She left a note. Just one line:
“Don’t blame yourself.” Then... she
lit a match.

Silence.

Fiona’s hand lifts to her mouth in shock.

FIONA

Joan...

The walls around the room subtly darken – not ominous, but reflective of Joan’s memory.

JOAN

I woke up in smoke. Flames
everywhere. I was twelve. I crawled
out a window.

Marcus steps closer – gently.

MARCUS

Joan... that wasn’t your fault.

Joan’s face contorts – anger, grief, shame, all tangled.

JOAN

She wrote the note to *me.* She
blamed *me.* Why else write it?

Nick steps forward, his voice low and steady.

NICK

She didn’t blame you. She loved you
– but she carried pain she couldn’t
put down.

Joan’s jaw trembles.

JOAN

Then why leave me? Why *choose* to
leave?

Nick kneels beside her.

NICK

Some people aren't running from
love. They're running from their
own darkness.

A soft warm glow appears on the couch – a faint outline of a
woman sitting.

Not fully visible. Shimmering. Like a memory remembering
itself.

Joan staggers backward.

JOAN

No. No no no—

The outline leans forward slightly.

A whisper – almost wind – fills the room.

WHISPER

I'm sorry.

Joan breaks – erupting in sobs she's spent decades burying.

JOAN

Why did you leave me?! Why wasn't I
enough?!

The outline glows brighter for a moment – as if reaching
toward her.

WHISPER

You were everything.

Joan collapses to her knees. Ortiz immediately kneels beside
her, holding her tightly.

Fiona and Lila join them.

The outline slowly dims... then dissolves like warm breath on
cold air.

Joan heaves, clinging to Ortiz.

JOAN

I didn't want to hate her. I just
didn't know what else to feel.

ORTIZ

Hate is grief with sharp edges. It
cuts the one who holds it.

Joan buries her face in his shoulder.

Marcus places a hand on her back.

Warren kneels too – unsure, awkward, but sincere.

WARREN

Joan... you're the toughest person
I've ever met. If *you've* been
carrying this– you're stronger than
any of us knew.

Joan lets out a broken laugh through tears.

JOAN

I didn't want to be strong. I just
wanted... someone.

Nick steps forward gracefully.

NICK

And now you have them.

Joan looks up – sees all of them kneeling around her.

Her breath trembles.

JOAN

God... I've never had this.

FIONA

You do now.

The room brightens – a soft warm glow spreading across the
walls.

The matchbook on the table folds closed on its own.

Joan exhales slowly – a release decades overdue.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – MOMENTS LATER

The group exits the room, supporting Joan.

She wipes her eyes aggressively.

JOAN

If anyone mentions this emotionally-charged breakdown to anyone else, I'm flinging myself into the nearest snowbank.

Lila smiles gently.

LILA

Joan... it was brave.

JOAN

Don't. Compliment me and I'll cry again.

Marcus pats her shoulder.

MARCUS

We're proud of you.

Joan nearly cries again – then pushes him lightly.

JOAN

Stop. I can't handle supportive people. It makes my skin itch.

Ortiz squeezes her hand.

She squeezes back – fast, embarrassed, but real.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

As they regroup, another door begins to glow.

This one is different:

****Large. Heavy. Carved with deep, swirling patterns. The wood seems older than the lodge itself.****

Marcus's throat tightens.

MARCUS

That one's mine.

Fiona steps beside him immediately.

FIONA

We're with you.

Marcus nods – breath shaky.

Nick approaches the door and rests his hand on it.

NICK

This one is deep. And it's time.

Marcus steels himself...

...and reaches for the doorknob.

FADE OUT.

INT. MEMORY ROOM – MARCUS'S DOOR – CONTINUOUS

The room is not a room.

It's a *void*.

Black, silent, endless.

The others step inside cautiously, huddled together.

A single SPOTLIGHT appears in the center – illuminating a HOSPITAL BED.

Marcus stops dead.

LILA

Oh no...

MARCUS

I can't do this.

Nick stands quietly beside him.

NICK

You already are.

Marcus swallows hard and takes one step forward.

Lights shift.

The void fills with faint shapes – walls forming, ceiling lowering – a memory constructing itself.

A YOUNG BOY lies in the bed.

Pale.

Small.

Too young to look that sick.

Marcus closes his eyes – pain ripping through him.

MARCUS

My son.

INT. MEMORY ROOM – HOSPITAL WARD – CONTINUOUS

The lighting now resembles a pediatric ICU – sterile and heartbreakingly gentle.

Machines hum softly.

Marcus's son, JACOB (8), lies still, tubes running from his tiny body.

The group remains respectfully at the edges.

MARCUS

He was... the brightest thing I ever had. Smarter than me by the time he was five.

A soft, sad laugh escapes him.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

He loved puzzles. Riddles. He used to ask me impossible questions just to see me try.

He steps closer to the bed.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

And then he got sick.

Fiona watches him with tears already forming.

FIONA

Marcus... why didn't you tell us?

MARCUS

Because I don't talk about him. Ever.

He kneels beside the bed.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

The doctors said chemo would buy time. They didn't say how little.

His voice breaks.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I told him to fight. Told him he was strong. Told him I'd be right there.

A faint shadow lifts from the pillow beside the boy.

A child's whisper.

JACOB (WHISPER)

Daddy...?

Marcus's breath stops.

His hands shake violently.

MARCUS

Jake?

The others freeze – hearts in their throats.

A SOFT LIGHT forms above the bed, shaping the likeness of a boy, sitting up just enough to speak.

Not a ghost.

Not a hallucination.

A memory made merciful.

JACOB (WHISPER)

Why are you crying?

Marcus collapses emotionally – tears flooding.

MARCUS

Because I miss you every day. Every second.

Jacob's outline tilts its head.

JACOB

I'm not gone.

Marcus sobs.

MARCUS

I wasn't there enough. I wasn't– I should've taken more pictures. I should've stayed home more. I should've–

Jacob interrupts gently.

JACOB

Dad... you played with me. You told me stories. You made me laugh.

The boy lifts a glowing hand toward him.

JACOB (CONT'D)
You were enough.

INT. MEMORY ROOM - WIDER

Everyone is crying now - even Warren, trying to hide it behind his sleeve.

Joan is openly sobbing.

JOAN
Oh God... oh God...

Ortiz places a hand on Marcus's back.

ORTIZ
You loved him. That's all a child ever sees.

INT. JACOB'S MEMORY - CONTINUOUS

Marcus touches Jacob's faint hand.

The boy's light flickers warmly.

MARCUS
I don't know how to live without you.

JACOB
You're not supposed to. You're supposed to live *with* me.

Marcus freezes.

MARCUS
What... what do you mean?

JACOB
When you laugh. When you help people. When you look up at the stars and think I might be looking back.

The faint outline smiles.

JACOB (CONT'D)
That's where I am.

Marcus cries harder, clutching the side of the bed.

Jacob's hand lowers gently to his head - like a blessing.

JACOB (CONT'D)
I'm proud of you, Dad.

Marcus collapses into Fiona, unable to stay upright.

INT. MEMORY ROOM – SHIFTING

The hospital fades.

The void returns.

But this time, the void is filled with SOFT LIGHT – golden, warm, comforting.

Nick steps toward Marcus.

NICK
You didn't fail your son. You just
never forgave yourself for
surviving him.

Marcus wipes his face, trembling.

MARCUS
I... don't know how to move on.

NICK
You don't move on. You move
forward.

He gestures toward the exit door, now glowing brightly.

NICK (CONT'D)
And he just gave you permission.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – MOMENTS LATER

The group exits the room.

Marcus leans heavily on Fiona, shaken but relieved.

Warren pats his shoulder.

WARREN
That was... I don't have the
vocabulary for that. And I'm a
professor.

Joan puts a hand on his back.

JOAN

You're not carrying that alone
anymore.

Marcus nods, eyes red but clear.

The corridor lights begin to flicker – a sign the lodge has
shifted.

Nick looks around.

NICK

You're all almost ready.

A GIANT DOOR at the end of the hallway begins to glow.

Prismatic light pours from its outline.

FIONA

What is that?

Nick steps forward.

NICK

The final door. The one you must
open together.

They exchange looks – fear, hope, uncertainty.

Marcus wipes his eyes.

MARCUS

Then let's finish what we started.

They step toward the final door–

Together.

FADE OUT.

INT. MEMORY CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

The GIANT DOOR at the end of the hallway pulses with shifting
colors – gold, blue, soft red – like northern lights woven
into wood.

The group approaches slowly.

Fiona grips Marcus's hand. Ortiz steadies Joan. Lila clings
nervously to Warren's sleeve.

Nick watches them with quiet pride.

LILA

This one feels... different.

ORTIZ

Like the lodge itself is breathing.

WARREN

Fantastic. A sentient building. My academic obituary will be *wild.*

The lights flicker overhead.

A low, resonant HUM rises – not threatening, but powerful.

Marcus steps forward.

MARCUS

Nick... whose door is this?

Nick smiles softly.

NICK

All of yours.

The group exchanges uneasy looks.

JOAN

Of course it is. Because growth, trauma, and now *group therapy*. My three least favorite hobbies.

Nick places both hands on the swirling carvings.

NICK

Each of you opened a door into yourselves. Now you must open the one between you.

The carvings begin MOVING – rearranging themselves like fluid symbols.

Fiona gasps.

FIONA

They're forming words...

The symbols settle into a glowing phrase:

"ONLY IN UNITY IS TRUTH REVEALED."

WARREN

Okay, well that's deeply ominous.

JOAN
Or deeply poetic. Which is worse.

Nick steps aside.

NICK
The lodge won't open it for you.
You must open it together.

The group hesitates – a moment of shared fear – and then Marcus extends his hand.

MARCUS
We go together.

Fiona places her hand atop his.

Ortiz follows.

Joan grumbles – but joins.

Lila and Warren add theirs.

The carvings glow brighter – then WHIRL into a brilliant flood of light.

INT. THE GREAT THRESHOLD – CONTINUOUS

The door swings open into—

A MASSIVE CIRCULAR CHAMBER.

A cathedral of memory and emotion.

Tall arched windows show a swirling blizzard outside – but inside, gentle snow falls from the ceiling, evaporating before it hits the ground.

A stone platform rises at the center.

Six smaller platforms encircle it – one for each of them.

Nick enters last.

LILA
Where... where are we?

NICK
The heart of the lodge. The place
where all paths meet.

JOAN

Ideally not the place where we die,
right?

Nick smiles faintly.

NICK

Depends on your definition of
death.

Warren blanches.

WARREN

That does NOT help.

INT. THRESHOLD CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

Nick gestures to the six outer platforms.

NICK

Step onto the place that calls to
you.

The group hesitates - listening - and then each feels drawn
to one.

Marcus's glows faintly blue - calm, sorrow, resilience.

Fiona's glows red - love, loss, courage.

Ortiz's is gold - faith, renewal.

Joan's is violet - pain, defiance, healing.

Lila's is silver - fear, honesty, blooming strength.

Warren's is green - intellect, guilt, forgiveness.

They step onto their platforms.

Instantly, connecting beams of light shoot from each
platform, forming a glowing hexagon.

The central platform begins to rise.

Nick stands upon it - illuminated.

NICK (CONT'D)

You have faced yourselves. Now face
the truth together.

The snow swirls faster, becoming a vortex overhead.

Images appear in the air – fragments of their memories:

Fiona's husband's hand slipping away. Ortiz lighting a candle for his mother. Warren erasing a cruel comment on a student's paper. Joan running through a burning hallway. Lila hiding her arcane book in a backpack. Marcus holding Jacob's tiny hand.

The images blend–

Then SHATTER like glass.

The shards swirl around them, warm and glowing.

MARCUS

What is this?

NICK

The truth of all you carry –
becoming the strength you share.

The shards spiral faster, then fuse into a brilliant golden light that envelops them all.

They breathe in – involuntarily – and their platforms RISE slightly, lifting them above the floor.

INT. THRESHOLD CHAMBER – HEIGHTENED

Their emotional burdens manifest as faint silhouettes around them – but these silhouettes soften, lighten, then dissolve.

One by one.

FIONA

(whispers)

I feel... lighter.

ORTIZ

This is grace.

JOAN

This is terrifying.

WARREN

This is...

(realizing)

This is forgiveness.

Lila closes her eyes, overwhelmed.

LILA

I've never felt safe like this.

Marcus looks upward into the swirling light.

MARCUS

Jake...?

A faint child's laugh echoes – warm and comforting.

Marcus's knees nearly buckle.

Nick raises his hands – guiding the ritual's final turn.

NICK

Let the past become part of you –
not the chain that binds you.

The swirling snow-light collapses inward–

A BLINDING FLASH–

INT. THRESHOLD CHAMBER – MOMENTS LATER

Everything is calm.

Snow gently falls again.

The platforms lower.

The group stands – winded, stunned, tear-stained, but transformed.

The last of the lights fade.

Nick steps off the central platform.

NICK

You're ready now.

JOAN

Ready for what?

Nick gestures toward a newly appeared door on the far side of the chamber.

A simple wooden door.

Warm light leaks from underneath.

NICK

Christmas morning.

They stare – emotional, raw, hopeful.

Marcus reaches for Fiona's hand.

Ortiz nods with quiet joy.

Warren wipes his face with his sleeve again.

WARREN

Do we... just walk through it?

NICK

Together.

They step toward the door—

And with one unified push—

It swings open into BLINDING WARM LIGHT.

FADE OUT.

INT. THRESHOLD CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

The door stands open now—warm golden light spilling across the stone floor.

The group hesitates at the threshold, blinking into the brightness.

Marcus looks to Nick.

MARCUS

Are you coming with us?

Nick smiles softly—kind, bittersweet.

NICK

My place is here.

FIONA

But we wouldn't have made it without you.

NICK

You would have. I just helped you listen.

Joan steps forward, unexpectedly emotional.

JOAN

Will we... ever see you again?

Nick tilts his head, eyes gentle.

NICK

Healing is not a straight line.
When you need the lodge—it will
find you. And maybe me with it.

That hits all of them.

Warren wipes at his eyes in the least subtle “not crying”
gesture imaginable.

WARREN

Well... this has been an unexpectedly
life-altering sabbatical.

Nick chuckles.

He places a hand on Lila's shoulder.

NICK

You see the world clearly for the
first time. Don't let anyone dim
that.

Lila swallows hard, nodding.

Nick then turns to Marcus and Fiona—his expression deepens.

NICK (CONT'D)

You've both carried more than most
could bear. But now you carry it
together. Don't forget that.

Fiona grips Marcus's hand tighter.

Finally, Nick gestures toward the open doorway.

NICK (CONT'D)

Go on. It's waiting for you.

INT. LODGE CORRIDOR - TRANSITION

They step through the light—

—and find themselves back in the familiar wooden hallway of
Evergreen Ridge Lodge.

No swirling lights. No collapsing memories. No supernatural
haze.

Just the lodge.

Quiet. Peaceful. Gentle.

INT. LODGE FOYER - CONTINUOUS

They descend the staircase into the main foyer.

A faint glow streams through the frosted windows.

LILA
Is it... morning?

Ortiz moves to the window, brushing aside a curtain.

His face lights up.

ORTIZ
It's Christmas.

They gather at the window.

Outside, the world is breathtaking:

A pristine blanket of snow, untouched. The storm gone. The sunrise turning the mountains pink.

Warren lets out a stunned breath.

WARREN
I thought this place was going to
kill us. Turns out it just... rebuilt
us.

Joan snorts softly.

JOAN
Speak for yourself. I cried so hard
last night I'm dehydrated.

They laugh—worn, relieved, alive.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

They enter the great room.

The fire is burning warmly. The Christmas tree twinkles softly.

But something is different.

On the center table sits:

****Six wrapped gifts.****

Plain brown paper. Twine bows. Each tag bearing a name.

They stare.

MARCUS
Did any of you...?

Everyone shakes their heads.

Fiona steps first.

She picks up the package with her name.

The others follow suit, each holding their own.

WARREN
Should we... open them?

JOAN
Unless they explode. Which at this
point is not off the table.

They carefully unwrap the gifts.

FIONA'S GIFT

A framed photo—her and her late husband on their wedding day.
But the frame is engraved with a new line:

"Thank you for letting love live on."

Fiona gasps, hand to her heart.

Marcus touches her shoulder lovingly.

MARCUS'S GIFT

A child's puzzle—unfinished. The final piece, a small star-
shaped block, rests in the box.

He lifts it, holding back tears.

MARCUS
Jake's favorite puzzle...

He presses the piece in. It fits perfectly.

His breath trembles.

ORTIZ'S GIFT

A simple beeswax candle. Hand-poured. Engraved with a tiny
cross.

ORTIZ

My mother used to make these...

He holds it reverently.

JOAN'S GIFT

A silver locket.

She opens it—

Inside is a tiny engraving:

"NOT YOUR FAULT."

Joan bursts into tears instantly.

JOAN

Son of a—

She hugs the locket to her chest.

LILA'S GIFT

A blank journal. On the first page, handwritten:

"Fill this with truth."

Lila smiles through tears.

WARREN'S GIFT

A red pen.

He stiffens—then sees it's engraved.

"FOR MERCY, NOT CORRECTION."

Warren laughs—deep, genuine, freeing.

WARREN

Okay, well... whoever orchestrated
this is officially my new favorite
omniscient entity.

INT. LODGE GREAT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They sit around the fire with their gifts, letting the moment settle.

The light through the windows grows warmer.

Marcus looks around at all of them.

MARCUS

You know... we didn't just survive
this place. We survived ourselves.

FIONA

And we did it together.

Joan raises the locket.

JOAN

To new traditions.

Ortiz raises his candle.

ORTIZ

To forgiveness and miracles.

Lila holds her journal.

LILA

To truth.

Warren holds up his pen.

WARREN

And to grading with compassion.
(beat)
Mostly.

They laugh again.

Marcus lifts his puzzle.

MARCUS

To remembering the people who
shaped us.

Fiona leans against him gently.

They all lift their gifts.

ALL

To Christmas.

EXT. EVERGREEN RIDGE LODGE - DAWN

The front door opens.

The group steps outside into the soft morning snow, bundled warmly.

The sky is spectacular—pink, gold, serene.

They walk forward as a new day begins.

MARCUS (V.O.)

Sometimes belief isn't about what you see. It's about who you walk beside.

They head down the snowy path—

Together.

FADE OUT.

EXT. EVERGREEN RIDGE LODGE - DAWN

The group stands outside in the crisp morning light, breath puffing in the cold air.

A gentle breeze moves through the pines.

The world feels new.

Fiona takes a deep, steadying breath.

FIONA

I haven't felt this... quiet inside in a very long time.

Marcus nods, his puzzle piece still in his pocket.

MARCUS

Me neither.

Joan wraps her coat tighter—awkward but genuine.

JOAN

Just so everyone knows... I'm not hugging anyone. I'm emotionally tapped out.

Lila steps up and hugs her anyway.

Joan stands frozen, then sighs and pats Lila's back stiffly.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Fine. One hug. And it never happened.

Warren chuckles, wiping snow from his glasses.

WARREN

You know... I don't actually want to leave yet.

Ortiz looks out across the mountain range.

ORTIZ

None of us came here expecting grace. But somehow, we found it.

WARREN

Speak for yourself. I came expecting mediocre cocoa and passive-aggressive Christmas playlists.

MARCUS

We got... something else entirely.

A soft rumble interrupts them.

The SNOWCAT from the local rangers appears up the trail, slowing to a halt.

A PARK RANGER steps out, waving.

RANGER

You folks okay? The storm cut the ridge off for two days. We've been trying to reach the lodge.

The group exchanges looks – startled.

FIONA

Two days?

RANGER

Had us worried. No way in or out until sunrise. Hope the lodge wasn't too spooky for you.

They all burst into surprised laughter – too knowing, too perfect.

WARREN

Oh, you have NO idea.

EXT. LODGE DRIVEWAY - LATER

They load their bags into the Snowcat.

Lila clutches her journal like a lifeline.

Ortiz pockets the candle.

Joan slips the locket under her coat where it rests close to her heart.

Warren twirls his new red pen like a talisman.

Fiona adjusts her scarf and looks back at the lodge - grateful.

Marcus steps beside her.

MARCUS

Think we'll ever come back?

FIONA

Maybe we won't have to. Maybe we take it with us.

Marcus nods softly - understanding exactly what she means.

EXT. EVERGREEN RIDGE LODGE - CONTINUOUS

Nick stands on the porch.

The group sees him - all of them waving.

He raises a hand in return, serene, warm.

LILA

Will he stay here alone?

ORTIZ

He's not alone.

A small snowflake drifts down onto Nick's palm.. then dissolves into a warm spark.

He smiles.

INT. SNOWCAT - MOMENTS LATER

They settle into their seats.

The Snowcat begins its slow descent down the snowy road.

Marcus gazes out the window, watching the lodge shrink into the sunrise.

Warren clears his throat.

WARREN

Okay, once classes start up again... maybe we, uh... keep in touch?

The others exchange amused looks.

JOAN

Warren, was that your attempt at forming human friendships?

WARREN

I'm... trying.

LILA

We can tell.

MARCUS

Let's all meet up after break. No magic doors. No emotional surgery. Just... dinner.

FIONA

I'd like that.

Ortiz smiles warmly.

ORTIZ

Consider it a new tradition.

Joan looks out the window, voice softer.

JOAN

I never had a tradition that didn't hurt. Maybe it's time I started one.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - CONTINUOUS

The Snowcat descends through a breathtaking valley.

Sunlight breaks over the ridge.

The world glows.

INT. SNOWCAT - CONTINUOUS

Marcus's hand rests on the puzzle piece in his pocket.

He whispers:

MARCUS
Thank you, Jake.

Fiona leans her head on his shoulder.

He closes his eyes – at peace.

EXT. EVERGREEN RIDGE – WIDE SHOT – DAWN

The Snowcat continues down the mountain trail, carving gentle tracks through the fresh snow.

Above, the lodge sits quiet, serene, watching over the valley.

For a moment, a warm glow flickers in its topmost window.

Not sunlight.

Something else.

Something kind.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Sometimes the greatest miracles
aren't the ones that change the
world... but the ones that change us.

The glow fades.

The mountain stands tall and peaceful.

The new day begins.

FADE OUT.

THE END