

Christmas across America

written by

Gary Laney

Phone: 971-285-5420  
E-mail: [gjhcl99@gmail.com](mailto:gjhcl99@gmail.com)

FADE IN:

INT. INDIE BOOKSTORE - CHILDREN'S CORNER - DAY

Warm twinkle lights. Mismatched rugs. A chalkboard sign reads:

Storytime with ELLIOT BRANDT  
Author of *Thomas the Wondering Buffalo Visits the Big Apple*

Dozens of KIDS sit cross-legged in front of a festive armchair. Parents hover with phones, ready to snap pictures.

ELLIOT BRANDT (40s)—handsome, weary-eyed, wearing a Thomas-themed holiday sweater, sits facing the kids with a large picture book open on his lap. He smiles, warm and animated for the crowd.

He reads aloud, pausing to show the illustrations.

ELLIOT

Page One: Far across the grassy  
plains, where buffalo love to roam,  
Lived Thomas, always wondering what  
lay beyond his home.

Some kids "aww," others giggle.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page Two: He'd wandered over  
mountains, he'd strolled beside the  
sea, But there was one big apple  
he'd yet to go and see.

A little boy raises his hand.

BOY

The Big Apple is New York, right?

ELLIOT

That's right. Best city in the  
world...  
...for buffalo.

LAUGHTER from the adults.

Elliot turns the page, keeping it light.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page Three: New York! he whispered,  
wide-eyed and full of cheer, A city  
full of magic, lights, and sounds  
from far and near!

Kids lean in. Elliot shifts slightly, he's good at this.  
Almost too good.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page Four: He packed his tiny  
suitcase, tucked his map beneath  
his horn, Then caught a yellow taxi  
just before the break of morn.

KID

Buffaloes can't ride in taxis!

ELLIOT

In *this* story... they can.

More giggles. Parents smile. Elliot continues, flipping pages  
in rhythm.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page Five: The buildings stretched  
like towers, the tallest he had  
seen! These trees are made of  
windows!' he said, a bit green...

The kids listening wide-eyed.

Parents recording on their phones.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 6: He saw a hot dog vendor and  
a juggler in the square, A  
saxophone was singing in the  
subway's steamy air.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 7: He climbed the steps to  
Brooklyn Bridge, hooves clicking  
all the way, Then danced through  
Central Park where silly squirrels  
play.

KID

I Like squirrels.

ELLIOT

Don't we all.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 8: He waved at Lady Liberty,  
so proud and standing tall,  
"Hello!" he bellowed cheerfully,  
"You're the grandest of them all!"

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 9: He watched the lights on  
Broadway sparkle up the night, And  
ate a giant pretzel under Times  
Square's neon light.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 10: But after all the sights  
and sounds, he found a quiet  
nook, And wrote about his travels  
in his little buffalo book.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 11: I've seen so many wonders,  
from buildings to a kite, But the  
best part of New York... was every  
kind smile I met tonight.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 12: so Thomas tipped his  
buffalo hat and gave a happy  
sigh, I'll wonder somewhere else  
tomorrow... but for now, goodnight,  
Big Sky!

The room erupts in applause. A little girl hugs her Thomas  
plush tightly.

Bookstore owner steps forward.

BOOKSTORE OWNER

Let's thank Elliot Brandt,  
everyone!

More applause. Elliot smiles, dutifully.

INT. INDIE BOOKSTORE - CHILDREN'S CORNER - LATER

A LINE of PARENTS and KIDS snakes past a signing table.  
Elliot sits, Sharpie in hand, fake-smiling like a pro.

A little boy hands over a copy of *Thomas the Wondering  
Buffalo Visits the Big Apple*.

BOY

Can you make it out to "Jonah the  
Brave"?

ELLIOT

You got it, Jonah the Brave.

He signs with a flourish, draws a tiny buffalo with a Santa hat. The kid beams.

MOM

You're his favorite. Thank you for keeping the magic alive.

Elliot musters a sincere nod. Behind him, more cameras click.

Suddenly NATALIE (30s, sharp and chic) pushes through the crowd. She's Elliot's manager. On the phone. Exasperated. Carrying a large stuffed Thomas the Buffalo

NATALIE (TO PHONE)

Yes, I'm aware he hasn't left yet.  
(to Elliot)  
We have a *problem*.

ELLIOT

I'm elbow-deep in buffalo fans. Can it wait?

NATALIE

You were supposed to be at JFK  
*forty minutes ago*.

ELLIOT

For what?

She stares at him. Blinks.

NATALIE

For your flight. To San Francisco.  
Remember? Christmas at you sisters.

ELLIOT

Oh, good. You got it. Thank God they finished on time.

Elliot's smile fades.

NATALIE

Your sister called me twice. Your niece, what's her name?

ELLIOT

Umm. Linda?

NATALIE

Are you asking me. Or telling me?

ELLIOT  
I'll get back to you.

NATALIE  
Why are you doing this again?

ELLIOT  
Guilt. She's five, and we've never met. All she wants for Christmas is me and Thomas.

Natalie pushes Elliot toward the door.

NANCY  
Well, don't screw this up. You break that girls heart. I'll kill you myself.

ELLIOT  
You know I dislike kids. And especially at Christmas time.

NATALIE  
And ,yet you write children's books. You can't write about wonder if you've stopped believing in it.

ELLIOT  
I have a doctrine in classical literature,trust me I got the irony.

She hands the large Thomas plush to Elliot.

NATALIE  
I packed for you. You're welcome.

ELLIOT  
Oh, Wait. My cat.

She hands him a beat-up suitcase,his usual travel bag, held together with duct tape and sarcasm.

NATALIE  
I'll feed the cat.

ELLIOT  
Kafka hates you.

NATALIE  
That makes two of us. Move.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot bursts out of the front door, coat flapping, suitcase in one hand, Thomas plush clutched in the other.

He waves his arms at the street.

ELLIOT  
Taxi! Taxi!!

A YELLOW CAB pulls up. He dives inside.

INT. TAXI - CONTINUOUS

Elliot throws the suitcase beside him, sets Thomas on the suitcase.

TAXI DRIVER  
Where to?

ELLIOT  
JFK. Terminal... whatever sadness  
flies out of.

The cab peels into traffic. Holiday lights blur by outside.

Elliot glances down at the plush. For a moment, his face softens.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
(to Thomas)  
What the hell are we doing?

The yellow cab weaves through midday Manhattan traffic. Holiday lights blur past the windows.

His phone BUZZES. MAYA (his sister). He hesitates... then answers.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
(to phone)  
Maya. Calling to cancel Christmas?

INTERCUT - INT. SAN FRANCISCO KITCHEN - SAME TIME

MAYA (40s) is on speakerphone, apron on, hands covered in flour. LILY (5) dances in the background wearing reindeer antlers.

MAYA  
Very funny. Just checking you're  
actually on your way and not locked  
in your apartment with that cat and  
a bottle of bourbon.

ELLIOT  
Whiskey. It's colder and less  
judgmental.

MAYA  
Elliot.

ELLIOT  
Yes, yes, I'm in a cab, I'm heading  
to JFK, I'm about to board the  
sleigh. Calm down.

LILY runs up behind Maya, squealing.

LILY (O.S.)  
Is it Unca Elliot?! Lemme talk! I  
wanna talk! Please!

Maya lowers the phone a bit. Elliot hears.

ELLIOT  
Is that... Linda?

MAYA  
Lily.

ELLIOT  
Right. Lily. I knew that.

MAYA  
You've literally written her name  
in three books.

ELLIOT  
Yes, well, I ghostwrite now. The  
ghost isn't great with names.

MAYA  
Be nice. She's excited. She's never  
met you and thinks you're basically  
Santa Claus with better hair.

ELLIOT  
That's a lot of pressure. Can I  
just send socks?

MAYA  
You're coming. You're staying. And  
you're going to be *present*—in both  
meanings of the word.

ELLIOT  
Very Hallmark of you.



MAYA

Get on the plane, Elliot.

He looks down at the plush on the seat.

ELLIOT

Does she still like Thomas?

MAYA

She *lives* for Thomas. She sleeps with the one you sent two years ago. She calls him "T." It's ragged and missing a horn.

ELLIOT

Good buffalo.

MAYA

You have the special one, right?

ELLIOT

Yup, riding shotgun.

MAYA

Call me when you land.

The call ends. Elliot pockets his phone. He looks down at the pristine Thomas plush, then out the window.

Outside, New York buzzes, alive, impatient.

TAXI DRIVER

Terminal Four, yeah?

ELLIOT

Yeah. Let's go meet Linda.

TAXI DRIVER

Lily.

ELLIOT

Right. Thanks.

Elliot's exits the cab, with Thomas and suitcase. hands driver cash.

TAXI DRIVER

Thanks, Merry Christmas.

ELLIOT

Merry Christmas.

Taxi drives away.

INT. JFK AIRPORT - BAGGAGE DROP - DAY

It's a holiday zoo. Harried travelers. Tinsel-wrapped suitcases. An irate Santa yelling into Bluetooth.

Elliot, haggard and over it, drags his carry-on and cradles THOMAS THE WONDERING BUFFALO like a fuzzy loaf of bread under one arm.

He approaches the airline counter.

AIRLINE ATTENDANT (20s, chipper)

AIRLINE ATTENDANT  
Final destination?

ELLIOT  
San Francisco. One-way ticket to regret.

She gestures to Thomas with a forced smile.

AIRLINE ATTENDANT  
That... needs to be checked.

ELLIOT  
He's a buffalo. A famous one. You want me to *check* a celebrity?

AIRLINE ATTENDANT  
If he can't fit under the seat, he can't fly first class.

Elliot tries cramming Thomas into the metal carry-on sizer. One hoof sticks out. A horn pops back up like toast. It's a hard fail.

ELLIOT  
Well. Sorry, buddy. This is how legends die.

INT. BAGGAGE TAG STATION - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot stands at a narrow counter, filling out a paper luggage tag with exaggerated care.

TO: *Lily Brandt*

AGE: 5

ADDRESS: *1150 Ashby Lane, San Francisco, CA*

He hesitates, then adds:

HANDLE WITH CARE — THIS BUFFALO IS LOVED.

He threads the tag around Thomas's neck, cinching it tight.

INT. DEPARTURE LOUNGE - CONTINUOUS

Elliot approaches the baggage drop-off, clutching Thomas.

A LITTLE BOY (7) in a puffy jacket appears beside him, wide-eyed.

BOY  
Is that... is that *Thomas* the  
Wondering Buffalo?

Elliot glances down. Sighs.

ELLIOT  
No it's a fluffy cow. Now go away,  
kid.

The boy blinks. Wanders off, disappointed.

Elliot hands Thomas off to a baggage with all the reluctance of handing over a piece of himself. Thomas disappears behind the counter.

INT. GATE AREA - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot slumps into a chair near the gate. He scrolls through emails. His boarding pass flashes on his phone.

A GATE AGENT walks up to the mic.

GATE AGENT  
Attention passengers: Flight 582 to  
San Francisco has been canceled due  
to severe winter weather on the  
East Coast and delays in the Bay  
Area. Please see the desk for  
rebooking.

A collective groan ripples through the crowd.

Elliot blinks. Laughs. Just once, sharp and joyless.

ELLIOT  
Of course it is.

He glances at the baggage counter.

A ripple of groans and curses rolls through the terminal.

Elliot blinks slowly, like someone who just took a snowball to the soul.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Well... merry freakin' Christmas.

He exhales, stands up, and starts walking, past the crowd, past the coffee stand, toward the baggage counter.

Thomas sits on the floor, floppy and noble, his new tag flapping around his neck.

Then, resigned and almost tender, he steps forward and lifts Thomas off the floor like a prize and a burden all at once.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Alright, partner. Guess we're doing  
this the hard way.

He grabs his suitcase, tucks Thomas under his arm, and walks toward the exit doors, just as a flurry of snow starts drifting down outside.

EXT. AIRPORT CURB - CONTINUOUS

Cabs idle. Brake lights blink in the early dusk. Elliot stands for a moment, staring out at the gray sky.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
(to Thomas)  
Let's go meet Linda.  
(beat)  
Lily. Whatever.

He steps off the curb, disappearing into the swirl of snow and headlights.

INT. JFK AIRPORT - CAR RENTAL CENTER - LATER

Chaos. Long lines. Short tempers. Everyone whose flight got canceled is now here, jostling for cars like it's Black Friday at the North Pole.

Elliot's suitcase in one hand, THOMAS in the other, barrels through the automatic doors.

He weaves through the crowd to the counter, where a frazzled RENTAL AGENT (30s) waves over the next person.

RENTAL AGENT  
One left. Who's next?

A storm of voices. A small man in a business suit SHOVES ahead. Elliot moves faster.

ELLIOT  
Hey! Watch the buffalo!

He slams his ID on the counter.

RENTAL AGENT  
Lucky you. Last one's a compact.

ELLIOT  
I am a compact personality.

The business guy groans behind him.

INT. RENTAL CENTER - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot signs the final form as the agent hands him keys.

RENTAL AGENT  
Spot 38. Red hatchback. Don't  
scratch it, don't speed, and don't  
sleep in it.

ELLIOT  
Well there go all my plans.

As Elliot turns to go, he nearly bumps into a SINGLE DAD  
(30s) with a LITTLE GIRL (6) wearing headphones and a Thomas  
backpack.

The dad looks exhausted. The kid, wide-eyed.

SINGLE DAD  
You got the last car, huh?

ELLIOT  
I won't apologize for greatness.  
Where you headed?

SINGLE DAD  
Pittsburgh. My mom's place. She  
still thinks I'm capable of  
handling Christmas.

ELLIOT  
Huh. Go figure.

He looks at the little girl. She smiles at Thomas. Gently  
touches his horn.

LITTLE GIRL  
Is that *the* Thomas?

Elliot eyes the dad. Then the kid. Then the keys.

He sighs.

ELLIOT  
You two decent at car karaoke?

SINGLE DAD  
We know the entire *Frozen*  
soundtrack.

ELLIOT  
Terrific. Shotgun's yours.

He hands the dad one of his bags.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Let's ride, strangers.

The girl beams. Dad nods, grateful.

EXT. AIRPORT PARKING STRUCTURE - MOMENTS LATER

They load up the red hatchback. Thomas rides up front,  
seatbelted in.

Elliot climbs into the driver's seat, adjusts the mirror. A  
beat.

He looks at the dashboard GPS. It blinks:  
DESTINATION: SHASTA, CALIFORNIA - 2,931 MILES

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Only a continent to go.

He starts the car. They drive off into the swirl of flurries.

INT. RENTAL CAR - MOVING - NIGHT

The red hatchback cuts through a snowy stretch of interstate.  
Headlights flicker on icy signs:  
PITTSBURGH - 67 MILES.

Elliot drives, slouched and squinting through the windshield  
glare. Single dad snoozes in the passenger seat, hoodie  
pulled over his eyes.

In the backseat, the little girl wears fuzzy earmuffs and  
clutches her tablet, half-awake.

Thomas is buckled in beside her, staring into the void.

Elliot hits a bump and mutters to himself.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
This road is garbage.

LITTLE GIRL (O.S.)  
You said a bad word.

Elliot glances in the mirror.

ELLIOT  
I did not.

LITTLE GIRL  
You said the "G" word.

SINGLE DAD  
(still half-asleep)  
Apologize, man. She's in Catholic  
school.

ELLIOT  
Sorry. The *road is subpar*.

LITTLE GIRL  
Thank you.

ELLIOT  
(to himself)  
Buffalo don't get judged like this.

He pulls out his phone and dials.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYA'S KITCHEN - SAME TIME

Maya picks up, sipping tea.

MAYA  
Tell me you didn't turn around.

ELLIOT  
Still westbound. Flight was  
canceled. I rented a car. I'll be  
there Christmas Eve.

MAYA  
You're *driving*? Elliot, that's—

ELLIOT  
Insane. Heroic. Possibly the  
dumbest thing I've done since that  
adult coloring book deal. But yeah.

MAYA  
Where are you now?

ELLIOT  
Just outside Pittsburgh. And still  
excited to see Linda.

MAYA

Lily. Who the hell is Linda?

ELLIOT

What?

MAYA

Her name is Lily. L-I-L-Y.

ELLIOT

Oh. Right. I knew that.

LITTLE GIRL (O.S.)

He also said a bad word earlier!

MAYA

Wait... who was that?

ELLIOT

Just... a judgmental elf I picked up.  
Long story. I'm carpooling with a  
single dad and his very observant  
child.

MAYA

You? *Sharing a car?*

ELLIOT

Look, people keep talking and I  
don't know why. But I'm still  
coming. And I've got Thomas.

MAYA

Alright. Drive safe. Don't  
traumatize your fellow travelers.

ELLIOT

No promises.

They hang up.

Elliot glances at Thomas, then at the girl in the rearview.

Elliot turns on radio. Christmas music plays. Elliot sings  
along.

RADIO

The cat bit the head off of baby  
Jesus again, I'm not sure but I  
believe that's a sin.  
All the guests arrived for the  
Christmas party an hour ago.  
The spirits have begun to flow  
(MORE)



RADIO (CONT'D)

All of our family and friends are  
aglow  
All of their cars look so pretty  
buried in snow  
Aunt beth and uncle John have had  
way too much wine, and started to  
bicker.  
Oh my lord did I just see the  
lights flicker

ELLIOT

I Just love this song.

RADIO

Why can't my Christmas be like a  
Hallmark Christmas scene?  
Filled with magic and romance,  
where love feels like a dream.  
I'm dreaming of a love story, like  
the ones I see on-screen,  
Oh, why can't my Christmas be like  
a Hallmark Christmas dream?

INT. RENTAL CAR - MOVING - NIGHT - LATER

The car hums quietly now. Single dad snores softly in the  
passenger seat, head against the window.

Elliot drives with one hand, sipping bad gas station coffee  
with the other. The road is quieter, trees frosted under the  
moonlight.

From the backseat:

LITTLE GIRL

What's his name?

Elliot glances in the rearview.

ELLIOT

Who?

LITTLE GIRL

The buffalo. With the sad eyes.

ELLIOT

His name is Thomas. The Wondering  
Buffalo.

(beat)

He wanders. And wonders. It's very  
thematic.

LITTLE GIRL  
He looks tired.

ELLIOT  
You and me both.

She leans forward between the seats a little, watching the road.

LITTLE GIRL  
I like him. He looks like he has secrets.

ELLIOT  
He does. Mostly about hotel mini-bars and bad decisions.

(beat)

What's your name, by the way? I feel like I've been kidnapped by a Hallmark card.

LITTLE GIRL  
Zoe.

ELLIOT  
Zoe. Strong name. Biblical, maybe. Or Greek. Definitely smarter than me.

ZOE  
What do you want for Christmas?

ELLIOT  
Sleep. Silence. And for nobody to ask me what I want for Christmas.

ZOE  
That's three things.

ELLIOT  
You're good at math. That's concerning.

ZOE  
I want a real art set. With the wooden case. And oil pastels. And those clicky pens that smell like blueberries.

ELLIOT  
Ambitious. Planning to paint your way out of kindergarten?

ZOE  
I'm in first grade.

ELLIOT  
Of course you are. My apologies.  
So what are you gonna draw?

ZOE  
I don't know yet. I'll know when I  
see it.

ELLIOT  
That's actually... kind of perfect.

A comfortable silence settles over the car. Snow drifts outside. Thomas stares forward from the seat, like he's listening too.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - PITTSBURGH - NIGHT

A quiet neighborhood, lit by soft yellow streetlamps and glowing Christmas decorations. Wreaths hang crookedly on front doors. Blow-up reindeer gently wobble in the cold breeze.

The red hatchback pulls to a stop outside a cozy, lived-in brick house with a snowman half-melted in the yard.

Elliot puts the car in park. Single dad stretches and groans awake in the passenger seat.

SINGLE DAD  
This it?

ZOE  
Yep! That's Grandma's house!

She bounces excitedly in the back seat.

ELLIOT  
There she is. Childhood Central.

SINGLE DAD  
Thanks for the ride, man.  
Seriously.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I figured karma owed me one  
anyway.

They get out. Zoe opens her door and hops into the snow in her boots.

ZOE  
Grandma bakes cinnamon rolls on  
Christmas Eve. And lets me stay up  
till ten.

ELLIOT  
Rebel.

ZOE  
You should come in.

ELLIOT  
I can't. Got a buffalo to deliver  
and a niece who may or may not  
think I'm Santa Claus.

She walks up and hugs him around the waist. Quick. Brave.

ZOE  
Tell her she's lucky.

ELLIOT  
I don't think she knows that yet.

ZOE  
She will.

Zoe turns and races toward the house. Her dad pulls the  
suitcase out of the trunk.

SINGLE DAD  
Drive safe. And hey. Merry  
Christmas, Elliot.

ELLIOT  
Yeah... you too.

The dad joins Zoe at the front porch, where a Grandma opens  
the door. Warm light spills out.

Elliot stands by the car for a moment. Alone again. The house  
glows behind him.

He opens the door and slides into the driver's seat. Looks  
over at Thomas in the passenger seat.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
What? It was a soft moment. Don't  
make it weird.

He starts the engine.

EXT. PITTSBURGH STREET - CONTINUOUS

The red hatchback drives off through the snow-dusted neighborhood, tail lights glowing like sleigh bells fading into the night.

EXT. RURAL GAS STATION - OHIO - NIGHT

Cold wind whistles through a nearly empty 24-HOUR gas stop. Plastic Santa flaps on the roof. A blinking "OPEN" sign flickers in protest.

Elliot pulls in, the red hatchback coughing as he parks. He gets out, shivers, and starts pumping gas.

Inside the car, Thomas watches from the passenger seat like a fuzzy co-pilot.

Nearby, a YOUNG BOY (7) sits on the curb near the air pump, crying silently, clutching a crumpled sheet of paper.

His mom is inside the convenience store, arguing with the cashier. It's late. Everyone looks tired.

Elliot notices the boy. Huffs a sigh. Then walks over.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Hey. You okay?

The boy doesn't answer. Just snuffles and shows Elliot the paper.

It's a crayon drawing of Thomas, wonky proportions, but clearly the same buffalo. Bright blue eyes. Puffy tail. A little heart next to his horn.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Wow. You made this?

BOY

It was in my backpack. I left it on the bench and now it's gone.

ELLIOT

Tough break. But hey... you've got the most important part.

BOY

What?

ELLIOT

Your imagination. And thumbs. You're gonna need those.

Elliot reaches into his coat pocket, pulls out a small moleskine notebook and a pen. He sits beside the boy on the cold curb.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Let's draw him again.

They start sketching together, Elliot doing the outline, the boy adding details.

The boy sniffs. Calms down. Focuses.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
He wanders, you know. Always wondering about new places.

BOY  
Where is he now?

Elliot points to the sky.

ELLIOT  
On a mission. Important buffalo stuff. But he told me to give you this.

Elliot takes the finished drawing and signs the corner:  
To Max — Keep Wondering! — Thomas the Buffalo.

The boy's eyes go wide. He beams.

His Mom comes out of the store. She looks worried at first, then sees the drawing and smiles.

MOM  
Say thank you.

BOY  
Thank you!

ELLIOT  
No problem, Max.

He heads back to his car.

EXT. GAS STATION - OUTSKIRTS OF CHICAGO - NIGHT

Wind whistles as Elliot stands beside the red hatchback, pumping gas with one hand, chewing on a stale peppermint from the checkout counter.

He glances across the street.

A small art supply store, The Creative Nest. Cozy lights glowing in the windows. Paper snowflakes in the glass. A hand-painted sign in the door reads: Open 9PM.

Elliot blinks. Squints. Something clicks.

INT. ART STORE - MOMENTS LATER

A bell DINGS as Elliot walks in.

Rows of sketchpads, colored pencils, and watercolor kits. It smells like paper, paint, and possibility.

He moves with purpose, scanning the shelves. Finds it:

A wooden artist's case filled with pencils, pastels, markers, and clicky pens.

He grabs it. Heads to the counter.

ART CLERK (20s, art-student energy)

CLERK  
Gift wrap?

ELLIOT  
No. Just... bag it up like it's been  
in the trunk for weeks.

The clerk smiles, rings it up.

EXT. POST OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot pulls up to a tiny, glowing Mail center, next to a shuttered donut shop.

He gets out with the art kit in hand, only to find the gate down, Closed sign hanging crookedly in the window.

He rattles the door. Nothing.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Of course.

He looks down at the bag in his hand. Then up at the stars.

Back to the car.

INT. RENTAL CAR - CONTINUOUS

Elliot gets in, tosses the bag gently onto the passenger seat beside Thomas.

He sits for a moment, quiet.

Then scribbles something on a sticky note and sticks it to the bag.

INSERT NOTE:

*"For Zoe. Future masterpiece enclosed. -E."*

He adjusts the bag so it leans against Thomas like they're watching the road together.

ELLIOT

We'll find a way to get it to her.  
Or you will.

He starts the engine, pulls back onto the road. The radio crackles faintly with a slow instrumental version of "Let It Snow."

Snow drifts lazily under a flickering overhead light.

Elliot taps the GPS screen. The map flickers to life.

He speaks, slightly annoyed but resigned.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Chicago. Let's go make questionable decisions in a colder zip code.

GPS

*"Navigating to Chicago, Illinois.  
Estimated arrival: 11:43 PM."*

Elliot shifts into drive, glancing at Thomas.

ELLIOT

No judgment, Thomas.

The car pulls out of the gas station and back onto the highway, taillights glowing red as they disappear into the snow-swept

EXT. CHICAGO GAS STATION - NIGHT

A gust of wind slams the gas station door behind ELLIOT as he finishes topping off the tank. The city hums in the distance, quiet and frozen.

Across the street, a battered old sign glows faintly:  
Chapter & Vers3 - Books, coffee. Below it, a sad window display with faded paper snowflakes and a crooked *Holiday Hours* sign.

Elliot squints. Shrugs.



INT. CHAPTER & VERSE BOOKSTORE - MOMENTS LATER

The bell over the door jingles as Elliot enters.

Inside warmth. Smell of cinnamon tea and old pages. A scattering of people browsing. A few candles flicker in empty mugs.

BOOKSTORE OWNER (50s, scarf, half-moon glasses) looks up from behind the counter. His eyes go wide.

OWNER

Wait a minute... you're—

ELLIOT

Nope. I'm a mirage.

OWNER

Elliot Brandt. *Thomas the Wondering Buffalo*.

We sell out of those every year.

ELLIOT

That sounds wildly irresponsible.

OWNER

You're just in time. Our Tuesday night story circle bailed. Want to read?

ELLIOT

No.

OWNER

We have cider. And no budget.

ELLIOT

Tempting.

A BEAT. Then:

INT. BOOKSTORE READING NOOK - LATER

Elliot sits in a worn armchair under string lights, holding a slightly bent copy of *Thomas the Wondering Buffalo Visits the Big Apple*.

Around him: a dozen or so KIDS and a few sleepy PARENTS in coats.

He reads.

ELLIOT (READING) (CONT'D)

Page 11: I've seen so many wonders,  
from buildings to a kite, But the  
best part of New York... was every  
kind smile I met tonight.

Elliot pauses, looking around at kids faces.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 12: so Thomas tipped his  
buffalo hat and gave a happy  
sigh, I'll wonder somewhere else  
tomorrow... but for now, goodnight,  
Big Sky!

A few kids smile. One claps softly. The warmth is real, and  
for once, Elliot doesn't flinch.

BOOKSTORE OWNER

Let's give a big thank-you to Mr.  
Elliot Brandt!

The kids clap harder. Elliot gives a little wave, looking  
more bashful than bitter for once.

A kid holds out a bok.

KID #1

Can you sign it?

ELLIOT

Uh... yeah. Of course.

KID #2

Can you draw Thomas next to your  
name?

ELLIOT

Okay, but fair warning—he might  
look more like a marshmallow with  
legs.

KID #3

Will you take a picture with me?

Soon, Elliot is surrounded. Signing books. Drawing quick,  
silly buffalo doodles. Smiling—a *real* one. Parents snap  
photos. A kid hugs him mid-signature and knocks his pen  
across the table.

ELLIOT

I'm under attack. Send help.

He lifts one kid onto his knee for a photo, arms full of books and scribbled programs.

BOOKSTORE OWNER (TO HERSELF)  
This... this is what it's supposed  
to feel like.

From across the room, Elliot catches her watching him and nods. She smiles and mouths: *thank you*.

Elliot looks down at the next book in line. It's tattered. Held together with tape. He runs a hand over the cover.

ELLIOT  
Thomas looks like he's been on  
quite the adventure.

KID  
He was in my backpack all summer.

Elliot smiles and signs the book.

INT. CHAPTER & VERSE - MOMENTS LATER

The crowd has cleared. The OWNER hands Elliot a cup of cider, still smiling.

OWNER  
Thanks for that. Some of those kids  
don't even have library cards. That  
was the most storytime they've had  
all month.

ELLIOT  
Glad I could disappoint in person.

He pulls the art kit bag from under his coat and sets it on the counter.

Elliot pulls out his wallet.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Any chance you ship things?

OWNER  
I'm a one-man USPS annex. No  
charge.

ELLIOT  
Thanks. It's for a kid I met. Zoe  
in Pittsburgh. First grade  
philosopher.

Elliot hands the owner a sticky note with Zoe's address.

OWNER  
You got it.

He looks at Elliot, a little deeper now.

OWNER (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
You ever think about writing a new  
one?

ELLIOT  
Every day. Right before deciding  
not to.

The owner smiles kindly.

OWNER  
Then maybe it's time to start  
wondering again.

Elliot doesn't respond. But he doesn't argue either.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot walks back to the car. Thomas waits in the passenger  
seat like a silent witness.

Elliot gets in, starts the engine. For once, he says nothing.  
He just drives.

EXT. ROADSIDE MOTEL - SANTA FE - NIGHT

A cold wind stirs the dust in the nearly empty lot of SLEEPY  
JACK'S MOTEL. One flickering lamppost. A blinking "VACANCY"  
sign buzzes.

Elliot pulls into a spot near the back. His breath fogs the  
windshield as he turns off the engine.

Across the lot, a minivan with the hood up. Steam curls from  
the engine. A SINGLE DAD (late 30s) stares helplessly at it.  
His LITTLE GIRL Maddy (6) sits on a suitcase, bundled in a  
hoodie, feet dangling.

Elliot watches for a moment.

Then Pops his own trunk.

No jumper cables.

ELLIOT  
Of course not.

Elliot slams the trunk shut.

He looks around, spots a glowing red sign across the street:  
PETE'S AUTO PARTS - OPEN LATE.

INT. PETE'S AUTO PARTS - MOMENTS LATER

Fluorescent lighting. Shelves of wiper fluid and cheap pine-scented air fresheners.

Elliot slaps a box of jumper cables on the counter.

PETE (60s, wiry, chewing a toothpick) raises an eyebrow.

PETE  
Your battery or someone else's?

ELLIOT  
Someone else's. Don't ask me why.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - LATER

Elliot pulls up next to the minivan.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Pop the hood.

The single dad blinks, startled.

SINGLE DAD  
You don't have to,

ELLIOT  
I know. But it's either this or I  
sit in my room watching static and  
contemplating my many failures.  
So... please pop the hood.

They get to work. Elliot hooks up the cables like he's done  
it once... years ago... maybe.

The engine rumbles to life. The little girl cheers.

SINGLE DAD  
Thank you. Really.

He goes to hand the cables back. Elliot holds up a hand.

ELLIOT  
Keep 'em.

SINGLE DAD  
You sure?

ELLIOT  
Consider it an investment in  
someone else's bad day.

The minivan rumbles to life, steam fading from the hood. The single dad claps Elliot on the back.

SINGLE DAD  
Thanks again. Seriously. You saved  
Christmas morning.

ELLIOT  
Let's not get carried away. I gave  
you cables, not a sleigh.

The LITTLE GIRL (6) sits on the motel curb nearby, arms crossed, quietly sniffing. Her cheeks are red, eyes puffy.

SINGLE DAD  
She's just... upset. Thought we'd be  
stuck here for days. She worries  
more than she lets on.

Elliot watches her. Something flickers in him. Then he turns to the car and pulls Thomas the Buffalo from the passenger seat.

He walks over and kneels down beside her.

ELLIOT  
You know, Thomas once got stuck  
too.

She glances at him, curious despite herself.

LITTLE GIRL  
He did?

ELLIOT  
Yup. In a giant puddle of bubblegum  
outside a fire station in  
Milwaukee. Couldn't move for hours.

LITTLE GIRL  
How did he get out?

ELLIOT  
He convinced a Dalmatian to bring  
him a spoon and a blow dryer. It  
was very sticky. And he still  
smells like cherries to this day.

That gets a tiny laugh from her.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Sometimes buffalo get stuck. But  
they always find their way. Usually  
with help.

She reaches out and gently touches Thomas's horn.

LITTLE GIRL  
Do you think I'll ever get stuck?

ELLIOT  
Of course. That's how you know  
you're going somewhere.

He hands her Thomas for a moment. She hugs the plush tight.

INT. MOTEL VENDING AREA - LATER

They're all gathered around the plastic table, mugs of  
lukewarm hot chocolate steaming.

UNO cards are scattered mid-game. The girl is smiling now,  
laughing as she plays a Reverse card on Elliot.

MADDIE (GIGGLING)  
I win again!

She slaps down her cards with triumph. Elliot raises an  
eyebrow.

ELLIOT  
Okay, no way she's not cheating.  
She's got that tiny con-artist look  
in her eye.

SINGLE DAD  
She's been scamming people since  
preschool. We're proud.

MADDIE (TO ELLIOT)  
You're funny. You talk like Thomas  
does in the books.

Elliot freezes slightly.

ELLIOT  
Yeah? I... guess I've read them  
once or twice.

MADDIE  
Thomas says "sometimes being lost  
is just part of wondering."

SINGLE DAD (TO ELLIOT)  
She made me read that page about  
fifty times.

Elliot hesitates, then shrugs modestly.

MADDIE  
One more game.

ELLIOT  
I don't know. You're dangerous. I  
hope Santa gives you coal *and* a  
calculator.

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - LATER THAT NIGHT

The minivan pulls away.

The girl waves from the window, now holding a sticky note  
Elliot gave her:

Keep wondering - Thomas.

LITTLE GIRL  
Bye, Buffalo Man!

Elliot watches them go. Looks at Thomas.

ELLIOT  
You really are the star of this  
movie, huh?

Elliot watches them disappear into the night.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - SANTA FE - NIGHT

A modest, slightly sad motel room. One lamp. One squeaky bed.  
A painting of a horse that looks like it's seen some things.

Elliot sits on the edge of the bed, coat still on, Thomas  
flopped beside him. He dials his phone, rubbing his face.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Maya answers on the first ring, holding a mug of tea. She  
looks surprised.

MAYA  
Wow. You *called*?

ELLIOT  
Don't get used to it. I'm in Santa  
Fe.



MAYA  
New Mexico?

ELLIOT  
Yup. Pit stop for the night.  
Nothing exploded. Nobody's crying.  
I'm shocked too.

MAYA  
Well, I'm glad you're okay. You  
sound... tired.

ELLIOT  
I'm either evolving as a person or  
slowly dying of vending machine  
cocoa poisoning. It's unclear.

MAYA  
Did you get a real dinner?

ELLIOT  
Hot chocolate and emotional  
progress. Surprisingly filling.

MAYA  
Sounds dangerous. You still on  
track for Christmas Eve?

ELLIOT  
Yeah. Shasta by the 24th. Still  
hauling the buffalo. Still  
pretending I know what I'm doing.

MAYA  
You're not pretending as well as  
you used to.

That makes him smile—just a little.

ELLIOT  
Good. I'm tired of pretending  
anyway. How's Lily?

MAYA  
She keeps setting out cookies. She  
asked me if you eat sugar.

ELLIOT  
Tell her I only eat cookies made by  
five-year-olds and sanctioned by  
talking plush animals.

MAYA  
So... she made you three kinds.

They both laugh. It's an easy, human moment.

MAYA (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Drive safe, okay?

ELLIOT  
Trying my best.

They hang up.

Elliot sets the phone down and looks over at Thomas.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Don't say it. I'm already  
sentimental enough for both of us.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - ARIZONA/NORTHERN NEW MEXICO - DAY

A long stretch of sun-bleached road. Cactus shadows. The hum of tires on asphalt.

Elliot's rental car cruises past dusty road signs. Thomas the Buffalo rides shotgun, bandana around one horn, watching the world roll by.

Up ahead a woman in a wedding dress, walking barefoot along the shoulder, heels in hand, veil tangled over one shoulder.

Elliot squints, slows down.

EXT. HIGHWAY SHOULDER - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot pulls to a stop. The woman glances over, wary but not surprised. Her mascara's smudged, but her posture says I'm not fragile. I'm pissed.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
You okay? Or is this some desert  
performance art?

WOMAN  
Left at the altar. Escaped during  
the cake cutting. I'm deciding if  
I'm heading to Vegas or just... the  
rest of my life.

ELLIOT  
You want a ride?

She looks at Thomas.

WOMAN  
Is that a buffalo?

ELLIOT  
He's very invested in this journey.  
Thinks he's the emotional core.

She smirks. Opens the door and slides in, trailing white lace.

INT. RENTAL CAR - MOVING - DAY

Desert rolls by outside. The sun shines bright. A long stretch of quiet.

WOMAN  
You sure about this?

ELLIOT  
I've picked up worse. Once gave a lift to a guy selling taxidermy out of a violin case.  
So... cake cutting?

WOMAN  
He texted my cousin during the speeches. Said he wasn't ready. Then just... left.

ELLIOT  
Damn.

WOMAN  
You?

ELLIOT  
On my way to meet my niece. Five years old. Never met her. I'm delivering a plush buffalo and decades of emotional damage.

WOMAN  
So a classic Christmas.

ELLIOT  
Exactly.

She looks at Thomas, then back at Elliot.

WOMAN  
You scared?

ELLIOT  
Terrified. I've made a career out of pretending to care. What if I forgot how to actually do it?

WOMAN

You're asking the wrong runaway  
bride. I forgot how to trust  
someone on purpose. But maybe  
showing up's the hardest part.

She looks out at the desert, softer now.

EXT. SMALL TOWN DINER - EARLY AFTERNOON

Elliot pulls up to a dusty diner with a pie sign swaying in  
the breeze.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

This is me.

ELLIOT

Sure?

WOMAN

They've got pie. I need pie.

She opens the door, starts to leave, then pauses.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

You're gonna do great, by the way.  
With your niece.

ELLIOT

You don't even know me.

WOMAN

You picked me up, gave me water,  
and didn't make a single weird joke  
about the dress.  
Low bar. But you cleared it.

She walks off. Her veil floats in the breeze.

Elliot watches her go. Then looks to Thomas.

ELLIOT

Don't say anything.

Elliot follows her inside.

INT. SUE'S PIE & PANCAKES - MOMENTS LATER

Chipped mugs clink. Vinyl booths creak. Sunlight beams  
through dusty windows.

Elliot and the bride sit in a booth. She's taken off the veil  
and tied her hair up. A stack of pancakes sits between them.

A slice of cherry pie and a side of scrambled eggs slowly disappear.

A waitress refills coffee, barely looking up.

WOMAN

I don't even like cherry pie. I just wanted something that felt like a decision.

ELLIOT

Honestly, cherry pie's not even in my top five reckless choices. I once invested in a personalized mascot costume company. The recession hit hard. America didn't need that many dancing otters.

She laughs—genuinely.

WOMAN

Why haven't you seen your niece?

ELLIOT

Because I spent too long convincing myself I didn't need anyone. And when I stopped believing it, I didn't know how to start again.

WOMAN

So what changed?

ELLIOT

This buffalo. And maybe a kid in Pittsburgh. And a flat tire in Santa Fe. Mostly, I just got tired of missing things before they even happened.

She leans back, takes another bite of pie.

WOMAN

For what it's worth... if I had an uncle like you, I'd have drawn you into all my art projects.

Elliot smiles. A real one.

ELLIOT

Then I hope she's got a crayon with my name on it.

They eat in companionable silence for a moment.

WOMAN

What do I owe you?

ELLIOT

Just... pick a place. Go there.  
Even if it's just five miles down  
the road. Make it yours.

She nods. Quiet. Emotional.

EXT. DINER - LATER

Elliot walks her to the entrance of a nearby bus depot. Her veil is tied into a bandana now. She carries her shoes and a to go pie box.

WOMAN

Thank you. For the pies. And the  
not judging.

ELLIOT

Thank you for reminding me people  
can still surprise me.

She smiles, hugs Elliot and heads inside.

Elliot turns, walks toward his car.

Thomas the buffalo waits in the passenger seat, sun beaming down on his fuzz.

Elliot opens the door.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Okay, Thomas. Time to finish this.

He taps the GPS.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Shasta. One last stop.

EXT. HIGHWAY OUTSIDE VEGAS - LATE AFTERNOON

Blistering sunlight. An empty desert road stretches toward distant mountains. No traffic. No help. Just heat and silence.

Elliot trudges along the shoulder, suitcase in one hand, Thomas under the other.

His rental car is a shrinking speck behind him, hood up, steam curling from the engine.

Sweat trickles down his face. His shirt clings to his back.  
He mutters to himself, furious and winded.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Two days from Christmas. Thirty  
miles from Redding. One buffalo.  
Zero functioning vehicles.

He yanks out his phone. Tries calling. Signal flickers.

ELLIOT (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Come on... come on—

It connects.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYA'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - SAME TIME

Maya answers, holding a spatula and wearing a flour-dusted  
apron.

MAYA  
Elliot?

ELLIOT  
Yeah. Hey. Just checking in to let  
you know I'm currently walking  
across the Mojave Desert with a  
plush buffalo and a suitcase full  
of regret.

MAYA  
What happened?

ELLIOT  
The car died. Like, spectacularly.  
Steam, clanking sounds, full  
mechanical swan song.

MAYA  
Are you okay?

ELLIOT  
Define "okay." My GPS says I'm  
twenty-eight miles from Redding.  
The nearest Uber is in another time  
zone. And I think Thomas is judging  
me.

MAYA  
You're... walking?

ELLIOT

I'm either walking or hallucinating  
the world's worst Christmas  
special.

(beat)

But yeah. I'm walking.

MAYA

Elliot. Just stop. I'll come get  
you. Stay put.

ELLIOT

No. I told her I'd be there. On  
Christmas Eve. And I'm gonna be  
there, even if I arrive looking  
like a rejected extra from *Lawrence  
of Arabia the Holiday Edition*.

MAYA (QUIET)

You sound... different.

ELLIOT

That's because I'm dying of  
sunstroke and growth. It's very  
inconvenient.

They both laugh, tired, but real.

MAYA

Just... keep walking, Buffalo Man.

ELLIOT

Always.

He ends the call. Stares at the road ahead.

Then looks at Thomas.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

She better love you, dude. Or I'm  
returning you to the void.

He keeps walking, determined, ridiculous.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - SUNSET

The desert glows gold and pink. Long shadows stretch across  
the asphalt.

Elliot trudges along the shoulder, sweat-streaked and  
sunburned, Thomas the Buffalo tucked under one arm, suitcase  
rolling stubbornly behind him.



Then, music in the distance. Tires crunching gravel.

A car crests the hill: a vintage pink cadilliac, top down, glinting like a dream.

It slows as it approaches.

Behind the wheel: TAYLOR SWIFT,(30) sunglasses on, scarf fluttering, exuding road-trip cool and effortless grace.

She peers over her shades.

TAYLOR  
Hey. You need a ride?

Elliot blinks. Sure he's hallucinating.

ELLIOT  
Hey aren't you?

TAYLOR  
Always have been.

She gestures at Thomas.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
I thought that was Thomas the  
Wondering Buffalo.

ELLIOT  
He gets around.

TAYLOR  
So do I.

A beat.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
You heading west?

ELLIOT  
Yeah. Shasta.

TAYLOR  
Perfect. I'm headed home for  
Christmas. Get in.

Elliot hesitates. Narrows his eyes.

ELLIOT  
How do you know I'm not a serial  
killer?

TAYLOR  
You're carrying a buffalo.  
How do you know I don't have a .45  
under the seat?

Elliot tosses suitcase and Thomas into back seat.

ELLIOT  
You look more like a .32 kind of  
girl.

TAYLOR  
I keep the small ones in my purse.

They lock eyes.

Then Elliot shrugs, opens the door, and slides in.

INT. PINK CADILLAC - MOVING - SUNSET

Wind in their hair. Taylor drives like she owns the horizon.  
The radio hums softly. The latest Christmas song, My  
boyfriends a snowman.

Thomas rides in the back seat, seatbelted, sunglasses  
obviously.

ELLIOT  
This ia incredible. I can't believe  
I'm getting a ride from brittany  
spears.

Taylor laughs

TAYLOR  
She wishes she was this cool.

ELLIOT  
That's the spirit, just shake it  
off.

Taylor chuckles, looks at Thomas in rear view mirror.

TAYLOR  
You know, my goddaughter used to  
read your books during chemo.

ELLIOT  
Seriously?

TAYLOR  
Yeah. Thomas got her through the  
hard parts. She called him "T the  
Brave."

Elliot swallows.

ELLIOT  
He's braver than his writer.

TAYLOR  
Then maybe it's time to catch up.

They drive on. The sun dips low behind the mountains. For the first time, Elliot looks calm. At peace.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
So, what's it like being a world famous author.

ELLIOT  
It's just like being a pop star,  
but my groupies are knee high and  
have sticky fingers.

Taylor laughs.

TAYLOR  
I'm sure they are better behaved.

ELLIOT  
This is easily the weirdest  
rideshare I've ever been on.

TAYLOR  
You say that like you've had a lot  
of pink Cadillac experiences.

ELLIOT  
Not a lot. There was a flamingo-  
themed prom night incident once,  
but I've blocked most of it out.

TAYLOR  
You look like a guy who peaked in  
homeroom.

ELLIOT  
Joke's on you. I never peaked. I'm  
still building toward a very  
mediocre crescendo.

She laughs.

TAYLOR  
You're very good at deflection.

ELLIOT  
I write emotionally manipulative  
stories for kids. It's a reflex.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
I wrote that book at three a.m.  
while eating cold dumplings and  
crying into a cat. But yeah... I'll  
take the win.

TAYLOR  
That's the thing about stories. We  
think we're just surviving, and  
someone else sees a lifeline.

A beat.

ELLIOT  
So what, are you the Christmas  
Ghost of Relevance Past?

TAYLOR  
More like the Christmas Ghost of  
Unexpected Roadside Therapy.

INT. PINK CADILLAC - MOVING - EARLY EVENING

The desert stretches endlessly. Golden light gives way to  
soft blue twilight.  
The Cadillac cruises down a quiet two-lane highway, wind in  
their hair, music low, playing the Hallmark Christmas song.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
You always carry him around like  
that?

ELLIOT  
Only when I'm on redemption road  
trips and slowly unraveling inside.

TAYLOR  
That tracks.

She adjusts the dial—classic holiday tunes melt into  
something lo-fi and dreamy.

ELLIOT  
So you really just... drive across  
the country like a Christmas fairy?

TAYLOR  
Sometimes I like to disappear.  
Pretend I'm someone else. No  
bodyguards, no schedule, just road.  
(MORE)

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
It's the only time I don't feel  
like someone's idea of me.

Elliot looks at her, thoughtfully.

ELLIOT  
I get that. Most people think I'm  
charming. Funny. Kid-friendly.

TAYLOR  
And you're not?

ELLIOT  
I'm exhausted. Dented. Mostly  
terrified of kids.

A long, quiet pause.

TAYLOR  
Then why now? Why the niece?

ELLIOT  
Because I think I'm tired of being  
afraid of her love.

Taylor glances over, serious.

TAYLOR  
That's the bravest thing I've heard  
in a long time.

(beat)

What's her name?

ELLIOT  
Lily. But I called her "Linda" for  
the first half of this trip.

TAYLOR  
You're a menace.

ELLIOT  
I prefer "late bloomer."

They both laugh.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT

The Cadillac cruises under a sky full of stars.  
The silence now is comfortable—earned.

TAYLOR  
You're gonna be good at it, you  
know.

ELLIOT

At what?

TAYLOR

Showing up. Loving her. Even with  
all the dents.

ELLIOT

I hope so.

They drive on, the road wide and quiet around them.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - NIGHT

The Cadillac's headlights sweep across endless dark.  
A sign flickers up ahead, glowing like a mirage:

NOLAN'S - FOOD, DRINK, JOY.

A rustic roadhouse lit with colored Christmas bulbs.

TAYLOR

Okay, I'm officially thirsty.

ELLIOT

For water? Or emotional resolution?

TAYLOR

Whiskey. Then maybe a carol.

Elliot looks at the glowing sign. Thomas bounces slightly in  
the backseat as they pull in.

INT. NOLAN'S ROADHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

It's cozy and glowing inside—strings of mismatched holiday  
lights, a jukebox humming low. A fire crackles near the bar.  
Locals in flannel sip from mugs and tap their boots to the  
beat.

Elliot and Taylor enter, shaking off the cold. They're road-  
worn but glowing.

BARTENDER (60s, Santa-adjacent)

BARTENDER

Merry Christmas Eve Eve. What'll it  
be?

TAYLOR

Whiskey, neat. He'll have something  
warm and judgmental.

ELLIOT  
Eggnog with a side of regret,  
thanks. Or scotch.

They settle into a table.

LATER - THE BAR

The place is livelier now. A group of locals has gathered near the upright piano. Someone starts playing the intro to "*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*."

Elliot nurses his drink. Taylor's sipping her second.

TAYLOR  
I used to think I had to earn quiet  
like this. Be perfect to deserve  
it.

ELLIOT  
Same. Except I went the other way.  
Ruined the quiet before it could  
hurt me.

She looks at him, kind, clear-eyed.

TAYLOR  
But look. You're still here.  
You showed up.

She stands suddenly.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
Come on. They have karaoke .

ELLIOT  
No. I don't do karaoke.

TAYLOR  
Yes. One carol. One chorus. You owe  
me for the ride.

He groans. She drags him up.

NEAR THE PIANO - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot and Taylor stand among the locals, a little awkward at first—but then Taylor starts singing, warm and low, and he joins in.

It's messy. It's real. People smile.

And Elliot is laughing, eyes bright. Actually happy.

INT. NOLAN'S BOOTH - LATER

The crowd has thinned. Elliot leans against the booth wall, sipping a glass of water now.

Taylor watches the firelight flicker.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)  
You're gonna remember this, you know.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I think I already do.

They share a look. Deep and still.

Then Taylor leans back, arms behind her head.

TAYLOR  
You're good company, Buffalo Man

A cozy swirl of lights and laughter. The piano is idle, drinks are flowing, and the fire crackles like applause.

Elliot slams his whiskey and waves at the bartender.

ELLIOT  
Another round. For me and my co-writer.

He grabs a napkin and pen from the bar, flattens it with purpose, and starts scribbling furiously.

TAYLOR  
What are you doing now?

ELLIOT  
Let's give these people a Christmas memory.

TAYLOR  
Is this... another Thomas epic?

ELLIOT  
Nope. It's Swiftmas.

She raises an eyebrow. He clears his throat. The crowd begins to hush as he stands on a barstool, napkin in hand.

ELLIOT (TO CROWD) (CONT'D)  
Ladies and gentlemen... can I have your attention. I give you..



TAYLOR

Oh no

The crowd chuckles. Taylor shakes her head, grinning.

Elliot hands Taylor the napkin.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)

Thirteen verses?

ELLIOT

Come on this is going to be epic.

The piano plays a slow, jazzy intro to "*The 12 Days of Christmas*."

Elliot's stands on a barstool, holding up his napkin like a sacred scroll. Thomas sits propped up on the piano, wearing a Santa hat. Taylor watches from the booth, mortified and delighted.

ELLIOT (TO THE CROWD) (CONT'D)

Ladies and gentlemen—  
Tonight, you have survived  
Christmas traffic, awkward family  
texts, and You deserve a little  
Swiftmas.

(he clears his throat)

Sung to the tune of "*The 12 Days of Christmas*"—

He points to the pianist, who starts playing.

TAYLOR

On the first day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
A red scarf and a memory!

CROWD (HALF-CONFUSED, INTRIGUED):

Hmm...

ELLIOT

On the second day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me— Two cardigans  
And a red scarf and a memory!

TAYLOR (LAUGHING):

I hate you and I love this.

ELLIOT

On the third day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Three exboyfriends!

(MORE)

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Two cardigans  
And a red scarf and a memory!

BAR CROWD (CATCHING ON):

Okay... okay!

TAYLOR

*On the fourth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Four hidden easter eggs  
Three ex-boyfriends  
Two cardigans  
And a red scarf and a memory!*

CROWD:

Hey!

ELLIOT

*On the fifth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Five Grammy wins!*

(jazz hands)

*Four hidden easter eggs  
Three ex-boyfriends  
Two cardigans  
And a red scarf and a memory!*

TAYLOR

He's terrifying. But I'm impressed.

TAYLOR (CONT'D)

*On the sixth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Six cat cuddles  
Five Grammy wins!  
Four hidden easter eggs..*

CROWD

*Three ex-boyfriends, two cardigans,  
and a red scarf and a memory!*

ELLIOT:

*On the seventh day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Seven Swifties screaming!  
Six cat cuddles...*

(Crowd echoes. Volume building.)

TAYLOR

*On the eighth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Eight re-recordings!  
Seven Swifties screaming...*

CROWD  
Six cat cuddles... five Grammy wins!!

Thomas nearly tips off the piano with excitement.

ELLIOT:  
On the ninth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Nine breakup anthems...

TAYLOR & CROWD:  
Eight re-recordings... seven  
Swifties screaming...

ALL TOGETHER  
Six cat cuddles... five Grammy  
wins!  
(cheers and clinking glasses)  
Four hidden easter eggs, three ex-  
boyfriends, two cardigans...  
And a red scarf and a memory!

ELLIOT  
On the tenth day of Swiftmas—

TAYLOR  
There are more?!

ELLIOT  
Oh, we're in Taylor's Version now.

TAYLOR & CROWD:  
—Ten eras spinning!  
Nine breakup anthems...

ELLIOT  
On the eleventh day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Eleven vinyl editions!  
(winks at Taylor)  
Ten eras spinning...

(The song is chaos. Joyful, messy, perfect.)

TAYLOR  
On the twelfth day of Swiftmas, my  
true fans gave to me—  
Twelve friendship bracelets!  
Eleven vinyl editions, ten eras  
spinning, nine breakup anthems...  
(nearly shouting now)  
Eight re-recordings, seven Swifties  
screaming, six cat cuddles...

CROWD  
*Five Grammy wiiiiinnnnssss!!!*

*(Thunderous clapping, glasses raised.)*

ELLIOT  
*Four hidden easter eggs, three ex-boyfriends, two cardigans...*

EVERYONE:  
*And a red scarf and a  
 meeeeemooorrryyy!!!*

INT. NOLAN'S - LATER

The bar settles. People are breathless with laughter. Someone wipes away a tear.

Taylor leans on the bar, smiling, a little overwhelmed.

TAYLOR  
 That was unhinged. I loved every second.

ELLIOT  
 I peaked. This is it. The rest of life is downhill.

TAYLOR  
 And I thought *I* had intense fans.

They clink glasses again. A soft holiday ballad plays on the jukebox now. Peace returns.

INT. NOLAN'S ROADHOUSE - MORNING

Elliot stands at the counter now, still groggy, one hand rubbing his temple.

BARTENDER  
 Coffee?

ELLIOT  
 Yes. All of it. Cups too slow, just leave the pott. And maybe something with carbs and forgiveness?

BARTENDER  
 Coming up.

INT. ROADHOUSE PATIO - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot sits at a small outdoor table, a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of him, a steaming mug of coffee in hand. He takes a sip. Winces. Then sighs like he's slowly reentering the world.

He pulls out his phone. Dials.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYA'S KITCHEN - SAME TIME

Maya picks up instantly. She's still in pajamas, icing cookies with Lily beside her, who's making a mess and grinning.

MAYA

Tell me you're on the road.

ELLIOT

Sort of. I'm... between transportation. Again.

MAYA

What happened?

ELLIOT

Taylor Swift happened.

MAYA

...You wanna run that by me one more time?

ELLIOT

She picked me up in the desert. In a pink Cadillac. We sang. She stole my buffalo.

MAYA

You're either concussed or in a Netflix holiday movie.

ELLIOT

Maybe both.

LILY (O.S.)

Was that Uncle Elliot?

MAYA

Yep.

LILY

Tell him Thomas is late!

ELLIOT

Tell her Thomas is on a detour but very committed.

Maya looks at him through the phone with something close to awe.

MAYA  
You're still coming?

ELLIOT  
If I have to ride a reindeer  
through a forest fire, yes.  
I'll be there by Christmas Eve. I  
swear.

MAYA  
You sound... different.

ELLIOT  
It's the eggs. Or the soul growth.  
Hard to tell. Anyway. Just wanted to  
check in. Tell Lily to keep that  
seat warm.

MAYA  
We will.

They hang up.

Elliot stares at his coffee for a long beat.

INT. NOLAN'S ROADHOUSE - LATE MORNING

Elliot pushes his empty plate toward the center of the bar,  
still nursing his coffee. He looks worn out but focused now—  
like a man who's finally surrendered to the journey.

He slides the mug toward the bartender

ELLIOT  
Don't suppose there's any chance of  
a ride to Shasta?

The bartender raises an eyebrow.

BARTENDER  
Shasta, huh? You're serious about  
this buffalo delivery.

ELLIOT  
It's Christmas. There's a five-  
year-old expecting wonder.  
I'm the last guy qualified to give  
it to her, but here we are.

The bartender nods, then jerks a thumb toward the back  
window.

BARTENDER

We get truckers in and out. Lot  
behind the diner's a layover spot.  
Some of 'em heading north.

ELLIOT

You think someone'd actually give a  
lift to a guy with no suitcase, no  
car, and a buffalo plush with  
abandonment issues?

BARTENDER

You've got a decent face and a damn  
good story.  
Buy a pie to go. Truckers trust  
pie.

Elliot stares for a beat. Then gets up and pulls a twenty  
from his wallet.

ELLIOT

One pie. Christmas magic flavor, if  
you've got it.

The bartender smirks and slides a box across the counter.

EXT. BACK LOT - NOLAN'S ROADHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot steps out into the back parking area, holding a box of  
pie and a to-go cup of coffee. The midday sun glints off  
dusty rigs lined up beside the diner.

He glances around, uncertain—then sees a big red semi truck  
with chrome accents and a santa hat decal on the side.

The driver—a big, bearded guy in a thermal shirt and boots—is  
climbing down from the cab, stretching his back.

Elliot hesitates, then calls out:

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

You headed north?

The man turns, squints, and cracks a grin.

TRUCKER

That depends. You carrying anything  
strange?

ELLIOT

Just the soul of a lost man.

TRUCKER

That's a yes.  
Where you goin'?

ELLIOT

Shasta, California. Niece.  
Christmas. Redemption, probably.

TRUCKER

I'm headed up the 5. I can get you  
pretty damn close.

Elliot lights up.

ELLIOT

I've got pie.

TRUCKER

Well why didn't you lead with that?  
Hop in.

INT. SEMI-TRUCK CAB - MOVING - AFTERNOON

The highway stretches ahead, sun setting in the rearview.  
Inside the cab, it's warm and humming with the low rumble of  
tires on asphalt.

Elliot rides shotgun, sipping from a paper cup of diner  
coffee. His hair's a mess, eyes tired but awake in a new kind  
of way.

TRUCKER (50s, bearded, gentle energy) drives with one hand,  
the other resting casually on the wheel.

TRUCKER (CONT'D)

So let me guess—Christmas Eve.  
Last-minute redemption mission.  
West Coast niece. Family you  
haven't seen in a while?

ELLIOT

Uncannily accurate.

TRUCKER

We get all types out here this time  
of year.

ELLIOT

She's five. Lily. Never met her.  
I'm the guy who sends books and  
excuses.  
Now I'm trying to show up with  
nothing but a hangover and borrowed  
momentum.



TRUCKER  
Sounds like the right kind of  
baggage for a holiday.

ELLIOT  
That's depressingly optimistic.

They share a quiet chuckle.

TRUCKER  
So what made you do it? The road  
trip, I mean.

ELLIOT  
I think I got tired of watching my  
life happen without me in it.

(beat)

Someone told me showing up is the  
bravest part.

TRUCKER  
Smart someone.

ELLIOT  
She was wearing a wedding dress in  
the middle of the desert, so jury's  
still out.

The cab hums. Peaceful.

TRUCKER  
Well. Showing up's only half of it.

ELLIOT  
Yeah?

TRUCKER  
Staying when it's messy—that's the  
rest.

Elliot stares out the window. The weight of that lands.

ELLIOT  
Noted.

EXT. RENO AVIS RENTAL LOT - EARLY EVENING

A glowing RENO city sign twinkles in the distance. The semi-  
truck rumbles to a stop outside a rental car hub tucked  
beside a gas station.

Elliot climbs down from the cab, dust in his coat, pie box under one arm, exhaustion in every step—but there's fire behind his eyes now.

The trucker hops out too, stretches.

TRUCKER  
You sure about this?

ELLIOT  
It's only five hours. I've survived worse. Including karaoke and Swiftmas.

TRUCKER  
Then you'll make it.

Elliot offers a handshake.

ELLIOT  
Thanks. For the lift. And the unsolicited life advice.

TRUCKER  
Don't thank me yet. Wait till you meet her.

They shake hands. Elliot turns and heads toward the rental office.

INT. AVIS COUNTER - MOMENTS LATER

A bored clerk scrolls a tablet. Elliot signs a digital waiver with a stylus that barely works.

CLERK  
You're in luck. Last compact left. Fuel's at three-quarters. Try not to return it smelling like sadness.

ELLIOT  
No promises.

EXT. RENO AVIS PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot climbs into a dusty white sedan, settles behind the wheel, and starts the engine.

He opens the glove box. Inside: a single piece of old gum and a dried-out Sharpie. He takes it.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
One more miracle, universe. Just one.

He pulls out of the lot, merging onto the highway with resolve.

INT. RENTAL CAR - MOVING - SUNSET

The sky burns orange over the hills as ELLIOT drives north. Pine trees blur past the windows. The road curves gently toward Shasta.

The radio plays soft Christmas jazz. A half-eaten gas station gingerbread cookie sits on the dash.

Elliot taps his phone, calls Maya.

INTERCUT - INT. MAYA'S KITCHEN - SAME TIME

Maya stands at the counter, apron dusted with flour. Lily hums in the background, coloring at the table.

She picks up immediately.

MAYA

If you're calling to say you turned around.

ELLIOT

Nope. I'm twenty minutes out. Just passed Redding.

MAYA

You're actually gonna make it.

ELLIOT

Don't sound so surprised. I had... help.

MAYA

Do I want to know?

ELLIOT

Not over the phone. The short version includes a runaway bride, a pie-fueled trucker, and Taylor Swift.

MAYA

Right. Classic Elliot.

ELLIOT

Hey... thanks for not giving up on me. I didn't make it easy.

MAYA

No, you didn't. But neither did  
Dad. And you? You're doing better.

(beat)

Lily's been practicing how to hug  
you without spilling juice on your  
shirt.

Elliot chuckles, emotional.

ELLIOT

Tell her she can spill whatever she  
wants. I'm ready.

MAYA

You sure?

ELLIOT

Yeah. I want to be her uncle.  
Finally.

A quiet beat between them.

MAYA

Drive safe. We'll leave the porch  
light on.

They hang up.

Elliot puts the phone down. The trees part slightly,  
revealing the snowy peak of Mount Shasta in the distance.

He exhales slowly, hand tightening on the wheel.

ELLIOT

Let's finish this.

EXT. GAS STATION - REDDING, CALIFORNIA - LATE AFTERNOON

Elliot fills the tank on his dusty rental. His face is worn,  
his coat rumpled, but his eyes are steady. Shasta's just over  
the horizon, he can almost feel it.

Next door, a modest Christmas tree lot bustles with holiday  
music playing over crackly speakers. String lights zigzag  
above rows of Douglas firs.

A teenage employee (17, hoodie under Santa hat) struggles to  
lift a tree onto the back of a woman's old pickup.

Elliot watches for a beat, then caps the tank and walks over.

EXT. CHRISTMAS TREE LOT - CONTINUOUS

Teenager strains to hoist the tree. The woman tries to help, but it's awkward.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Need a hand?

TEENAGER  
Seriously? That'd be great.

Elliot grabs the trunk. They lift together, swing it up, and slide it into the truck bed.

WOMAN  
Thank you. Merry Christmas!

She gets in and drives off, waving.

Elliot and the teen stand there for a moment, catching their breath.

TEENAGER  
People always expect you to be  
jolly this time of year.  
Even if you feel like crap.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I've been jolly-adjacent  
since Ohio. It's exhausting.

The kid chuckles.

TEENAGER  
You heading home?

ELLIOT  
Something like that.  
(beat)  
Trying to fake less and feel more.

The teen nods, then picks up another tree.

TEENAGER  
I think showing up counts.

Elliot watches him for a second.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I think so too.

He turns and walks back to his car. Slips into the driver's seat.

For a beat, he just sits there, staring out at the rows of trees. Watching the snow fall.

Then, he smiles. The kind that's earned.

EXT. SHASTA HIGHWAY - TWILIGHT

A narrow two-lane road winds through tall evergreens. The snowy landscape is peaceful, almost serene—until it isn't.

Elliot drives cautiously in his rental car, eyes flicking between the winding road and his GPS.

The radio is playing a Christmas song, Oh what a lively, lovely delicious Christmas time. ELLIOT sings along.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Oh, what a lively, lovely,  
delicious Christmas time, Where  
snowflakes fall, and hearts full of  
cheer. Frosty air, twinkling  
lights, it's a magical sight,  
Sleigh bells ringing, all through  
the night.

Up ahead a car stopped on the shoulder, hazards flashing.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Oh no...

As he presses the brake—

TIRES SCREECH.

The wheels hit a patch of black ice. The car slides sideways, out of control.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
No no no—!

He swerves wildly and manages to avoid the stopped car barely and comes to a violent stop at the snowy embankment.

A heartbeat of silence.

Then—

CRUNCH. CRASH. HORN.

Behind him, two more cars collide. One spins. Another skids off the road.

ELLIOT jerks his head around, eyes wide, heart pounding.

And then he sees it, a small sedan in the trees, crumpled at the front. Steam rising. A wheel spinning.

No movement inside.

His breath fogs the windshield. He freezes, just for a second.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Come on...

Then he unbuckles, throws open the door, and runs into the snow.

EXT. CRASH SITE - TWILIGHT

Snow falls lightly, softening the chaos. Elliot stumbles through the drift toward the crashed sedan, its front end buried in a cluster of fir trees.

Steam hisses from the crumpled hood. The passenger window is shattered. An airbag dangles, deflated.

Inside, the driver, a woman in her 60s, with wispy gray hair and a bloodied lip, sits pinned against the steering wheel. Her chest heaves with panic.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Hey! Hey, I'm here. it's okay,  
you're not alone.

He tries the door. It creaks, stuck in the snow and dented frame. He goes to the passenger side door. He throws his shoulder into it, once, twice-POP!

He slips inside, crouching beside her.

WOMAN  
I-I can't move. My seatbelt's  
stuck.

ELLIOT  
Alright. That's okay. You're okay.  
I'm going to help you out of here.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
What's your name?

WOMAN  
Nancy. Nancy Preston.

ELLIOT  
Hi Nancy. I'm Elliot.

He looks down—her seatbelt is jammed, twisted tight against her chest.

Her knees are pinned under the collapsed steering column. She's trembling, pale, one hand clutching a photograph in her lap.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Ok, nancy everything is going to be fine.

NANCY  
I was just. I was going to see my grandkids. I always bring the Christmas cinnamon rolls.

(beat)  
I'm gonna miss it, aren't I?

ELLIOT  
No. You're not missing anything. You're going to get there.

He tugs the belt, no luck.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Alright, hang tight. I'm going to find something to cut this, okay?

She nods, her breath hitching.

NANCY  
I was so close...

Elliot pauses. Looks her in the eyes.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I know the feeling.

He scrambles back to his car.

EXT. ROADSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot rifles through the trunk, throws aside old papers, a bottle of water, finally finds a tire pressure tool with a built-in blade.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Don't fail me now, Discount AutoMart.

He runs back to the car.

INT. CRASHED CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot slips back in beside her.



ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Okay. I'm gonna cut the belt. One  
deep breath, then lean forward when  
I say.

She nods, clutching his coat sleeve.

He wedges the blade under the strap and snaps it free.

NANCY  
Oh my God.

ELLIOT  
Okay. That's step one. Now we wait  
for help. But you're free.

She starts to cry, overwhelmed.

NANCY  
Thank you. I just didn't want to  
ruin Christmas.

ELLIOT  
You didn't. You showed up.  
Sometimes that's all it takes.

She reaches for his hand. Grips it tight.

He pulls out his phone, no signal.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Come on...

He steps out of the car, climbs up to the roadside, trying  
again. Still no bars.

The wind bites. The trees sway gently in the fading light.

In the distance, two sets of headlights appear, cars winding  
cautiously down the icy road.

Elliot stumbles into the lane, arms waving.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Hey! Stop! Slow down!

The first car slows to a crawl. The second pulls up behind  
it.

DRIVER  
What happened?

ELLIOT  
There's a crash down there. Woman's  
stuck, no signal.  
Can anyone call 911?

PASSENGER  
I've got one bar, trying!

Suddenly, from down below—

NANCY (O.S.)  
*HELP!*

Elliot jerks around. Looks back down the hill toward the  
crashed sedan.

The hood catches fire.

ELLIOT  
No no no—! Not now.

He turns and sprints to his own rental car.

EXT. RENTAL CAR - SECONDS LATER

Elliot throws open the trunk, tosses aside fast food wrappers  
and a blanket.

His hands find a tire iron.

He grabs it and bolts.

EXT. CRASH SITE - CONTINUOUS

Flames begin to lick the windshield. Smoke curls up fast.

The woman inside is screaming, slamming her palm against the  
inside of the window.

NANCY  
HELP ME! HELP ME!!

ELLIOT  
I'm coming!

He leaps down the embankment, snow spraying with each step.

Reaches the car, yanks the driver doors still jammed.

He uses the tire iron to pry open drivers door. No luck.

Smoke rushes out.

Elliot pries open the passenger rear door.

He crawls in from the passenger side, choking on fumes.  
 Elliot reaches down and reclines passenger seat completely.

Elliot runs back to rear driver seat.

ELLIOT (COUGHING) (CONT'D)  
 Okay—one shot. I'm pulling you  
 free.

NANCY (CRYING)  
 I can't—I can't move my leg—

ELLIOT  
 Yes you can. Just one push. I've  
 got you.

He braces himself, pulls hard, and slides her out on rear  
 door.

POP.

Her leg clears. They both tumble out the passenger side into  
 the snow just as the fire whooshes higher.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
 CALL 911 NOW!

EXT. ROADSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Two drivers rush down to help. One has a phone to their ear,  
 finally connecting.

OTHER DRIVER  
 Yes, fire, vehicle crash—Shasta  
 area—send emergency now!

Elliot lies in the snow, coughing. The woman clings to him,  
 shaking, crying.

ELLIOT  
 Hold on, help is on the way.

OTHER DRIVER  
 Ambulance is 45 minutes away.

But she's alive.

He looks up at the burning car. Then at the sky above.

ELLIOT  
 Okay, universe. What now?

A new sound—bells, Hooves. Something approaching.

In the distance—a faint jingle.

Elliot looks up, confused.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
...What the hell?

Elliot looks at other driver.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Wwhat's your name?

OTHER DRIVER  
Dave.

ELLIOT  
Dave stay with her. I'll be back soon.

EXT. DEEPER IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

Snow pours down now, thick, heavy, muffling the world.  
Elliot stumbles through the whiteout, gasping, frozen, eyes searching.

Jingle bells, faint at first—then closer, sharper.

He pushes through a curtain of pine boughs and finds.

A wooden sleigh, parked in a small clearing, flanked by two massive draft horses, their flanks steaming in the cold.

Sitting casually on the bench is SANTA O'CONNOR—big-bearded, red-coated, fur-trimmed, and weathered like an old leather boot. His hat droops to one side, a candy cane tucked behind his ear.

In one gloved hand, reins.

In the other: a half-empty bottle of Irish whiskey.

He takes a sip, eyes twinkling under snow-flecked brows.

SANTA O'CONNOR (IRISH ACCENT)  
Well now... aren't you a sight.

ELLIOT  
Me?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aren't you the saddest, coldest thing I've seen all season.

ELLIOT  
I need help.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
You're bleeding.

ELLIOT  
I know.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
You look lost.

ELLIOT  
I—there was an accident. I helped  
her. But I need to get to a  
hospital.

Santa O'Connor studies him, bottle resting on his lap.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
What happened to your face?

ELLIOT  
Car crash. Smoke. Fire. Heavy  
emotion.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Good. Better than just whiskey.

ELLIOT  
Are you... really Santa?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
No, lad. I'm a man with warm  
horses, a clear path, and just  
enough magic to carry lost souls  
the last mile home.

(holds up bottle)  
just enough left to keep me from  
freezing my arse off.

ELLIOT  
Will you help me?

Santa O'Connor reaches behind the seat, pulls out a blanket—  
throws it over the bench.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Well then. Best hop in, lad.

Shasta's a good bit north, but I know a shortcut or two.

ELLIOT  
You're serious?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
I've been serious since 1978. Only  
now I wear red velvet.

Elliot stares at him, then at the sleigh, then climbs aboard without hesitation.

Santa O'Connor gives a whistle. The horses snort and begin to move, bells jingling against the thickening storm.

Elliot climbs up, boots wet, hands trembling. The sleigh creaks as it shifts under his weight.

He glances at the bottle.

ELLIOT  
Is this sleigh street legal?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
In three counties and every  
fairytale worth reading.

He snaps the reins. The horses pull forward, bells chiming with each step.

As the sleigh glides through the snowy woods, Elliot leans back, silent.

EXT. WOODED ROAD NEAR CRASH SITE - NIGHT

The sleigh glides through the snow, bells jingling gently. Elliot squints ahead, moonlight glows through the trees.

They round a bend and arrive at the crash site. Emergency lights are just visible in the distance, still slowly approaching.

EXT. CRASH SITE. SAME.

A driver has stayed behind, wrapping Nancy in a blanket, her hands trembling, face pale.

She looks up, startled, as a horse-drawn sleigh emerges from the woods like a storybook.

NANCY  
What in the world..

Elliot leaps out of the sleigh.

ELLIOT  
Hey, it's okay. It's me.

She recognizes him, her breath catching.

NANCY  
You're back.

ELLIOT  
And I brought cavalry.

He nods to Santa O'Connor, who tips his cap, a glint in his eye.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Evening, Miss. You look like you  
need a proper ride.

NANCY  
You look like you walked out of a  
whiskey ad and a Christmas pageant.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aye. That's the idea.

Together, Elliot and Santa gently help Nancy to her feet. She winces but nods.

They guide her carefully to the sleigh. Elliot holds her hand the whole time.

NANCY  
I didn't think I'd... I thought I'd  
be stuck.

ELLIOT  
You and me both.

They get her settled under blankets in the back.

Santa pulls another quilt over her lap and tucks it in like he's done this a hundred times.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
We'll have you sipping cocoa before  
the EMTs even get out of first  
gear.

NANCY  
Thank you.

ELLIOT  
You saved me first.  
Now it's my turn.

They exchange a look, real, exhausted, grateful.

Elliot hops back onto the bench beside Santa.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Now... let's get moving, lads,  
shall we?

He snaps the reins.

The sleigh glides forward, snow swirling in the moonlight, Nancy wrapped in warmth behind them, Elliot sitting taller than before.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - NIGHT

The sleigh glides over the snow as Nancy lies bundled in the back, her face pale and eyes fluttering.

ELLIOT (TO SANTA)  
She's fading. We need to get to a  
hospital—now.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aye. I know a shortcut.

(beat)

Hold on tight, lad.

Elliot grabs the edge of the sleigh as Santa snaps the reins and lets out a sharp whistle.

SANTA O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
*Hyah!*

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The horses charge forward, hooves pounding through snowdrifts.

The sleigh cuts through the forest like a bullet, snow sprays up in arcs, branches whip past.

They twist and turn, flying between pine trunks, wheels and runners skimming ice patches.

ELLIOT  
Is this even a trail?!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Only if you believe in it!



A sharp turn, the sleigh drifts sideways on a patch of ice before righting itself. Elliot nearly falls out, laughing and terrified.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF SHASTA - MOMENTS LATER

They burst from the woods onto the edge of town. The streets are slick with packed snow and holiday quiet.

Christmas lights glow on houses as they fly past.

The sleigh slides around a corner, sparks flashing from one runner hitting pavement.

ELLIOT  
This is completely insane!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Insanity is underrated!

They tear down a small hill icy and treacherous. The horses lose traction for a second—the sleigh begins to fishtail—

Elliot reaches back, grabs Nancy's hand.

ELLIOT  
We're gonna get you there. You hear me? *You're not missing Christmas.*

EXT. DOWNTOWN SHASTA - NIGHT

WHAM! The sleigh bursts out of a wooded alley and careens into a quiet downtown street, slick with fresh snow.

Holiday lights twinkle across lampposts. Christmas carols drift from a corner café.  
People stroll peacefully, sipping cocoa, wrapped in scarves.

And then—

JINGLE BELLS. YELLING. HORSES.

ELLIOT (SCREAMING) (CONT'D)  
WE'RE GOING WAY TOO FAST!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Speed's only dangerous if you doubt it!

He pulls the reins hard, the sleigh barrels down the street, horses clomping full-tilt.

EXT. SHASTA MAIN STREET - CONTINUOUS

A minivan pulls out of a parking spot just in time for the sleigh to cut it off, spinning sideways across the snowy road.

HONNNNK!

DRIVER (O.S.)  
WHAT THE-~~IS~~ THAT A SLEIGH?!

Pedestrians scream and scatter as the sleigh zooms down the sidewalk for a split second—weaving between Christmas shoppers and a guy in an inflatable Grinch costume.

ELLIOT  
I AM SO SORRY!

Santa lifts one hand, tipping his hat to a stunned family carrying shopping bags.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Happy holidays!

Then, without missing a beat, he pulls a battered whiskey flask from inside his coat and takes a hearty swig.

ELLIOT (HORRIFIED)  
Are you DRINKING?!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
I drive better with a little burn  
in me bones!

ELLIOT  
Is that what you call it?

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - CONTINUOUS

The sleigh slides sideways around a corner, narrowly missing a snowman and slamming into a garbage can that explodes into a cloud of glittery wrapping paper.

They careen through a cul-de-sac, cutting through a yard where two kids are building a snow fort.

KID #1  
MOM! LOOK It's SANTA'S SLEIGH!

ELLIOT  
This cannot be legal.

INT. SLEIGH - MOVING

Elliot is gripping the side of the sleigh, still covered in blood and soot, wind whipping his hair, heart pounding.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
WE'RE GONNA DIE IN A HOLIDAY  
POSTCARD!

SANTA O'CONNOR (GLEEFUL)  
Not tonight, lad! We've got one  
more miracle to deliver!

He jerks the reins and the horses launch off a snow berm,  
catching air for half a second.

ELLIOT  
ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!

EXT. SHASTA HOSPITAL - NIGHT

The sleigh barrels into the emergency bay with a final jingle  
and skid, the horses rearing slightly as snow explodes around  
them. A mix of steam, sleigh bells, and adrenaline fills the  
air.

Elliot leaps down before the sleigh even stops moving.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
SOMEONE HELP—SHE'S HURT!

Nancy, still bundled in blankets, groans from the back of the  
sleigh.

Inside the ER bay, two NURSES in scrubs and fleece jackets  
rush to the automatic doors as they *slide open*—then freeze.

NURSE #1  
What in actual...

NURSE #2  
Is that a... sleigh?

Santa O'Connor stands tall in the driver's seat, red coat  
flapping in the wind like some ancient Viking road warrior.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
She's got shallow breath and a  
banged-up wrist. Stable, but  
chilled.

ELLIOT  
We pulled her from a crash—she's  
going into shock.  
*Please.*

The urgency in his voice snaps the nurses into action.

NURSE #1  
Let's go, let's go!

They run forward with a gurney, one of them calling into her radio.

A third EMT steps outside mid-coffee sip and spits it out at the sight.

EMT  
Did Santa just roll up with a  
trauma patient?!

NURSE #2  
Get her vitals. Warm blanket pack.  
Let's move!

Elliot helps guide Nancy down, still holding her hand until she's safely strapped in.

NANCY (TO ELLIOT)  
You made it happen. I thought I'd  
miss it all. Thank you.

ELLIOT  
You're gonna make it. Go raise hell  
with those grandkids.

The nurses wheel her inside. The sleigh exhales. The chaos settles.

Santa O'Connor watches the doors close, then turns to Elliot, calm again.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
You did good, lad.

ELLIOT  
So did you.

Santa hops down and claps a hand on Elliot's shoulder

SANTA O'CONNOR  
We did good, lad.

ELLIOT  
Sure did.

INT. SHASTA HOSPITAL - NIGHT

The automatic doors slide open as Elliot and Santa O'Connor step inside.

Fluorescent lights hum overhead. Christmas music plays quietly from a wall-mounted speaker. A sad fake tree flickers in the corner.

Nurses wheel Nancy away through swinging ER doors. A few glance back—still unsure if they hallucinated the sleigh.

Elliot still stained with blood, soot, and snow, walks to the row of plastic chairs and sinks into one, utterly spent.

Santa follows, slower, with the casual weight of someone who's been in many waiting rooms before.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Hospitals are the only place where  
time stops and stretches all at  
once.

ELLIOT

I feel like I just sprinted through  
four movies and a blizzard.

He rubs his hands together. Stares at the scuffed linoleum.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

You think she'll be okay?

SANTA O'CONNOR

She made it here. And you didn't  
leave her behind.  
That's what Christmas is, lad. Not  
the lights. Not the damn cocoa.  
It's carrying someone else when  
they can't walk.

A beat.

ELLIOT

I used to be the one who walked  
away. From everyone. Everything.  
It was easier.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Aye. Until it wasn't.

Santa reaches into his coat and pulls out the half-empty  
whiskey bottle. He looks at it.

SANTA O'CONNOR (CONT'D)

We all carry things. Some heavier  
than others. What matters is what  
we choose to carry forward.

He sets the bottle gently on the floor beside his boot.

SANTA O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
You did good tonight, Elliot  
Brandt.

ELLIOT  
I don't know what I'm doing.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Neither does anyone of worth.

INT. SHASTA HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

The vending machine hums. An old TV plays a muted Hallmark movie. Christmas lights blink tiredly around the nurses' station window.

Elliot sits slouched in a plastic chair, arms limp, bloodied coat still draped around him like a war story. His hands are filthy. His face is streaked. His eyes... are open.

Across from him, Santa O'Connor reads a battered copy of *Field & Stream*, holding it upside down. A nurse has offered him a peppermint tea, which steams untouched beside him.

SANTA O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
They always decorate, these waiting  
rooms. Try to make 'em feel less  
like a place where people wait to  
hear things they don't want to.

ELLIOT  
Cheerful.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
It's the effort that counts.  
Kinda like parenting. Or being an  
uncle.

Elliot closes his eyes, exhales long and heavy.

ELLIOT  
I didn't know if I was capable of  
any of this. The road trip. The  
crash. The... kid waiting for me.  
And now I'm sitting in a hospital  
in the middle of nowhere with Santa  
and no clue how I got here.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Sounds like Christmas to me.

They sit in silence.

Down the hall, a gurney squeaks. A nurse laughs. A baby cries.

ELLIOT (QUIETLY)  
What if I screw it up?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
You will.

(beat)

But not all the time. And not tonight.

Elliot looks over. Santa O'Connor isn't smiling anymore. He's just present. Steady.

SANTA O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
Showing up with your sleeves rolled  
up, heart cracked open...  
That's more than most ever manage.

Elliot nods. Swallows hard.

ELLIOT  
She better still believe in  
buffaloes.

Santa reaches into his coat and pulls out a peppermint. Hands it over without a word.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
She does.

ELLIOT  
Flowers. We need flowers. I saw a  
gift store near the entrance. I'll  
be back.

INT. HOSPITAL GIFT SHOP - NIGHT - SHORTLY AFTER NANCY'S  
SURGERY

The soft ding of a bell echoes as Elliot steps into the small hospital gift shop. Shelves are stacked with plush animals, sad balloons, and generic greeting cards.

He moves through the narrow aisles, still in his soot-stained coat, hair tousled, boots wet with melted snow.

He scans a shelf of bouquets, finally selecting a simple bunch of white lilies and evergreen sprigs. A little holiday, a little hope.

As he turns to leave, something on a lower shelf catches his eye—a silver flask, smooth, slightly scratched, with just a hint of old-fashioned swagger.

He picks it up. Smiles.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Ellio sits hunched over in the waiting room chair, peppermint melting in his palm. His coat is folded next to him, stained with soot and dried blood. Santa O'Connor snoozes nearby, hat tilted over his eyes.

Elliot's phone buzzes, it's Maya.

He answers, voice low and ragged.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Hey.

MAYA (O.S.)

Where are you? Lily's literally watching the driveway with binoculars. She's asking if the buffalo missed his exit.

ELLIOT

I'm close. I just had... a detour.

MAYA

Elliot.

ELLIOT

There was a car crash. Not mine—I pulled a woman out. No signal, no phone service. Then this sleigh showed up.  
I mean an *actual sleigh*, Maya—with bells. Horses. Snow flying everywhere. We skidded into the ER like *Die Hard* on Christmas Eve.

MAYA

...Are you drunk?

Before Elliot can respond, Santa O'Connor stirs, lifts his head and leans toward the phone.

SANTA O'CONNOR

He's not drunk. I am. He's just covered in someone else's blood, frostbite, and unresolved emotional wounds!



Elliot slaps a hand to his face.

MAYA  
Who the hell was that?

ELLIOT  
That's Santa.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Santa O'Connor! Retired pub owner.  
Current emergency sleigh operator.  
We raced through Main Street, cut  
off three Toyotas, jumped a  
snowbank the size of a golden  
retriever, and almost hit a  
snowman.

MAYA  
Oh my God.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
And we made it. With minutes to  
spare.

ELLIOT  
The woman's okay. They took her in.  
She's gonna see her grandkids.

There's a pause.

MAYA  
You didn't have to do all that.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I did. For her. For me. For  
Lily.

(beat)

I'm not missing this.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
That's the spirit, lad.

MAYA  
You've got about twenty minutes  
before she falls asleep under the  
tree with cookies in her lap.

ELLIOT  
Tell her to stay awake. The  
buffalo's almost home.

She hangs up.

Elliot lowers the phone, looks at Santa.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
You're really something.

The clock ticks quietly. Elliot and Santa O'Connor sit side by side in stained coats and worn-out silence.

The double doors swing open, and a NURSE (30s, professional but kind) walks in holding a clipboard.

NURSE  
I thought you'd both like to know.  
Nancy Adair's stable. Vitals are  
improving. She's a lucky woman.

ELLIOT  
Thank God. Can we see her?

NURSE  
Sorry. Immediate family only.

Santa stands

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Now hang on, love. We're the reason  
she's in that room, not under a  
snowbank. This lad here pulled her  
from a burning wreck with nothing  
but a tire iron, blind hope.

Elliot gives a tired thumbs-up.

ELLIOT  
It's true. I think my kneecap's  
still vibrating.

NURSE  
You were... part of the rescue?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
More like the whole bloody cavalry.

She studies them both, two men who look like they've come through a war, and maybe a cartoon.

She sighs.

NURSE  
Five minutes. Don't touch anything.

She disappears back through the doors.

Elliot lets out a long breath, stands.

The doors open again.

In walks a tall, broad-shouldered POLICE OFFICER (40s), snow on his boots, hat still in hand.

He scans the room, expression unreadable. Then—

OFFICER  
Which one of you crashed a sleigh  
into the ER driveway?

Elliot raises a slow hand.

OFFICER (TO SANTA) (CONT'D)  
Dad. What the hell.

Elliot does a double take.

ELLIOT  
Wait, your dad?

Santa grins proudly.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aye. My boy Liam. Grew up in my  
pub, now he's Chief Law & Sleigh  
Order.

OFFICER LIAM  
We got reports of horses on  
pavement, property damage near  
Main, and "a man dressed like Santa  
flying over a snowbank."  
(beat)  
Please tell me that was an  
exaggeration.

ELLIOT  
I... can't.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
We were saving a life, son. The  
rules of the road were... loosely  
interpreted.

OFFICER LIAM  
And the whiskey?

Santa shrugs, producing the half-empty bottle from his coat  
like a magician.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 Medicinal. Soul-warming. Also, I  
 wasn't driving—I was *navigating*  
*chaos*.

OFFICER LIAM (TO ELLIOT)  
 Are you hurt?

ELLIOT  
 I'm everything but dead. But I've  
 got somewhere to be. Like, miracle-  
 level important.

The officer looks him over—bloodied, filthy, eyes full of  
 truth.

He sighs, rubs his face.

OFFICER LIAM  
 If anyone asks, this was a seasonal  
 horse-drawn volunteer medical  
 escort. You've got ten minutes  
 before I pretend to care more.

Santa beams.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 That's my boy.

ELLIOT  
 Is your entire family legally  
 unhinged?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 Only on the holidays.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Soft beeps and a faint carol play from a radio near the bed.

Nancy rests in a hospital bed under crisp white sheets. Her  
 wrist is wrapped, oxygen tube gently resting beneath her  
 nose. Her face is pale, but peaceful—alive.

The door creaks open.

Elliot steps inside, hair matted, face smeared with soot,  
 still in the bloodstained coat. He carries his exhaustion  
 like armor.

Santa O'Connor follows, hat respectfully off, moving quieter  
 than usual.

Nancy turns her head, blinking groggily.

NANCY  
...Buffalo Man?

Elliot smiles softly, stepping closer.

ELLIOT  
Hey. You scared the hell out of me.

NANCY  
You *dragged me* out of a flaming car  
with your bare hands.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I've had a weird week.

She chuckles weakly. Elliot sits a vase of flowers on window.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
These are for you.

NANCY  
Thank you so much. Did we actually  
ride a sleigh to the hospital... or  
was that the morphine?

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Both. Bit of holiday magic, bit of  
Irish nerve.

She shifts slightly, winces—but smiles at them both.

NANCY  
I never even got your name.

ELLIOT  
Elliot Brandt.

NANCY  
Well, Elliot Brandt... you gave me  
Christmas back.  
And probably a few years I didn't  
earn.

ELLIOT  
You earned them. I just happened to  
be stupid enough to try.

Nancy reaches for his hand. He takes it gently.

NANCY  
My grandkids—they think I'm the  
dependable one. The unshakable one.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Well now you get to be the  
*legendary* one.

NANCY  
Thanks to you two clowns.

She smiles. Teary.

NANCY (TO ELLIOT) (CONT'D)  
Go. You look like you've got  
someone waiting too.

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I do. Merry Christmas, Nancy.

NANCY  
Merry Christmas, Elliot. It's  
Christmas eve, don't you have  
someplace to be?

ELLIOT  
I do indeed.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Rest easy now, love. You're on the  
nice list.

They leave quietly, closing the door behind them.

EXT. SHASTA STREETS - CHRISTMAS EVE - NIGHT

WHOOSH!

The sleigh rockets down a snow-covered street, cutting  
through the storm like a red-and-gold missile.

Elliot clutches the side of the sleigh with one arm, teeth  
chattering, hair blowing straight back.

ELLIOT  
Why are we going faster?! I thought  
we were close!

Santa is grinning like a maniac.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
We are close! And we've got two  
minutes till midnight! You want to  
arrive with style or not?!

The horses gallop full speed, snow flying from their hooves.

They skid around a sharp turn, narrowly missing a recycling bin and a group of carolers who dive for cover behind a minivan.

CAROLER (O.S.)  
Is that a *sleigh*?!

ELLIOT  
We are going to get arrested! By  
your son!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Not if we deliver the magic first!

EXT. DOWNTOWN SHASTA - CONTINUOUS

They blow past a glowing Nativity scen, a plastic donkey topples over in their wake.

A lone police cruiser flashes its lights once, then lets them go.

ELLIOT  
Did your son just give us a pass?!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
He knows better than to ticket  
Christmas!

The sleigh hits a slushy patch, fishtails, then rights itself, the horses powering through like champions.

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - MOMENTS LATER

The sleigh barrels into a residential street, snow flying, lights blurring, mailboxes whizzing past.

INT. MAYA'S LIVING ROOM - CHRISTMAS EVE - NIGHT

Maya sits on the couch, a soft throw blanket across her lap, flipping the same page of a book for the third time. The fire pops quietly. A plate of cookies and a half-glass of wine sit untouched on the coffee table.

From upstairs—

SOFT FOOTSTEPS.

LILY (O.S.)  
Mom?

Maya looks up to see Lily in her Christmas pajamas, standing halfway down the stairs with messy bed hair and a blanket clutched in her arms.

MAYA

Lily, what are you doing up?

LILY

I heard something. I can't sleep.

MAYA

What kind of something?

LILY

Bells. Like... sleigh bells.

Maya smiles gently, rising to her feet.

She walks over, kneels in front of her daughter, brushing a curl from her cheek.

MAYA

Honey, it was just a dream. It's late. Go back to bed, okay?

Lily frowns, disappointed. She turns to head back up the stairs.

Then, Jingle bells ring loud.

Maya freezes.

Another jingle. Closer. Louder. Like reins pulled taut in the snow.

Her eyes slowly widen. She turns toward the front door.

LILY (WHISPERS)

Did you hear that?

Maya doesn't answer. Just walks slowly toward the door, her hand trembling slightly.

LILY (CONT'D)

Mom... I think it's him.

EXT. MAYA'S NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT - CHRISTMAS EVE

The world is still and blanketed in snow.

JINGLE BELLS. THUNDERING HOOVES.

In the distance: headlights flash as a sleigh rockets down the street, sparks flying where the runners hit pavement. A swirling blizzard of snow trails behind it.

INT. MAYA'S FRONT PORCH - CONTINUOUS



Maya and Lily step onto the porch. Maya clutches her robe tight. Lily blinks against the snowflakes.

LILY (CONT'D)  
I *knew* it was real.

The sleigh whips around the corner at full speed.

It skids wildly, fishtailing past two parked cars so close it knocks a side mirror clean off with a clatter.

Dogs bark furiously from behind fences—one small terrier chases after the sleigh, bouncing in the snow, trailing a string of Christmas lights tangled around its leash.

The sleigh spins around a mailbox, nearly tipping, before drifting into Maya's front yard in a glorious, snow-blasting halt, spraying the steps with powder.

Santa O'Connor pulls back the reins and laughs like a man who's been thrown out of bars in four time zones.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aye. Still got it.

Elliot climbs out, his coat is torn. Hair wild. Blood on his cheek. No Thomas. No suitcase.

He wobbles up the path and stops in front of Maya and Lily.

ELLIOT  
Hi.

MAYA  
Oh my God...

LILY  
You look *crazy*!

ELLIOT  
Yeah. I feel kinda... great?

Maya stares at him, slack-jawed.

MAYA  
Elliot...

ELLIOT  
Hi, Maya.

Maya looks him up and down.

MAYA

Are you bleeding? Why are you  
covered in blood? is that *smoke*?

ELLIOT

Mostly from the burning car. Some  
of it might be sleigh exhaust.  
Also, do not ask about the raccoon  
thing.

LILY

Can I pet the horses?!

She's already halfway down the steps before anyone can  
answer.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Only if you say hello first. Horses  
deserve manners too.

Lily runs to the sleigh and gives the nearest horse a careful  
pat on the nose. It lets out a warm snort and dips its head.

LILY

His nose is so big!

ELLIOT

Lily, this is Santa O'Connor.

Santa tips his fur-lined cap.

SANTA O'CONNOR

At your service, miss.

LILY

Are you real Santa?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Close enough to get you on the nice  
list. Barely.

MAYA

Wait... you're seriously calling  
him Santa?

ELLIOT

Maya, the man *drifted a sleigh into*  
*your yard* and saved a life with me.  
He also might be drunk. So yes. I'm  
calling him Santa.

Santa winks. Maya blinks, trying to recalibrate her entire  
reality.

MAYA

You're lucky I baked. Come inside.  
All of you. You look frozen and  
insane.

SANTA O'CONNOR

If there's hot chocolate, I'm in.

ELLIOT

Does it have little marshmallows?

MAYA

Don't push it.

They all head toward the house.

Lily grabs Elliot's hand and tugs him along the path,  
bouncing with excitement.

LILY

This is the best Christmas ever.

ELLIOT

Yeah... I think it is.

INT. MAYA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The fire glows warmly now, casting golden light over the  
room. Stockings hang on the mantle. A snow-dusted Elliot has  
changed into a clean sweater from Maya's emergency laundry  
stash. Santa O'Connor still wears his coat, hat pushed back,  
cup of cocoa in hand.

Everyone is gathered on the couch or curled up with blankets.  
MAYA brings out a tray of hot chocolate, the kind with too  
many mini marshmallows, just how Elliot always liked it.

MAYA

Okay... you two better start  
talking. Because I saw a sleigh  
skidding through my azaleas and I'm  
still not convinced this isn't a  
fever dream.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Well, it all started with black  
ice, a burning sedan, and a buffalo  
with a destiny...

ELLIOT

We're skipping the part where I  
jumped out of a moving rental car  
in Reno, by the way.

LILY

What's Reno?

MAYA

A place where people lose money and dignity. Go on.

ELLIOT

So I helped this woman in a crash—Nancy. She was pinned. Smoke, fire... the whole action-movie thing. No signal. No help. And then *this* guy shows up in the middle of the forest with a sleigh and whiskey breath.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Medicinal.

ELLIOT

We raced her to the hospital. I'm pretty sure we broke physics. And several traffic laws.

SANTA O'CONNOR

And an inflatable Santa.

ELLIOT

Then I forgot Thomas. And my suitcase. And probably several important internal organs.

LILY

But... you came back.

Elliot turns to her, heart full.

ELLIOT

Nothing, *nothing* was going to stop me from being here with you tonight.

Lily beams and wraps her arms around his middle. Maya watches from the chair, blinking back a tear.

LILY

But you can't leave yet.

ELLIOT

Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere.

LILY

No—I mean you can't leave until you  
read *The Night Before Christmas*.

She hops up and grabs a big, worn hardcover from the coffee  
table.

LILY (CONT'D)

It's tradition.

Santa sips his cocoa.

SANTA O'CONNOR

She's right, lad. Rules are rules.

MAYA

Go on. You've got the voice for it.

Elliot opens the book.

Lilt is curled up beside Elliot the couch, wrapped in a fuzzy  
blanket, hot cocoa forgotten in her lap.

Maya sits nearby, sipping hers, finally relaxed.

Santa O'Connor lounges in an armchair like he's been part of  
the family for years, cocoa in one hand, flask peeking out  
from the other.

ELLIOT

Twass the night before Christmas,  
when all through the house...  
Not a creature was stirring... not  
even a mouse.

SANTA O'CONNOR

That's always suspicious, isn't it?  
No one stirring? Sounds like a  
setup.

MAYA

Let him read, Dad Santa.

ELLIOT

The stockings were hung by the  
chimney with care, In hopes that  
Saint Nicholas soon would be there.

Santa tips his cup.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Ah, flattery. Never underestimate  
it.

Elliot shoots him a look, but Lily giggles.

ELLIOT

The children were nestled all snug  
in their beds, While visions of  
sugarplums danced in their heads...

SANTA O'CONNOR

Sugarplums. Not actually great.  
Little chewy disasters, if I'm  
honest.

LILY

What do sugarplums taste like?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Like cinnamon and regret.

Maya laughs.

MAYA

Please continue before he reviews  
the whole pantry.

Elliot chuckles, and keeps reading. His voice is calm, warm.

ELLIOT

When out on the lawn there arose  
such a clatter,  
I sprang from the bed to see what  
was the matter.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Usually a raccoon. Sometimes a  
skunk.

ELLIOT

You done?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Not even close.

Lily leans into Elliot, smiling.

LILY

Uncle Elliot?

ELLIOT

Yeah?

LILY

This is the best storytime ever.

Elliot looks at her, overwhelmed. He reaches over, gently tucks her hair behind her ear.

ELLIOT

Mine too.

He finishes the poem, his voice low and steady.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Happy Christmas to all, and to all  
a good night.

Santa raising his mug

SANTA O'CONNOR

And a warm drink to anyone who  
saved a stranger, showed up late,  
and still made it right.

Everyone is quiet.

The fire crackles.

Lily's eyes finally begin to flutter closed.

Maya exchanges a look with Elliot

MAYA

*You did it.*

Elliot closes the book.

INT. MAYA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

From driveway, hooooonkk.

A car pulls into the snowy driveway.

Maya rises from the couch and peers through the curtains, squinting into the porch light's glare.

MAYA (CONT'D)

Who the hell drives a *pink*  
*Cadillac*?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Oh... This can't be good..

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Everyone freezes. Maya slowly approaches the door and opens it.

Taylor Swift stands there, snow-dusted and radiant, holding Elliot's battered suitcase in one hand...

And Thomas the wondering buffalo in the other.

Around Thomas's fuzzy neck is a handwritten luggage tag, laminated and curled slightly from travel.

It reads, in Elliot's messy but careful handwriting:

Handle with care this buffalo is loved.

Lily gasps and runs forward, eyes wide with joy.

LILY

*Thomas! You made it.*

Taylor kneels down and hands him over.

TAYLOR

Someone told me he had somewhere important to be.

Lily clutches Thomas tight, spinning in a little circle.

LILY

He has my name! He knew where to find me!

MAYA

Is that—? Is that—?

ELLIOT

Yep. This is Taylor Swift.

MAYA

How do you two know each other?

TAYLOR

We go way back. Karaoke buddies and buffalo delivery.

MAYA

So... karaoke buddies is that a thing?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Aye.

ELLIOT

Absolutely. You should've heard her our 'Total Eclipse of the Heart.' I still have chills.



MAYA

Okay. I want the *adult version* of this story sometime.

TAYLOR

Deal. But only if you make more of those marshmallow bombs I just saw float by

MAYA

Come in, come in. There's hot chocolate.

Taylor steps inside. Santa O'Connor, lounging on the armchair by the fire, lifts his mug in greeting.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Aye! The pop star. With a buffalo, no less.

TAYLOR

You must be the sleigh pilot.

Santa O'Connor rising, bowing slightly.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Santa O'Connor. At you service Old-school transportation, new-school chaos.

ELLIOT

You've got good timing.

TAYLOR

Story of my life.

TAYLOR (TO LILY) (CONT'D)

You think I can sit next to you during storytime?

LILY

Only if you do the reindeer voices.

TAYLOR

Like a pro.

MAYA still processing everything.

MAYA (TO ELLIOT)

So... Taylor Swift just delivered a stuffed buffalo to my house?

ELLIOT

The universe moves in mysterious,  
slightly insane ways.

Maya steps forward, pulling Taylor into the circle with easy grace.

MAYA

Please, come in, join the chaos.  
There's cocoa, there's peppermint  
schnapps, and I have *so many*  
*questions*.

TAYLOR

You had me at peppermint.

Maya points to the kitchen.

MAYA

Peppermint station is open.

TAYLOR

My favorite kind.

She heads to the kitchen, slipping off her coat like she's  
been coming to this house for years.

Santa O'Connor raises his cocoa in salute.

SANTA O'CONNOR

She's got good timing.

ELLIOT

Yeah. She really does.

MAYA

Alright, I know this night's been  
insane... but Lily wants *The Night*  
*Before Christmas*, again  
And now that the whole cast is  
here...

LILY

Can everyone read it together?

SANTA O'CONNOR

Only if I get to say the reindeer  
names.

TAYLOR

Dibs on "not a creature was  
stirring."

Elliot picks up the book

ELLIOT

Fine, but I'm closing it out. I  
earned the final "good night."

They all gather back near the fireplace.

Elliot sits. Thomas in Lily's lap. Taylor sipping cocoa with  
peppermint. Santa half-napping in the armchair. Maya curled  
up with a knowing smile.

Elliot opens the book once more.

TAYLOR

I call the opening line. It's  
iconic.

SANTA O'CONNOR

I demand the reindeer roll call.

ELLIOT

And I finish it. I earned the good  
night.

MAYA

Then I get the bit with the  
sugarplums. It's my brand.

They all gather around the open book on the coffee table.

TAYLOR

'Twas the night before Christmas,  
when all through the house,  
Not a creature was stirring, not  
even a mouse.

MAYA

The stockings were hung by the  
chimney with care,  
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon  
would be there.

SANTA O'CONNOR

Now Dasher! now Dancer! now Prancer  
and Vixen!  
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donner  
and Blitzen!

LILY (GIGGLES)

You forgot Rudolph!

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 Ah, he's union. Only works  
 Christmas night.

ELLIOT  
 As I drew in my head, and was  
 turning around,  
 Down the chimney St. Nicholas came  
 with a bound.

Lily's eyes flutter, but she fights sleep—just to hear it  
 all.

TAYLOR  
 He spoke not a word, but went  
 straight to his work,  
 And filled all the stockings; then  
 turned with a jerk.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 Not the first time someone's said  
*that* about me.

MAYA (LAUGHING)  
 Don't you dare ruin this.

They all look to Elliot.

ELLIOT  
 But I heard him exclaim, ere he  
 drove out of sight—  
 Happy Christmas to all, and to all  
 a good night.

A hush falls.

LILY  
 That was perfect.

She curls up beside Thomas. Eyes drifting closed.

Taylor gently reaches for a blanket, tucks it over her.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
 You know, I've read that story a  
 hundred times. But that one felt  
 different.

ELLIOT  
 It felt like home.

They all sit in the glow for a long, still moment.

LILY  
Best story ever.

TAYLOR  
It really was.

LILY  
Its Christmas morning. Presents!

INT. MAYA'S LIVING ROOM - LATER CHRISTMAS MORNING

The frenzy of gift unwrapping has slowed. Paper litters the floor. Cocoa's been topped off. Lily is busy drawing with her new art kit—Thomas seated beside her like he's supervising.

Elliot walks over to his battered old suitcase, still smudged with travel dust and glory.

He kneels, flips it open, digs through socks, a crushed protein bar, and a bent copy of *Thomas the Wondering Buffalo Visits the Big Apple*... until he finds a small, carefully wrapped box with a faded ribbon.

He walks over to Maya, suddenly quieter.

ELLIOT  
Hey... I have something for you.

She looks up from her mug, surprised.

MAYA  
Seriously? You managed to keep a gift alive in that suitcase?

ELLIOT  
Barely. But... I packed this before I ever left New York. Didn't even know if I'd get the guts to give it to you.

He hands it to her, a little nervous.

MAYA  
Please don't let it be guilt wine.

She unwraps it slowly.

Inside: a framed photo from when they were kids. The two of them, messy-haired, maybe 10 and 13, reading under a blanket fort. Between them: a beat-up buffalo plush—an early, homemade Thomas.

Tucked behind the frame is a note, handwritten in Elliot's careful scrawl:

"Thanks for building my first audience. I think I'm finally ready to be the person who finishes the story."

- E

Maya's eyes well instantly.

She hugs the frame to her chest.

MAYA (CONT'D)  
Okay... that's not guilt wine.

ELLIOT  
I missed a lot. I don't want to miss what's next.

MAYA  
Then don't.

She sets the frame on the mantle, beside the stockings and glitter-smeared garland.

Bright sunlight filters through the frosty windows.  
The house is alive with movement and laughter.

Wrapping paper flies. Ribbons unravel.  
A half-decorated dog in a bowtie barks as Lily spins in her new unicorn slippers.

Maya snaps pictures on her phone, laughing, wearing an oversized holiday sweater that says *Feliz Navidog*.

Elliot in clean pajamas (borrowed from Maya's ex), lounges on the floor beside Lily, helping her open a gift labeled *To Lily, From Thomas*. It's an art kit—complete with glitter that's already spilling everywhere.

ELLIOT  
Oh no. Glitter. The herpes of craft supplies.

LILY  
Thomas says sparkle is forever.

Taylor kneels beside the tree handing out gifts with the skill of a seasoned pop-star-turned-elf.

TAYLOR  
One for Santa O'Connor—labeled  
"Open only if jolly."

SANTA O'CONNOR  
I'm always bloody jolly.

He opens it to find a vintage flask engraved with *One Good Shortcut Deserves Another*.

ELLIOT  
I couldn't resist. Santa.

SANTA O'CONNOR  
Aye. You people spoil me.

The fireplace crackles. Everyone basks in the glow.

A speaker plays "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree", and before long, Taylor starts humming along.

TAYLOR  
Alright. Who's in for a Christmas morning sing-along?

MAYA  
Only if you promise not to upstage us with harmonies.

TAYLOR  
I would never.

They all join in-off-key, laughing, clapping. Elliot grabs a spoon and does percussion on a mug. Santa tries to harmonize and gets shushed. Lily leads the verses, standing tall beside Thomas, who now wears a Santa hat and a hand-knit scarf.

Elliot watches it all, beaming. Not as an outsider. Not a guest. But a brother. An uncle. A man who finally showed up.

ELLIOT (TO HIMSELF)  
Best Christmas ever.

INT. BOOKSTORE - SPRING LIGHT FILTERING THROUGH WINDOWS - DAY

A cozy, sun-dappled independent bookstore, walls lined with color and life.

A sign out front reads:

Author Event Today! Elliot Brandt Reads From His New Book:  
*Thomas the Wondering Buffalo Goes Home for Christmas*.

Inside, the back room is packed with parents and children, cross-legged on pillows and rugs.

At the front sits Elliot now confident, relaxed, a little cleaner than last time, but still wearing the same slightly wrinkled charm. He holds up a bright, fresh copy of his book.

Elliot picks up his chair and moves to the children, they gather around him. Elliot holds up his new book.

On the cover: Thomas the Buffalo wearing a scarf, arriving at a glowing little house covered in snow.

Elliot reading aloud, smiling.

*Thomas the Wondering Buffalo Goes Home for Christmas*

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 1

Far over the hills where the snow  
softly falls,  
Lived Thomas the Buffalo, fluffiest  
of all.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 2

He wandered through deserts,  
through forests and rain,  
From mountains to meadows and back  
home again.

A LITTLE GIRL (5) in the front row raises her hand mid-page.

LITTLE GIRL

Does the buffalo get cold? He  
doesn't have mittens.

ELLIOT

Good question. His fluff is  
thermally superior. Like a built-in  
coat.  
Also, have you seen his scarf?

Elliot flips page.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 3

But though he saw wonders from near  
and from far,  
Something was missing—he just  
didn't know *what*.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 4

One snowy December, while watching  
the sky, Thomas sighed, Is it  
Christmas already? Oh my!



KID IN GLASSES (7)  
My cousin ate a pinecone once.

ELLIOT  
Sounds like something Thomas would  
try. Let's see what he eats.

Elliot flips page.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Page 5  
He thought of warm cocoa, of songs  
and of light,  
Of laughter and family and trees  
shining bright.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Page 6  
I think, Thomas whispered, it's time  
to go back.  
To the ones who love buffaloes—no  
*matter the track.*

BOY IN DINOSAUR HAT  
Can buffalo fight robots?

ELLIOT  
Only if the robots insult Santa. Or  
hot cocoa.

The parents chuckle. Elliot finds his rhythm

Elliot flips page.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Page 7  
So he packed up a scarf and a tiny  
red hat, And even remembered to  
scribble a map.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)  
Page 8  
He rode through the wind on a  
jingly sleigh ride, With a driver  
who maybe had peppermint pride.

LITTLE GIRL  
He's a nice buffalo. He can come to  
our house.

ELLIOT  
I think he'd really like that.

Elliot flips page.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 9

He slid down some hills, he spun  
round a bend,  
He flew past a snowman who *cheered*  
*for his friend!*

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 10

The stars twinkled brightly above  
all the while,  
And Thomas kept dreaming of *one*  
*little smile.*

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 11

He stopped at the porch of a house  
glowing gold,  
Where stories were waiting and  
cocoa was bold.

KID IN GLASSES

Can you read it again but do all  
the voices?

Elliot flips the page.

ELLIOT

Page 12

And there, at the door, in her  
jammies and socks,  
Stood Lily—who gasped, He found me!  
He *rocks!*

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 13

She hugged him so tightly and  
danced in the snow, I *knew* you'd  
come back! I just *needed* to know.

KID IN DINOSAUR HAT

Can you write one where Thomas goes  
to space?

LITTLE GIRL

Can Thomas come to my school?

ELLIOT

You all drive a hard bargain.

Elliot flips page.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 14

And Thomas, the buffalo, finally saw. Home wasn't *just* grass, or a hill, or a draw.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 15

It was laughter and cocoa, and songs sung off-key, and someone who whispers, You're right where you're meant to be.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

Page 16

So now every Christmas, wherever he roams—  
Thomas the Wondering Buffalo always comes home.

The kids are hanging on every word. Parents exchange warm smiles. A few wipe their eyes.

Seated in the back, Msya and Lily watch with pride. Lily clutches her now well-loved Thomas plush. Next to them, Santa O'Connor in a suspiciously festive sweater, munches popcorn from a tote bag. Takes a swig from flask.

Elliot closes the book.

ELLIOT (CONT'D)

And that's the story of how the wondering buffalo... came home because he finally knew where he belonged.

The room bursts into applause.

A little boy raises his hand.

BOY

Is Thomas real?

Elliot smiles, winking at Lily.

ELLIOT

He is if you believe in showing up. Even when it's hard. Especially then.

Lily turns to another kid.

LILY

That's my uncle.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - MOMENTS LATER

Elliot steps outside for air, the sun warm on his face. He removes a small note in his pocket—it's Lily's drawing of him and Thomas, still slightly crumpled, but loved.

Maya walks up beside him.

MAYA

So what's next for Thomas?

ELLIOT

I don't know. Maybe... he wonders a little less. And lives a little more.

They smile. From inside, the sound of kids chanting:

KIDS (O.S.)

"Thomas! Thomas! Thomas!"

ELLIOT

Alright, alright. The buffalo's got fans.

He heads back in.

FADE OUT.